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BACKGROUND ON THE DECENNIAL CENSUS ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The Decennial Census Advisory Committee (DCAC) provides advisory input on the design of the 2010 census, the American Community Survey, and related programs. Committee members represent a range of census stakeholders, and APDU's seat on the Committee provides a channel for APDU members to weigh in from the data user perspective.

This meeting report is designed to keep APDU members informed on census activities, but also to encourage feedback. We received few responses to the questions posed in the previous meeting report; however -an important question was raised concerning the Census Bureau's assurance that the ACS would reflect full long form content, but their indication that selected ACS questions were being dropped. In a July 1 APDU communication, we relayed the Census Bureau's clarification that the questions dropped (such as non-cash benefits) were on the ACS questionnaire in anticipation of their inclusion on the 2000 long form. However, these questions did not make it on the 2000 long form, and are being dropped from the ACS questionnaire. In short, the ACS questionnaire does reflect full long form content.

Your Decennial Census Advisory Committee representative ([Ken Hodges khodges@claritas.com](mailto:khodges@claritas.com)) and alternate representative ([Mark Salling mark@urban.csuohio.edu](mailto:mark@urban.csuohio.edu)) hope to encourage further questions and participation among APDU members. We have posed new questions at the end of this report, and look forward to all questions, comments, and resulting dialogue.

SEPTEMBER 30 – OCTOBER 1 MEETING OF THE DECENNIAL CENSUS ADVISORY COMMITTEE

At the recommendation of census director Louis Kincannon, the September 30-October 1 meeting followed a new format, intended to promote greater engagement, dialogue, and problem resolution. In the new format, topics for discussion are identified in advance, and relevant materials sent to Committee members. At the meeting, Census Bureau staff now provide only a brief overview, rather than a full presentation. A few Committee members (volunteers designated in advance) then serve as discussants—providing remarks to “start and animate” discussion among the full Committee.

Report from the Census Director

Prior to addressing the meeting's topics, we heard from census director Louis Kincannon, who offered remarks in remembrance of Chip Alexander, who died tragically last month. Chip was a key contributor to the American Community Survey, and a valued and much liked colleague. The director also described the appointment and anticipated contributions of Hermann Habermann (formerly with the United Nations and the Office of Management and Budget) as his new deputy director.

Kincannon pointed with pride to the completion of the SF3 release before the end of the fiscal year, and to the ahead-of-schedule delivery of voting rights tabulations to the Justice Department. The “bad news,” he commented, is that if there is no American Community Survey (ACS), we will have to wait another 10 years for new data. ACS funding is a hot topic, as it appears that Congress will not fund the nationwide implementation of the ACS in 2003. As Kincannon described it, there are large increases for anti-terrorism activities, but funding is frozen for pretty much everything else.

Despite the funding setback, the Bureau will continue planning for a re-engineered 2010 census, including the ACS. When asked how many years of insufficient funding it would take before we would have to go back to a long form, Kincannon said he did not expect that to happen. He stressed that the administration is committed to a re-engineered census, and expressed confidence that if the benefits of the ACS are understood, “the outcome will be positive.” The benefits are that, for the same cost as a long form census, the ACS would provide updated information and a more accurate census. The Census Bureau expects a better count from a short form-only census that benefits from MAF/TIGER enhancements that depend on the ACS going forward. The contribution to a more accurate 2010 census is seen as the most effective selling point for the ACS.

When asked about research on Census 2000 coverage and adjustment, Kincannon deferred to Jay Waite. Waite reported that research will be completed by the end of the calendar year, and that the Bureau will issue reports, recommendations, and any adjusted data at that time.

Congressional Update

Chip Walker (Republican staff of the House Subcommittee on Civil Service, Census and Agency Organization) and David McMillen (Democratic staff of the Committee on Government Reform) both painted a bleak picture of census funding prospects. Census budgets are part of the funding for the departments of Commerce, State and Justice, where data programs always have a tough time against priorities such as “cops on the beat.” McMillen noted that, with homeland security now in this budget, the competing priorities are even more formidable. And with federal revenues diminished by the economic downturn and recent tax cuts, funding is now severely limited. Walker added that census funding is always difficult following a census—with numerous programs expecting funding that was deferred to cover the spike in decennial census costs.

Walker described the top four census priorities that the Subcommittee has communicated to the appropriators. These include: 1) the American Community Survey, 2) the Economic Census, 3) the new Census Bureau building, and 4) MAF/TIGER enhancements. He also noted chairman David Weldon’s continued concern that ACS response be voluntary (current plans call for mandatory response), and that they are working with the Census Bureau to structure a test to determine the impact of voluntary response. Data quality is a concern for users, but Congress will likely focus on the higher cost of a voluntary ACS (with reduced response rates). Walker noted that the current

request fixes ACS funding at last year's level plus an additional \$1 million for the voluntary response test.

When asked about the prospects for funding full ACS implementation in 2004, McMillen said he is usually an optimist, but expects the same forces to work against 2004 funding, plus added pressure to balance the budget in a non-election year. McMillen concluded that he is not optimistic, and Walker said he agreed. They also agreed that, while the choice is not yet widely understood, Congress will recognize the need to either commit to the ACS or go back to the long form. Perhaps significantly, no one seems to be ruling out the option of falling back on a long form census.

Reengineered 2010 Census Update

Nancy Gordon and Jay Waite then briefed the Committee on 2010 census planning. Current activities include the design of a voluntary ACS test, a major restructuring of the census field operation, MAF/TIGER enhancements, preparations for the 2003 and 2004 census tests, and exploring options for counting the overseas population in the census. The cautionary note was that these activities depend on recommended budgets, and would have to be reworked if full funding is not provided.

Study of Responses to Race Questions: Initial Results from Census 2000

Census Bureau presenter David Hubble noted the difficulty of identifying race trends due to the need to “bridge” 2000 race data to the old race definitions. In response to this need for “bridging parameters,” the Census Bureau is conducting a Census Quality Survey (CQS)—designed to provide information on how the “two or more” race population would distribute to single race categories.

The CQS re-contacted a sample of 55,000 Census 2000 households—oversampling those with at least one person of more than one race, and asking for a response using the old “mark one race” instruction. The results raise questions, as some respondents marked more than one race even when instructed to “mark one,” and those who marked two or more races in the census often reported different combination in the CQS.

The Bureau's questions to the Committee concerned issues such as the specification of denominators, and variables for future research. But noting that the CQS raises as many questions as it answers, the Committee questioned the need for bridging. The small (2.4 percent) portion of the population marking more than one race was cited, as was diminished concern over the dilution of “minority” race counts. It was suggested that the “all-inclusive” race tabulations are best suited to civil rights enforcement, and that the bridging guidelines already issued by OMB should be sufficient for most purposes. Members seemed to find the CQS interesting, but were more inclined to focus on current data, and the broader challenges of defining and measuring race and ethnic identification. An alternative view might be that—apart from bridging applications—the CQS provides rich information that could reveal much about the reporting of race.

Race and Ethnicity Research and Development for the 2010 Census

Presenter Claudette Bennett explained that, as part of the Census Bureau's efforts to improve the collection of race and ethnicity data in the 2010 census, a contractor conducted 60 cognitive interviews to assess proposed changes in the questions on race and Hispanic origin. Among the proposed changes are returning the term "origin" to the Hispanic question, and dropping the "Some other race" category. The results were described as "not encouraging," and the Bureau was seeking the Committee's feedback, and recommendations for further tests.

The Census Bureau did not explain exactly what was not encouraging, but a quick read of respondent comments suggests that few were pleased with any versions of the questions that were presented to them. Many found the questions confusing, objectionable, or "just plain wrong."

The Committee provided a few specific comments—noting that all interviews were conducted in English, and wondering how representative the respondents were. But again, the discussion turned to broader race and ethnicity measurement issues. One member commented that the current census questions are an archaic mix of race, ethnicity, skin color and geography. And a suggestion for a combined race and ethnicity question prompted extensive discussion of that option (almost as though it had never been considered). It was also noted that the national origin detail for Asian and Pacific Islander race and Hispanic ethnicity is a source of annoyance for groups who wonder why they do not see their origins reflected on the census questionnaire.

Kathy Wallman

Conveniently, the next agenda item was a working lunch with Kathy Wallman, who joined us as the above discussion wrapped up. Wallmann, the chief statistician at OMB, noted that the current OMB race and ethnicity standards were adopted in 1997 after much research and public comment, and that there is no formal review of these standards underway at this time. She reminded the Committee that the standards establish a minimum set of categories, and that agencies can collect additional information as needed, so long as they are consistent with the standards.

Several members took the opportunity to raise questions concerning race and ethnicity questions. Again, the combination of the Hispanic and race questions was suggested, and it is clear that many would favor a re-examination of the census questions, and perhaps the OMB standards. When asked if the Census Bureau could combine the race and Hispanic questions without violating the OMB standards, Wallman noted that the answer would depend on interpretations (not yet made) of Public Law-311, which is the reason that Hispanic data are collected separately from race.

2004 Census Test Plans

Teresa Angueira reported that the Census Bureau is planning a 2004 census test to be conducted in Colquitt, Thomas and Tift counties in Georgia, Lake County IL, and a portion of northwest Queens County, NY. Details of the test will be guided by the results of the race/ethnicity cognitive interviews, and a 2003 national census test. In contrast to the 2003 test, the 2004 test will be the first to test new methods in a full census environment. Among the methods to be tested are those aimed at reducing duplication, alternative race and ethnicity questions, alternative response modes, dual language questionnaires, improved distinctions between households and group quarters, and the use of mobile computing devices in field work. The 2004 test also will include a test of methods for counting Americans living outside the U.S., but the countries for this test have not yet been determined. The 2004 test results will inform the 2006 tests, and contribute to the 2008 dress rehearsal in preparation for the 2010 census.

Committee comments on the test plans focused on the selected test areas, and whether they would contain sufficiently large numbers of Hispanics, migrant workers, and other populations of interest. It was difficult for Angueira to be specific in her response because the tracts for the Queens site have not been finalized, but other Committee members offered their impressions that, based on personal knowledge of some of the areas, they would reflect a very diverse population.

Within Household Coverage

The Census Bureau's Maria Urrutia noted that while the 2000 census achieved impressively high net national coverage, a major effort is underway to improve within household coverage in 2010. Within household coverage problems include the failure to count persons in households that are counted (within household misses), or the counting of persons more than once (duplication). In an effort to better understand the "root causes" of these problems, and to identify potential solutions, the Census Bureau has conducted three "brainstorming sessions." The first session included census field regional office staff, the second included internal Census Bureau staff, and the third included members from the various census advisory committees.

Committee members who participated in the third brainstorming session reported that it was an impressive laptop-based exercise with participants typing responses that were displayed for all to see, discuss, and amend.

The discussion sometimes drifted to general coverage issues (persons missed as opposed to within household misses), but there was useful discussion of the limits of the current residence rules, the communication of residence rules, and the types of persons most likely to be missed. There was concern that the Census Bureau has a tendency to "blame the respondent" when residence rules are not followed, and it was argued that the residence rules do not apply well to some populations (such as migrant workers), and may need to be revised. There was specific concern with the imputation of data for

persons in households with seven or more members—and that while this is a small percentage of all households, it is a significant percentage for some segments.

The Within Household Coverage effort seems to be doing a good job of identifying root causes—or why some household members are missed and some people are counted more than once. But it remains to be seen if additional partnerships, more effective communications, enhanced follow up, or even revised residence rules, would improve the ability of the census to count every person only once and in the right place with respect to whatever residence rules are used.

MAF/TIGER Enhancements Program

The Census Bureau's Bob Marx explained TIGER and Master Address File (MAF), and their contributions. TIGER is a massive set of digitized information used to generate maps and other geographic capabilities, and the MAF is the massive address list used as the starting point for the census, and potentially, as a sampling frame for surveys throughout the coming decade.

However, enhancements are required if MAF and TIGER are to fulfill their key role in 2010 census plans. For example, much of the information on TIGER needs to be brought into true GPS alignment. In other words, things like street locations must be made more accurate to ensure the correct coding of addresses to census blocks. And the MAF must be continuously updated to reflect new addresses—a process that can be difficult, laborious, and expensive in rural areas. The Committee was asked if it could suggest high quality GIS files from tribal, state or local sources, or nationwide sources of information identifying the existence of new streets and features.

The lone discussant observed that Committee members were not falling over each other to discuss this topic, but described its importance even to those not deeply into mapping or geographic applications. Many data users have a stake in accurate geocoding and the improved estimates enabled by MAF/TIGER. And plans for the American Community Survey and re-engineered 2010 census depend on MAF/TIGER enhancements and updates. Because MAF/TIGER, the ACS and the 2010 census are so interdependent, there was discussion of the threat posed to MAF/TIGER enhancements by the lack of ACS funding.

The Committee identified no major data sources that the Census Bureau does not already have—with the possible exception of proprietary private sector sources not likely available to the Bureau. And there was comment on how labor intensive and expensive MAF/TIGER enhancements might have to be. In short, there seems to be agreement on the importance of MAF/TIGER enhancements, but no delusions about how challenging they will be to achieve and maintain.

Race and Ethnic Advisory Committee Update

Bob Hill provided an update on the activities of the Race and Ethnic Advisory Committee (REAC). REAC sees a need for additional ACS outreach for the American Indian and Alaska Native population, and a question on tribal enrollment. They also call for an Asian language program for the 2010 census, an oversampling of the Asian population, and special studies on the Asian undercount. Oversampling and additional research also are recommended for the Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander population. African American members recommend a follow up question for persons who mark two or more races—identifying which race is primary, and providing data better suited to civil rights enforcement. With respect to the Hispanic population, Hill noted that REAC has also considered the need for clearer instructions on the race and Hispanic questions, and the possibility of a combined race/Hispanic origin question.

Research and Evaluation Program for the American Community Survey

Census presenter Debbie Griffin noted that the ACS research and evaluation program is only now becoming formal, but is investigating enduring questions related to ACS feasibility and cost, survey quality, survey design, and data products. However, the broader objective is to answer four key questions.

1. Can the ACS be implemented as planned?
2. Can the ACS maintain/achieve quality performance standards?
3. Will ACS data meet the needs of decennial long form data users and satisfy stakeholders?
4. How will we manage ACS risks, and can we improve the ACS throughout the decade?

The Committee was asked if these four questions are comprehensive, and to identify which lines of research are of particular interest, and which should be of highest priority.

One discussant commented that, at a time when the Census Bureau is struggling to achieve funding for full ACS implementation, it sounds odd for the Bureau to propose research addressing the question “Can the ACS be implemented as planned?” Data user interest was noted for topics including the integration of ACS and Census estimates, seasonal populations, the quality of ACS data for small populations, and ACS data products. However, given the prospects for ACS funding, it was suggested that priority might better be given to operational issues such as MAF updates, mail response, response modes, and non-response follow up methods. As with TIGER in its early years, the first objective might be to establish an operational product, and then focus on enhancements.

Confidence was expressed in the ability of the ACS to eventually provide what data users need, but there is concern that user support for the ACS is thin, and would erode if sample size and other specifications are scaled back. There was discussion of the need for contingency plans (What if there is no ACS?), and questions about the point at which we “shut it down and go back to the long form.”

Asked if the Bureau has a plan for dealing with reduced ACS funding, census director Kincannon said he is convinced that sample size cannot get any smaller than it is now.

And while he appreciates the need to plan for contingencies (and hinted that they are doing that), he is reluctant to show his cards at this time. He stressed that a re-engineered census is a priority of this administration, and expressed continued hope that the ACS can go forward—as a critical component of the re-engineered census.

At this point, a member suggested that the Committee send a letter in support of the ACS to the Secretary of Commerce. Following discussion of the letter's form and prospects for impact, Committee chair Kim Coon recruited four volunteers to draft such a letter. Director Kincannon invoked the metaphor of the 3-legged stool (interdependent ACS, MAF/TIGER and re-engineered census), and urged that the letter stress the quality of the re-engineered 2010 census as the “hook” in making the case for the ACS.

Quality of Estimates from the American Community Survey for Small Population Groups

Alfredo Navarro described a paper by the late Chip Alexander, completed in response to concerns that the Committee expressed at its previous meeting. The paper explains why the Census Bureau believes that ACS data for small populations would be preferable to those from the long form—even though the ACS sample is somewhat smaller. The paper argues, for example, that the greater sampling error of the ACS is offset by better non-response follow up, as well as the advantage of more recent data. Navarro acknowledged that the problem of estimating year-to-year change in five-year averages has not been solved. But the paper provides useful illustrations of how ACS averages would change from year to year under different circumstances—and how such data would compare with long form data updated only once a decade.

The topic is of intense interest to Committee members representing small population groups, but it was noted that the findings for small populations also are relevant to ACS data for small areas. Thus, the paper understates the scope of its own implications.

Committee discussants described the paper as excellent—especially in addressing the issues associated sampling error and the year-to-year use of averages. It was suggested that a companion paper addressing the issue of bias would be similarly helpful. The concern is that apparent inconsistencies between ACS and long form data are dampening support for the ACS. The expectation is that there might be legitimate reasons for these differences—such as mode differences and other non-sampling errors—that such a paper could explain.

Questions for APDU Members

Please send your thoughts on these or any other census data issues to your APDU representative, Ken Hodges at khodges@claritas.com and/or alternate rep Mark Salling at mark@urban.csuohio.edu. Your responses will keep us aware of APDU interests and insights, and provide us with specific feedback to relay to the Committee.

1. Please describe your level of support for the American Community Survey. What do you see as the pros and cons of pressing ahead for ACS funding versus going back to the census long form?
2. For purposes of your data applications, how long could the ACS go without funding for full implementation before you would recommend going back to the long form?
3. Do you need to identify 1990-2000 trends in race and ethnic composition? In other words, is the “bridging” of census race data between the old and new definitions important to your applications?
4. How would the elimination of the “Some other race” category affect your work?