

Association of Public Data Users Annual Conference—Plenary

Director's Remarks as Prepared for Delivery

September 20, 2022

- Good morning. It's an honor to be here in my role as your director of the U.S. Census Bureau.
- Yes, I did say your director. This position serves the public . . . it serves our nation. And that's how I'm approaching my role as a public servant who happens to be in a leadership position.
- But first let me return to my original statement, that it's an honor to be here with you today.
- APDU has been a valued partner of the Census Bureau for many years, and we especially appreciate your engagement and feedback leading up to, and during, the 2020 Census. So I want to personally thank you for your engagement and outreach.
- And here today, with you, our data users and stakeholders, I want to tell you a little about how I am leading the Bureau.
- First, I think my roots as a statistician, a policy researcher, a fellow stakeholder and a person of color offer me a unique perspective in leading the Census Bureau.
- I'm a leader who champions diversity, equity, and inclusion, or DEI. I've lived them over a 40-year career and seen firsthand that innovation and excellence are advanced by embracing DEI principles.
- An important part of our DEI effort includes seeking out and listening to diverse voices. That certainly includes listening to our partners and stakeholders, which of course includes you.
- We're committed to producing data that reflects an accurate portrait of America. Census Bureau data are valuable assets that can be used by policymakers and the public in many ways—one of which is to assess equity and identify underserved communities.
- In 2021, President Biden announced a federal agenda to advance equity for all, including people of color and others who have been historically underserved, marginalized, and adversely affected by persistent poverty and inequality.
- Because this goal "requires a systemic approach to embedding fairness in decision-making processes," we need quality data about our people and economy to advance equity.
- Providing that quality data will require new ways of thinking and doing. I believe that we promote excellence by embracing equity, diversity and inclusion in our workforce, policies and practices, as well as in how we engage stakeholders and how we gather and incorporate feedback and advice.
- Let me talk a little more about that:
 - **First, we are committed to data equity.** We created an Equity Data Working Group to assemble various data sets generated by Census Bureau that can help identify and explore disparities and inequities in our society. We stand ready to work with OMB and others on collecting disaggregated race data if and when the revision of race-ethnic standards comes up for discussion as well as questions on sexual orientation and gender identity.

- **Second, we seek to infuse diversity and inclusion in our workplace.** Diverse voices and perspectives can be a potent catalyst for increasing data quality, data relevance, as well as advancing equity. It promotes innovation, critical thinking and excellence. I have spoken about this and written about it in my Director's Blog as well as when I was president of the American Statistical Association.
- **Third, we will engage with and actively listen to the full diversity of our stakeholders in the United States.** Stakeholder feedback is critical to understanding the needs of our data users. We plan to strengthen existing partnerships and identify new partners including advocacy organizations, folks in philanthropy, state and local jurisdictional officers, community-based organizations, scientific, and other professional associations, and so on. The idea is to create a continuous partnership to build trust to aid in public participation in our research endeavors and apprise partners of the value of Census Bureau data.
- A key aspect of data equity is ensuring that our data are an accurate reflection of our nation. We are working to develop new ways to collect data that are more accurate, timely, relevant, and most of all meet the needs of the public.
- And in that vein, one of the big ongoing projects at the Census Bureau right now is our quality assessments of the 2020 Census. So far, we've:
 - Released several reports on operational quality metrics
 - Commissioned three separate assessments by independent experts
 - Conducted and released findings from a Demographic Analysis
 - And, most recently, began releasing findings from our Post-Enumeration Survey.
- By publishing these quality assessments, data users and policymakers alike can better leverage insights and utility from the data produced by the Bureau. Data consumers are best served when they are apprised of the strengths and limitations as well know them. I believe that such transparency adds value to the published data and reinforces the scientific integrity of the Census Bureau.
- Moreover, these assessments are vital for planning the 2030 Census as well as our ongoing data collections such as our flagship American Community Survey.
- It is important to note that the Census Bureau only releases statistical data that has passed rigorous quality standards and is deemed to be fit for its intended uses.
- As a former data stakeholder, I spent many years analyzing policy and data, and I know how important data quality is. I can say that I've always felt and continue to feel confident using Census Bureau data to explore community needs, identify inequities and develop policy recommendations.
- Now, in addition to looking at those analyses of 2020's operational quality metrics to identify best practices and lessons learned, we've also begun research in five major areas that affect the quality and cost of the census. These are: data collection, data processing, counting people in group quarters, infrastructure for operations, and continuous assessment of coverage and quality.
- And last month—for the first time—we formally invited public input into the planning and design stage of a census.
- This is a new avenue we're trying to solicit ideas from communities and organizations across the country in hopes that their suggestions will help us to reach historically undercounted people and encourage response, and to reimagine what a 2030 Census can be.
- We're eager to hear the new ideas that will arise from this process. I encourage you to visit www.census.gov/2030census to learn more and to submit your own ideas.

- Lastly, I want to touch on differential privacy and data protection. The Census Bureau, like all official statistical agencies in the U.S., has strong protections around privacy and confidentiality. It's our responsibility as ethical stewards of public data to ensure that privacy is not violated.
- As you know, statistical agencies are facing disclosure threats which over time can only grow in sophistication. Our obligation to protect our data means we need to get ahead of these threats—not just for today but for the coming years.
- And, strong privacy protections are critical to ensure strong response rates. The most common feedback we receive from respondents is that they fear how their data will be used or shared.
- At the same time, data access can be a critical component of achieving data equity goals. Those goals are meant to serve those same marginalized communities that are most at risk from data sharing, so it's important that we are thoughtful about how to meet our privacy and confidentiality obligations while still pursuing opportunities for more effective equity assessments.
- For our 2020 Census data products, we're using a new disclosure avoidance methodology involving differential privacy. This approach addresses our 21st century confidentiality threats which over time will only grow in sophistication.
- And because of our obligation to protect census data, we believe this approach gets ahead of these threats—not just for today but for the coming years.
- It's a methodology that most would agree is much more advanced than the data swapping methods used in the last decennial. And I think we all agree that differential privacy is far more protective against disclosure than previous methods.
- Now, we know that differential privacy operates by adding noise to census tabulation cells, and it does so in a measured and a transparent way. But it does come at a cost of dampening some of the granularity that data users have come to enjoy and expect in the past.
- Implementation takes time as well as user input to hone-in on the right balance of granularity and accuracy while still preserving confidentiality.
- Stakeholder feedback is a critical part of that process. But we believe that differential privacy, in combination with the other tools, can meet the dual objectives of disclosure avoidance and data granularity and accuracy to meet most data user needs.
- And as I mentioned, we are conducting ongoing engagement and discussions about our research and findings with partners and stakeholders who identify needs and data gaps that may be missed if it were not for their feedback.
- And that is part of the reason I am here with you today—to make sure you understand that the Census Bureau seeks to strengthen and sustain our partnership. We need hear your needs.
- Thank you for your interest in Census Bureau Data and for your engagement. Your cooperation and feedback are really important in helping us to maintain the excellent data quality we provide. Again, thank you for having me.