



Council of Professional Associations on Federal Statistics

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ADVANCING EXCELLENCE IN FEDERAL STATISTICS

MARCH 6, 2020 COPAFS QUARTERLY MEETING NOTES

Taken by Ken Hodges, COPAFS Board Secretary

COPAFS Chair Felice Levine started the meeting, and Executive Director Cynthia Clark noted the extension of early bird registration for the April 14-16 FCSM conference. Clark also noted that Associate Director Corinna Turbes has joined Data Coalition and wished her well in the new position.

Update on the Federal Statistical System

Kerrie Leslie. Office of the Chief Statistician of the United States

Office of Management and Budget

With Chief Statistician Nancy Potok retired, and the position still open, Kerrie Leslie presented the OMB update. She described the big increase in the Census Bureau's FY2020 budget to cover decennial operations, and an increase for BLS in part to fund its relocation to Suitland. An increase for BEA supports activities such as GDP estimates for Puerto Rico. Looking to FY2021 recommendations, a sharp drop for the Census Bureau reflects the winding down of decennial operations, while an increase for BLS would provide further support for the office move as well as work on the Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey (JOLTS) and improved poverty measures.

Leslie noted that the Foundations of Evidence Based Policymaking Act has requirements for federal agencies related to data access and stewardship. OMB continues to work toward fulfilling its obligations under the act --- such as establishing standards for data quality, and a path for agencies to request data from each other. She described OMB's progress in establishing a working group that will make recommendations on the implementation of the Evidence Act, and indicated that OMB's policies and regulations will come out on a flow basis, with opportunities for comment at each step.

Following up on two working groups Potok had described in previous meetings, Leslie explained that the first (on consumer inflation measures) is working on its report, and the second (on alternative poverty measures) issued its interim report on February 14. A *Federal Register* Notice on the report provides the opportunity for public comment through April 14. Leslie also described OMB's work on a statistical protection toolkit (addressing the need for better confidentiality solutions), and guidance on the measurement and reporting of data quality, especially as it relates to the use of administrative records. Proposed revisions to NAICS are also out for public comment, and metropolitan area updates are forthcoming.

Leslie wrapped up with some brief agency updates, noting that the Census Bureau continues to release products from the economic census, and that BLS is making use of expert advice in its work on the contingent labor force and the Consumer Price Index. BLS also is working on its first ever JOLTS estimates' for states, and an experimental set for large metropolitan areas. They will soon release new estimates of personal income, and first-time estimates of income distribution. BEA is working on refinements to its measures and is working with NOAA's Office of Space Commerce to understand the importance of the commercial space industry to the US economy.

Update on the Federal Data Strategy and the First Year Action Plan

Nick Hart, Data Coalition. Shelly Martinez, Office of Management and Budget

Shelly Martinez described the Federal Data Strategy and the 2020 Action Plan as direct results of the President's Management Agenda that recognizes the importance of data as a strategic asset. Data are seen as important to promoting economic growth, civic engagement, and the effectiveness and transparency of government.

The mission of the Federal Data Strategy is to “leverage the full value of federal data for mission, service, and the public good by guiding the Federal Government in practicing ethical governance, conscious design, and a learning culture.” The strategy involves a multi-year process, with each year having an action plan developed with an iterative process, and guided by comments from stakeholders. Martinez started with a review of the 2020 plan, which was released December 23, 2019, and identifies three kinds of actions.

Agency Actions are steps to help agencies better manage data assets while considering how those assets could better advance the agency's mission. These include:

1. Identify data needs to answer priority agency questions.
2. Constitute a diverse data governance body.
3. Assess Data and related infrastructure maturity.
4. Identify opportunities to increase staff data skills.
5. Identify priority data assets for agency open data plans.
6. Publish and update data inventories.

Community Practice Actions seek to integrate and coordinate efforts that are relevant to the strategy. These include

7. Launch a Federal Chief Data Officer Council.
8. Improve data and model resources for AI research and development.
9. Improve financial management data standards.
10. Integrate geospatial data practices into the Federal Data Enterprise.

Shared Solution Actions are government-wide efforts led by a single agency or council for the benefit of all agencies.

11. Develop a repository of federal enterprise data resources.
12. Create an OMB federal data policy committee.
13. Develop a curated data skills catalog.
14. Develop a data ethics framework.
15. Develop a data protection toolkit.
16. Pilot a one-stop standard research application.
17. Pilot an automated tool for information collection reviews.
18. Pilot an enhanced data management tool for federal agencies.
19. Develop data quality measuring and reporting guidance.
20. Develop a data standards repository.

Martinez then presented timelines for implementing the actions described above.

Nick Hart stressed the importance of feedback on the Federal Data Strategy, and remarked that OMB has not only sought feedback but actually incorporated it in developing the strategy – something they do not always do. He described the strategy as a paradigm shift covering statistical and non-statistical agencies, and noted that its ten-year span is uncommon, as presidents usually want short term goals to point to before the next election.

Hart sees the Data Strategy and action plan as a real opportunity, and a thoughtful approach to implementing some of the objectives of the Evidence Act. He noted, however, the lack of new money devoted to implementing the act, and that some agencies are requesting funding where resources are needed. In this election year, progress could be slow, some deadlines might be missed, and mistakes will be made, but Hart assured that Congress is still interested in the success of the Evidence Act, and we should not lose sight of the great progress that is being made.

Tiered Data Access – Report on Sloan Funded Workshops **Cynthia Clark. COPAFS**

Cynthia Clark described two workshops on tiered data access that COPAFS organized with support from the Sloan Foundation. The workshops were motivated by the Evidence Act, with the goal of facilitating OMB statistical policy by providing insights from researchers and others interested in access to federal datasets.

The first workshop, held in September, convened attendees from federal statistical agencies, contractors, and data users to consider data access challenges in the context of the Evidence-based Policy Commission’s recommendations.

Workshop recommendations were that OMB should encourage experimentation with different options for access, address legislative barriers to data use, and develop a continuum for mitigating risk in the “Five Safes” – Safe Setting, Safe People, Safe Projects, Safe Output, and Safe Data. Attendees also recommended research into approaches for access in lieu of public-use microdata, approaches for quantifying and estimating disclosure risk, and holistic review of individual agency products to balance data utility with confidentiality concerns.

The January 2020 workshop considered different frameworks for data access. The agenda included a presentation on the Five Safes, and small group discussions of four of the Safes (setting, people, project and output). Deliberations included review of a Statistics Canada Confidentiality Classification Tool that quantifies the sensitivity of data, and examination of a three-tiered UK Data Service model.

Safe Setting recommendations included IT based solutions using encryption and continuous monitoring. Safe People recommendations included training protocols with an ethnics focus, required affiliation with a recognized research or public institution, individual and institutional sanctions for violations, and the reflection of different levels of data sensitivity in training and sanctions. It was recommended that Safe Projects employ sound research in ethical considerations, assess the results of data linkages, reflect lawful/constitutional uses, and develop repositories of research projects. Safe Outputs should assess the likelihood of re-identification, the likelihood of malevolent intrusion, and the degree of harm/sensitivity.

Final discussion topics included the need to include researchers in the disclosure review process, the need for academic expertise on metadata, stakeholder involvement in data release decisions, the cost and funding of RDCs, balancing timeliness with access constraints, communication of research results, and access options. In addition to the COPAFS presentation, follow up will include a project report posted on the COPAFS website, a presentation at the 2020 FCSM Conference, and input for individuals to respond to a forthcoming *Federal Register* notice.

The Role of the Decennial Census in the Geographic Allocation of Federal Funding **Andrew Reamer. George Washington University**

Presenting remotely due to illness, Andrew Reamer described his widely cited Counting for Dollars work that measures the amount of federal funding distributed based on data derived from the census, and the impact of census accuracy on the fair distribution of those funds.

Reamer’s most recent work looked at four kinds of census-guided programs.

- Financial assistance programs that provide direct payments to state and local governments.
- Matching payments from states to the federal government.
- Tax credit programs that allow exclusions or exemptions from gross income.
- Programs that award federal contracts to small businesses in selected areas.

The two major uses of census-derived data are 1) determining the eligibility of areas or households for federal programs, and 2) allocation formulas.

The project examined programs that allocated FY2017 spending to states and local areas based in whole or part on data derived from 2010 census data. Rather than using decennial census data directly, many programs use data that derive from or depend on the decennial census. Such sources include the Census Bureau's population and housing unit estimates, surveys such as the ACS and CPS, and program specific measures of income, poverty, spending, and prices. Also dependent on census data are geographic classifications such as urban/rural and metropolitan/micropolitan.

The method identified the universe of census-derived datasets, then the programs that rely on census-derived data, and determined FY2017 funding for each program. The labor intensive process requires searching through many sources including the Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance, US Code, Code of Federal Regulations, Notices of Funding Availability, program websites, and others.

Reamer found that in FY2017, 316 federal spending programs relied on 2010 census-derived data to distribute \$1.504 trillion, accounting for 9.04 percent of US personal income. He contrasted his \$1.504 trillion figure with the Census Bureau's \$675 billion, noting that his amount is more current than the Census Bureau's, and more comprehensive, as its 316 programs exceeds the Census Bureau's 132. For example, Reamer determined that all of Medicare is census-guided, while the Census Bureau number includes only Part B.

Reamer fields frequent calls from reporters seeking a dollar amount for each person missed by the census, but explains it is not that easy, as the sensitivity of funding to undercount varies. Some programs are tied to total population, so there is a direct per person impact, but many are based on a population characteristic. If a person missed by the census is not of the relevant type, funding is not lost. Other programs distribute funding based on an area's classification as, for example, urban or rural, and a missed person usually does not change the classification. As Reamer put it, undercount in New York City does not make it rural. Also, undercount might not impact how states distribute federal funding to local areas, and one cannot compute a per person dollar impact for programs that distribute funds based on a combination of census and other data sources.

Another mistaken notion is that funding lost due to undercount goes back to the US Treasury. The reality is that for most programs, Congress sets a total appropriation, and census data determines the share going to specific areas. Funds lost by one area just go to other areas.

In conclusion, Reamer remarked that the Census Bureau needs a more comprehensive understanding of how its data drive the allocation of federal funding. He expressed concern that bureau's lack of understanding impairs its ability to persuade Congress for funding, limits its ability to motivate response to the census, and undermines its credibility with the media and the public. Reamer does not wish to be viewed as the national expert on this topic, and would rather see the Census Bureau adopt his more complete measure, and increase the likelihood of a successful 2030 census.

Census Messaging Strategy – Research Conducted for Article 1

Steve Jost. Subject Matter

Steve Jost, formerly with the Census Bureau and now with Subject Matter, described independent research designed to help Census stakeholders promote Census self-response through a better understanding of public perceptions of the Census. The research identifies themes and messages that resonate, as well as the messengers best suited to communicate those messages. The research, conducted by Quadrant Strategies for Article I (a national campaign to promote the 2020 Census), consisted of focus groups and online surveys.

Jost said the Census Bureau's communications campaign has to address the main barrier to participation – the belief that the government will do what it wants regardless of census data. The campaign also will encounter high levels of skepticism from Muslim Americans, Asian Americans, Black or African Americans, and young adults age 18-34. Latinos are the least skeptical among the hard to count, but concerns persist in the wake of the citizenship question debate.

Key findings are that Census outreach campaigns need to 1) reach out to vulnerable or skeptical communities, 2) give the Census a stamp of approval through trusted community spokespeople, and 3) motivate these audiences with the message that the Census is about claiming power for your community, and showing what America truly looks like. In other words, Truth to Power. The message needs to vary by audience, as some want to defy the powers that be, while others want to feel uplifted.

Turning to results, Jost noted that most people (about 83 percent) say they will probably respond to the Census, but only a little more than half (58 percent) say they will definitely participate, and some among the unsure – especially young adults – are tough to reach and motivate. Convincing the skeptical to participate is especially difficult given distrust of the federal government, widespread belief that the government will do what it wants regardless of the data, and will use personal data for nefarious purposes.

The Census Bureau's campaign can make a big impact by highlighting benefits of the Census, but the research indicates that benefits such as funding for schools, hospitals and public safety are more persuasive than those related to political representation. To get buy-in from skeptical populations, the goal should be to reassure and inspire with messages that resonate – such as those focused on themes of empowerment and strength. The empowerment message encourages people to take a stand, and make their voices heard via the Census. An element of defiance seems to resonate, as the message that “they don't want people like you counted” was effective with young adults and African Americans. For other groups, stressing the need for a true picture of America was most effective. “Truth to power” is the theme, and should be backed up with a reminder that the Census is easy, quick, and confidential.

While messages such as these could improve response rates and save taxpayer dollars, they will not drive participation by themselves. Messengers are the key to building trust. The research found that the Census Bureau is held in high regard, and can be part of positive branding if it is kept distinct from the lowly regarded federal government. But because of its position within the government, the Census Bureau cannot deliver the harder-edged “they don't want you counted” messages. To deliver the more emotional and effective, messages, campaigns should partner with credible and trusted messengers who can put a stamp of approval on the Census. Among the most trusted and effective sources are first responders and health care professionals. Among the least effective are celebrities and professional athletes.

COPAFS Business Meeting.

Representatives participated in a brief business meeting, and the meeting was adjourned.