

# **The Federal Statistical System in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Role of the Census Bureau**

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**Testimony of**

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Chair Maloney, members of the Joint Economic Committee, I am Barbara Everitt Bryant. I was Director of the Census Bureau from 1989 to 1993 and of the 1990 census. You have asked me to talk about how I perceive the role of the Census Bureau in this century.

The Census Bureau got off to a roaring start for this 21<sup>st</sup> century by implementing the American Community Survey. As of 2010, the American Community Survey—acronym ACS--provides new data on the characteristics of the U.S. population every year with enough interviews to report on even the smallest communities. Prior to the ACS, the nation had to wait every 10 years for a decennial portrait of who we are and how we live. The American Community Survey was envisioned in the 1960s. It was finally researched and designed in the 1990s and in this decade. ACS was a long time coming but worth the wait. Its implementation frees the decennial census of many social and economic questions and leaves the 2010 questionnaire with only the eight questions needed for reapportionment and redistricting, the Constitutional and legislative purposes of the census.

In the rest of this century, I envision that the Census Bureau will build upon its illustrious past as the originator of data processing, of computerization, of the Tiger geographic system which is the basis for computer mapping of every block in the nation, and as the source of continuous improvements in capturing data faster and more accurately. I think we can count on the Census Bureau to be a continuing source of innovation, new products and processes. That is, if we structure it for the future and not for the past. When he figured out how to do massively large counts with punch cards for the 1890 census, Herman Hollerith—a census employee—didn't envision today's computer industry. More recently, we who watched the computer mapping of every block in the nation get implemented for the 1990 census didn't envision that this, coupled with communication satellites to transmit the data, would become the start of a large GPS industry. Amazingly, the Census Bureau is an enormous bureaucracy. with all that implies, but it is also a hot bed of change. The challenge for this century is to keep it that way although we do not know what all the changes will be.

Let me speak to two ways you might change structures to make the Census Bureau nimble, and less bureaucratic as we move into the next 91 years of this 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **1. Recognize the 10-Year Cycle In Which the Census Bureau Operates and Make Its Director's Term of Office 5-Years**

First, recognize that the Census Bureau operates on a 10-year cycle, not a 2-year, 4-year, or 6-year political cycle. Within the decade are two five-year cycles for the Economic Censuses. As it faces its largest project, the decennial census, the prior census was always conducted by a prior administration. The only institutional how-to-do it memory for census taking rests in career employees at the Census Bureau, not at the Commerce Department in which the Census Bureau resides. This cycle also means that every 20 years--as has occurred so recently--the Director of the Census Bureau is a Presidential appointee of a President inaugurated in January of the year ending in '9.' That Director is not in office in time to have any role in the planning of the census which he or she is charged to direct. The Senate just confirmed a new Director last week, seven

months before the start of the 2010 census. Twenty years ago, I was not in office until December 7, 1989, with the census to start in early 1990. Questionnaires for which I would have implemented easier-to-use formats were already rolling off the printing presses.

The solution to the inherent difficulties of a 10-year cycle is to make the term of the Census Director a 5-year term, half of that cycle, starting in the years ending in 1 or 2 and 6 or 7. That way a Director coming to office in mid-decade could fully participate in the ramp up to the decennial census and the first dissemination of data from that census..

## **2. Flatten the Bureaucracy**

My second recommendation is to flatten the bureaucracy by removing the Census Bureau from the Department of Commerce. Since leaving the Census Bureau, I have spent 16 years at the University of Michigan in its business school working on an economic indicator, the American Customer Satisfaction Index, or ACSI. The current mantra for customer satisfaction, for getting close to the customer, is to flatten organizational structures. Successful corporations are doing this to be profitable and get repeat customers. Unfortunately, some corporations from my own state of Michigan learned this lesson too late and are only now, after bankruptcy, changing their structures to be leaner and more responsive to customers. Structures that were very successful in the 20<sup>th</sup> century don't necessarily work in the 21<sup>st</sup>.

The Census Bureau is a bureaucracy under a bureaucracy. It's a large organization that reports to another large one, the Department of Commerce. Commerce is not geared to a 10-year cycle but to a four-year one. Commerce has many other large organizations under it—the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the National Institute of Science, and Technology, the Patent Office, and others. The Commerce Department has a large load of responsibilities to deal with of which the Census Bureau is only one. When the Census Bureau was small, it was logical that it be under a larger department. Today the Census Bureau is the largest statistical organization

in the federal government and could be more responsive to its customers if it were a free-standing scientific organization like the National Science Foundation.

Who are the Census Bureau's customers? First, there is the Congress, then the other statistical organizations for which it conducts major surveys such as the Current Population Survey (BLS), the Housing Survey (HUD), the Health Interview Survey (HHS), the crime survey (DOJ). State and local governments depend on census data for decision making. Finally, the American public is both a customer and a data supplier. The Census Bureau depends upon the confidence and good will of the public for interview responses which become its data. The Census Bureau needs to be flexible in communicating to these customers.

Census Bureau paperwork goes through not one, but two levels of approval in the Commerce Department at an under-secretariat level and again at the secretary level. Every response to a letter from you in Congress, every press release, and every major decision must be vetted, and often is edited, at the Department of Commerce. This delays responses and leaves customers, in turn, thinking that the Census Bureau has something to hide because response is so slow

The Department of Commerce is not a statistical organization. Its personnel, for the most part, do not understand what the Census Bureau does or needs. Its own budget is dominated in census years by that of the Census Bureau and once the census is completed, Commerce does not understand why the Census Bureau starts immediately planning for the next census, and needing money to do so.

When I became Director I found an organization that was way behind the academic and private sector survey research organizations, and even the much smaller Statistics Netherlands, in implementing computer-assisted-telephone-interviewing, or CATI, for surveys. I had been using such interviewing methodology for several years at the medium-size market research company from which I had come. Once the 1990 census was over, I made moving the Census Bureau away from paper and pencil interviewing to

computer interviewing a priority. The Census Bureau, which had been an early 20<sup>th</sup> century leader in computerization, was lagging in what was proving to be a cost-saving and accuracy-improving technology. Since the Census Bureau's budget request is within the Commerce Department's budget that goes to OMB, budgeters at Commerce deleted our requests for funding for research and development of computer-assisted interviewing two or three years in a row. After all, their thinking in the years following the census was that it was time for other Commerce agencies to get larger budget shares. The Census Bureau shouldn't need new money. Finally, at the Census Bureau we had to rearrange R&D budgeting, borrowing from existing programs to find the money to bring in a panel of experts from academic and private sector survey organizations, from Statistics Canada, and from Statistics Netherlands to assess our computerized interviewing situation and give us guidance on how to play catch-up. Ultimately, the Census Bureau caught up and by the mid-1990s, using software adapted from the University of California, Berkley, and from the Netherlands, all survey interviews were computerized with the charges built into survey costs. The computer-assisted interviewing was much used for follow-up on non-respondents in the 2000 census and will be in 2010. But the Census Bureau might not have had it if it was still waiting to get funds approved by Commerce personnel who didn't understand what CATI was and why it was the methodology of the future.

### **Conclusion: Two Recommendations**

In conclusion, my two recommendations for structuring the Census Bureau to be successful in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and to serve its customers, including the other statistical agencies are;

1. Make the term of the Census Director a 5-year term
2. Make the Census Bureau an independent agency removed from the Commerce Department.