

PAA Applied Demography Conference

Director's remarks as prepared for delivery

February 7, 2023

- Good morning, everyone. It's great to be here today and an honor to be able to address you.
- I confess I didn't know a lot about the Applied Demography Conference—although I should have.
- So I went to the PAA website to check it out. I love the idea of applied demography . . . probably because I've been an applied survey researcher and statistician much of my career, besides the leadership roles I've always enjoyed.
- But, hey, I can lay claim to dabbling in the crudest form of applied demography from my work as a sampling statistician back in the early 1980s.
- Back then most of our surveys involved paper-pencil, face-to-face interviews . . . the glory days of surveys for us seniors.
- In those days, survey research organizations needed something called a master national area probability sampling frame.
- It was a selection of 50 or 100 or even 150 counties and metro areas across the nation that could be used repeatedly for conducting surveys over the decade.
- Depending on the survey needs, we'd use the appropriate number of geographic units for a specific survey.
- It allowed us to maintain and nurture a national permanent cadre of professional interviewers.
- Anyway, as soon as the Census Bureau would release the decennial counts, sampling statisticians at places like SRC Michigan, Temple ISR, Westat, RTI, NORC, and so forth would scramble to build their ten-year sampling frames, and brag about them.
- I suppose it was like a race to the moon each decade—who could do theirs first . . . and with what new bells and whistles?
- Now, it's not a great idea to base your ten-year design on just the most recent decennial counts.
- Sure, you'd end up with a valid probability sample at the end of the decade, but it would become statistically inefficient because of population change over time.
- So what to do? Well, that's where the crudest of population estimates was invoked.
- We simply took the population change from the most recent two censuses, halved it, and added it to the decennial count.
- That was used as our mid-decade measure of size.
- Those estimates were then used to select the primary sampling units that comprised our ten-year sampling frame.
- Ok, I hope not too many of you are shaking your head . . . SMH . . . I get it.
- Look, that was the best we could do at the time.
- Back then, technology and our ability to manipulate data was a bit limited.
- Plus, we had small budgets. All this work was being done on overhead funds—a big deal for soft money operations.
- I'd expect that in today's society, we could employ much more sophisticated methods.

- After all, much better data are available . . . much better technology is available . . . much better methods are available.
- And, of course, the need for research organizations to maintain ten-year master area probability sampling frames isn't as great as it was in the past.
- But it's interesting to reflect on the states of nature between then and now.
- In general, approaches and methods we used from decades ago are now often considered obsolete—not just because of advancements in technology, methods and data availability, but also because of societal changes.
- Last month, I gave a talk where I noted that the Census Bureau—like all the federal statistical agencies—operated at the juncture of mathematical sciences, the social sciences . . . and society.
- Solutions to data and statistical problems aren't always a matter of optimizing squared error loss in a statistical estimation model.
- Social and even ethical factors need to be taken into account.
- Social factors can include different groups of stakeholders with competing needs based on their own use cases. Sound familiar?
- Or laws that require confidentiality and protection of privacy. Sound familiar?
- Or public trust that can affect the extent to which quality data can be obtained through solicitation, as we do in our censuses and surveys. Sound familiar?
- Or the availability of administrative records that call the question—perhaps naively—for the need to solicit data directly from individuals or businesses.
- It's really quite fascinating when you think about it.
- So hold onto that line of thinking for a moment while I weave in another perspective.
- I want to bring into the fold some things I experienced in my first year as director.
- First, I can't believe it's been just over a year since I was sworn in.
- I've learned how the Census Bureau nimbly adapted its massive decennial census operation in the midst of challenges that included a global pandemic which shut down the nation just before Census Day in 2020.
- The ability of the Census Bureau to adapt nimbly helped motivate a robust transformation and modernization initiative.
- The initiative redefines how the Census Bureau collects, processes, and disseminates our statistical data products.
- Last year, I saw an opportunity to bolster that transformation.
- How? By diversifying how we innovate our systems, operations, policies, and even mathematical solutions to problems.
- And by living the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion in our everyday work activities.
- That notably includes concerted efforts to solicit feedback from a wide range of internal career staff and external stakeholders, partners, data users, and the public.
- And that includes folks like everyone here today.
- So, I spent this last year laying the groundwork to create continuous, ongoing community engagement in its broadest sense.
- I and Census Bureau staff met with numerous scientific and government associations.
- We've conducted listening sessions with stakeholders representing both communities and data users.
- I spoke at conferences.
- Internally, I met with career staff at all levels and in offices around the country.

- I went out on multiple field observations.
- I conducted media interviews and used blogs, videos, and other communications to reach out to stakeholders and the public.
- I met with tribal leaders from around the country.
- Throughout these engagements, we listened carefully, we strengthened existing ties, and we established new relationships.
- I must say: the experience was profound.
- I engaged with rural America and witnessed the struggles and joys of the lives of farmers and small-town businesses.
- I visited inner-city neighborhoods; I spoke to local community leaders and pastors who recognized the value of local statistical data and expressed concern about data quality.
- I witnessed the dignity of America's indigenous people and their honorable, indeed sacred way of life through living with nature.
- And I met with scholars and researchers from across the nation to understand their concerns.
- After all these amazing experiences, here's my bottom line:
 - I learned that it takes a community-of-the-whole to maintain a fully functioning and successful federal statistical agency.
 - We need to seek and act on feedback from stakeholders, partners, and the public.
 - We should be continuously communicating a value proposition that highlights the utility of our statistical data products.
 - We need to expand and nurture a trusted-messenger ecosystem of partners and stakeholders that operates continuously, not just near the time of decennial census.
 - Such an ecosystem is a key for us to collect data from historically recalcitrant segments of our wonderfully diverse population.
- OK, so I've now talked about the juncture between mathematical and social sciences and society where the Census Bureau operates
- And I've noted that we need a community-of-the-whole approach to be a successful federal statistical agency based on insights from our outreach efforts.
- Combining these two perspectives, it's clear that we need to exploit new technologies, new methods, and new sources of data.
- But we need to do this in a way engages with and benefits stakeholders, data users, communities, tribes, government, and the public.
- That necessarily includes underserved communities, communities of color, rural populations, tribes—all the people who pose measurement and participation challenges to us.
- Only then will we be able to stay true to our mission: to produce quality data on our nation's people and economy.
- Let's now turn to this year.
- Here are the planning priorities for 2023:
 - ***I'll start with the modernization of surveys.*** Household and economic surveys are increasingly difficult to conduct.
We see declining participation rates and rising per unit costs. So, we need to explore and invest in more tailored approaches.

We'll be modernizing our data collection operation by exploring alternative data sources to supplement survey data, blended data approaches, and the expansion of AI to ease the burden of collection.

- ***The next priority area is administrative records enumeration.*** The 2020 Post-Enumeration Survey suggested that the accuracy of responses using administrative records exceeded those provided by proxy interviews.

We need to exploit that. We'll focus on expanding administrative data sources and conducting research to improve decennial census coverage and quality.

Research will guide us to where administrative records are most effective including among historically undercounted populations.

Ultimately, administrative records usage will permit more resources for tailored approaches to historically undercounted populations.

- ***External engagement is a priority area.*** As I said earlier, we need a community-of-the-whole effort to accomplish our mission.

The net must be cast broadly and involve a two-way flow of ideas, suggestions, concerns, and feedback.

We'll continue to strengthen ties with our data users.

We'll develop data tools and products tailored to different user communities.

And we'll review and facilitate access to data from our Federal Research Data Centers as well as the nascent National Statistical Data Service.

We'll strengthen ties with tribes on a nation-to-nation basis, and conduct outreach to communities that have concentrations of historically undercounted populations.

Partnerships will be leveraged with universities in historically Black and Hispanic colleges and universities and tribal colleges, like those we have in place with Bowie State University in Maryland and the University of Texas at San Antonio.

Engagement also requires an enhanced strategic communications plan that demonstrates a commitment to transparency, data utility, and scientific integrity.

- ***Besides external engagement we will have complementary efforts with Internal engagement.*** A community-of-the-whole approach also includes the Census Bureau's most valuable assets—our career staff.

We'll continue our efforts to enhance the work culture of the Census Bureau.

We'll promote enterprise-level innovation efforts, hold listening sessions to gather and incorporate diverse perspectives from all staff levels, and provide equitable opportunities for career growth to all staff.

By the way, we have staff here who can help you learn more about careers at the Census Bureau and how you can join our team and help us work on these priorities.

- ***And finally, there's our Economic statistics modernization priority area.*** We seek to leverage emerging methods to use our data more fully.

We'll focus on using new nonsurvey data sources for developing retail statistics. Our reengineering statistics using the Economic Transactions team is currently refining and conducting scalability testing of experimental integrated retail statistics.

- Those are our priority areas for 2023.
- Note that the Census Bureau is a large organization.

- There are many projects that are already under way and others being planned.
- So, my project illustrations were not meant to be all inclusive. Lots more falls into these areas.
- One project that I know is as important to you as it is to us, that I'd like to mention now, is our Population Estimates Program.
- I hope you were waiting for it!
- We're very excited about the efforts to improve our population estimates.
- As you probably know, we annually develop official estimates of population and housing units between decennial census years.
- Historically, the base, or starting point, for these estimates has been the decennial census counts.
- However, there was a delay in 2020 Census input data due to the COVID-19 pandemic and associated factors.
- So, the data we needed for our 2021 population estimates was simply unavailable.
- As a result, the Census Bureau developed a new April 1, 2020, estimates base—which we call the “blended base.”
- It integrates several sources of data: the 2020 Census data available at the time, 2020 demographic analysis estimates, and the vintage 2020 estimates.
- And in adopting this approach, we saw a mitigating effect on the known undercount for some historically undercounted populations: specifically, young children.
- Now, this blended base opened our eyes—and the door—to exploring what else may be possible to improve the base estimates.
 - For instance, can we incorporate other sources of data, such as administrative records, into the estimates base?
 - Can we use coverage measures to design and apply adjustments to the base population? That could mitigate coverage issues for other populations.
- Many avenues of research are now being considered by our Base Evaluation and Research Team, fondly known as BERT.
- The team includes experts in areas like: population estimates, age and sex statistics, coverage measurement, race and ethnicity, demography, and disclosure avoidance.
- You'll hear more about their research progress in a few months at PAA in New Orleans.
- Just so you know—the expansion and support of our Population Estimates Program is a priority.
- The impact of their work is far-reaching—from facilitating community planning to informing funding formulas for the states and nation.
- So, now let's talk disclosure avoidance.
- I know disclosure avoidance is incredibly important to many of you.
- Did you know the Census Bureau is hosting a workshop tomorrow morning that will cover this topic?
- I won't go into too much detail now . . . I've already spoken too long.
- But allow me to give a short update on a few items that we'll cover in that workshop:
 - First, the Demographic and Housing Characteristics (DHC) file is in production right now, with a planned release in May.
 - External engagement was critical in developing a disclosure avoidance system for the DHC.
 - Many of you helped us during this effort, and we want to acknowledge that and thank you.
 - In the end, we believe we found a good balance between disclosure protection and data utility. You—our data users—will be the ultimate judge.

- We've heard requests for more guidance on using our 2020 differentially private data products, and we intend to meet those needs.
- Additionally, the Detailed DHC A, which will include tables on detailed racial and ethnic groups and American Indian and Alaska Native tribes and villages, is scheduled for release in August.
 - A Proof of Concept demonstration product was just released and we seek your feedback.
 - In fact, we held a webinar recently to help data users understand the product.
- Tomorrow's workshop will include Census Bureau staff with extensive knowledge about the 2020 Census data products and the new disclosure avoidance methodology.
- I encourage you to attend if you're interested in that work or in the DHC products.
- Lastly, I want to mention something that's of interest to all of us—that is, the federal collection of race and ethnicity data.
- As you know, every federal agency—including the Census Bureau—collects race and ethnicity data following standards set by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget.
- Last summer, OMB announced that it was beginning a formal review of its Statistical Policy Directive 15, which lays out standards for maintaining, collecting, and presenting federal data on race and ethnicity.
- This review process has a simple goal: to ensure that the standards better reflect the beautiful diversity of the American people.
- On January 26, the OMB Office of the Chief Statistician released an initial set of recommended revisions to the statistical standards for collecting and reporting race and ethnicity data.
- These proposals were developed by an Interagency Technical Working Group made up of federal government career staff representing more than 20 agencies, including the Census Bureau.
- The proposal cover:
 - Collecting race and ethnicity together using a single question.
 - Adding a response category for Middle Eastern and North African, separate and distinct from the "White" category.
 - Updating the terminology, definitions, and question wording in the standards (SPD 15).
- These recommendations are preliminary, and they don't represent the positions of OMB or the agencies participating on the working group.
- There's still much work to be done.
- But like the Census Bureau, they cannot do this alone. They need your input.
- The working group wants to hear directly from the American people and stakeholders like you.
- I encourage you to review these proposals. Comments can be submitted through April 12, 2023.
- Please visit the working group's new website at <https://spd15revision.gov>.
- The working group is committed to a full, transparent revision process and remains on track to reach the goal of completing these important revisions by Summer 2024.
- The Census Bureau will continue to support OMB throughout this critical endeavor by co-chairing the working group and providing extensive subject matter expertise.
- I'll conclude by circling back to my earlier remarks.
- I noted that we're on a journey of transformation and modernization, one that adopts a single enterprise paradigm and leverages new technology and methods.

- But this is something we can't do alone.
- We need your engagement, your support, and your constructive, critical feedback.
- We need your diverse voices to help us make the best decisions and produce the best data that meets your needs.
- We—the Census Bureau—are a work in progress, like all agencies.
- We aspire to perfection knowing that we won't get there but that we can advance in that direction.
- I hope everyone can see that through our aspirations, our actions, and our engagement efforts, we're making progress towards our data nirvana and more importantly towards serving the public better.
- Thank you.