American Community Survey Data Users Conference

Director's remarks as prepared for delivery

May 16, 2023

- Good morning, everyone. It's great to be here today and an honor to be able to address you. First, thank you everyone for attending. This conference is going to be informative as well as fun.

- So…We're all data nerds here, right? I just want to take a moment to soak up all the good vibes from wonderful data users like you who demonstrate the value of our treasured American Community Survey (ACS) through your analyses.

- I said it at my confirmation hearing, and I'll say it again: the ACS is a national treasure. It tells us who we are as a nation, in all our rich diversity. It's the largest household survey the Census Bureau administers, and its data are used to allocate billions of dollars in federal funding every year.

- There's really nothing else like it. This statistical data product stands alone for its breadth, for its ability to dig down to local areas, and frankly, for its gold standard quality. It's found uses in just about all aspects of public policy, as you'll see later in the conference.

- So here's a perspective I'd like to share with you this morning. I see the Census Bureau—like all the federal statistical agencies—as operating at the juncture of mathematical sciences, the social sciences, and society.

- Mathematical sciences—including statistics, economics, computer and data science—they're frequently used to reduce data into compact data products and statistical estimates. Social sciences offer frameworks to develop measures like poverty, or methods for fostering survey participation by using social psychology, sociology, demography, and so forth.

- And then there's society. As you know, we're in the midst of a technological and global renaissance where society is rapidly evolving before our very eyes.

- We're changing the way we communicate with each other. We're increasing our reliance on data and new technology. We're witnessing changes to our social networks, how we work and play, and even how we live our day-to-day lives.

- All this impacts how we do our work at the Census Bureau, including the ACS.

- Now, here's what happens when the Census Bureau operates at this juncture. Solutions to statistical problems are no longer just a matter of optimizing squared error loss, calculating a margin of error, or publishing p-values. We also must incorporate social and even ethical factors.

- 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 public participation in our censuses and surveys. Sound familiar?

- Or the availability of administrative records that can alleviate the need to solicit at least some data elements directly from individuals or businesses. It's really quite fascinating when you think about it.

- We're faced with having to think differently if we wish to achieve our mission. We need new insights, new approaches, creative solutions.

- So, how are we doing that? Through a transformation and modernization initiative. We're moving from our legacy approach of public solicitation where we ask people and businesses for information. We're flipping that model on its head.
- Under our new vision, we embrace a single-enterprise operation that uses common platforms to capture, process, and deliver data products.
- It features a data lake that ingests all sources of data, from administrative records from public and third-party sources to survey and census data.
- All these data sources will be linked to offer new, powerful, and unique data tools and statistical products.
- The necessary systems are well underway. But a true transformation can't occur unless our staff similarly undertake their own personal transformation through a cultural change. That change is aimed at nurturing innovation and creative thinking.
- And that comes from infusing the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion into our core values of scientific integrity, objectivity, transparency, and independence…and then using those in our daily work and to guide our decision-making. Doing this leads to better science, better designs, better methods, more accurate and relevant data.
- And while inclusivity is necessary within the over 10,000 staff that make up our agency, it also applies externally. That's why I've devoted much time laying the groundwork to create continuous, ongoing community engagement in its broadest sense.
- I and Census Bureau staff have met with numerous scientific and government associations. We've conducted listening sessions with stakeholders representing both communities and data users. Throughout these engagements, we listened carefully, we strengthened existing ties, and we established new relationships. I must say: the experience was profound.
- And here's my bottom line: We 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 need to expand and nurture a trusted-messenger ecosystem of partners and stakeholders that operates continuously.
- Such an ecosystem is key for us to collect data from historically recalcitrant segments of our wonderfully diverse population, not all of which may have administrative records to draw upon.
- Yes, 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 includes you, our ACS data user community. And it necessarily includes underserved communities, communities of color, rural populations, tribes—all the people who pose measurement and participation challenges to all our data collections, including the ACS.
- Let's now turn to this year. I'd like to review our 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. In fact, we just put out a technical memorandum on this. Research will guide us to where administrative records are most effective including among historically undercounted populations.

- ***External engagement*** is also 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 developing 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. Engagement also requires an enhanced strategic communications plan.

- Besides external engagement, we will have complementary efforts with ***internal engagement***… engaging our staff at all levels. Our career staff are our most valuable asset. We'll continue our efforts to enhance the work culture of the Census Bureau. We'll promote enterprise-level innovation efforts, gather diverse perspectives from all staff levels, and provide equitable opportunities for career growth.

- And finally, there's our ***economic statistics modernization*** priority area. We seek to leverage emerging methods to use our data more fully, leveraging tools like artificial intelligence and machine learning.

- Those are our priority areas for 2023. Next, here is a short update on a few items:
  ◦ First, the Demographic and Housing Characteristics (DHC) file is in production right now, with a planned release this month. 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 September.

- I'll conclude with a remark about perfection. 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 the ball down that field. After all, it's about the journey not the destination.

- I hope everyone can see that through our aspirations, our actions and our engagement efforts, we're making progress towards serving the public better. Thank you.