Respondent Confidentiality Concerns and Possible Effects on Response Rates and Data Quality for the 2020 Census

National Advisory Committee on Racial, Ethnic, and Other Populations Fall Meeting

November 2, 2017

Arturo Vargas,
NALEO Educational Fund
Discussant
Census 2020 will have many unique challenges because of its new design and the lack of sufficient funding to adequately prepare and execute.

Its greatest challenge will be the one that is most familiar.

• One of the most potent and persistent barriers to a full count has been public skepticism that data provided to the Census Bureau will be kept safe and confidential, and not used to harm the respondent.
The observations of the Census Bureau’s staff confirms what leaders and stakeholders in communities of color, immigrant communities, and vulnerable communities experience everyday:

- These communities today **fear their own government**. The fear is not irrational, it is not unfounded, and it is real. And the cause of this fear comes from the **highest offices of the government itself**.

- It is alarming that the Census Bureau’s observations were among individuals that were invited to participate in interviews and thus predisposed to participating. The situation is likely more acute among the general population and in a decennial Census environment.
The Census Bureau must heed the recommendations the NAC already has made, including those from the spring of this year:
Recommendation:
The NAC recommends that the Integrated Partnership and Communications’ Campaign work with immigrant communities to get out the message that fully responding early by web or mail to the 2020 Census will minimize the likelihood of in-person visits from enumerators.

This will help address fears immigrants may have of having government agents come to their home. This is similar to messaging used in 2010 Census.

CENSUS BUREAU RESPONSE:
The Census Bureau concurs with this recommendation and will be doing this through Communications and Partnerships efforts.
Recommendation:

The NAC recommends that the communications strategy needs to be tailored to the current and evolving environment affecting public trust in contact with federal agencies employees, and the targeted audiences should include the “trusted messengers,” historically undercounted communities, as well as the public at large.

The NAC further recommends that the Census Bureau report back to the NAC on how the communication strategy will alleviate fears that data might be used against responding communities.

CENSUS BUREAU RESPONSE:
The Census Bureau concurs with these recommendations and will take these actions.
We appreciate the recommendations of the research staff for additional messaging research to provide additional tools to field staff and enumerators in 2020. This plan must be aggressive, bold, robust and strategic and should begin with the End to End Test.

- The research, testing and message development must be segmented for separate audiences: The general public, and the “Trusted Messengers.”
- The Census Bureau should complement and coordinate with research, messaging and testing that will be conducted by independent, nonprofit organizations.
- The Census Bureau must prepare for and execute messages and tactics that are bold and strategic. It cannot be timid.
- The Census Bureau should speak out against efforts to undermine the decennial, such as proposals to add last minute, untested questions.
More is needed.

The Census Bureau must **invest additional resources** into the **Partnership and Communications programs** to specifically address this crisis.

The NAC should meet with U.S. Secretary of Commerce **Wilbur Ross** and Undersecretary **Karen Dunn Kelley** to discuss the crisis, its causes, and to develop effective and credible plans and strategies to address it.
What is at stake?

The success or failure of the 2020 Census.
Thank you.

Arturo Vargas
Executive Director
avargas@naleo.org
Twitter: @ArturoNALEO

www.naleo.org