



2025 unConference Summary

The federal statistical system has been struggling with budget constraints for several years. In the first six months of 2025 threats to the integrity of the system increased substantially, including cuts to staffing and contracts, data removals, revisions to data collections, and delays and missed deadlines in the publication of key information.

In light of these concerning and ongoing threats, APDU opted to turn the 2025 annual conference into an “unConference,” a format where the meeting is organized by the attendees themselves.

Ahead of the event, attendees suggested and voted on breakout discussion topics, including one notable request for “anything action-oriented, I’m done wallowing.” APDU leadership encouraged participants to carry that request through all six breakout discussions, which are listed below:

- Communicating importance of public data
- Improving transparency
- Data preservation and monitoring
- Informing 2030 Census
- What can states do?
- Anything goes (what do you want to chat about today)

Although the breakout discussions varied widely, we did find several recurring themes, and have identified some concrete action items. Those are described immediately below. This document also includes a more thorough summary of each of the breakout discussions.

Detailed notes are not verbatim nor necessarily in the order in which topics were discussed. APDU Board members and volunteers began with detailed meeting notes, then edited for clarity and flow.



Overall Action Items and Next Steps

There are specific actions identified during each breakout discussion, with themes that recur throughout. APDU's key action items fall into categories that mirror the key themes above.

More Education is Needed

- Create a shared (and up-to-date) slide deck that anyone can use to brief their network.
- Provide media training to a wider network of people in the data community.
- Collect and publicize use cases or "data stories" (or amplify existing data stories efforts).
- Establish a working group to communicate changes in the federal statistical system and their impact on local governments
 - In forming working groups and other collaboratives, continue to find ways to leverage virtual participation/collaboration as a workaround to the no-travel-resources and language mismatch concerns.
 - Identify and help publicize other virtual events, like the unConference, that are available for information sharing. (If none, APDU could host more.)
- Document and communicate what has worked for localities (e.g., California Health Interview Survey).
- Circulate meeting summary from the Data Integrity Summit.
- Host a webinar, or something similar, with an influencer to reach a broader audience.
- Develop talking points/call to action for press/stakeholders to communicate/disseminate urgent challenges (e.g., absenteeism, child malnourishment).
- Determine continued ways of improving outreach during evolving time.

More Collaboration Is Needed

- Build and strengthen networks of public data users, including state and local governments, business leaders, and existing networks/associations.
- Partner with existing organizations to ensure that critical information and actions are shared with as wide an audience as possible.
- Do more to engage the business community—which may range from basic education (explaining how private data vendors use public data as the foundation of their products, so you can't just buy your way out of the problem) to enlisting them in advocacy efforts.

More Research Is Needed

- Improve understanding of dataset intersections (what data stream feeds into what other data stream) as that will help with communicating the implications of any changes.
 - Consider building a large language model (LLM) to scan through information collection requests (ICRs) to identify linkages between data products.
- Encourage federal statistical agencies to produce detailed technical documentation and "plain language" translations.



- Share meeting info for the Independent Census Scientific Advisory Committee (ICSAC) with ADPU members and encourage them to submit comments during the public comment portion of the meeting.
- Circulate meeting summary from the Data Integrity Summit.



Breakout 1: Communicating the importance of public data

Summary

This discussion highlighted the critical and indispensable value of public data for a functioning society, emphasizing its role in informed governance, robust economy, and more. Participants stressed that public data is foundational, often serving as the base for local data products, disaster preparedness, and understanding societal needs. Federal data are relied upon both because of their high quality and transparency, and also because state and local governments often lack the resources to produce data of similarly high quality, frequency, and granularity.

A key takeaway was that everyone needs to be a messenger for public data, which will require broader media training and avoiding technical jargon. The discussion identified the importance of partnering with national organizations like the National Conference of State Legislatures to expand the reach of supportive messaging. Business leaders may also be valuable allies, but encouraging the business community to advocate on behalf of data will take time and effort.

To help support all of this work, we need compelling "data stories," including those that illustrate the "downstream" effects of data (how one dataset feeds into others). Artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning may be a way to help these data linkages.

The discussion concluded with a strong call to action for all participants (and APDU membership more broadly) to actively champion the value of public data. The collective sentiment was clear: public data is not a luxury, it's a necessity for informed governance, economic vitality, and a truly democratic society. Ongoing efforts to protect and promote public data are critical for the well-being of the nation.

Action Items and Next Steps

- Create a shared (and up-to-date) slide deck that anyone can use to brief their network.
- Provide media training to a wider network of people in the data community.
- Collect and publicize use cases or "data stories" (or amplify existing data stories efforts).
- Improve understanding of dataset intersections (what data stream feeds into what other data stream) as that will help with communicating the implications of any changes.
 - Consider building a LLM to scan through ICRs to identify linkages between data products.
- Partner with existing organizations to ensure that critical information and actions are shared with as wide an audience as possible.
- Build and strengthen networks of public data users, including state and local governments, business leaders, and existing networks/associations.
- Do more to engage the business community—which may range from basic education (explaining how private data vendors use public data as the foundation of their products, so you can't just buy your way out of the problem) to enlisting them in advocacy efforts.



Detailed Notes

The discussion started with a prompt “Why do you value public data?” that elicited some compelling responses, including the following:

- Detailed information about methodology and accuracy, such as publishing margins of error and providing robust metadata, mean that federal data have long been a trusted resource. They’re “not pushing a particular agenda.”
- Federal data also allows us to understand the needs and challenges faced by people, and to respond to those needs. Federal data are one way that people get heard.
- Lawmakers may have a different perspective than the public at large—they may not care about margins of error. They want to know why the data matter to them (or their constituents).
- Considering local, regional, and state governments, attendees expressed that they would not be able to answer policymaker/leaders questions without federal data because smaller governments lack the capacity to collect reliable data at the scale the federal government does. Federal data also serve as the foundation of local data products (like population projections).
- One participant noted that data is the foundation of their work, describing it as a pyramid—with data as the base.
- Federal data are also critical for disaster preparedness and emergency response.

Data quality was also seen as both a strength and a challenge. Some localities may have better data than the federal government and need ways to convey that information (such as through the LUCA program, and population estimates challenge program) while still recognizing the value of the federal statistical system. It can be challenging to strike a balance between respecting the integrity and quality of the data while also needing to point out some flaws.

Another challenge that bubbled up during the discussion is when is it ok to let a dataset go. As one example, Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) provides longitudinal information on poverty that cannot currently be found anywhere else. Could administrative records be a substitute? (Maybe or maybe not.)¹

In response to the prompt “Who are we trying to target? Who is the messenger? Any examples of what worked well or not?” several themes emerged:

- We all need to be messengers.
 - Having more messengers will require media training for more people.
 - We need to avoid technical jargon when speaking about data.
- There’s a disconnect between local and state users and federal decisionmakers. Expand reach by partnering with existing organizations—like the following:

¹ APDU editor’s note: This tension in the discussion suggests that we may need mechanisms to help sort out complicated tradeoffs.



- U.S. Conference of Mayors
- National Association of Counties
- National Association of Towns and Townships
- National Association of Regional Councils
- National Governors Association (not as active recently)
- Council of Chief State Schools Officers
- National Conference of State Legislatures
- National League of Cities
- Caution is warranted: There is a fine line between good advocacy and having the information you present turned into a road map for how to destroy data.

It is also clear that business leaders could be valuable allies in defending public data. However, many have been sitting on the sidelines. We can and should do more to engage the business community—which may range from basic education (explaining how private data vendors use public data as the foundation of their products, so you can’t just buy your way out of the problem) to enlisting them in advocacy efforts. There is some evidence that local/regional coalitions have been the most effective at mobilizing business leaders for advocacy.

Being able to provide clear and compelling stories about the importance of data will be foundational to any outreach and advocacy work. That includes being able to identify the “downstream” uses of data, such as when one data product feeds into another, so canceling the one may have unintended consequences for the other. One participant suggested building a LLM to scan through technical documentation and ICRs to identify linkages between data products – so that if one dataset is at risk the LLM tool could help identify the downstream effects.

For education of a broader community (beyond APDU membership), one participant described a panel discussion about their planning for their state to bring people with less information up-to-speed on what’s been happening with the federal statistical system. The event will be hosted by a trusted partner and tailored to the types of data that attendees use most often. This is a promising approach that can help quickly build knowledge (and maybe encourage more advocacy) that is going to be replicated in other states.

Another helpful tool was the “rapid response webinar” that APDU recently co-hosted with partners at PRB and dataindex.us. Sometimes even those who are well-informed may not know where to start, so we piloted a 30-minute webinar to answer the questions:

- What's in this dataset?
- Why is it important?
- What are the current risks?
- How can you take action?

As a result of the first rapid response webinar, more than 80 people submitted comments to the Federal Register Notice on the American Time Use Survey.



However, many of the events described are smaller in scale. Participants also offered suggestions for shifting the media landscape, including participating in wiki edit-a-thons and/or producing large volumes of “pro-data” content to feed AI search engines.



Breakout 2: Improving transparency

Summary

The conversation in this breakout was largely about how data providers can provide better documentation, both for data experts who need complete documentation, and for non-experts, who need information about a dataset to be communicated in a way that makes sense. Some participants expressed concern about how some agencies are reluctant to give complete information, because agency staff are worried that it might be misinterpreted (either accidentally or willfully). No participants felt that worry about misinterpretation was a valid reason to withhold information. However, the potential for misinterpretation does obviate the need for well-written documentation with context that can be helpful for a novice. Participants also felt it is important to make the documentation easy to find, which is not always the case on current agency websites.

Some key takeaways from the discussion include the following:

- Data providers shouldn't withhold documentation out of fear it will be misinterpreted (accidentally or wilfully).
- Providers should provide more context, in terms that are understandable to lay users (as opposed to data experts).
- AI could erode trust in data because it is "black box."

Action Items and Next Steps

- Encourage federal statistical agencies to produce detailed technical documentation and "plain language" translations.

Detailed Notes

The discussion was vigorous, indicating the importance of dataset documentation, which, too often, is left until the last minute and not integrated into the production workflow (a good reference on this point with recommendations is the 2022 Committee on National Statistics (CNSTAT) report, [Transparency in Statistical Information for the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics and All Federal Statistical Agencies | The National Academies Press](#)).

Documentation of the steps to produce a dataset, tables, estimates from a statistical program needs to be complete

A participant noted the growing importance of imputation for missing data in a survey or another data source and consequently the need to provide documentation of imputation procedures and their effects on the data. Imputation procedures, however, are typically a black box and their effects on variability and bias are not estimated. Work by Census Bureau staff on the National Experimental Well-Being Statistics (NEWS) is an exception in which their procedures to link multiple data sources to improve household income and poverty estimates from the Current



Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement are thoroughly documented (see [National Experimental Well-Being Statistics \(NEWS\)](#)).

A classic example of what can happen when imputation procedures are not well documented occurred in the early days of the SIPP. To the dismay of the Congress and the disbelief of policy analysts, SIPP estimated larger than expected numbers of ineligible higher income people who reported receiving food stamps. Investigation determined that a contributing factor was that the income imputation procedures did not include poverty status or program receipt (see Chapter 3, footnote 6, in this 1993 CNSTAT report, [3 ACHIEVING SIPP's GOALS | The Future of the Survey of Income and Program Participation | The National Academies Press](#)). It took SIPP users to press for research to uncover the problem.

Participants suggested that statistical agencies should enlist users to review beta versions of documentation, data access tools, and the like before they are released to identify areas for improvement prior to publication. Such enlistment should be designed not to overburden particular users (e.g., several people in effect served as unpaid consultants to the Census Bureau in carefully reviewing iterations of the various 2020 census products for an appropriate balance between confidentiality protection and usability).

Transparency about upcoming key decisions needs to be front and center and include user input

Participants recalled the 2020 census Disclosure Avoidance System rollout for the summary file data products as an object lesson in the lack of genuine two-way communication and worried about how communication with data users would work for 2030. Areas of particular concern were confidentiality protection methods and the use of administrative records in the census. (The Census Bureau released the first 2030 operational plan the day after the APDU unconference — see [2030 Census Operational Plan](#).)

Another example of problematic lack of consultation occurred when the Bureau of Labor Statistics concluded that not many people seemed to be using the Current Employment Statistics Women Worker Series (CES WWS) and announced in December 2004 that these data would be discontinued without involving data users and advocacy groups in the decision. The intense blowback could have been foreseen (see, e.g., [LCCR Coalition Letter to Amy A. Hobby Regarding CES WWS | American Civil Liberties Union](#)) and led Congress to mandate that these particular data continue to be collected and published.

In contrast, the role out of the plan for the American Community Survey (ACS) to replace the census long-form sample and of the ACS itself was generally handled well.

Participants lamented the absence of formal advisory committees and noted that the members of the CSAC planned to hold a public meeting from 2-5 PM Eastern on September 18 to review the presentations they received prior to the cancellation of their March 2025 meeting and the dissolution of CSAC itself. The meeting will include an opportunity for public comment. Participants suggested that letter writing to agencies to ask questions (e.g., what does it mean



for areas with hidden housing units that the 2030 operational plan says that the development of the address list will not include field work?) could be an option for communication.

One participant recalled the history of consultation between users and the Census Bureau for the 1980 – 2000 censuses. The Census Bureau let a small contract for each of these censuses to APDU to establish a working group of APDU members, who signed up for particular subject areas. The Census Bureau would present options—for example, for how much race/ethnicity detail to provide in summary files—and the APDU coordinator (the late Patty Becker of Detroit) would correspond with relevant working group members to craft a reasoned response. This approach provided for genuine two-way dialogue and avoided the problem that if asked without any specificity about tradeoffs what they need, users will of course say “everything.” This participant observed that once data products became ubiquitous on the internet, statistical agencies seemed to adopt the posture that they had done their job and didn’t need to dialogue the way they had previously. The ACS data users forum is a good example—it functions very well for users helping other users but it is rare for Census Bureau staff to participate or to learn how to improve ACS data products.

Documentation should be complete, including information on problems in data programs and products of which users should be aware

Data users need documentation that enables them to fully understand the dataset they are working with, warts and all. Statistical agencies worry that full transparency could lead to unintentional or willful misinterpretation of the data, but this should not be a reason to omit or gloss over problems that users need to know about for their analysis. Instead, documentation and other user aides should provide context and appropriate cautions about use.

Documentation should be easier to find, as should quality metrics, such as response rates, over time

Currently, agencies vary widely in how they make documentation and data quality indicators accessible. The ACS has a good, regularly updated page of quality metrics, although the page isn’t easy to find (see [Sample Size and Data Quality | American Community Survey | U.S. Census Bureau](#)), but often quality indicators only become available when an agency publishes a report and, for a time series, must be laboriously assembled. This is an area where the chief statistician and the Interagency Council on Statistical Policy could usefully set standards.

Documentation and associated user guides and such need to be prepared to help users with different levels of experience and expertise

While necessary, it is not sufficient to provide complete documentation for the experienced data user. Easily accessible information that helps new users become familiar with a dataset or other data product, including its uses and limitations, is important. The ACS has a series of handbooks for different user groups (e.g., media, researchers, business community API users) that are helpful and have been updated as of 2020–2023 ([American Community Survey Handbooks for Data Users](#)). Often, even more basic information is needed to inform stakeholders of the meaning and importance of various statistical agency programs and products.



AI warrants careful attention as it may affect data quality and meaning in the future

It is not at all clear how AI may be used in producing official statistics. Obvious examples involve automated coding of occupation and other characteristics, building on several decades of experience with automated coding schemes. One could imagine other uses that would require very careful research and experimentation, including how to document the effects of AI on the data (see this 2025 summary of a 2024 CNSTAT workshop, [Future Directions for Social and Behavioral Science Methodologies in the Next Decade: Proceedings of a Workshop—in Brief | The National Academies Press](#)).



Breakout 3: Data preservation and monitoring

Summary

The breakout discussion on data preservation and monitoring noted a growing ecosystem of preservation and monitoring efforts, but identified gaps that remain, including needing to develop protocols and processes for tracking data quality.

Action Items and Next Steps

- Develop protocols and processes for tracking changes in data availability and quality.
 - Secure funding to develop protocols and support ongoing monitoring.
- Promote/support work of organizations (like [Data Rescue Project](#), [dataindex.us](#), [The Nation's Data at Risk](#), and others).
- Develop a “most wanted” list “most wanted” list of functionality for data archiving/preserving.
 - Tools could include, for example, hashes of the data sets at the time they were collected.

Detailed Notes

In response to the prompt “What’s going on, or is already underway, and who’s doing it?” participants shared the following list of organizations and projects that are actively engaged in data preservation and monitoring:

- Data Rescue Project
- DataIndex.US
- Federal Data Forum
- American Statistical Association – The Nation’s Data at Risk: Ongoing Monitoring
- Data Foundation – SAFE-TRACK
- Center for Open Data Enterprise (CODE)
- Funders for the Future of Public Data

Beyond specific organizations, there is a general push for a user-friendly/one-stop shop that helps people find existing data preservation and monitoring projects and, crucially, access the tools being reproduced. Data Rescue Project largely fills this role now, but a novice may be overwhelmed.

Participants also discussed the importance of being able to identify what has changed in a dataset and why. This is particularly difficult because historical records of modifications are often lacking. (In recent months data files were revised with no public indication of the change—not even an updated “last revised” data on the webpage.) One participant noted [a recent article in The Lancet that assessed revisions across 232 datasets](#) and found that nearly half of the datasets assessed had been noticeably altered, but that additional review—such as comparing current datasets to previously-published versions—is necessary.



Even when changes are indicated, it may be unclear how these changes were implemented in the actual data file. This makes it challenging for users to understand if something has gone missing or been altered. A concrete example cited is the National Survey of Children's Health, where a question about discrimination based on gender was removed from the dataset and the corresponding questionnaire document was edited. Without expertise and careful comparison, such changes are hard to detect or automate on a large scale.

Hashing may be an important technical support for monitoring efforts. By generating a unique "fingerprint" (hash) of a dataset at the time of collection, any subsequent change to the data, even a single character, will result in a different hash. This allows for easy detection of changes, though it doesn't reveal *what* specifically changed. (Technical expertise will still be required to understand what changed and whether or not a change is concerning.)

Participants discussed the importance of data "provenance" (knowing when and from where a dataset was downloaded, its original source, and any subsequent modifications). ICPSR, for instance, records the download date for open-access datasets they ingest, ensuring that the version they share was indeed accessible on that specific day.

Relatedly, while volunteers are crucial to data rescue efforts, participants acknowledged that their capacity for detailed documentation, especially for datasets they may not be experts in, is limited. The priority is often to save the data first, rather than waiting for perfect documentation. In addition, it is not always clear what is needed so that a user will be able to unpack a data file that's downloaded. For example, in the past we didn't need to be concerned about a questionnaire being missing or altered—but this year historical questionnaires (which, in the past, served as an archival record of what was in the field at a given point in time) have been altered. This makes it imperative to get *all* related documentation when downloading/archiving.

One participant raised a question about how to engage students in data preservation and monitoring. There's a recognition that many students are passionate about public good, and a suggestion was to create a "Federal Evidence Agenda" similar to the LGBTQ Evidence Agenda. This could provide students with concrete projects to work on, leveraging their skills. Students and early career folks also may bring fresh perspectives to the work and be able to identify issues that experts might overlook.

Restricted-Access Data Poses Unique Challenges

Participants also expressed concern about the ability to protect restricted-use data. Due to legal and ethical challenges, these data often cannot be preserved (or even monitored) through the same mechanisms used to preserve published data. Data librarians are now advising researchers to make backup copies of restricted-use data where legally permissible, and strongly emphasize downloading accompanying documentation like questionnaires, which were once assumed to always be available.

The challenge of preserving restricted use data will grow over time. Already agencies like National Center for Education Statistics hold massive amounts of such data, and there are concerns about dwindling staff dedicated to its maintenance and accessibility. Similar issues



were noted for the Demographic and Health Surveys. As other agencies face staffing and funding cutbacks, the problem is likely to grow.

The discussion highlighted the "sticky situation" of encouraging authorized users to hold onto copies of restricted data, with the hope that a pathway might emerge to bring these back into the public domain or make them more broadly accessible in the future. The best advice to researchers/data holders is to consult with legal counsel regarding personal copies of restricted data.

One participant noted that turning restricted data into a shareable synthetic dataset may be a useful workaround. Synthetic data are data designed to imitate a confidential dataset while limiting information about individual records in the confidential dataset. The National Secure Data Services is actively providing a synthetic data generator, server code, and training on its use.

Looking Ahead

The sentiment that "the system as we knew it is done" suggests a recognition that traditional methods of data collection and dissemination may no longer be sustainable. This may necessitate a move away from surveys as the primary mode of data collection and an embrace of new approaches. This period of change is also seen as an opportunity to implement improvements that have long been desired but were difficult to enact. However, in an ideal situation any new systems would be run in parallel with existing systems to allow time for analysis and understanding of how the systems differ (and the implications of those differences for interpretation of the resulting data).

Looking ahead, participants also noted that the ICR process and Federal Register Notices can be helpful signals for identifying possible future changes to data collections, but even these notices sometimes are vague and may not provide sufficient detail to understand what changes are being proposed.

Beyond explicit changes to previously-published data, the discussion touched on tracking more subtle signals of data quality decline, such as:

- Decreases in survey sample sizes.
- Changes in publication frequency.
- Reduction in data formats or analysis briefs from federal agencies.
- The increasing labeling of changes as "nonsubstantive" without clear justification.
- Ending of specific statistical programs or data products (e.g., BEA ending certain statistics on foreign direct investment and satellite accounts).
- Reduced presence of federal staff at conferences or their availability to answer questions about data files and formats, which can be an indirect signal of diminished capacity for data quality review.



Participants agreed it would be helpful to assemble a “most wanted” list of functionality for data archiving/preserving. Tools could include, for example, hashes of the data sets at the time they were collected.

The discussion also included a crucial note about not disparaging the efforts of federal staff who are still working under immense duress to release decent data. There's a caution against prematurely assuming data quality is "bad" before a proper threshold for evaluation is established.



Breakout 4: Informing the 2030 Census

Summary

The breakout discussion focused on the urgent need to address critical issues surrounding the 2030 Census, particularly in the wake of the Census Advisory Committee's dissolution. Participants expressed significant concern about the implications of this void and sought to collectively strategize ways to ensure a complete and accurate count. The discussion covered a broad range of topics, from budgetary constraints and methodological changes to local outreach and the potential political targeting of vulnerable populations.

- Start at the local level now, might not have the support at the federal level.
- Census 2026 tests could still go on as planned, but unsure if they will. People want to support this as possible, including at a local level in those areas to make sure people respond and we hear what comes out of the tests that will help for 2030.

The dissolution of advisory committees created a vacuum but has also spurred independent action and a renewed commitment to advocacy. Key concerns include funding, staffing, ability to adequately vet new data and methods (including administrative records), the potential for limits on non-response follow-up, and the impact of political rhetoric on immigrant communities and the count of young children.

Despite these challenges, there is hope stemming from the current level of attention on the census, the recognized importance of accurate data for local funding and apportionment, and existing support within Congress. The immediate focus is on influencing the 2026 Census Tests, strengthening local complete count committees, and finding creative ways to engage a broader range of partners, including businesses and tech companies, to ensure a fair and accurate 2030 Census.

Action Items and Next Steps

- Share meeting info for the Independent CSAC with ADPU members and encourage them to submit comments during the public comment portion of the meeting.
- Circulate meeting summary from the Data Integrity Summit.
- Host a webinar, or something similar, with an influencer to reach a broader audience.

Detailed Notes

This discussion focused on critical concerns and proactive strategies for the upcoming 2030 Census, particularly in light of the dissolution of the CSAC (along with the 2030 Census Advisory Committee and National Advisory Committee) and a perceived lack of clear direction from the Census Bureau.



One important goal is to fill the void left by the dissolution of committees, gather information about the budget and plans for 2030, and empower stakeholders to advocate for a fair and accurate count.

This committee previously served as a vital forum for discussion and feedback regarding census operations. Its absence leaves stakeholders feeling uninformed and without a direct channel to communicate concerns or propose solutions to the Bureau. This has spurred former members of the CSAC to "get back together" independently. The other two dissolved committees, however, felt unable to meet without direct information from the Bureau to respond to or comment on, which highlights the challenge of engaging effectively without official channels.

The upcoming (unofficial) CSAC meeting on September 18th, hosted by National Conference on Citizenship, is a crucial opportunity to address the communication void. The meeting agenda includes a public comment period, which will provide stakeholders with an opportunity to voice their concerns in a forum that may be heard by staff at the Bureau.

Budget and 2026 Census Test

Participants raised concerns about the adequacy of the budget for the 2030 Census and, more immediately, for the 2026 Census Test. While budget numbers suggest the tests could proceed, explicit allocations are lacking. There's apprehension about the Bureau's hiring progress, with participants noting they are behind schedule compared to the last decennial cycle. The fear is that a lack of sufficient funds and staffing will hinder the successful execution of the 2026 tests. The discussion emphasizes the importance of these tests for identifying what works and what doesn't in community engagement.

The Census Project will continue advocating, such as through comments and letters, for a robust 2026 Census Test.

Considerations for Administrative Records

The move towards greater reliance on administrative records is attributed to declining response rates in traditional surveys and the potential for cost savings. In 2020, 5% of all households counted in the census were counted based on administrative records.

One participant asked "can this approach be sufficient for 2030?" While administrative records are perceived to be a cheaper alternative to a self-response census, participants raised concerns about the accuracy of characteristics beyond a simple count. One promising option is to concentrate traditional enumeration efforts on historically hard-to-count populations while using administrative records for more easily counted households. For example, incorporating birth records into the census process could vastly improve the count of young children (though state participation in data sharing may be a concern).



Participants requested that APDU formally request clarity from the Bureau on plans for incorporating administrative records into the 2030 count, including how “in office enumeration” would play out.

Threats to an Accurate Count

The potential for limits to Non-Response Follow-Up, such as a “two contact maximum” law which was proposed recently is a major concern. Such limitations, if legally binding, could decimate response rates and lead to a poorer quality count.

Participants also noted that federal enforcement and policy changes aimed at undocumented immigrants could severely impact the accuracy of the count, especially for young children. Currently 1 in 4 children in the country have at least one immigrant parent, and attacks on immigrants could significantly depress the count of young children (which is already among the most under-counted subpopulations).

Understanding Customers and Communicating Data Concerns

There's a recognized gap in understanding who the customers are and a reliance on "status quo data." Participants noted the importance of effectively communicating data concerns and issues to customers, particularly those in the field of demography. This involves finding creative ways to shape the 2030 Census and ensuring that the insights gained from discussions like this one can be effectively conveyed to relevant stakeholders.

Differential Privacy Application and Its Impact on Data Products

The application of differential privacy (or formal privacy) and its potential impact on data products is another key concern. Differentially private mechanisms, while designed to protect individual privacy, can introduce noise into the data, potentially affecting its utility for various purposes. Participants reiterated the need to understand how differentially private (or formally private) mechanisms will be implemented in the 2030 Census and its implications for data users.

The discussion also briefly touched upon anticipated changes to Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) files, which provide detailed, de-identified individual-level data from the census. Changes in data collection methods or the application of differential privacy could affect the content and utility of PUMS data.

Roadmap and Ground Game

Given the lack of complete information, participants expressed interest in developing a roadmap for action. A crucial aspect of this is the "ground game," when local areas get involved and what they will be expected to do.

Participants noted that a recent webinar on Local Update of Census Addresses (LUCA) is seen as a positive step for local engagement. In addition, participants noted that New York City, which



has a robust LUCA process, may provide a helpful model for other communities who are embarking on LUCA.

Participants noted the importance of building complete count committees and the need for community involvement in the 2026 tests to provide feedback on what works. Participants also suggested establishing a Census coordinator office about two years before the census, with a ramp-up three months prior. There may be opportunities to engage local elected officials on the importance of local complete count efforts around the time of elections, when local issues are top of mind. However, participants also acknowledged the challenge of securing sufficient funding for complete count committees.

"Unprecedented Challenges" and Political Climate

While some participants felt that "every census we talk about 'unprecedented challenges'," there was general agreement that the 2030 Census may potentially be "worse" than 2020. Despite the trillions of dollars of funds that rely on the census, there's concern that the current administration might not prioritize the census due to sweeping efforts to defund government programs.

The discussion underscored the urgency of starting early to get the message out to people in positions of power who can be census champions.

Census Bureau Staffing and Leadership

The Census Bureau has lost many staff due to early retirement options, potentially impacting the Bureau's capacity to run a new census. Funding levels are seen as lower than needed, creating a sense of "waiting for the other shoe to drop." The delay in announcing a new Census Bureau director, potentially tied to the approval of the Director for the Department of Commerce, adds to the uncertainty. The potential loss of Ron Jarmin, a key figure, was also noted as a worry.

Sources of Hope for 2030

Despite the challenges, participants identified several sources of hope. The significant "attention that is focused on the census right now" is seen as a positive sign. The increased attention to local funding, which is directly tied to the census, is also encouraging, as it means people don't need to be "totally plugged into the 'census'" to care about its outcomes.

The ongoing LUCA process is also viewed as a promising early engagement point.

The fact that state-level results from the Post-Enumeration Survey showed undercounts in conservative states has resonated, demonstrating that a good count is in everyone's interest, including for apportionment.

These issues provide an opportunity to customize the advocacy approach based on what representatives are interested in, be it education or constitutional adherence.



The high level of engagement among stakeholders at this early point in the cycle is also seen as very promising, providing an opportunity to “fight back” on issues where we might not have been heard in the past.

Action and Collaboration

Throughout the discussion there were several points noted for action and/or collaboration. The list is provided below:

- **Redistricting Special Census:** Although the meeting took place before the presidential call for a mid-decade census, the possibility of a redistricting special census was mentioned as an area that may need an advocacy strategy.
- **Trade Organizations/Businesses:** Call for trade organizations and businesses to be more engaged in advocating for public data, noting their hesitancy in 2020 due to political sensitivities like the citizenship question. Their involvement is crucial given the economic importance of accurate census data.
- **APDU Involvement:** The discussion explored who should be involved with APDU, and who isn't already, with an aim of broadening the coalition.
- **Big Tech Engagement:** The challenge of mobilizing Big Tech (Google, Twitter, etc.) in 2020 to flag malicious or misleading information is revisited, with questions about their willingness to engage this time. The idea of cross-checking who they worked with in 2020 with the current Census Project list is suggested to leverage past relationships.
- **USAFacts.org:** USAFacts.org, with its high-production value data videos, is seen as a potential ally, possibly in partnership with the Census Project.
- **New Nonprofit for Vital Statistics:** The emergence of a new nonprofit working with all states on their vital statistics is highlighted as a promising development for data collection and accuracy.
- **Congressional Support:** The positive news that there are many census advocates in Congress, on both sides of the aisle, which provides a strong foundation for advocacy efforts.

Useful links

In discussion and in chat the group shared numerous links that may offer additional resources or insights:

- <https://www.ncsl.org/events/details/luca-improving-census-data-heres-how-starting-now>
- <https://www.norc.umd.edu/research/library/ensuring-fair-representation-for-cities-and-states-the-rough-accurate-census-data.html>
- <https://countallkids.org/resources/new-luca-resource-guide-released/>
- <https://thecensusproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/The-Census-Project-FY-2026-Funding-Recommendation-FINAL-July-2025.pdf>
- <https://www.govexec.com/workforce/2025/07/census-has-long-struggled-staffing-shortages-employees-say-trump-making-it-worse/406840/?oref=ge-featured-river-top>
- <https://www.census.gov/data/experimental-data-products/national-experimental-wellbeing-statistics.html>



- <https://hdr.mitpress.mit.edu/pub/ntchx9im/release/1>
- <https://thecensusproject.org/2025/07/18/senate-appropriators-advance-census-funding-bill-for-fy-2026/>
- <https://thecensusproject.org/2025/07/17/house-cjs-subcommittee-approves-fy-2025-census-spending/>



Breakout 5: What can states do?

Summary

Participants noted both concerns about the degradation of federal data resources and opportunities for states to fill in the gaps. Participants also noted that there are knowledge gaps, where people at the state and local levels may not yet even be aware of what has happened and what's ahead.

Action Items and Next Steps

- Establish a working group to communicate changes in the federal statistical system and their impact on local governments: In the climate of a weekly set of new emergencies, it can be tougher for localities to have a good sense for what is going to have an effect in the slightly longer term.
 - In forming working groups and other collaboratives, continue to find ways to leverage virtual participation/collaboration as a workaround to the no-travel-resources and language mismatch concerns.
 - Identify other virtual events, like this, that are available for information sharing. If none, APDU could host more.
- APDU could help document and communicate what has worked for localities. For example, the California Health Interview Survey is a local data collection that others could learn from.

Detailed Notes

Participants noted both concerns about the degradation of federal data resources and opportunities for states to fill in the gaps. Participants also noted that there are knowledge gaps, where people at the state and local levels may not yet even be aware of what has happened and what's ahead.

The Crucial Role of LUCA and the Need for Enhanced Outreach

The effective execution of the 2030 Census is critically dependent on a robust and accurate address list, beginning with the LUCA program. Established by law in 1994, LUCA aims to leverage local governmental knowledge to improve the Census Bureau's master address file. However, a significant challenge lies in the lack of widespread awareness and understanding of LUCA's importance within the broader community, particularly among state and local governments.

The LUCA program, slated to begin in 2027, calls upon governments, especially states acting as coordinating agencies, to meticulously identify any gaps or inaccuracies in the existing address list. This initial logistical operation is paramount, as an incomplete or flawed address list



can lead to significant undercounts or overcounts, ultimately impacting resource allocation and political representation for years to come.

Despite its legal mandate and critical function, there's a recognized deficit in outreach and communication regarding LUCA's value. The focus needs to shift from simply informing governments about the program to effectively storytelling about the tangible, value-added benefits of strong data governance and management in real-world applications, extending beyond just federal interests. Organizations like the Hartford Data Collective are already demonstrating this by linking with state education and labor departments to undertake similar data-driven work, showcasing the potential for cross-sector collaboration.

Shrinking Federal Resources and the Growing Burden on States

Following the LUCA discussion, participants noted that a pressing concern is the significant reduction in federal resources. The Geography Division at the Census Bureau, for instance, has reportedly lost approximately a quarter of its staff. This substantial loss of expertise and capacity at the federal level inevitably shifts a greater burden onto states to compensate. States are now faced with the arduous task of managing these critical work configurations with fewer federal resources, making it considerably tougher to dedicate the necessary investment to initiatives like address list updating.

This predicament is not isolated. Washington's Longitudinal Data Systems have historically relied heavily on federal funding, and with those resources diminishing, they are actively seeking ways to coordinate with other states to reduce their dependence on past federal ties. There's a growing sentiment of hope regarding increased willingness among state colleagues and collaborators to work together, underscoring that regional and joint partnerships will be increasingly vital. The dialogue centers on navigating alternatives to the traditional federal resource role, including forging new partnerships and regional collaboratives. The dismantling of groups like the federal state longitudinal data system group at the Department of Education, with some former members now forming consulting firms, further highlights the vacuum left by reduced federal engagement.

Navigating Communication, Political Sensitivities, and Data Sharing

States like Utah are actively striving to improve communication with their state partners about the downstream impacts of ongoing federal changes. While partners may recognize that their federal contacts are gone, they often don't fully grasp how the cuts and shifts affect data collection, availability, and the broader ripple effects. Crafting this message is made more difficult by inherent political sensitivities/partisanship.

The challenges extend to the very vocabulary used in messaging. As exemplified by Pew's work on criminal justice reform, sometimes the most accurate terminology is problematic in certain political circles, necessitating careful rephrasing to ensure engagement and avoid alienating key stakeholders. This difficulty in making stories resonate due to language and interpretation differences can even hinder the phrasing of agendas and documents, making it harder to secure



participation from various agencies, especially on sensitive matters like the Statistical Policy Directive No. 15 (SPD15) guidelines for race and ethnicity measurement.

Beyond these communication hurdles, there's a real and tangible impact from the simple loss of federal data at the state and local levels. Many applications and analyses, where it might not have been immediately obvious, relied on federal datasets for benchmarking and comparison, and the broader resources that supported these datasets are also diminishing.

The Climate of Data Sharing and Concerns about Sensitive Information

A crucial aspect of modern data governance involves states sitting on vast amounts of valuable information, while federal agencies are increasingly moving towards incorporating more administrative data. This brings to the forefront the current climate regarding data sharing with the federal government. There's a palpable tension, particularly concerning sensitive information. For instance, questions arise around sharing school records of young children, which could significantly improve census quality, versus broader data sharing for law enforcement purposes.

States, in their role of coordinating postsecondary data, find themselves in a unique position of stewarding education data without truly owning it. The actual owners, often within the state's executive branch, have demonstrated a strong disinclination to share, especially on highly sensitive issues such as citizenship status. This sentiment of exercising great care and minimizing data sharing with the federal government is echoed in other states, particularly when actions like Medicaid turning over data to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) contradict the promise of data privacy under Title 13, leading to headlines that erode public trust.

A corollary effect of these pressures is that states themselves may be scaling back the content of their data collection in reaction to the same pressures faced at the federal level.

Seeking Collaborative Solutions

Given these multifaceted challenges, there is a clear and urgent need for information about other working groups and collaboratives actively engaged in messaging and outreach within this space, beyond organizations like the APDU. Examples of such potential collaborators include the Federal Data Forum, the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials in the vital statistics arena, and emerging partnerships focused on LUCA and broader census support. Identifying and fostering these collaborative efforts will be essential for states to navigate the complex landscape of reduced federal resources, enhance data quality, and ultimately ensure a more accurate and equitable 2030 Census.



Breakout 6: Anything goes

Summary

The “anything goes” breakout included a rotating group of participants who joined as other breakouts closed.

Action Items and Next Steps

- Develop talking points/call to action for press/stakeholders to communicate/disseminate urgent challenges (e.g., absenteeism, child malnourishment).
- Determine continued ways of improving outreach during evolving time.

Detailed Notes

- Concern about impact of federal data movement across agencies on response rates and enrollment in services (e.g., enrolling children in school, receiving SNAP benefits).
 - What trends will we see in administrative data?
 - Example: [American Enterprise Institute data](#) on chronic absenteeism.
- Dissemination need: How can we make a future harm currently relevant to a wide range of audiences?
 - [Children's Health Watch](#): organization of doctors who track malnourished children.
 - [Coalition on Human Needs](#).
 - [National Immigration Law Center](#).
- Data need: For emerging concerns, what data do we need to work the problem?