

## **Recommendations and Comments to the Census Bureau from the Census Scientific Advisory Committee Spring 2018 Meeting**

To: Ron Jarmin, Associate Director for Economic Programs, Performing the Non-Exclusive Functions and Duties of the Director

From: Barbara A. Anderson, Chair, CSAC

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### **Citizenship Question on Main Census**

The citizenship question planned to be on the main 2020 Census came up in CSAC comments on many different sessions. The following summarizes these comments:

1. CSAC wishes to officially state our opposition to the last-minute inclusion of the citizenship question on the 2020 Census. We have concerns about the lack of adequate testing, about the implications for nonresponse (unit and item), implications for the cost, and implications for attitudes about the Census Bureau and concerns about confidentiality. There is a hierarchy of needs for the decennial census, with an accurate count of foremost importance, so any proposed changes should be evaluated in consideration of the potential impact on completeness and accuracy.
2. We think that the rationale offered by Sec. Ross in favor of adding the question relied on flawed logic. Fundamentally, the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. In other words, just because there is not clear evidence that adding the question would harm the census accuracy, this is not evidence that it will not. Moreover, the empirical evidence that was discussed by Sec. Ross came from data collected in a different data collection context, in a different political climate, before anti-immigrant attitudes were as salient and consequential.
3. The Census tradition has always been to collect evidence about the impact of a question before the question is added to the Census. We worry that it could have spill-over item nonresponse consequences for the race/ethnicity item. Similarly, borrowing the question from the ACS—which has question wording that reflected a different set of motivations and uses—results in a question wording that is puzzling in its specificity distinguishing U.S. territories. We would encourage the Census Bureau to immediately start testing the impact of the citizenship question.
4. We anticipate an increased need for NRFU in light of reaction to the addition of the citizenship question. We would like to receive updated NRFU and cost estimates. A sensitivity analysis of the magnitude of the effect on costs would be appropriate, since a wide range would be plausible.
5. One suggestion for evaluating the impact of the citizenship question is to compare responses to the 2018 Providence Census Test before and after Ross's announcement. Comparisons could be made in terms of unit and item nonresponse, junk responses, etc.
6. We would like to hear how the Census Bureau plans to assure the public of confidentiality protections. We also express concern that the knowledge of future availability of block-

level estimates might lead to increased item or overall non-response, even if Title 13 effectively protects individual level data. Currently, based on the ACS, these data are available on the block group level, but the specificity, detail and risk would be much greater with block level data from a complete census.

We believe adding the citizenship question has important implications for communications strategy. We would like to have relevant Census staff and Y&R present at the fall meeting to share their progress and plans in light of CBAMS results and the political context.

7. Given the Census Bureau will need to produce block level estimates, the Census Bureau must determine how to incorporate Census data and administrative records to create estimates of citizenship by census block. CSAC would like to be involved in the decision making. We request information on the timeline, relevant decision makers, and other information that will keep us up to speed.
8. CSAC requests that at its next meeting John Abowd report on how the release of citizenship data at the block level will affect the risk of disclosure of personal information.
9. Even before the full communications strategy for 2020 is set, we urge the Census Bureau to be proactive about communications countering false information published through social media.
10. We encourage the Census Bureau to further investigate whether application of statistical methods to the ACS data on citizenship could satisfy the needs to enforce the Voting Rights Act that Sec. Ross discusses. We would like to have a presentation on this at the next CSAC meeting.

### **Update on the 2020 Census**

We encourage the Census Bureau retrospectively to look back over the last decade to see which deadlines it has met and which have not been met. Doing so could identify the particular areas of weakness and areas where there is a need to invest time and energy.

### **2018 End-to-End Test**

The Committee looks forward to an interim report on the results of the 2018 End-to-End test at its next meeting. Some topics that the Committee highlighted in its questions during the session include:

1. Whether item-non-response varies by method of completion (e.g. internet, phone).
2. Whether the use of CAPTCHA continues to be an effective deterrent against bots and whether CAPTCHA is differentially burdensome to respondents by demographic group.
3. Whether non-ID response options posed any new problems to obtaining an accurate count.
4. How the use of administrative records for NRFU worked out.

### **Demonstration on Recruiting and Assessment**

We commend the Census for focusing on applicant experience in the new recruiting and assessment platform. The online application will help reduce barriers for candidates and prevent

a cumbersome process from hindering the goal of hiring the workforce needed for a successful Census.

1. We suggest the Census consider the value of having the voluntary fields of race, disability, etc. compared to potential costs of dissuading applicants concerned about discriminatory treatment. If they are kept, we suggest you place those questions at the end after the other components of the online form.
2. It would be helpful for users to have an overview of what they should expect before entering the application platform - asking about home address and transportation, asking about hours and days available, assessment tests, etc.
3. The presentation did not focus on the information pages available to potential candidates before they enter the application platform, but we encourage having clear and complete information about the opportunities and processes.
4. We would recommend that the types of positions are clear with a standard job description, and as much information as possible about the rough magnitude of jobs open. We'd expect this latter information to be readily available from improved performance dashboards.
5. To be clear with applicants, hiring policies on disqualifying past criminal offenses should be public and explicit.
6. CSAC recommends that Census Bureau staff implement some means of verifying whether job applicants can actually speak and read the foreign languages they claim to speak.

### **Questions Planned for the 2020 Census and the American Community Survey Process Overview**

1. To ensure that non-English speakers are aware of Census Bureau resources available to complete the census, CSAC recommends that Bureau staff tabulate foreign languages spoken at home by county or MSA to identify areas with high concentration of language speakers and then consult lists of foreign language media outlets to find appropriate venues for advertising and outreach.
2. CSAC recommends that Census Bureau staff explore the possible use of technology to identify respondents' preferred language of interview.
3. CSAC recommends that Census Bureau train enumerators to be able to confirm that family-provided translators actually understand the meaning of the questions they are translating and can communicate it to the respondent.
4. CSAC recommends that the content be the same for all 59 languages rather than being abbreviated for languages supported by internet self-report assistance or census questionnaire assistance.
5. In order to communicate the availability of language guide templates and video shells for languages beyond the 59 supported languages, CSAC recommends creating a check box for "other language" with a write-in space, and then programming the interface to send a message to the Decennial Translation Branch to assign a callback or visit by an interviewer fluent in that language or a translator.
6. The listing of racial groups on the Census is in decreasing order by number of people in the category. Thus, we recommend that for sex, Female be listed before Male, since there are more females than males in the United States. This should be implemented as soon as possible on the Census and all Census surveys.

## **Cyber Security in the 2020 Census**

We make the following suggestions:

1. The Census Bureau should conduct phishing experiments and study other attacks on contractors, not just Census Bureau systems.
2. Be careful what information is posted publicly (contractor names, system architecture).
3. There should be stress tests for Denial of Service attacks.
4. The Census Bureau should be proactive in educating the public about phishing attacks.
5. Be prepared for complex social media threats.
6. Prepare for foreign actors entering fraudulent information.
7. Ensure there are clear roles to manage external threats. While the Census Bureau is ultimately responsible for all threats, it does not have the capability to manage all external threats.
8. Work on detecting “cyber-trolling”- purposefully entering incorrect information.
9. We would like to know what happens if there are two entries for the same person, but one was based on a stolen identity (for non-id cases)? Records would likely be identical for Person 1 except for the phone number/email or lack of contact information.

## **Administrative Records Research Usage in the American Community Survey**

1. Census should be cautious about incorporating Administrative Records that are derived from proprietary or black-box methods, as it will not be possible to validate methods or results, or to be confident about changes to underlying systems or methods over time.

## **Administrative Records Usage in the 2020 Census**

There are the following recommendations based on the work of the Administrative Records Data Working Group and endorsed by CSAC:

1. Census should continue to explore strategies for incorporating out-of-sample forecast error (also called cross validation) into the multinomial regression models for the 2020 Census to improve and refine categorizations of Occupied, Vacant and Non-Existent housing and to refine the assignment of probabilities for correct addresses.
2. Census should test additional thresholds for owner-renter and Hispanic origin sub-national models. Two additions could be considered: adding new thresholds beyond the less than and greater than 20% breakpoint currently being tested, and consider testing more than two categories. For example, the urban/rural distinction is currently binary – could more than two categories be considered, as for example suburban and/or exurban.
3. Census should continue testing to further reduce bias in assigning characteristics of age, sex, race / origin and tenure in documented low income and marginal demographic communities, where inaccurate assignments may be more pronounced. Special attention should be paid to simulations applying “Within Household” and “Nearest Neighbor” hot deck assignments, given the recent decisions against using a combined

question for collecting race/ethnicity or a separate “Middle Eastern or North African” (MENA) category.

4. Census should implement formal protocols for risks, dependencies and priorities for AR use in handling NRFU units for the upcoming decennial census data collection and for future efforts. Testing and analysis take time but are less costly than repeated NRFU follow-ups. Additionally, incomplete testing might provide incomplete information. CSAC recommends testing additional parameters / thresholds, additional categories, and/or additional test areas.

To this end, we suggest that the Census Bureau assign/hire more statisticians to carry out the technical tasks necessary for investigating administrative records use in the 2020 Census, since there is current insufficient staff to accomplish the tasks and this would overall save money.

5. To assure the goal of reducing Decennial costs by \$1.4B while maintaining quality, we recommend the Census Bureau prioritize the effort of those involved in working on Administrative Records activities. With the understanding that both staffing and time are limited, the Bureau should evaluate the remaining activities to determine benefit, effort, risk, and dependencies. Ideally, the activities with the highest benefit and lowest effort, risk, and dependencies should be worked on first. This is important in light of the possibility that in 2020 those that choose to not respond may increase.
6. CSAC would appreciate a presentation on any updated estimate of NRFU in 2020, including the possibility of increased non response in combination with the savings from Administrative Records.

### **New Annual Business Survey**

CSAC expressed appreciation and support for the presentation and initiative to conduct an Annual Business Survey. There were no comments on the presenter’s questions.

CSAC wants to see more effort to identify and gather information about non-employer businesses. We would like to know if more information can be obtained through the ACS’s question on employment, possibly combined with administrative records.

CSAC would be interested in a follow-up presentation on the progress of the ABS and on initiatives to gather more information about non-employer businesses or individuals who are generating income but do not necessarily regard themselves as being in business. We would also like to hear how/whether Census is coordinating with BLS, BEA, SBA, IRS and other agencies that may have an interest in both employer and non-employer businesses.