



The Our American States podcast—produced by the National Conference of State Legislatures—is where you hear compelling conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy.

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Ready, Set, Count: Kicking Off the Census | March 12, 2020 | OAS Episode 85

Hello and welcome to “Our American States,” a podcast from the National Conference of State Legislatures. On this podcast, we’re all about legislatures: the people in them, the policies, process and politics that shape them. I’m your host, Ed Smith. Thanks for joining us.

On today’s episode we’re going to dive into the Census, the once-a-decade count of everyone in the country. April 1st is Census Day and that’s coming right up. By then, everyone should have received a notification to fill out the Census, and when you respond you tell the Census Bureau where you live on April 1st.

We’ll check in with the Census Bureau later in the show. But first I’m joined by my friend and colleague, Wendy Underhill, who runs the elections and redistricting program at NCSL. Wendy, you’ve been a guest on this podcast before, so I’ll say welcome back to “Our American States.”

Wendy: Well thank you, I’m glad to be here with you.

Time Marker (TM): 01:03

Ed: So, Wendy, let’s get right to it. What can you tell us about the Census, about the history of the Census? And I know we’ve talked about a few interesting facts, so fill us in.

Wendy: Alright. Well, the first Census was taken in 1790, so the country was brand new, and that’s pretty exciting because the United States was the first country to establish a regularly conducted census, and also the first country to use census information to divvy up political power by not giving it by geography, but by giving it by the number of people.

So, we go back a long ways, and much of what we were doing then, we're still doing now. Much that drove us then is still the same now. The main goal I'd say is to understand who are the American people – who lives here, what makes us tick.

And then the second thing, of course, I've already mentioned, is the divvying up of political power in Congress at least, but also that first Census was done to get information that could guide economics and guide trade and guide businesspeople. So, it was about gathering information that could be of real use.

One more thing from times past: President Washington was concerned that there was an undercount – 3.9 million people were accounted for, but he apparently grouched that that wasn't anywhere near as many as it should have been.

TM: 02:17

Ed: Well, I suppose we're still worried about getting the count right now. Refresh our memories about what the stakes are here, both in terms of redistricting and in terms of the redistribution of federal money.

Wendy: Absolutely. You've hit on the two largest ones. I like to think of this as democracy, dollars and decision making, so I'm going to throw that piece in as well
In terms of democracy, the data the Census releases does underpin how the seats in Congress are divvied up, so which states are going to have an additional seat, which states might lose a seat, which ones are going to be steady states. So, that's pretty hot news that comes out on December 31st, 2020, or maybe even just a couple of days earlier than that.

But the information from the Census is also used for redistrictors in the states to draw the lines for congressional seats, to draw the lines for state legislative seats, and also for drawing lines for any local electoral bodies that use geographic districts. So where these lines are drawn helps determine who has got the power in the state, but it is all based on how many people are in each little, tiny Census block, adding them up to get to equal population amongst those districts.

TM: 02:17

Ed: So, those are some of the things that are the same I guess about the Census, since it started in 1790. What are some of the differences in how we handle the Census now from 230 years ago?

Wendy: I'm sure most folks will remember that back in the day, enslaved peoples were counted as three-fifths of a person. Maybe it's not as well known that Native Americans weren't counted at all. So that has changed dramatically. Obviously, it's one person is one person now, as it ought to be. The racial categories that have been used over the course of time to more accurately represent who we are.

And another change from then: you can picture people on horseback with books and they knocked on doors and then they wrote in their books what the answers to the six questions were. Well now, of course, we have forms that go out to everyone, and the way those forms get out to people has changed, and the ways those answers are received back has changed.

Even before the turn of the 20th century, the Census was working with a punch card tabulation system. So that was a pretty advanced kind of technology. And this time there will be a request to everyone to fill out their form online, not that there won't still be the option of doing it by phone or on paper... lots of ways to do your form... but they're making the online option available.

TM: 04:44

Ed: Wendy, I understand states are taking a more active role in trying to get a complete count this cycle. Can you tell us what kinds of steps they've been taking?

Wendy: Absolutely. First of all, it strikes me as kind of unusual that states are kicking in at all in terms of effort in funding to a federal program. The Census is the nation's largest peacetime operation and it is done with federal dollars. So, states don't have to do anything at all.

Having said that, almost all states have created a state-level complete count committee, and that helps to get the word out that it's important to get those forms filled out and to get an accurate count. And about half the states have put money behind these efforts as well.

California stands out absolutely as the largest, with 187 million dollars dedicated to Census outreach.

TM: 05:32

Ed: What are state legislatures doing specifically? Have they gotten involved in this as well?

Wendy: Yeah, to some extent they have. Three of those complete count committees that I mentioned were created through legislative action: those were the ones in Illinois, New York and New Jersey. And in other states it was mostly executive orders that did it.

And then in Oklahoma, the Oklahoma Senate has done something that is truly unique around the nation, and that's to create its own Senate complete count committee, and that was a bipartisan effort. The leaders from both sides got together to do that.

Alabama was one of the very first states to put any money behind their Census efforts and they did it through the avenue of economic development. That's how they saw it.

And then some other legislators... we occasionally pick up on what they're doing – they're going out and talking a little bit about this. They're asking that field offices for the Census be nearby. They're encouraging kickoff events and participating in all kinds of ways.

TM: 06:25

Ed: Now I know some population groups are more difficult to count than others. What kinds of steps is the Census taking to ensure that we're getting everyone?

Wendy: In an odd way, they have a pretty good handle on who is hard to count, and that's the phrase that gets used. One of the categories of people would be homeless people. You can see why they're hard to count; you can't necessarily mail them a postcard telling them to go online.

So, they do do a specific count on the night before and the night of Census day for these folks, and they go to places where they get service: homeless shelters, soup kitchens, places where they tend to congregate. So, there's a really specific effort in that regard.

Another group that's hard to count are people who move a lot, probably renters – again, do they get their mail delivered or forwarded to them at the right address? So those folks can be hard.

Anyone who doesn't speak English well... Now the Census Bureau has done a huge amount to support people with other languages. They have the forms in a dozen languages, and they have phone support in many other dozens of languages, and yet you can picture if you're not really proficient, that might be tough.

Immigrants, hard to count – in part some might not be looking forward to having the government ask them questions. Others may not realize that this is to count all of the people living in the United States, not just the citizens. People who are distrustful of the government might not respond on their own.

And then the biggest surprise for me was that children under the age of 5 are hard to count, and that's because some babies are born right before or right after the Census day and literally might be forgotten. And families that live in non-traditional situations, maybe several families in a household, it just could be difficult to count.

TM: 08:03

Ed: So, it hardly seems like we can get through a Census without some controversy emerging. So, what were the controversial issues this time around?

Wendy: Boy, I have to say that I didn't realize that there was so much controversy associated with it. Before I got involved, I thought it was plain vanilla. But you are absolutely right – there is controversy when there's the Census going on.

The hot-button issue this cycle was definitely whether there would be a citizenship status question on the questionnaires. And the end of all of that is: no, there will not be a citizenship question on the questionnaires. However, there will be a set of data on citizenship provided to the states and it will be based on administrative records.

So, the Census Bureau right now is trying to figure out exactly how they're going to gather those and in exactly what format they will share that information. And then states will have to figure out if they want to use that information or not. So, I think this is a TBD – this summer we'll be looking for perhaps more fireworks around the outcome of that.

A less known issue still relating to citizenship comes out of the State of Alabama. Alabama has sued, saying that apportionment for Congress should be based on citizens, not based on total

population. And for many people that's a philosophical question, which is the right basis. But for Alabama it's got a practical impact in that they're likely to lose a seat in Congress, but if this were divvied up according to citizenship, then they would likely keep that seat. So, you can see why Alabama is taking the lead on that.

And then there's one more item I'd like to mention. Some people think this might be a little on the nerdy side. The Census Bureau has determined to use a new method to protect the confidentiality for the respondents and for their responses. This is a really high value, that the information that people provide to the Census must be kept private, and that's in statute and everyone agrees that's a great idea.

The effort to keep that data private, however, has the impact of making the data that gets released a little more inaccurate, a little farther away from what the raw data says, and then that becomes a concern for states potentially in regard to how will they distribute the money that they get and how will the redistricting be changed by that.

So, I'm starting to see states paying some attention to this. The legislative leaders in Utah have produced a letter for the Census director. We've got that linked on our differential privacy for a Census webpage, and other states, largely state demographers, are also sending in letters of that kind saying: the system you've adopted with the parameters that you have adopted in a tentative format are making your data unusable for what we need to do.

The Census Bureau is very sensitive to this. They want to get it right. They are listening to responses. So, I think this is something else that will be TBD. Over the summer we'll get the details on that, and NCSL is looking into whether that's something we need to pay any attention to and what kind of an impact we might want to have on that question.

TM: 11:06

Ed: Well, Wendy, I think like so many public policy issues, they look simpler from the outside than they do when you start getting into them and really taking them apart. So, thanks so much for going through this with us.

Next on the program we're going to talk with Kathleen Styles from the U.S. Census Bureau. We'll be back right after this.

Music and VO:

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Ed: Now we're going to speak with Kathleen Styles, Chief of Decennial Communications and Stakeholder Relations at the U.S. Census Bureau. Kathleen, welcome to "Our American States."

Styles: Thank you. I'm happy to speak with you today.

TM: 12:11

Ed: Kathleen, to start, can you tell us about your role at the Census?

Styles: Thank you. So, you gave my title: Chief of Decennial Communications and Stakeholder Relations, and a number of offices are under me including our redistricting office, which I know works with NCSL quite a bit.

But I guess if I had to say at a very high level what my job at the Census Bureau is, I think my job is to maximize self-response to the coming Census.

TM: 12:37

Ed: I just spoke earlier on the podcast with Wendy Underhill from NCSL about some of the changes in the Census since 1790. Can you tell us about what some of the changes will be from 2000 or 2010?

Styles: The 2020 Census is different in that, of course, the Census is now confidential, and it has been for many decades. And the biggest change in the 2020 Census is that a lot of the Census will be conducted online.

TM: 13:05

Ed: How much of the population do you hope to capture with the online forms?

Styles: As much as possible is I guess what I would say. Based on our tests that we've done during the decade, we think that of the households that self-respond, we're going to get about 60% of them online, about 30% of them on paper, and about 10% of them on the telephone, because we have all three response options this time.

Households are going to be able to choose how they want to respond and we hope they do so online or on the telephone, but the paper is fine with us too and that's going to comprise a good portion of the households that do respond.

TM: 13:42

Ed: So, the technology will be a little different, but the stakes in the 2020 count are pretty much the same as in 1790, aren't they? It still determines apportionment and federal funding.

Styles: The stakes in terms of political representation ramifications are the same in 2020 as in prior censuses, but the federal funding that will flow from the 2020 Census is really much greater than in prior censuses. The figure the Census Bureau has validated is that over 675 billion is allocated yearly based on the Census results, and outside individuals say that that's closer to 1.5 trillion.

So, there's a lot of money that flows from the Census, as well as political representation.

TM: 14:27

Ed: Speaking of those stakes, what can state legislators do to encourage a complete count? Do they have a role?

Styles: Absolutely. So, most states have formed complete count committees and state legislatures and legislators can and should be active with those complete count committees.

We work a lot with local partners because getting out respondents really does depend on having trusted voices in the community urging people to respond to the Census on their own, to self-respond. And we rely a lot on state legislatures and legislators to help us do that, or to help get the word out.

TM: 15:06

Ed: Having an issue with privacy in this age of big data and cybersecurity, what is the Census doing to safeguard privacy?

Styles: Sure, that's a great question. So, the first thing that people should understand is that their responses to the Census are confidential by law. The Census Act specifically says that we can only use the information we get for statistical purposes, you have to be a sworn employee to see it, and that we cannot share data in identifiable form.

So, privacy and security and confidentiality are things that we take very seriously at the Census Bureau, and we want the American public to understand that their information that they provide to us really is going to be confidential.

TM: 15:48

Ed: Has the Census hired everyone it needs or are you still looking for workers?

Styles: So, we're in the recruitment phase right now for hiring enumerators. We had a bit of a slow start, but we have been ramping up rapidly and we expect we are going to meet all of our recruitment goals in a timely fashion.

So, we have recruited I think now over 2.4 million individuals, and we hope to recruit 2.6 million. So, we're close to our recruitment figures. We have not actually started hiring people. We are going to go through the applications starting, I think it's the second week in March, and make offers to people, and then people who we hire will actually start, most of them, in May.

TM: 16:30

Ed: The issue of a citizenship question came up earlier this year and ultimately was not included on the Census. But as I understand it, the Census Bureau will use other data sources to determine citizenship. How will that be reported at the end of the process?

Styles: So yes, to verify what you said, there will be no citizenship question on the 2020 Census. Households should not look for that; it's not going to be asked.

As you probably know, we have been ordered by an executive order from last summer to collect information from other government agencies about citizenship and we're in the process of doing that. We have been asked to produce a file in 2021 about citizenship and the citizen and noncitizen population in the U.S., and we're in the process of working out the details of what that file will look like.

TM: 17:22

Ed: So, that's still to come. How will that look at the end?

Styles: Yes, that is a special tabulation. It's not the decennial Census products. The first product that most people are going to hear about will be sometime in late December when we release to the public and to the President the apportionment totals, the state-by-state totals of how many people reside in each state that are used to determine how many seats in the House of Representatives each state gets.

TM: 17:50

Ed: How long will the count take?

Styles: So, the data collection operations will continue through the end of July. We're asking people to respond as soon as they get their invitation. Most households should get their invitations between March 12 and March 16. We encourage them to respond soon after that. But the data collection period will actually go through the end of July.

The housing units that do not respond, we will start a door-to-door operation to follow up with those households in the May timeframe. And then after we close our data collection operations, we begin our processing operations, which are equally complex, take us many weeks to do.

And so, I think I mentioned already, we release the apportionment counts in December, and then of great interest to your NCSL community, we will be releasing the redistricting data files starting the second or third week in February of 2021 and continuing up until March 31st of 2021.

We continue to release data files for a long time after that, so when you say how long does the Census Act last, the Census takes 12 years for us from the beginning of the cycle to the end of the cycle.

TM: 19:07

Ed: You mentioned reapportion and redistricting. Can you give us a quick primer on those two terms?

Styles: The apportionment counts are the state-by-state totals; it's just the number of people who live in each state. And that is used to determine how many seats each state gets in the U.S. House of Representatives.

The redistricting data is provided at a greater level of detail in terms of the geography, and it also contains some information, you know, people above 18, under 18, etc.; I'm sorry, by racial breakdown. And those files are made available in the February and March timeframe. And that is used by state legislators and the commissions and other organizations that they establish to draw lines within states. And they use it to draw lines for both the U.S. House of Representatives as well as for state legislatures.

TM: 20:05

Ed: Well, that information is, of course, of keen interest to legislators and legislative staff. I wonder if there's anything else you'd like to share about the Census before we wrap up.

Styles: I would just like everyone to understand that it's safe, easy and important. I think the important part is self-evident given the money and political representation that flows from the Census. We've talked about safety and the confidentiality of the Census.

But I would like people to understand that it's really easy to fill out the Census form. It's very fast. Most households, it will take less than 10 minutes to do it. There are very basic, simple questions and it's really easy to do.

Ed: Thank you so much for your time, Kathleen.

NCSL has resources on its website about the Census. Visit www.ncsl.org/podcast to see more information linked from this podcast.

And that concludes this edition of our podcast. We encourage you to review and rate our episodes on iTunes, Google Play or Spotify. You may also go to Google Play, iTunes or Spotify to have these episodes downloaded directly to your mobile device when a new episode is ready. For the National Conference of State Legislatures, this is Ed Smith. Thanks for listening and being part of "Our American States."

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