

University of Nebraska—Lincoln Bureau of Sociological Research Keynote: “How Rural Data Informs the Future of Connected Communities”

Director’s remarks as prepared for delivery

March 20, 2024

INTRODUCTION

- Good afternoon, everyone. It’s an honor to be here in my role as director of the U.S. Census Bureau. I thank you for the opportunity to have a conversation with you.
- In my role as director of the Census Bureau, I seek closer connections with Census Bureau partners, stakeholders, and the public more generally. I need to understand the rich, diverse needs of communities from urban and suburban neighborhoods as well as rural counties, farms, and ranches, and even tribal lands.
- That’s why I’m here in Nebraska this week: to hear from elected officials, community organizations, businesses, advocates, and other groups about what their data needs are and how census data can help them.
- The Census Bureau is committed to producing data that reflect an accurate portrait of Nebraska and the rest of the United States. We are committed to providing you with the quality data you need and that your communities rely on. These data are valuable assets that can help the public and policymakers assess equity and identify underserved communities.
- Our mission is to serve as America’s leading provider of quality data about its people, places, and economy.
- Our nation is big and beautifully diverse, and it comes as no surprise that the data needs of its people and communities vary—but there are some common threads.
- As I travel and speak to people and communities across America, one thing I hear frequently is the importance of data about how we live.
- From concerns about broadband connectivity, to changes in where and how people work, to the ever-present concerns about affordable and quality housing, some issues are important no matter where we live or how big our communities are.
- At the Census Bureau, we take our work to provide the data to answer these questions (and many others!) to heart. We need data that better reflect our nation’s demographic characteristics, such as age, sex, relationship, racial and ethnic groups, and geographic levels—data that capture local experience and reflect the rich diversity of their communities and neighbors.
- Combining these data with information about housing can create greater potential for understanding economic development possibilities, addressing community needs, and mitigating inequities.

NATIONAL TRENDS FROM THE 2020 CENSUS

- So let's explore the moment with data! After all, providing statistical data is what the Census Bureau does. I'll start at the national level and then dive down. In particular, today I want to talk about how our data reflect, and can be used by, rural communities.
- Now, our nation is constantly changing—evolving—growing. To give you a taste, here are some findings from our 2020 Decennial Census.
- First and foremost, *our nation is increasingly diverse*. The overall racial and ethnic diversity of the country has increased since 2010.
- One group that has experienced growth and demographic change is the Hispanic/Latino population.
- Eight Hispanic subgroups, like Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, and so on. Eight reached a million or more in population in 2020 in the United States. This includes Colombian and Honduran populations; they reached that population milestone for the first time in census history. And did you know that in 2020, one in four of all children in the United States were Latino?
- Here is another important change to think about. *Our nation is getting older*. The U.S. population in 2020 was older than in 2010 or even 2000.
- Over the last century, the population aged 65 and over grew nearly five times faster than total population did. That's why a lot of policy folks talk about the silver tsunami...the growing senior population...of which I am one, by the way.
- In 2020, about 1 in 6 people in the United States were age 65 and over. Back in 1920, it was less than 1 in 20. Think about that! Boomers like me are aging.
- Next, let's talk a little about national housing. The housing count in the United States grew by 6.7 percent between 2010 and 2020. That's about one-half the growth rate of the previous decade.
- But here's the kicker: the growth was not equal across metropolitan areas—and or even micropolitan areas, for that matter.
- Additionally, we've seen shifts in work patterns because of a rise in remote work and gig work. These shifts appear to have been accelerated by the pandemic. And that has been accompanied by shifts in housing and commuting patterns.

NEBRASKA TRENDS

- And off course, change is occurring here in Nebraska. In your state, we see many of the same demographic trends that have and continue to reshape our country's population: from the suburban growth spreading west from Omaha, to the ebbing populations in some of the more rural areas of the state, to the new immigrant communities that have emerged across Nebraska, from Lexington to Crete to Grand Island.
- If we look at the state overall, Nebraska's population is now nearing 2 million. It still has more births than deaths, but increasingly, the source of the state's population growth is international migration.
- New Census Bureau population estimates released just last week show a mix of gains and losses across Nebraska's counties.
- As Nebraskans well know, the state's overall population growth is mostly in its urban areas. Many of the state's smaller and more rural counties, on the other hand, continue to see their populations decline.
- Aside from a brief spate of population decline in the 1970s, the city of Omaha has expanded steadily for a century and is approaching a half million in population. The Omaha metro area's population has also climbed steadily and is now just under 1 million people. Meanwhile, the city of Lincoln is approaching 300,000.

- However, Nebraska's population is 27 percent rural—up slightly from 2010, and 7 percentage points higher than the U.S. percentage. Sixty-one of the state's 93 counties are 100 percent rural. And an additional are mostly rural, which means that 50 percent or more of the county's population resides in rural areas.
- While these rural counties contain only 20 percent of the state's population, their needs are as important as the 80 percent living in mostly urban counties and the 65 percent living in Nebraska's metropolitan areas. In terms of infrastructure and other services—broadband access, transportation, access to health care—their needs are perhaps greater.

DATA FOR RURAL NEEDS

- The question for us is: How can we bring our rich data resources to bear in ways that help communities meet those needs?
- Census Bureau data are available for individual communities, but we also need to think and present data in terms of groups of communities, context and setting, and representing relationships between communities.
- That's why right now, a key area of focus of the Census Bureau's Geography Division is enhancing the identification and classification of rural communities to improve data for analysis and decision-making.
- When we talk about rural Nebraska—or rural communities anywhere—we need to move beyond the rural-urban dichotomy in our data products.
- Currently, the Census Bureau's urban/rural classification focuses on defining individual urban areas. Rural is the residual—whatever is not defined as urban.
- This is not adequate for producing data for the variety of rural communities that exist in Nebraska and elsewhere, and it doesn't support the kinds of planning and decision-making needed to meet the needs of rural residents.
- Our geographic definitions and our data products need to account for and represent the variety of contexts in which communities exist.
- We need to identify where communities sit along a continuum: from the most rural and remote areas, to those with small towns that serve as the focal point for the surrounding region, to rural communities on the outskirts of larger places like Omaha and Lincoln.
- We also need to better account for the social and economic relationships that exist between rural communities and produce data for those areas. Folks in rural areas know these relationships because they are part of their daily, weekly, monthly routines.
- The statistical geographic areas that we define and use to produce data, however, do not adequately reflect and represent the variety of interactions occurring in rural America.
- To address that, our Geography Division has formed an Urban-Rural Continuum Working Group to research and develop a variety of methods and classifications that will allow us to do a better job identifying the contexts in which rural communities exist, as well as the relationships between communities.
- This will in turn will facilitate tabulation and presentation of data that better aligns with the kinds of areas and regions that are used in planning and decision-making.
- An initial step was development of a four-category Rural/Urban Continuum that classifies counties based on the proportion of population that is rural or urban. This continuum has already been used with some of our Experimental Business Dynamics Statistics.
- We need to do more along these lines. There's an opportunity for us to work together on questions of geographic classifications to make sure the categories we develop meet the needs and challenges of rural communities and data users.

- Because these needs and challenges are best addressed from a foundation of knowledge, from an evidence base. Data driven insights allow informed decision-making, which in turn can enhance urban and economic planning.

DATA SOURCES

- And that's where the Census Bureau comes in. We can help you "meet the moment." A key aspect of our work is getting these important data into the hands of people who need it.
- Since becoming director, I've heard directly from countless local officials, community groups, tribal representatives, businesses, students and educators, and many others who need data to address issues in their communities—and they usually aren't statisticians or data experts!
- Our goal at the Census Bureau is to make accessing our data easier than ever. At <data.census.gov>, you can search for and filter by a wide range of demographic, economic, and social characteristics.
- Searching for specific towns or census designated places will pull up a profile of that area that includes a wide range of statistics across key topics like housing, employment, income and poverty, and health. This is a quick and easy way to easily gather the most up-to-date information on your community.
- Our *American Community Survey* provides a treasure trove of data that paint a portrait of the city's population and housing. We offer data at state, county, city, and even census tract on such things as race, ethnicity, sex, disability stats, income, poverty, education, veteran status, plus housing and many other key sociodemographic variables.
 - Most policy at federal, state, and local levels is developed using American Community Survey data. It would be wonderful for Nebraska to get the full benefit of these data, too.
 - We are working on new tools that will allow users, regardless of technical experience, to access microdata from the American Community Survey and create their own custom tables.
- We also have rich economic data from our economic census that breaks out businesses by size, industry classification, production and sales, number of employees, and even the race-ethnicity of the owner—all at various levels of geography.
- And of course, we provided resources like data visualizations, webinars, and how-to guides to help communities explore and use the data.

DATA TOOLS

- We're constantly working to better meet your data needs. In fact, let me tell you about three tools we've created great tools specifically to help communities, businesses, and governments.
- First, there's the *My Community Explorer* dashboard. It provides demographic, business, and resilience information for states, counties, and communities. The data are presented in maps, interactive dashboards, and tables.
- Next is the *Census Business Builder*. It combines economic and demographic data at state and county levels that help entrepreneurs and businesses decide on where to start a business or build a manufacturing plant.
- There's also our *Community Resilience Estimates*, or CRE. Community resilience is the capacity of individuals and households within a community to absorb the external stresses of a disaster. Our CRE data tools help to measure the social vulnerability of a community and the ability to recover from social, economic, or natural disasters.
 - One tool, CRE for Equity helps users see the connection between income inequality and higher social vulnerability to the impact of disasters at the state, county, and census tract level. Users can review area-level statistics and explore how these characteristics differ based on race and ethnicity. These data include information on topics such as income, age, unemployment, and health insurance status that play a role in measuring equity.

- The tool indicates that 18 percent of the population in Nebraska would be considered vulnerable to a health, economic, or natural disaster. In Lancaster County, where we are now, around 16 percent of the population would be considered vulnerable.
- Earlier this week, I spoke to the Nebraska Broadband Office about these tools, and I heard from them how important broadband access is for rural communities in your state.
- The Census Bureau's recurring report on Computer and Internet Use in the United States shows that in most states, urban residents have a higher rate of broadband subscription than their rural counterparts. This is true in Nebraska, where 85.9 percent of households overall have a broadband subscription but that only 80.8 percent of households in rural areas do.
- Because of data needs of organizations like the Nebraska Broadband Office—as well as policymakers, businesses, and the public—we worked with the National Telecommunications and Information Administration to create the *Digital Equity Act Population Viewer* and the *ACCESS BROADBAND Dashboard*.
- With these tools, users can identify and help address the broadband needs of unserved and underserved populations and assess how changes in broadband availability and adoption could impact local economies.
- The Census Bureau and NTIA (National Telecommunications and Information Administration) plan to update the dashboard annually so users can assess the economic context of areas, like Nebraska, where broadband availability and adoption efforts are underway.
- But that's not all. If you go to the Census Bureau's home page and click on "visualizations" you can find a wide variety of data viz tools that will help you interpret the data on our people, places, and economies.
- For example, there's a tool that lets users look at the age/sex structure for the nation, states, metro areas, micro areas, and counties based on the 2020 Census and compare that to 2010 and 2000 so that you can see how things have changed over time.
- And what's interesting is that you can also look at the pattern for the total population and then by race and Hispanic origin. This is especially useful in a state like Nebraska, where much of the immigration has been relatively recent and where the immigrant communities are often younger than the overall population. The graphics bear this out.
- These tools help us to understand the data, and they sometimes point out some trends that may run counter to popular perception.
- For instance, another data viz tool looks at age groups in the 2020 Census. It shows that Nebraska's school-age population (5-17) grew by 9.6 percent between 2010 and 2020.
- That's a faster increase than we saw in fast-growing states such as Florida or Nevada. In fact, only five states and the District of Columbia had larger increases in their aged 5-17 populations.
- And finally, this past September, we released a data viz tool that looks at detailed races and ethnicities from the 2020 Census. This tool has both maps and rankings for states and counties for various detailed races and ethnicities and illustrates the rich diversity of the population and the role of immigrants.
- For several counties in Nebraska, for instance, the most common detailed Black or African American alone group is Somali and for some, the second most common group is Sudanese, Nigerian, or Ethiopian.
- These data and tools illustrate our commitment to developing statistics that accurately reflect our ever-changing nation, offering the rich mosaic representing who we are.

HELP ACCESSING OUR DATA

- Our data serve and benefit everyone including America's underserved groups, and new tools will hopefully make it easier to answer the questions facing communities big and small across the country. The Census Bureau's mission can only be fulfilled when not only is everyone counted, but when their data needs are met, too.
- Hopefully, I've whetted your appetite for the data we have that can help everyone "meet the moment." Truth be known, I've not even scratched the surface. There is a lot more data available, and we're eager to share it all with you.
- To help with that, allow me to point out a great resource here in your state: the Nebraska State Data Center, located at your partner institution, the University of Nebraska at Omaha.
- The Center is part of the broader state data center network that helps make Census Bureau data available to state and local government, as well as local communities. So, if you're interested in accessing our data, I encourage you to contact them.
- The Census Bureau also has data dissemination specialists whose job it is to provide training and assistance to the public on all our products.

2030 CENSUS PREPARATION

- Of course, another key area of work this year will be our preparations for the 2030 Census. We're doing a lot of exciting work and research ahead of the next census.
- In January, we announced that our initial operational plan for the 2030 Census will be released in early 2025, and we'll hold a major field test in 2026. Soon we will begin to release strategy documents outlining how we're approaching fundamental aspects of our census preparations, including stakeholder engagement.
- I want to point out our redesigned website at <www.census.gov/2030census>. The content there will give you a better idea of all the work that we're doing.
- And as part of our commitment to open and transparent communication, we will be continuing our series of webinars to share information about our preparations. I hope that you will follow along on those webinars.
- Our main goal for the 2030 Census—and for every decennial census—is a complete and accurate count of the nation's population. To accomplish that, it's so important that we engage with diverse voices and perspectives.
- After 2020, stakeholders asked us to do more earlier in the decade—and we listened, and are acting on that.
- We need to hear from people across our nation about how to reach historically undercounted populations, how to leverage technology, how to collect information in an easy and efficient manner. We need to work with stakeholders to identify hard-to-find populations and tailor our strategies to reach them.
- One manifestation of that commitment to reaching hard-to-count areas is a focus on improving our information about addresses and housing unit location for rural and remote areas.
- We face challenges in navigating to houses in rural areas when addresses are nonexistent or—when they do exist for mailing purposes—are not recognizable by most mapping and navigation applications.
- Descriptions like "white house with blue shutters" or "the Smith homestead" might tell us what the house looks like or who owned it, but not where it's located.
- We need descriptions that are easily understood and easy to navigate to so our census takers can find the house to deliver a questionnaire or conduct a survey. So, we need to develop processes to detect and maintain information for rural communities that lack "city-style" addresses.
- In recognition of that fact, we are seeking to innovate the way we geolocate residential addresses in rural and remote locations in the United States.

- How can the Census Bureau capture and maintain residential addresses that are not traditional mailing or city-style addresses more efficiently or effectively than solely by sending a human canvasser out to capture that information?
- To help answer that question, we are seeking novel technologies, methods, and approaches from the public and from experts.
- One way we're doing that is through an Address Geolocation Challenge via our StatVentures program. This is a program that scouts technology through collaborations with innovators outside of the government, to ensure we continue to provide the highest quality data.
- The Address Geolocation Challenge is happening right now, and if you have ideas about how the Census Bureau can geolocate residential addresses in rural and remote locations, I hope you will submit your ideas. You can learn more at <<https://coil.census.gov/statventures>>.

CONCLUSION

- As we move toward 2030, we cannot complete our mission alone. We need a community-of-the-whole approach that involves support from the wonderfully diverse people of our nation.
- I hope you will all join us on our journey to the next decennial count and provide your valuable input and feedback.
- Both rural America and the Census Bureau are facing challenges in the coming years and decades. But you know, I've always seen challenges and even obstacles as fodder for opportunity. You just have to think about them differently to see the opportunity that others don't see.
- That's why I believe great things lie ahead for rural communities in Nebraska and throughout our nation. By tapping our creativity, our passion for helping each other, and even the cultural strength of the city, I believe rural America will thrive like never before...and so will its residents.
- Just know that the Census Bureau is here to help with a bounty of data for your informed decision-making and planning.
- Thank you so much for the honor of addressing you. I look forward to your questions.