The Future of the Census of Governments: A Progress Report from the U.S. Census Bureau

 Presented at the Governmental Research Association Annual Meeting

 July 28, 2009

Disclaimer: This report is released to inform interested parties of research and to encourage discussion of work in progress. The views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of the U.S. Census Bureau.
Introduction to Governments Division

• Main purposes of Governments Division programs:
  – Provide economic statistics about governments
  – Are the public counterpart to business, industry, and services economic data
  – Follow the activity of governments over time
• Virtually no confidentiality restrictions
• Response is voluntary
State and Local Government Statistics at a Crossroads

- 2007 report issued by the Committee on National Statistics (CNStat)
- Suggested recommendations for improving existing programs
- Initial response slow due to staff transitions and focus of 2007 Census of Governments
- Since August 2008, focus on using recommendations to leverage change/improvements within the Division
CNStat Report Themes

• Data Quality, Relevance, and Utility
• Timeliness
• Dissemination
CNStat Theme: Data Quality, Relevance, and Utility

• Recommendation 3-1: Get feedback from users on suggested improvements to the detail and classification of data on state and local government finances and employment

• Progress Update:
  – Increasing participation in user meetings
  – Series of focus groups with variety of data users in both the Federal statistical community and the private research community
  – Data User Workshop to be held in Spring 2010 to discuss feedback from the focus groups and proposals for content to the 2012 CoG and beyond.
CNStat Theme: Data Quality, Relevance, and Utility

• Recommendations in Chapter 4: Conduct research on existing methods to see where efficiencies and improvements can be made (i.e., survey redesign, response, editing and imputation, data revisions)

• Progress Update:
  – Redesigning all aspects of the Quarterly Tax survey (new sample for property tax is in its 3rd quarter of production)
  – Developed new macro and micro level edits for the annual finance and employment surveys and we continue to research alternative methodologies and adjust the bounds.
CNStat Theme: Data Quality, Relevance, and Utility

• Recommendations in Chapter 4: Conduct research on existing methods to see where efficiencies and improvements can be made (i.e., survey redesign, response, editing and imputation, data revisions)

• Progress Update (continued):
  – Re-organized the division to develop an area devoted to research and methodology
  – Q-Tax redesign
  – New sample for 2009 Annual Employment
  – Local Finance Central Collection Evaluation
  – The results of the data user exchanges yield additional approaches to these topics
CNStat Theme: Timeliness

- Recommendation 5-1: Research the benefits/ costs of adopting earlier release procedures, i.e., releasing preliminary estimates or releasing estimates as they are compiled.
- Ability to do this is dependent on GOVS reengineering its existing processing systems.
- Progress Update:
  - Successful in moving up the release of several products.
  - Some constraints due to data processing and the use of statistical methods; are reviewing existing processes and methods to determine where efficiencies can be made.
CNStat Theme: Dissemination

- Recommendations 4-1, 4-3, 4-8: Provide users with needed tools and documentation to accurately navigate existing methodologies
- Recommendation 5-2: Redesign and continually improve the Governments website
- Progress Update:
  - Working to position existing areas to focus specifically on user outreach and education
  - Produced an in-house dissemination tool, Build-A-Table
  - Exploring three mechanisms for dissemination: expansion of Build-A-Table, DataFerrett (including hot reports), and the new American FactFinder to debut in 2011
  - Implementing standards that are consistent in the Census Bureau
Build-A-Table

Select category

Select variables

Retrieve data
CNStat Theme: Dissemination

• Recommendation 5-3: Facilitate wider dissemination of products by issuing press releases; add value to existing data by providing simple derived measures

• Progress Update:
  – Regular press releases began in October 2008 with the release of 2007 Census of Employment data
  – Introduction of quarterly surveys to Tip sheets and planning on developing quarterly press releases
  – Availability through DataFerrett
# Data Release Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Release Date</th>
<th>Release</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September 2009</td>
<td>2007 Census of Finance</td>
<td>Quinquennial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2009 (Dec., Mar., Jun.)</td>
<td>Quarterly Tax</td>
<td>Quarterly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 2009</td>
<td>2008 Annual Employment</td>
<td>Annual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2009</td>
<td>2008 State Government Finance</td>
<td>Annual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2009</td>
<td>S &amp; L Public Employee-Retirement Systems</td>
<td>Annual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2009</td>
<td>Annual State Tax Collections</td>
<td>Annual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2009</td>
<td>2007 Census of Finance</td>
<td>Quinquennial</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Final Thoughts

• Working toward addressing the majority of recommendations by the 2012 Census of Governments
• Have some immediate challenges to overcome
• To be successful we need
  – Your patience and support;
  – Your input as we propose and recommend suggestions; and
  – Your assistance both in terms of input but also in helping to keep our response rates high
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