

National Conference of State Legislatures

Director's Remarks as Prepared for Delivery

August 3, 2022

- Good morning, everyone. It's an honor to be here as director of the U.S. Census Bureau.
- I'd like to start by expressing my sincere thanks to National Conference of State Legislatures for the opportunity to address you today.
- You know, I greatly admire state legislators for their public service charge.
- Being an elected official in today's society poses quite the challenge, with many complexities.
- In your roles, you deal with issues up close and personal.
- You meet constituents in their neighborhoods, in their homes, in their schools.
- You hear their stories and need to understand problems from their perspectives.
- And your measure of success rests on their assessments of how well you address their problems.
- I'll tell you that in my new role as director of the Census Bureau, I do something similar.
- I seek closer connections with Census Bureau partners, stakeholders, and the public more generally.
- I need to understand the diverse needs of communities from urban and suburban neighborhoods as well as from rural counties, farms, ranches, and tribal lands.
- And of course, there are the needs of the federal, state, and local governments as well as the business sector, policy makers, scholars.
- This list includes state legislators, of course!
- I, too, serve the public, and that means everyone... including you.
- And understanding the needs of our diverse states is really important to us.
- But first let me return to my original statement... that it's an honor to be here with you today.
- NCSL has been a valuable, long-time partner to the Census Bureau.
- In the lead-up to 2020, you helped spread the word about why the census was so important and, as you know, *critical* to our democracy.
- You assisted in our complete count efforts, then used the resulting decennial data for redistricting.
- So, I want to personally thank you for your help.
- In the spirit of strengthening our partnership, I'd like to start my remarks by sharing some thoughts about how we work and what we aspire to.
- The Census Bureau is charged with measuring the nation's people, places, and economy.
- We most famously enumerate the U.S. population once a decade as prescribed by our U.S. Constitution.
- Decennial census data are used for congressional seat apportionment as well as legislative redistricting, as you well know.
- But there's so much more data on our population and businesses that we produce.

- We conduct over 130 surveys annually.
- This includes our flagship American Community Survey with its treasure-trove of rich socioeconomic data, the Current Population Survey that tracks unemployment and wages, and our Economic Census and Annual Business Survey that inform our economy.
- The resulting statistical data span a host of topics such as income, housing, poverty, education, as well as businesses, and much more.
- They're used to generate numerous important economic indicators.
- And they represent just the tip of an enormous data iceberg.
- Collectively, these data allow decision makers like you the opportunity to make informed, evidence-based decisions in many important policy areas.
- More generally, Census Bureau data keep us informed about who we are as a nation and economy, and how we're changing over time.
- For instance, over the last decade, our nation's population grew at its slowest rate since the 1930s.
- An increasing proportion of our population lives in metro areas, while our rural populations are increasingly sparse.
- Our population has become more multiracial and beautifully diverse.
- So... we've clearly changed over the decade.
- As communities change, so do their needs.
- The information we provide helps us understand our communities' needs and better target our policy making and economic development.
- Our statistical data are used for infrastructure planning of schools, roads, fire stations, hospitals, as well as public health and disaster plans.
- Businesses use our data to decide where to open stores, offices, shopping centers, warehouses, and manufacturing plants.
- And using our data, the federal government distributes literally trillions of dollars to states and communities across the decade.
- And need I mention the use of decennial census data by state legislatures for redistricting?
- The bottom line is that census data—in all its forms and from all its sources—help our nation to function, grow, and prosper.
- And, yes, they help preserve our democracy.
- Now, we understand all these uses and take them incredibly seriously.
- That is why we are so mission-driven.
- Speaking of our mission, I'd like to turn to the topic of data quality.
- Naturally, the Census Bureau is committed to excellence.
- We strive for continuous improvement, knowing that all our statistical products are highly useful, even though they—like all such products—are inherently imperfect.
- It's interesting to me as a statistician that the public doesn't fully understand that data and statistics are always subject to some levels of uncertainty and systematic error.
- Perfection is quite simply... impossible. But it is worth pursuing, and we do even though we know it's unachievable.
- Yet, even in the face of imperfection, data can be produced that are of sufficient quality to be enormously useful and insightful.
- The Census Bureau understands and controls the inherent uncertainty and error of the data.
- We do this by using rigorous scientific methods and a lot of quality control.

- That's why our 2020 decennial census data are fit for the purposes of congressional apportionment and legislative redistricting.
- And that's also why the 2020 American Community Survey data were released only in experimental form... it's because they did not meet our gold-standard quality thresholds.
- Having said that, all other annual American Community Surveys have met those thresholds, including our richly detailed 5-year data products.
- These data paint vivid portraits of our people and communities, revealing valuable insights in the areas of health, education, housing, employment, wealth, and many other areas.
- We also provide economic data to sister agencies who release statistics on unemployment rates, job creations, wages, inflation, even the data for safety net programs like SNAP, school lunches, and housing vouchers.
- I'll now say a few words about values, which are near and dear to me and the Census Bureau.
- The work at the Census Bureau is driven by our values of scientific integrity, objectivity, independence, and transparency.
- We also embrace the principles of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility because they provide a unique pathway to better methods and lead to more accurate and relevant data.
- But let me to focus on transparency for a moment.
- Transparency motivates our assessments of the quality of our statistical data.
- Communicating the strengths and limitations of our data actually increases their utility.
- The assessments also provide important insights for improving future data collections.
- To illustrate, here's how we're documenting the quality of the 2020 Census.
- Thus 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 a Post Enumeration Survey.
 And there's more to come.
- Now, our post enumeration survey suggested that six states were undercounted, and eight states were overcounted.
- I should note for context that miscounts have been detected in past decennial censuses.
- Historically hard-to-count populations like Blacks, Latinos, and persons on tribal lands were also undercounted, but at higher levels than in 2010.
- We recognize our obligation to reverse that trend, and we take it very seriously.
- Now, let's talk about integrity.
- Bolstering our scientific integrity is essential to pursuing excellence.
- Please know that we'll continue to be transparent about the quality and reliability of the statistics we publish and the data we release.
- That's what scientific integrity is all about.
- We've been transparent about how the 2020 Census encountered numerous data collection and operational challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic... challenges that raised concern from stakeholders and demographic experts about data quality.
- It's important to acknowledge this.
- But it's also important to note that the Census Bureau only releases statistical data that has passed rigorous quality standards and are deemed to be fit for their intended uses.

- As a statistician and former data stakeholder who's spent 4 decades in policy research, I know the importance of data quality.
- I've always felt and continue to feel confident using Census Bureau data to explore community needs, to identify inequities, and to develop policy recommendations.
- Now, let's look to the future.
- As I mentioned, we are conducting stakeholder engagement and discussing our research and findings to clarify needs and data gaps that would be missed if it were not for such feedback.
- We want this engagement to be regular and continuous, not confined to a couple of years before a decennial census.
- And that's part of the reason I'm here with you today—to make sure you understand that the Census Bureau seeks to strengthen and sustain our partnership with NCSL.
- We seek to build trust through continuous engagement, listening, and incorporating what we hear.
- We want to relay the value proposition that comes from participating in our census and surveys.
- We'll do this by communicating real-world examples of how data benefits states, counties, rural communities, cities, and neighborhoods.
- And we'll do this by providing easy-to-use tools and visualizations that incorporate a variety of different data sources at your fingertips.
- Now let's consider the 2030 Census.
- We're in the early stages of planning the 2030 Census.
- Counting every resident of the United States is incredibly complex, and each census takes a decade of planning and preparation.
- We're currently conducting extensive analyses of our 2020 Census 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.
- By mid-decade, we'll have developed a 2030 Census operational design—the big-picture plan for the census.
- This will allow us time to test and refine procedures and technologies, as well as to develop other necessary infrastructure.
- Besides our own research we'll solicit and incorporate public feedback in our planning process.
- Your feedback for the 2030 Census is critical now as the groundwork takes shape.
- In a few weeks, we'll be issuing a Federal Register Notice to publicly solicit ideas for reimagining what a 2030 Census can be.
- Your ideas will help us to reach historically undercounted people and encourage response.
- I hope that you provide suggestions—and spread the word and encourage others to share their ideas, too.
- By the way, we're also rethinking our Population Estimates Program.
- This is a big deal.
- It's these annual estimates that drive the allocation of billions of dollars annually in federal funding.
- An internal group of census experts is exploring how the results of our quality assessments can improve our annual populations estimates.
- This effort will include outreach to stakeholders and experts in the field.

- Now, let me turn to other opportunities to be involved in census planning that can help your communities.
- But I'll start with a value proposition.
- I believe that your help in all our data collection efforts creates a win-win scenario.
- When the Census Bureau collects quality data, then you and your constituencies benefit from these data in your planning and your economic development activities.
- That's why we encourage your advocacy and your feedback on all our products.
- It certainly improves our decision making and benefits your constituents.
- It's in this spirit that I request that you promote the upcoming 2022 Economic Census among your business communities and chambers of commerce.
- Economic Census statistics help businesses to be more competitive, to help provide more local jobs, and fuel innovation and entrepreneurship.
- When we begin mailing those surveys this January, we need all businesses to respond.
- Their participation ensures that you as state leaders have quality, timely data about your state economies.
- Another area we request your help is with our 2020 Post-Census Group Quarters Review operation.
- This is a new, one-time program that responds to public concerns about 2020 group quarters population counts.
- Last month, we mailed to 40,000 eligible governmental units at the tribal, state, and local levels about this program.
- Government units can request a review of their own 2020 Census group quarters population counts for facilities they believe were undercounted.
- Any revisions that are made will be incorporated into the Population Estimates I spoke about earlier.
- So if you believe there were group quarters counting issues in your districts, we want to hear from you.
- Well, that is what I wanted to talk to you about today.
- In closing, I want to reiterate that NCSL is a highly valued partner.
- Thank you again for your engagement and for listening.
- It was an honor to address you.