

# Utah Valley University: “The Role of Data in Policymaking”

Director’s remarks as prepared for delivery

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## INTRODUCTION

- Good morning, everyone. I’m Robert Santos, director of the U.S. Census Bureau.
- It’s an honor to be here and address you all today.
- Thank you to Utah Valley University for inviting me to talk about data and the role it plays in policymaking. I want to start by sharing a personal and timely example of how impactful the intersection of data and policy can be.
- As you know, today is the anniversary of the September 11 terror attacks, also known as Patriot Day. This day is incredibly profound to our nation and to me, as I expect it is for you, too.
- Even after more than two decades, the tragic images of suffering and the feelings of assault and horror associated with the events of the day are indelible in our memories.
- Our Census Bureau family was directly touched by the 9/11 tragedy. Marion Britton and Waleska Martinez, employees from the New York Regional Office, were passengers on Flight 93 that went down in Shanksville, Pennsylvania.
- The events of 9/11 brought out the best in many of us. Everyday people became heroes. First responders became superheroes. So many sacrificed their lives for others.
- One of the distinct honors of my statistical career was participating a research project to document the survivor experience as they exited the towers prior to collapse. As part of that study, our project team interviewed those loved ones who received phone calls or had voicemails from loved ones who did not make it out to safety on that fateful morning.
- Conducting this research proved to be absolutely heart wrenching. But we recognized the importance of this work. The data we collected was contributing to the creation of stronger, safer, and easier-to-evacuate buildings.
- The experience impacted the project team personally and immensely. To this day, I still get emotional when talking about the project, as some of my fellow Census Bureau staff know well.
- But the truth is, I don’t ever want to feel unemotional about it. It was real and the research mattered.
- As a result, I carry a deep sense of patriotism with me as part of my life experience. My passion for contributing to this research and helping make society and our nation better has continued to grow over time, and it directly relates to my work now as the leader of a federal statistical agency.

## IMPORTANCE OF CENSUS BUREAU DATA

- You see, at the Census Bureau, 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.
- 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. These data are valuable assets that can help the public and policymakers make data-driven decisions.
- Our data can assist federal, state, local, and tribal governments in equitably distributing resources and identifying underserved communities. The data can also be used to help governments and communities enforce antidiscrimination laws, regulations, and policies.
- We provide a wealth of data by age, disability, race, ethnicity, sex, income, veteran status, and other key demographic variables to help measure equity.
- Combining these data with information about housing, voting, language, employment, and education can create great potential for understanding economic development possibilities, addressing community needs, and mitigating inequities.
- These data are often by geography, which provides meaning and context to the statistical data, and can identify rural and underserved communities.
  - For example, just yesterday was our annual release of national-level income, poverty, and health insurance coverage statistics.
  - And tomorrow, we will release the 2023 American Community Survey 1-year estimates, the latest data available from the ACS covering all places with populations of 65,000 people or more.
  - These are important data sets are critically important and are widely used for policymaking and decision-making by communities and businesses across our nation.
- Simply put, the data we collect and maintain and disseminate is not just a national asset, it's a keystone to our democracy.
- This is also true for data provided by our federal statistical partners and more broadly for all our federal government. Democracy is at risk when we no longer know who we are—as a people, as an economy, and as our nation.
- That's why we are committed to producing data that reflects an accurate portrait of Utah and the rest of the United States. That's important in order for us to provide you with the quality data you need, and that your communities rely on.
- To that end, we're constantly assessing how we can improve our statistical programs to better serve and represent you.
- We continuously research strategies for improving respondent understanding of questions we ask and the accuracy of the data we produce. We're constantly asking ourselves how we can make our data more widely available, and provide better access to communities that deserve their equitable share of resources.

## COMMUNITY-OF-THE-WHOLE EFFORT

- In all our work, and especially as we prepare for the 2030 Census, an important part of our efforts includes seeking out and listening to diverse voices. That certainly includes listening to our partners, which of course includes you.
- In my role as director of the Census Bureau, I seek closer connections but with Census Bureau partners, stakeholders, and the public more generally.
- Since becoming director, I've traveled across the country and have 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!

- That's why I'm here in Utah 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.
- A key part of our mission is to educate the public, policymakers, and stakeholders about the data we have available and how to use them. And our goal is to make accessing our data easier than ever.
- We have a huge amount of data sets available at [data.census.gov](https://data.census.gov), where you can search for and filter by a wide range of demographic, economic, and social characteristics. This is a quick and easy way to easily gather the most up to date information on your community.
- We are working to develop new tools to help people quickly access our data. Here are some of the exciting tools we've launched in that effort:
  - The Opportunity Atlas is a comprehensive census tract-level dataset of children's outcomes in adulthood covering nearly the entire U.S. population.
  - The Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics program produces public-use information combining federal, state, and Census Bureau data on employers and employees. It fills critical data gaps and provides economic indicators that state and local authorities need to make informed decisions.
  - My Community Explorer is an interactive, map-based tool that highlights demographic and socioeconomic data that measure inequality and can help inform data-based solutions.
  - Our Community Resilience Estimates provide an easily understood metric for how at-risk every neighborhood in the United States is to disasters, including the COVID-19 pandemic, winter weather, and flooding.
- We also are doing great work with The Opportunity Project and the Census Open Innovation Labs to turn federal open data into new technologies that solve real world problems.
- 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.
- 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.
- Another part of our transparency efforts is transparency in our communications and our decision-making processes. As the nation's premier statistical agency, it's so important that we communicate openly with the public.
- We engage openly with our stakeholders from all across the United States in our work. For example, we work with advisory committees, whose deliberations are open to the public.
- We also proactively provide training and assistance to our data users. By meeting with them, we are also able foster two-way communication on data usability, operational issues, and other data-user needs.
- Some of the ways we can do this are through our data dissemination specialists, State Data Centers, and the Census Information Centers. These folks work directly with the public—including government officials, researchers, tribal leaders, community organizations, and chambers of commerce—to help them understand and access Census Bureau data.
- We are also part of the international statistical community, and we work with other nations' statistical agencies to understand best practices and address common concerns.
- All these entities have diverse perspectives to offer us. When we listen to and incorporate the perspectives of the people we measure, we'll produce more accurate, more relevant, more useful data.
- Likewise, it's critical that the public can trust us.

- That means trust in our data, and maintaining and enhancing scientific integrity is essential. To that end, the Census Bureau only releases statistical data that adhere to rigorous quality standards and are fit for intended uses.
- But it also means that the public can trust us to protect their information. Balancing transparency with the privacy protections afforded in our laws is an incredibly important duty, and it's one that we take very seriously.
- The Census Bureau's mission can only be fulfilled when not only is everyone counted, but when their data needs are met, too.
- We constantly strive for excellence and are transparent about the limitations and issues we see in our work and the data we produce. And we will continue to be open and honest.

## PREPARATION FOR 2030/HUP RESEARCH

- All of these challenges are why the Census Bureau focuses so heavily on researching how to enumerate hard-to-count and historically undercounted populations.
- We conduct research on public trust, cultural relevance, language usage, question comprehension, and many other topics to develop better methods to reach and collect data from the hard-to-count population.
- Many other areas of research that may not appear on the surface to be about historically undercounted populations also intersect with these populations.
- Consider research on our field operations, on improving efficiency of enumerators using adaptive design, on leveraging administrative records to predict housing unit occupancy, on improving our frame of housing units. All such research interacts with and ultimately impacts the enumeration of historically undercounted people and their households.
- In fact, using this lens, it is easy to see that much of the research to improve the 2030 Census directly or indirectly involves the enumeration of historically undercounted populations.
- So it should come as no surprise that we have an interwoven research agenda to address the 2030 Census enumeration of historically undercounted populations.
- In our journey toward the 2030 Census, we have been conducting over 50 projects in five different enhancement areas. You can read about all of them in our 2030 Census Research Explorer tool at [census.gov/2030census](https://census.gov/2030census), by the way.
- Several projects primarily focus on reaching, motivating and accurately counting historically undercounted populations.
- Much of this research intersects with these topics even if the titles of the research do not include the term "historically undercounted population."
- In fact, 22 or 40% of our research projects have been investigating how to increase participation of historically undercounted populations, while nine (16%) others probe how to improve external engagement, which necessarily includes research to engage historically undercounted populations.
- That means over half of our projects involve research that addresses our ability to effectively enumerate these critically important populations.
- Our efforts in this arena cover a wide range of topics. Among them:
  - Conducting research to inform our overall 2030 Census communications campaign and developing outreach strategies for historically undercounted populations.
  - Exploring how we can use administrative records and analysis of 2020 Census data to investigate the undercount of young children, one of the most persistently undercounted groups.

- Examining the use of tailored contact strategies—that is, messaging, materials and methods of inviting households to self-respond to the census. Improving and increasing self-response is critical to the quality of census data, and we want to design our contact strategies with the needs and preferences of different demographic groups and geographic areas in mind.
- Developing an internet self-response instrument specifically for certain types of non-institutional group quarters, such as college student housing or military barracks.
- Additionally, we received a lot of public feedback suggesting that we include training and educational materials to prepare our census staff to engage and interact with culturally diverse respondent communities, including the use of tailored, unique cultural approaches with historically undercounted populations.
- In response, we're investigating how we might add training that ensures Census Bureau staff build specialized skills on cultural competencies, including field staff and Census Questionnaire Assistance representatives.
- Improving how we collect and present information on historically undercounted and hard-to-count populations is important work. We're taking a single enterprise approach across the Census Bureau—both within and outside of the 2030 Census research program—on the collection and reporting of data on these populations.
- For example, we also have experts throughout the agency working together on topics like the undercount of young children.
- And we're seeking to innovate the way we geolocate residential addresses in rural and remote locations in the United States.
- I want to invite you to learn more and follow along with our preparations at [www.census.gov/2030census](http://www.census.gov/2030census). The content there will give you a better idea of the scope of the work that we're doing.
- As we endeavor to develop a superb 2030 Census, we ask that you stay engaged with us and with each other.
- We're all in this together. Our efforts and our nation are stronger when we work together toward the common goal of a complete and accurate census.

## CONCLUSION

- Both Utah 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 communities in Utah and throughout our nation.
- By tapping our creativity, our passion for helping each other, and our shared resources, I believe we will thrive like never before and so will our residents.
- And 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 policy and economic planning.
- Just know that the Census Bureau is here to help with a bounty of data for your informed decision-making.
- Thank you so much for the honor of addressing you. I look forward to your questions.