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First 'High-Tech Census' Raises Stakes for Local Government.

Much of the discussion about the 2020 U.S. Census has been dominated by President Trump's push to add a citizenship question, as well as critics who say he's doing so to undermine the count. But officials across the country are also grappling with conducting a Census in a country and world that have drastically changed in the past decade due to an acceleration of technology and new online threats.

Basically, when the 2020 U.S. Census arrives next spring, it will be seeking to accurately count a vastly different country than the one it surveyed 10 years ago.

The reference day used for the Census will again be April 1, as it has been since 1930, and the geographic space the Census covers will be the same. So too will the people, for the most part. What has changed since the federal government took its last sweeping decennial count of the population, however, is the way society engages with, shares, uses and values information.

The United States has counted its citizenry every 10 years since 1790, collecting data that includes age, gender, ethnicity and address, among other fields. Once the count is finished, the information is used by the federal government to plan how to best serve residents in a number of ways, including funding for health care, education, transportation, employment services and more. It is also used to help determine where to build vital infrastructure such as schools, roads and hospitals. Then there's political representation: Census data helps determine how many congressional seats certain areas get to represent them at the state and federal levels.

Funding and political representation have been at the forefront of recent conversations about why the Census matters. But what is perhaps less talked about is how the modern value of data — and the way local and state governments use it in tech and innovation offices — has made getting an accurate count all the more important.

Unlike 10 years ago, we now live in a world in which more local governments are using data to guide their decisions. Some of the actual data in that equation is often derived from the Census, increasing the stakes for communities this time around.

At the same time, the public's relationship with willingly surrendering data has become fraught. Hacks and data breaches are common, and the national climate is one in which many people are more reticent to share the exact information the Census seeks. At the same time, experts say bad actors online may be using the Census as a point of attack, warning about everything from foreign powers launching misinformation campaigns to petty criminals setting up fake websites to steal personal information for financial gain. Meanwhile, younger generations like millennials are all but unreachable via traditional methods of correspondence like phone, mail or door-to-door visits.

What this all adds up to is a far more complicated — and more high-stakes — environment for the U.S. Census Bureau to work within. But there are ways that local, county and state governments can assist. They are, after all, far more knowledgeable about the people being counted in their

communities than their federal counterparts.

What it comes down to, experts say, is understanding how the count will be taken, why it matters and what needs to be done to reach people and ensure they will be counted.

THE ‘FIRST HIGH-TECH CENSUS’

When it comes to understanding how the count is taken, it is perhaps most important for local and state governments to realize there has been a major change for 2020: For the first time ever, residents can fill out the Census online. For whatever reason, however, this has been misconstrued by some to mean that all citizens will be required to do this, and that the old methods — mail, phone and in-person visits — have been abandoned. Terri Ann Lowenthal is a nationally recognized Census expert who was the staff director of the U.S. House of Representatives Census oversight subcommittee from 1987 to 1994. She also covered the Census Bureau for the 2008 Obama Presidential Transition Team. This year, she is advising many state and city Census support efforts.

Within that work, Lowenthal has identified frequent misgivings over the idea that this will be the nation’s first fully digital Census, misgivings that she says are perhaps unfounded, owing to vague terminology.

“I think the term ‘digital Census’ suggests to many people that the response part of the Census will be done only online,” Lowenthal said, “and that in fact has created a lot of worry at the community and local government level. The Census Bureau itself never used the term ‘digital Census.’”

Lowenthal instead uses the phrase “first high-tech Census,” meaning that Internet response is now an option for filling out the survey, but it is by no means the only way to respond. As a result, concerns at the local level that the Census will leave behind residents without access to the Internet are unfounded. Misunderstanding aside, Lowenthal says there are advantages to this high-tech Census.

“No one argues with the need to modernize the Census,” Lowenthal said. “I find it ironic that people could buy Girl Scout cookies online before they could respond to the nation’s decennial Census online. Technology makes the Census more cost effective. Responding online is the least expensive way to gather data, and the Census Bureau is using technology not only to collect data, but also to prepare for the Census. … It has to know where every housing unit is, because the Census doesn’t just count people — it has to put them in the right location.”

Things like satellite imaging, construction permit databases for residential housing and other new data sets that have been collected or digitized in the past decade all stand to make the Census Bureau’s work easier by giving them a better idea of where people live. The Census also has new access to administrative records that can help them count people who don’t respond, although that is far from ideal. That all is the upshot of technology.

Conversely, having an online option to answer the Census creates potential for phishing attacks in which criminals trick the public into surrendering personal info. It also opens the country up as a whole to disinformation campaigns from foreign actors seeking to disrupt our political processes by fouling up the count.

“There is significant concern among local officials — and understandably so — that social media will be a conduit for rapidly spreading false information about the Census,” Lowenthal said. “For example, in relation to who should respond and how Census data can and cannot be used.”

Local governments can help the Census Bureau here by drowning out falsities with accurate

information, and by designing messaging campaigns with their own communities in mind that will effectively tell people the things they must know to stay safe and get counted correctly.

WHY THE COUNT MATTERS

The other focus of local governments when it comes to messaging, experts say, should be making sure their communities know why it is so important to get accurate Census data.

The idea that the Census is important because it influences funding and representation is perhaps an over-simplification. Andrew Reamer is a research professor at the George Washington Public Policy Institute at The George Washington University in Washington, D.C. He is a nationally recognized expert in what Census data is used for, and specifically how it affects funding.

Reamer said that it is very rare for the Census data itself to directly influence exact dollar amounts for funding. What happens is that for the next 10 years, other data sets that are derived from the Census actually dictate these things. This also has the potential to vary by state, with some states' federal funding allocation written into state law based on Census-derived data. What also might be unknown to most folks — both in government and within communities — is that Census-derived data influences private-sector decisions.

"Businesses use data derived from the Census to find out where to locate operations," Reamer said. "Target and Starbucks never locate a new operation without looking at the Census data. They have to understand how many people live in an area, what are their characteristics, how much money they have. If you're Target, you don't have cookie-cutter stores. Data will affect what you have inside, how you market, and how you advertise."

For some, it might be enough to learn that if they don't fill out their Census, the state highway authority might not have enough federal funding to repair roads. For others, however, it might ultimately be more effective to stress that not responding to the Census could determine whether or not they have a Starbucks at the end of their block that they can walk to.

This all comes back to the idea that state and local governments know how best to reach the people in their areas, or, failing that, know how to recruit volunteers and staff who can. In fact, across the country, many state and local government leaders are doing their best to support the federal Census Bureau by acting as conveners, and by working with nonprofits and other groups who know the people even better than they do.

SUPPORTING THE COUNT

San Jose, Calif., Mayor Sam Liccardo understands what's at stake for his city with the Census, estimating that for every person missed, his community could lose roughly $2,000.

As a leader of a city that consists of 40 percent residents born in another country, he also understands the challenges of crafting messaging for specific communities. This has been a focus of the city hall's work there to support the count, as has working with groups outside of government.

"We're doing some customary things and some unorthodox things," Liccardo said. "I think cities throughout the country are finding ways to message in multiple languages, to find trusted third parties such as churches and nonprofit organizations that can communicate the importance of the Census in their communities, and engaging many partners to ensure that we're all working together."

Some of the unique things that San Jose has been doing include working with partners to create a

texting app that can help locate residences that aren't on the map. This is technology that helps partners like nonprofits and faith-based organizations take to the streets and identify signs of unorthodox housing situations, such as families living in garages, accessory dwelling units or other makeshift homes within a community affected by the soaring cost of living in Silicon Valley. With the texting app, San Jose has been able to geolocate these units on the map. They can then use that data in the future to better organize Census support efforts.

Part of the city's work with community groups includes clearly communicating that data being gathered for the Census won't be used for other governmental purposes. "We have a lot of distrust to overcome as a result of the actions in Washington," Liccardo said.

San Jose is also leveraging unique partnerships with tech businesses in the area, including a particularly interesting one with Niantic, the company that makes the popular augmented reality game, Pokemon Go. In the past, Niantic has hosted events within Pokemon Go that require players going to a special area in the city to find rare Pokemon, areas that just so happen to be where they can also register to vote. That effort was a success in San Jose, and Liccardo says something similar may be helpful to spark engagement again for the Census, especially with the often-elusive millennial generation.

"Nobody ever thought Pikachu would be a partner of local government," the mayor said, "but we go where the people are."

San Jose is just one example, but it speaks to the idea that local government and the groups it works with are well-suited to help the Census by leveraging their intimate knowledge of communities to get the word out, emphasizing why this is important while helping to drown out misinformation campaigns. While the modern era is an increasingly complex one for a federal agency tasked with accurate data collection, there are also new cost-efficient tools that can be leveraged to help. The more that local governments embrace and understand that now, well in advance of the actual count, the better off their communities will be not just on April 1, but in the following decade that depends on Census data.

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