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Focus on Facts

Maxine Goodman Levin College of Urban Affairs – Cleveland State University

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Why Do We Still Conduct a Costly Census of All U.S. Residents Every Ten Years?

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- Who hasn't heard that the 2020 Census is upon us? The anticipation and anguish about missing large numbers of persons (again!) is in the news and on social media daily. The Census Bureau is posting daily news releases. Public officials and nonprofit leaders are rallying to get the word out about the importance of the decennial Census. Last year we saw widespread political opposition to the Trump administration's attempt to add a question about citizenship to the 2020 Census form because opponents argued it would decrease participation within the Hispanic community.¹
- The case for accurate data about all U.S. residents has been made by many – it is needed for redistricting political boundaries; for accurate allocation of federal, state and local funds; for planning of infrastructure projects; for budgeting public services, for better marketing studies by the business community; and many others. But it is costly, estimated at over \$15.6 billion by the U.S. Government Accounting Office², up from \$12.3 billion for the 2010 Census.
- The U.S. Constitution requires the Federal Government to conduct an accurate count of all people who reside within our borders every ten years. But counting methods and counting technologies have advanced since the first Census in 1790. One might ask why we try (and spend so much money) to count every single person, every ten years, when there are other data that might be able to replace an actual count and might also provide more current data than every ten years.
- For example, researchers and businesses often use samples of the population to reach conclusions and make decisions. The Census Bureau's own annual American Community Survey (ACS) is an excellent example of a widely-used survey based on samples. Each year the ACS provides estimated annual updates of the data collected in the decennial Census and much more, including income, employment, education, and housing costs to name a few.
- Furthermore, many Federal agencies have large databases they create in the course of providing services to U.S. residents. These administrative data could substitute for data gathered in the Census. Examples include databases from the Internal Revenue Service, U.S. Medicaid and Medicare claims, Social Security Administration records, Veterans' Affairs, the U.S. Postal Service, and Selective Service. State and local government agencies also create large amounts of administrative data, such

¹ See "Predicting the Effect of Adding a Citizenship Question to the 2020 Census", by J. David Brown et al, **Demography**, Volume 56, Issue 4, August 2019, pp. 1173–1194.

² https://www.gao.gov/highrisk/2020_decennial_census/why_did_study#t=1

as motor vehicle licenses, registered voters, and building permits. Commercial databases may also provide data for this purpose. Use of administrative records could have many advantages, such as reducing the burden on respondents to the Census and improving data quality. In fact, these and other sources are being considered by the Census Bureau for enhancing the ACS.³ And the decennial Census misses some people anyway!⁴

- So why attempt a complete count every 10 years? The answer is that all these samples, and all of these annual estimates, START with the decennial Census numbers.
- Annual resident population estimates for the nation start with the decennial Census and adjust the numbers based on administrative data - adding births, subtracting deaths, and adding net international migration. State and county population estimates use the same basic method, but include net domestic migration estimates from administrative and ACS data. These are then adjusted to the national totals. The population estimate at any given time starts with a population base (the last decennial Census or the previous year's estimate). See Figure 1.

Figure 1: Methodology for National, State, and County Population Estimates⁵



- Estimates for subcounty areas such as cities, townships, and villages employ administrative records on new building permits, as well as occupancy rates and population per household ratios from the decennial Census. They are then adjusted to county totals. Thus local “complete count” efforts are especially important to local governments, service providers, and businesses.
- ACS data rely on the annual population estimates to adjust the data collected from a sample of respondents to reflect the larger population. In turn, the annual population estimates take advantage of estimates from the ACS. The decennial Census is the starting point for the population estimates program, which (along with some administrative records data sources) is, in turn, essential for ACS data to be reflective of the nation’s population throughout the decade.
- In conclusion, without sound base numbers from the decennial Census, reliable annual estimates of the population and their characteristics would not be possible. Our governments and businesses will rely on a successful Census 2020 for the next ten years.

³ “Realizing the Promise of Administrative Data for Enhancing the American Community Survey”, U.S. Census Bureau, November 2018. <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/programs-surveys/acs/operations-and-administration/administrative-records-in-the-american-community-survey.pdf>

⁴ The Census Bureau estimates that fewer than 2% were omitted. Because there was also an overcount the net undercount was 0.01% (0.14% standard error). For more, see “Census Bureau Releases Estimates of Undercount and Overcount in the 2010 Census”, May 22, 2012, U.S. Census Bureau, Newsroom Archive at https://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/2010_census/cb12-95.html.

⁵ From “Methodology for the United States Population Estimates: Vintage 2018: Nation, States, Counties, and Puerto Rico – April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2018”, U.S. Census Bureau. <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/popest/technical-documentation/methodology/2010-2018/2018-natstcopr-meth.pdf>