We Travel Together—National Travel Monitoring Exposition and Conference

Director's remarks as prepared for delivery

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INTRODUCTION

- Good morning, everyone. I'm honored to be here this morning as your director of the U.S. Census Bureau.
- Hey, I'm not sure how many people here know that I conducted transportation research for over a decade beginning in the early 2000s.
- In fact, I've worked with at least a few people at this conference! So in a real sense, I'm back with old friends. . .Just so you know. . .I started with research for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to get regional estimates of particulates emitted by vehicles.
- I designed some pretty cool studies that sampled roads for one set of studies and sampled construction sites for others.
- For the construction site studies, we'd send folks to those sites to affix emission-monitoring devices on tractors and bulldozers. . .all the heavy equipment.
- I also was involved in a number of travel behavior surveys for metro areas as well as a stint with the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA).
- For FHWA, I was involved in design work on the National Household Travel Survey as well as some exploratory data collections on a project where I partnered with Battelle that called for data collections using phone apps to track people's trips geospatially.
- I also conducted a multiyear national survey for AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety (AAAFTS) called the American Driver Survey, and I was involved in a longitudinal survey of aging drivers in partnership with Columbia University and the University of Michigan's Traffic Research Institute.
- I remember visiting the EPA facility in Ann Arbor where they tested vehicles for gas mileage, and they had this secret, highly secured area for future models of sports cars like corvettes and mustangs.
- The folks would tease us by saying the cars were just behind that door in the building next door, but absolutely no one could enter, not even for a quick peek.
- Those were all good times, I'll tell you. . .
- But enough reminiscing. . .I'm here to tell you about some cool data that are available to you.
- Now I'd be remiss if I didn't first express my sincere thanks to the Idaho Transportation Department and the Pacific Northwest Transportation Consortium for organizing this event and for the opportunity to address you today.
- And thank you to the organizing committee for this invitation. I have been trying to get to this area of the country for a couple of years.
- Why? Well, you might recall that I said I was your director of the U.S. Census Bureau.
- And I meant it.
- In fact, I have made external engagement with the public a high priority for the Census Bureau.

- So whenever I come out for a keynote speech like this one, I make it a point to visit with the local university or community college, local tribal areas, community leaders, elected officials from cities, states and counties, Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs), chambers of commerce. . .whoever can spare some time.
- It's important for us to show the public the value of our data for their communities.
- So that's exactly what I'll be doing later this week.
- And in a very real sense. . .that's why I'm here this morning to talk to you.
- I recognize that many of the entities represented here today—former colleagues included—rely heavily on the statistical data we produce for planning and governance.
- It's our mission to get you the data you need, in a form that's easily understandable, that's usable. . .and that's culturally relevant.
- That means besides talking to you, I'm also here to listen. . .to understand your data needs and to take those back to our staff so we can develop better tools and release statistical data that are more helpful to you.
- Based on all the policy research I've done over the past 40 years, I know that in order to be effective, we must work together, plan together, and help each other.
- In the travel research world and in many other planning and policy research communities, I have seen this time and again.
- I've witnessed and promoted cooperation among federal, state, and local governments, among regional planning and development agencies, MPOs; among county and city public health departments, and so on.
- We are stronger and more effective when we help each other.
- And all that very much resonates with me.
- It allows that the best solutions to societal challenges rise to the top, be those challenges in the transportation arena, or in housing, hunger, public health, economic development. or whatever.
- But you know what? We need quality data to create the evidence base for solutions.
- So let me talk to you about quality data.
- But first I'll give a little context.

CHANGING NATIONAL LANDSCAPE

- I'd like to start by sharing some illuminating data about the state of our nation.
- After all, providing statistical data is what the Census Bureau does, right?
- So, let's do it!
- OK, I hope we all realize that our nation is constantly changing—constantly evolving and growing.
- Let me give you a taste of that with some findings from our 2020 Census.
- First, our nation is increasingly diverse.
- The overall racial and ethnic diversity of the country has increased since 2010.
- The White alone, non-Hispanic population went from 64 percent of the population in 2010 to just under 58 percent in 2020.
- And our projections suggest that it will be 48 percent by 2050.
- In fact, currently, our population estimates show that among minors—that is, people under the age of 18—people of color are already a majority of the population.
- Yes, the diversity train has left the station, and it did so a while ago.
- Here is another important change to think about.
- Our nation is getting older. Hey, aren't we all? I know I am!
- Anyway, overall, the U.S. population in 2020 was older than in 2010 or even 2000.

- Hey, in 2020, about 1 in 6 people in the United States were aged 65 and over.
- But back in 1920, it was less than 1 in 20.
- Over the last century, the population aged 65 and over grew nearly five times faster than total population did.
- Think about that! Boomers like me are aging. That's why a lot of policy folks talk about the "silver tsunami."
- So. . .are we feeling old, folks? Well, just remember. . .70 is the new 50! Okay?
- Now let's take a peek at residential mobility.
- We're also seeing population shifts and state-to-state migration.
- From the Vintage 2023 Population Estimates released last month, we know that while the nation's fastest-growing cities continue to be in Sun Belt states, some of the top gainers are now on the outskirts of metropolitan areas or in rural areas.
- Perhaps it's a sign of the pandemic's lasting impact.
- Our country's fastest-growing places are increasingly likely to be far-flung exurban communities on the outer margins of metro areas—say, 30, 40, and even more than 60 miles away from the largest city's downtown.
- While 39 percent of the country's population lived in cities of 50,000 or more, we remain a nation of mostly smaller communities.
- Along with these population shifts are interesting housing dynamics.
- So let me mention that.
- The housing stock in the United States grew by 6.7 percent between 2010 and 2020.
- That's about half the growth rate of the previous decade.
- But here's the kicker: the growth was not uniform across metropolitan areas, just like for regions and states.
- By the way, Canyon County, which includes Caldwell just west of here, can boast the highest growth in housing stock percentagewise between 2022 and 2023.
- Bet you didn't know that.
- OK, so I've provided some context about our changing society and you might be thinking "so what?"
- So let me tell you so what. . .

COMMUTING CHANGES

- All these changes have serious impacts on travel and transportation.
- In fact, some of the most far-reaching effects can come from shifts in work patterns.
- Remember, there has been a significant rise in both remote work and gig work.
- We know that the pandemic radically altered U.S. commuting behaviors between 2019 and 2021.
- And that change has been accompanied by shifts in housing and commuting patterns.
- The commuting experience—or to put a finer point on it, its absence—is central to the life and well-being of many U.S. workers.
- During the pandemic's initial phase, the share of people working from home roughly tripled—from just under 6 percent of workers in 2019 to about 18 percent in 2021.
- A year later, in 2022, it declined to 15 percent of workers as public health protections came to an end and we entered—fingers crossed—our post-COVID world.
- But that's still a significant shift, right?
- The pandemic introduced a striking decline in the share of people commuted to work.

- In 2019, just over three out of four workers drove alone to work, compared to about two out of three in 2021.
- And by 2022, the share of workers driving alone to work did increase slightly to 69 percent, but that's still significantly lower than the 76 percent of workers driving alone to work before the pandemic.
- As in prior years, the percentage of home-based workers varied by geographic area.
- However, uneven home-based work showed large differences between geographic areas.
- For example, the share of home-based workers in Colorado, the District of Columbia, and Washington was 20 percent or more in 2022.
- Yet, only about 8 percent or less of workers worked from home in Mississippi, North Dakota, and Puerto Rico.
- Those differences are pretty striking.
- Our data show that in significant ways these changes remained in place in 2022.
- Employers, workers, families, governments, and service providers continued to adjust to the constraints of the pandemic.
- Many employers encouraged workers to return to on-site work while testing flexible, hybrid work arrangements.
- And traditional employment centers hosted fewer on-site workers.
- Many states and municipalities found themselves evaluating the role public transportation in the face of reduced and uncertain ridership.
- As the share of workers who drove alone to work remained low by recent standards, so did the share commuting by public transportation.
- Public transit ridership was cut roughly in half during the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the share of U.S. workers commuting by transit dropping from 5 percent in 2019 to 2.5 percent in 2021—the lowest share ever recorded by the American Community Survey (ACS).
- In 2022, this share increased to just over 3 percent, which is still substantially lower than in 2019.
- Before the pandemic, in 2019, about 70 percent of public transportation commuters living in U.S. metro areas lived in one of these seven transit-heavy metro areas:
  - Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C.
- Now, a closer look at these places illustrates the sharp decline in transit commuting during the COVID-19 pandemic and the extent of the rebound since the pandemic's first phase.
- Transit commuting did not return to 2019 levels in any of these seven transit-heavy metros by 2022, although they all have seen some increases since 2021.
- For instance, in the New York metro area—historically home to far more public transportation commuters than in other areas—there were roughly 700,000 fewer transit commuters in 2022 than in 2019.
- We see a similar story in the Washington, DC metro area, where many federal employees live and work.
- Heck, I've seen it for myself when taking the Metro in DC.
- The number of transit commuters in 2022 was less than half the 2019 estimate.
- In the San Francisco metro area, the relative decrease in transit commuters was even steeper, from about 462,000 in 2019 to about 183,000 in 2022.
- That's a 60 percent decrease.

OTHER NATURAL DISASTERS

- Now, COVID-19 is one of the biggest phenomena we think about when considering disruptors to transportation.
- But it's by no means the only one.
- For example, the collapse of Baltimore's Francis Scott Key Bridge in March has affected commuting patterns and complicated traffic in the area now and will continue to do so in the months and years ahead.
- It could also slow new home and business construction as delivery routes for supplies are disrupted.
- Census Bureau data on the Baltimore region's population, demographic, economic, and commuting profiles can help planners and emergency managers respond to the needs of that community and plan for its recovery.
- The data also show this event's potential impact on the area's most socially vulnerable people and neighborhoods.
- Baltimore City and Baltimore County are home to more than a million people and over 32,000 business establishments, many of whom have been affected by the bridge collapse.
- Thousands more tourists and commuters could be impacted.
- Approximately two-thirds of people who worked in the city and county drove alone to work.
- The collapse will also likely impact the more than 50,000 people living in neighborhoods near the port and on the water upstream from the bridge.
- Fourteen percent of people in these neighborhoods live below the poverty line.
- Hey, vessel traffic in the Port of Baltimore has also been affected.
- Last year, the total value of trade through the port was $81 billion, representing 47 million tons of goods.
- About 8,000 people worked at the Port of Baltimore facility, and more than 15,000 jobs were directly related to the port.
- It will be important to track how this disaster affects transportation, employment, and poverty levels now and in the future.
- And so, in the wake of the bridge's collapse, the Census Bureau conducted a rapid-response analysis of commuters directly impacted by the incident.
- In a first-of-its kind analysis for our agency, we calculated turn-by-turn, segment-by-segment driving routes to work for car commuters in the area who responded to the ACS.
- Commuters who likely used the bridge represent a distinct slice of the local commuting population.
- Here's what we found:
  - Compared to other car commuters in the area, bridge commuters were more likely to:
    - Hold a high school degree as their highest educational attainment.
    - Have annual earnings between $50,000 and $64,999.
    - Work in production, transportation, and material moving occupations.
- This is important information for planners, and may be useful to the transportation research community.
- The methodological approach we used joins our growing toolkit to help members of the public and government partners prepare for and respond to emergencies.
- So let's put this into a little more perspective.

HOW CENSUS DATA CAN HELP

- All these changes—in demographics, housing, and work, as well as disasters—can present challenges to transportation planners.
- But these 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 transportation planning.
- And that's where the Census Bureau comes in.
- We have granular data on the nation's people, households, and businesses that can be combined to external information such as road, transit, and traffic data.
- Hopefully, I've whetted your appetite for the data we have.
- 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.
- In particular, our American Community Survey provides a treasure trove of data that paint a portrait of a city's population and housing.
- It's the source of many of the data points I've mentioned today.
- And most policy at federal, state, and local levels is developed using ACS data.
- The ACS offers data at state, county, city, and even census tract levels on such things as race, ethnicity, sex, disability stats, income, poverty, education, veteran status, plus housing and many other key sociodemographic variables.
- 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.
- We're constantly working to better meet your data needs.
- In fact, let me tell you about some tools we've created to help you get access to our data.
- 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.
- And our Community Resilience Estimates provide a simple metric to help gauge the social vulnerability of every neighborhood in the United States to disasters such as a bridge collapse, wildfire, flooding, hurricanes, and a pandemic.
- Modeled estimates are based on 10 components of social vulnerability include employment, disability, and vehicle access, which is included to address an individual's or household's capacity to evacuate an area affected by a disaster.
- This information is particularly important for local officials when responding to emergencies.
- As decision-makers plan recovery efforts, our data will help them gauge the needs and vulnerabilities of communities, residents, and businesses in their region.
- So there you have it, folks.

CONCLUSION

- I've talked a lot today about changes and challenges.
- 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.

- By tapping our creativity, our passion for helping each other, and even the cultural strength of the nation, I believe we will thrive like never before. . .and so will our 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.