Census Bureau's New Tool **Aims to Boost 2020 Response Rates**

To ensure an accurate count, the bureau developed a web mapping tool to improve response rates in hard-to-survey areas.

Challenge

The Census Bureau's mission is to count everyone once, only once and in the right place. That's no small task.

By 2020, the bureau estimates that about 330 million people will be living in 140 million housing units across the United States and Puerto Rico.

According to Census data, 79.3 percent of U.S. households that received a 2010 Census mail questionnaire completed it and mailed it back. But 20.7 percent of households did not respond, and those families were geographically dispersed across the country. If people don't fill out the forms, Census workers must follow up with those individuals at their homes.

"And that's the most costly operation associated with the decennial census," said Deirdre Bishop, Chief of the Geography Division at the Census Bureau. Another ongoing challenge for Census is ensuring its regional directors hire people with a deep knowledge about the communities they survey.

Solution

For one, the bureau is encouraging self-response to the decennial census as much as possible. Also, workers will now have a tool that enables them to better understand the communities they're counting, and share more detailed and visual information with local partners, such as government officials and community leaders.

"The Census Bureau's Response Outreach Area Mapper (ROAM) application was developed to make it easier to identify hard-to-survey areas and to provide a socioeconomic and demographic characteristic profile of these areas," according to the bureau.

In the past, employees had access to information like this in the office, and they would have to communicate those insights either verbally or by printing maps to help educate local leaders. Those leaders would in turn share those insights with their stakeholders.

Solution (cont.)

"Now, we're able to have the community leaders access this application in real time and see the data for themselves," Bishop said. "They can carry around their tablet like I am today, and see where the hardest-to-count populations are living."

Anyone who has an internet-connected computer, smartphone or other handheld device can use the ROAM application. Users can access the complete body of knowledge that Census built to identify hard-to-count areas nationwide.

When local community leaders are on the street talking to people about how important it is to participate in the census, this is extremely valuable information to have at their fingertips, said Suzanne McArdle, a Computer Mapping Specialist at the Geography Division.

That's because undercounted communities are at risk of losing congressional seats and billions of dollars in federal funding — at the least. Using ROAM, residents can easily see their neighborhood's socioeconomic and demographic profiles, including median household income, in addition to the variables that make their communities hard to count, McArdle said.

Tips for Success

1. Let the data guide you

Census merged geospatial and statistical data to help drive decision-making, engage the community in various efforts and build overall awareness about the decennial census.

2. Share your data

In addition to making information available to the public via its mapping tool, Census also made the underlying data in ROAM available to third-party developers.

3. Use technology as a conversation starter

ROAM empowers government officials, faith-based organizations and others to not only tell residents about the importance of participating in the census, but to show them as well.

Key Stats

~330
million people will be in the U.S. and Puerto Rico by 2020

79.3%
of U.S. households completed the 2010 Census mail questionnaire

20.7%
of households did not respond

"As Chief of [the] Geography Division at the U.S. Census Bureau, I want people to understand how powerful a tool like this can be."

Deirdre Bishop, Chief of the Geography Division at the Census Bureau