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## Planning February 2017

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# Countdown to the National Selfie

Here's what to expect from Census 2020 — and a look at tools that can help planners navigate the facts and figures.



Photo by Mario Tama/ Getty Images.

*By Christopher Williamson, AICP*

On April 1, 2020, a giant orbiting cell phone will slowly pass over the U.S., taking statistical "selfies" of 330 million Americans in 11 million census blocks. That's right. It's almost census time, an American tradition since 1790.

Several things are new this time around. For one, the census that will take place in three years is going almost all-digital. It also may have a few changes in the race/ethnic origin categories that could affect comparability with past census data and other datasets. And perhaps of the most immediate use to planners and local governments: There are tons of new tools for harnessing and crunching data.

If the census feels like a wonky, in-the-weeds activity of the Census Bureau, remember this: It is the largest peacetime undertaking of the U.S. government. It calls for counting everyone once — and only once — and in the right place at the same time and in the same way. And state, county, and local government planners play a major role, before, during, and after.

For communities, the outcomes of the decennial census and its annual companion survey, the American Community Survey, are a very big deal. Population data, housing data, and updated census geography are the statistical backbone of the federal government, the states, and counties and cities. (Learn more in a free webinar, "[Assessing Existing Conditions with Census Data \(/events/course/9026928/\).](https://www.planning.org/planning/2017/feb/census/)")

Planners use census data all the time, particularly from the ACS. It delivers age and characteristics of housing structures, housing costs, employment and journey to work, educational attainment and school enrollment, persons with disabilities, and other statistics. ACS data also provides median household incomes and poverty statistics that qualify census tracts for Community Development Block Grants. Each ACS question is related to a federal program or directly required by legislation, but it also functions as a continuous narrative of how and where we live in the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

### **Questions on questions**

This time around, the Census Bureau's Hispanic Origin question will likely need to be tweaked, again, because a growing segment of Hispanic respondents are not selecting any of the current five race categories: White, American Indian or Alaska Native, Black or African American, Asian, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, and/or Other Race.

But a bigger change might be the addition, to be decided by the U.S. Congress next month, of a new race category, Middle Eastern and North African. Presumably, most people who self-identify as MENA would have previously claimed White, but not all. The MENA population can mostly be found in large, diverse cities, while the U.S. Hispanic population is widespread, from big cities to small towns. This matters to planners because 2020 Census race and Hispanic Origin data may not be completely comparable to past census or other demographic data.

Other questions being considered include one on "self-identification" in Native American tribes — which the National Congress of American Indians opposes — and another on sexual orientation and gender identity, the "LGBT Data Inclusion Act," introduced by Sen. Tammy Baldwin (D-Wis.), along with Sen. Patty Murray (D-Wash.). Census and survey data already tabulate same-sex couples, but not the total LGBT population.

Senator David Vitter's (R-La.) proposal would require the Census Bureau to include questions on citizenship and immigration status, a move meant to exclude undocumented residents or non-citizens from state population totals used for congressional apportionment and possibly for redistricting and allocating federal program funds.

By the end of March, the Census Bureau will send Congress a full list of proposed topics and their respective question changes to the 2020 Census and the ACS. Actual question wording approval is due a year later, by March 31, 2018. Since the ACS is the sample data for 2020 Census, these changes will carry over to the ACS.

Without knowing what the administration of President Donald Trump will do regarding deportations of undocumented residents, 2020 Census race and citizenship questions could become a political hot potato. Will we have another census crisis on our hands, like we did in 1998 and 1999, when the Clinton administration's decision to use sampling to adjust Census 2000 results went to the U.S. Supreme Court? Few planners probably remember that, and it'll be interesting to see if it comes back up.

### **Countdown to Census Day**

You never put on a big show without several practice runs, right? Full-scale 2020 Census rehearsals, called the "2018 End-to-End Census Test," will take place in Pierce County, Washington; Bluefield-Beckley-Oak Hill, West Virginia; Providence County, Rhode Island; and possibly Puerto Rico, the Standing Rock Reservation in North and South Dakota, and the Colville Reservation and Off Reservation Trust Land in Washington.

Everything has to work, including the ability for the public to (confidentially and securely) answer the census via the Internet and the old-fashioned but reliable paper questionnaire. In particular, there is a new Census Enterprise Data Collection and Processing program rolling out for this census. It's designed to reduce 2020 Census costs from \$18 billion to \$12.5 billion. It will eventually expand to include the Census Bureau's 100 surveys, such as the Current Population Survey and Survey of Income and Program Participation, and the seven economic censuses.

In 2019, 2020 Census staff will update over 130 million residential addresses and finalize geography down to the block level. The hiring and training of thousands of district office staff and the opening of processing centers will then go into high gear.

Then, in early 2020, the \$415 million Young and Rubicam "answer the census" campaign rolls out in numerous languages and across all social media.

April 1, 2020, is Census Day. From May to July census enumerators try to raise the expected-based-on-past-censuses initial mail-back response rate of about 66 percent by calling and visiting addresses, some of which may be invalid or vacant. By December 31, state-level apportionment census data are all released, and by April 1, 2021, all block-level basic population counts are released for use in redistricting congressional, state, and local districts.

The U.S. Supreme Court announced last June that it would hear *Bethune-Hill v. Virginia State Board of Elections*, a Virginia case involving extreme gerrymandering. New precedents could be set on how to consider race in redrawing districts that are supposed to reflect "communities of interest" without discriminating against protected race classes.

Meanwhile, throughout all of 2020, the ongoing ACS is gathering sample-based data (the "long form" or "sample data," for you old-timers) that would also be released in 2021.

The ACS census tract-level data will go with your 2020 Census basic "100 percent data" but will be based on a 2016 to 2020 ACS five-year dataset. In that sense, 2020 Census is already started. Census geographies with populations of 20,000 or more will have 2020 ACS one-year data that will mesh nicely with 2020 Census data.

## Changes in the ACS

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The three-year data program has been discontinued; there is now only one-year and five-year data. One-year (calendar year) data is released annually, usually in the fall of the next year, for all census geographies of 60,000 population or larger. Five-year data is considered a large enough sample to create decent statistics at the census tract level and



for census geographies under 20,000 population, so each year the five-year data are updated by dropping the oldest year and adding the most recent year — providing a rolling sample.

For census geographies between 20,000 and 60,000 population, ACS has started creating high-level estimates" for selected topics, called the "One-Year Supplemental Estimates." In general, these 58 tables have fewer cross-tabulations and less subpopulation details. But beware: The published margins of error are larger in some cases than the estimate itself! Details about all ACS data are at [tinyurl.com/h7vvgo9](http://tinyurl.com/h7vvgo9) (<http://tinyurl.com/h7vvgo9>).

## **Planners have a duty**

There are several local pre- and post-2020 Census operations (each with its own acronym, of course), managed largely by the Census Bureau's six regional offices, that invite and rely on local government partnerships, usually planners and GIS departments. But two programs, known as LUCA and PSAP, are arguably the most important at the city and county level.

In a repeat of the lead up to the 2010 Census, the LUCA — Local Update of Census Address program — invites local governments to review and update the census address list for their jurisdictions by providing addresses of possible "extra" housing units based on, for example, high water meter usage or a request for extra trash service, whatever local evidence you have.

Address lists are considered census-confidential under Title 13, and someone on your staff has to "take the oath" and lock up the address lists if you participate in LUCA. Begin to think about how to compare the LUCA address list, block by block, with your official city or county address data. You could start creating address totals by block, including all apartments, and then compare your block-level tallies against the LUCA files and narrow down your LUCA review to just those areas where your address data is very different from LUCA data.

Census tracts are supposed to be about 4,000 people, or 2,000 to 3,000 housing units. The Participant Statistical Areas Program allows local governments, usually working with a county coordinator, to split tracts that are too populous and merge tracts that have declined in population.

You may be surprised when the PSAP flags areas as having too few people. Planners might not have caught up to what school districts already know: Many older single-family neighborhoods are full of baby-boom empty nesters where there were kids a few years ago. By updating your local census tract boundaries, your ACS data will better reflect local neighborhoods.

After the census data is released in early 2021, local governments should plan to review their census data during the County Review and Count Question Resolution programs. Use those LUCA tallies of housing units by census block to compare to 2020 Census housing counts and check to make sure quarters like dormitories and prisons are in the right location.

2020 Census staff also work with school districts, Native American tribes, military bases, prisons, universities with campus housing, and others in preparing for the big selfie. Many communities organize a Complete Count Committee, set up help centers in shopping centers

and libraries, suggest areas where the homeless congregate, and help with local media outreach. Why not get yourself appointed as the 2020 Census Liaison? You'll have a great time.

### Census data tips and tools

**American FactFinder.** The doorway to the ACS, and most all Census Bureau data, is the American FactFinder website. Bookmark this web address: [factfinder.census.gov](http://factfinder.census.gov) (<http://factfinder.census.gov/>). Using FactFinder is not hard once you stumble around a bit, and there are myriad tutorials and self-help guides. Start with *What State and Local Governments Need to Know*, available at [tinyurl.com/zsapfhm](http://tinyurl.com/zsapfhm) (<http://tinyurl.com/zsapfhm>). Advice publications are being updated for release in 2017.

**Opportunity Project.** Augmenting American FactFinder is the Obama administration's Opportunity Project ([opportunity.census.gov](http://opportunity.census.gov) (<http://opportunity.census.gov/>)), released in March 2016, which consolidates federal and local data sets on a Census Bureau site with numerous query tools with the intent to create more equitable cities and better access to jobs, housing, schools, and transportation.

Participating cities include Baltimore; Detroit; Kansas City, Missouri; New Orleans; New York; Philadelphia; San Francisco; and Washington, D.C., plus organizations and companies such as Redfin, Zillow, GreatSchools, PolicyLink, and Streetwyze.

**Deep Linking.** Most city or county websites have a section for demographics, but the data is often out of date. Keeping up with updates can be a tedious chore. Instead, use deep linking to insert a direct link from your website to the most current Census Bureau data for your county or Place (remember, "Place" is an incorporated jurisdiction in census-speak) and you're done. Check it out at [tinyurl.com/jhszy5f](http://tinyurl.com/jhszy5f) (<http://tinyurl.com/jhszy5f>).

**Mobile Apps and API.** There is a growing list of mobile apps at [census.gov/mobile](http://census.gov/mobile) (<http://census.gov/mobile>). (Use the dwellr app to discover the top 25 U. S. cities and towns that best fit your lifestyle by finding neighborhood-level statistics on home values, education, and how people get to work.)

The census application programming interface lets developers create custom apps to reach new users and makes key demographic, socioeconomic, and housing statistics more accessible — and customizable — than ever before. Users get quick and easy access from an ever-increasing pool of publicly available datasets. This data is currently used to distribute around \$400 billion in federal, state, and local funds in ways that help communities plan for schools, social and emergency services, highway improvements, and economic developments.

Developers could use the statistics available through this API to create apps that:

- Show commuting patterns for every city in America.
- Display the latest numbers on owners and renters in a neighborhood.
- Provide a local government a range of socioeconomic statistics on its population.

So, with three years to go, what can we expect from the 2020 Census? It could be politically interesting, like in 2000, or it could go relatively smoothly, like Census 2010.

The \$12.5 billion selfie is coming. Get in the picture!

## Decoding Census Acronyms

Here are some other census operations — and their acronyms — that planners might be asked to help with.

**BAS**, the Boundary and Annexation Survey, is used to update information about the legal boundaries and names of all governmental units in the U.S.



**GUPS** (Geographic Update Partnership Software) is an open-source, customized GIS provided by the Census Bureau ([census.gov/geo/partnerships/bas.html](http://census.gov/geo/partnerships/bas.html) (<http://census.gov/geo/partnerships/bas.html>)) for those without extensive GIS experience. It replaces the MAF/TIGER Partnership Software. Expert GIS users may employ their own GIS to make updates and boundary updates. These can also be made using paper maps.

**BBSP**, the Block Boundary Suggestion Project, provides states the opportunity to update small area geography (census tabulation blocks) for the purpose of legislative redistricting ([tinyurl.com/jsgwlzy](http://tinyurl.com/jsgwlzy) (<http://tinyurl.com/jsgwlzy>)).

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