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Lessons learned from censuses of the 2020 round

2020 Census Communications Campaign: Campaign Optimization and Lessons Learned

Note by the United States Census Bureau*¹

Summary

The United States 2020 Decennial Census was unlike any of the 23 that preceded it. It was, after all, the first in U.S. history to give everyone the chance to respond online. The year 2020 also presented an unprecedented set of circumstances in which the difficulty of counting every single person living in the United States, Puerto Rico, and the Island Areas (comprising American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, and the U.S. Virgin Islands) was magnified by the COVID-19 world pandemic.

The 2020 Integrated Partnership and Communications (IPC) operation was one of 35 major operations of the 2020 Census. A critical component of the Decennial Census, the operation aimed to reach, and encourage participation by, everyone living in the areas listed above, regardless of their education, literacy level, language, country of origin, citizenship status, income, familiarity with technology, or general views and interests.

Kicking off the 2020 Census, the U.S. Census Bureau and the communications campaign announced its rallying cry: “Shape your future. Start here.” Throughout the campaign and through a variety of communication channels, this message encouraged people in communities large and small to respond to the Census. This message acquired additional relevance when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States just as the Census Bureau was launching its self-response phase.

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Note: The designations employed in this document do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Secretariat of the United Nations concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

¹ This document was submitted late due to delayed submission of the document by the United States Census Bureau.



Despite the challenging 2020 environment, the combined efforts of the IPC operation helped the Census Bureau achieve a final self-response rate of 67 per cent for the 2020 Census, exceeding the final 66.5 per cent self-response rate in 2010. In addition, 99.9 per cent of all housing units were accounted for in 2020.

This document summarizes the approach to planning and executing the IPC, as well as reimagining it, when needed, to adapt to challenging circumstances. It also shows lessons learned from this operation and what steps the U.S. Census Bureau is already taking to implement those lessons learned.

I. 2020 census integrated partnerships and communications operation: overview

1. Since 2000, Congress has allocated funding for the Census Bureau to conduct a paid communications campaign that educates the population about the decennial count and urges people to participate. This has been critical to the Census Bureau's success in delivering an accurate count. For the 2020 Census, the Census Bureau used the message "Shape your future. Start here" as a new platform to raise awareness and drive participation, with the goal of counting everyone once, only once, and in the right place.

2. The 2020 Census made history: for the first time, the majority of census respondents could choose to complete the questionnaire online, by phone, or by mail. The 2020 Census represented the first time that an online response option was offered to the population at large. The modern digital environment offered unprecedented opportunities, not only to reach audiences in new ways, but also to quickly refine our outreach and engagement during the response period as results and data on self-response rates and patterns became available. This was done while being good stewards of taxpayer dollars and respecting the public's time and privacy.

3. The IPC operation provided leadership and strategic support for its two components, the 2020 Census Partnership Program and the 2020 Census Integrated Communications Campaign.

II. 2020 Census Partnership Program

4. The 2020 Census Partnership Program cultivated relationships with organizations and stakeholders who could strengthen awareness of the census and of the partner organizations' presence in the community. The programme was carried out by the Census Bureau's National Partnership Program (NPP) at the national level and by its Community Partnership and Engagement Program (CPEP) at the local and regional levels. Partner engagement helped build trust, as well as raise awareness and encourage participation in the 2020 Census.

III. 2020 Census Integrated Communications Campaign

5. The 2020 Census was a massive undertaking—and it presented a huge opportunity for all in the United States, including Puerto Rico and the Island Areas, to be counted. The Census Bureau created the ICC to promote that opportunity, adapting campaign activities as unexpected challenges arose.

6. To raise awareness, motivate response, and respond to a changing environmental backdrop of health, societal, and economic concerns, the 2020 Census communications campaign employed a multipronged approach, encompassing activities in the following programme areas:

(a) *Stakeholder relations.* Stakeholders helped raise awareness of the count in communities and neighbourhoods across the country—work that became even more valuable in the complex COVID-19 pandemic environment;

(b) *Advertising and media buying.* The paid media and advertising strategy incorporated both traditional and evolving technologies to raise awareness and drive response among all audience groups. Television, radio, print, and out-of-home advertising kept the 2020 Census front and centre in the public mind. The campaign also deployed a broad range of digital, paid social, email marketing, and keyword search advertisements that could easily be tailored, targeted, and adapted to reach distinct audience groups. These assets connected viewers to Census Bureau web properties with one click, providing quick access to the census's online response tool;

(c) *Public and media relations.* Public and media relations activities helped drive education and awareness efforts through press releases on the 2020 Census website and other owned media platforms, virtual news briefings and events, and earned media coverage, which included media mentions of and stories about the 2020 Census. These efforts were particularly important for reaching hard to count (HTC) audiences. Public and media relations were invaluable in keeping audiences up to date on changes to Census Bureau operations and the communications campaign;

(d) *Crisis communications/Trust and safety.* With the rapid spread of information in the current digital environment, crisis communications were critical, especially when the pandemic presented challenging circumstances. The crisis communications team conducted threat monitoring and social listening activities, while also deploying messaging for public announcements and to mitigate the spread of misinformation and disinformation. Crisis communication efforts were coordinated closely with public relations, partnership, 2020 Census website, and stakeholder management efforts to ensure a comprehensive approach across communication activities;

(e) *Website development and digital activities.* The 2020 Census website, 2020Census.gov, was a critical element of the campaign, which emphasized internet response. The website and integrated owned media activities engaged diverse audiences with relevant, digestible content and encouraged them to participate in the census. Both the website and other owned media activities, including opt-in email marketing, were optimized for mobile devices;

(f) *Social media.* Social media outreach offered a unique and valuable opportunity to personally engage with the public on a variety of platforms, including Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, and YouTube. Social media efforts leveraged existing Census Bureau channels and used a variety of interactive elements—such as customer service chatbots and live events—to raise awareness of the census and drive response;

(g) *2020 Statistics in Schools programme.* The 2020 Statistics in Schools (SIS) programme aimed to raise statistical literacy among students at the pre-Kindergarten through to 12th grade levels nationwide, including in Puerto Rico and the Island Areas. SIS created materials in English and Spanish for the 2020 Census and worked with partners, who promoted the materials' use in schools and at home. The programme held live and virtual events and produced free worksheets, maps, videos, and the "Everyone Counts!" song with an accompanying story and workbook to engage students and build awareness of the census. Resources targeting parents and caregivers were also developed for at-home use during the pandemic;

(h) *Communications efforts for field recruitment.* The Census Bureau created recruitment marketing materials in multiple languages and developed a centralized recruiting resource—the 2020 Census jobs website, at 2020Census.gov/jobs—to generate interest in Decennial Census jobs. An added paid media component enabled us to rapidly expand our employee base, helping ensure there were enough enumerators and office staff to count people across the country after COVID-19 safety measures were implemented and Census lost some of the original enumerators due to them no longer wanting to participate in the operation;

(i) *Campaign monitoring and optimization.* This programme component facilitated timely and data-driven adjustments to the communications campaign during its execution. Continuous monitoring of census response rates and campaign engagement metrics enabled us to refine our communication strategies, which informed adjustments to campaign messaging and creative assets. This was especially true as the COVID-19

pandemic took hold and census operations had to continually adapt in response. The Census Bureau also reallocated media resources, helping address specific response rate challenges and outreach needs in diverse communities across the country.

7. The 2020 “Shape your future. Start here” campaign was developed and adapted, in numerous forms of media and through various forms of messaging, to reach the following audience groups:

- (a) Diverse mass audiences;
- (b) Hispanic audiences;
- (c) Black/African American audiences, including Haitian Creole and Sub-Saharan African;
- (d) Asian American audiences, including Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese;
- (e) American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) audiences;
- (f) Audiences in Puerto Rico;
- (g) Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NHPI) audiences;
- (h) Arabic-speaking Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) audiences;
- (i) Other audiences, including Brazilian as well as Polish- and Russian-speaking audience groups.

8. The Census Bureau used the communications channels that most effectively reached each population group. To ensure the campaign messaging could be comprehended by and resonate with various population groups, we provided paid media and promotional materials available in English as well as the following 12 languages: Spanish (tailored to both mainland Spanish speakers and Spanish speakers in Puerto Rico), Chinese (Simplified and Traditional, Mandarin and Cantonese), Vietnamese, Korean, Tagalog, Russian, Polish, Arabic, Haitian Creole, French (Sub-Saharan African), Portuguese and Japanese.

9. It is important to note that campaign materials were not simply translated from English into the languages listed above. The themes expressed through those assets were individually adapted for each campaign language in a process known as transcreation. In this process, we considered the cultural norms, preferences, and nuances related to the use of each language, and these aspects informed how messages and visuals were developed. For language groups not listed above, we tapped into our network of partnership specialists.

IV. A CAMPAIGN BASED IN RESEARCH

10. From the start, the Census Bureau relied on data and systematic research and analysis to reach campaign audiences where they lived and to address their concerns. For instance, the Census Bureau tested the communications campaign’s creative platform— “Shape your future. Start here”—and determined that this performed strongly with respondents, who found it to be personable and relatable as if “speaking directly to me.” In addition, we relied on results from our 2020 Census Barriers, Attitudes, and Motivators Study (CBAMS), which showed that funding for community benefits ranked as the number one motivator for census participation.

11. Creative execution testing later underscored CBAMS findings about how important it was for the campaign to stress that census data brings about community benefits—from supporting the building of schools, hospitals, and clinics to funding the improvement of roads, bridges, and public transit services. These details, more than dollar figures in the billions, were shown to resonate with the public.

12. The Census Bureau also deepened its understanding of the campaign’s audiences by conducting the 2020 Census Tracking Survey over the course of the campaign. With these surveys, we collected data on a continuing basis, which helped us identify trends in public attitudes about, awareness of, and intent to participate in the census over time. Ultimately,

the insights drawn from these survey responses helped us evaluate the impact of the communications campaign as it was unfolding.

13. The 2020 Census and its communications campaign used sophisticated, modern data analytics and media technology to prepare for and execute the communications campaign. Advanced targeting tactics were used to deliver paid media to the designated market area (DMA), the ZIP Code Tabulation Area (ZCTA), and even the census “block group” levels.

14. During campaign execution, research and tracking survey data were frequently analyzed to ensure that communication tactics aligned with data-driven strategy. This was especially important as significant changes to the campaign were made, such as launching the communication surge efforts. Despite impacts caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and other unexpected challenges, the Census Bureau was able to adapt the campaign while maintaining its integrity and adherence to the established “Shape your future. Start here” platform.

V. Motivation phase: COVID-19 crisis starts

15. As enumeration operations began and the communications campaign launched, from late January to February 2020, the world was beginning to experience what eventually became known as the COVID-19 pandemic. As more information became known, cities, states, and other jurisdictions established a range of protocols related to social distancing and mask wearing and issued temporary operating restrictions for nonessential businesses (including restaurants, gyms, and entertainment venues).

16. Prioritizing the health and safety of the public and employees (including temporary workers hired for the 2020 Census), the Census Bureau suspended all in-person enumeration operations from March to May 2020. All scheduled in-person promotional events were also cancelled.

17. Originally planned to end on 31 July 2020, the self-response period was extended until October, and the delayed Non Response Follow Up (NRFU) operation took place from July to October. Further, a Census Bureau COVID-19 Internal Task Force was established to monitor pandemic conditions and to plan and prepare for operational challenges and changes, as necessary.

18. Considering the pandemic and the variation in emergency response by region, the communications campaign sought to emphasize to all audiences the ease of responding to the census online, over the phone, or by mail without the need for an in-person interaction with a census taker. Communications efforts quickly shifted toward accomplishing several goals in response to the pandemic, including:

(a) Emphasizing to all audiences the importance and ease of responding to the 2020 Census from the safety of their homes, either online, over the phone, or by mail—without having to interact with a census taker. This was essential to the original goal and premise of the campaign that the content should feel timely and resonant to audiences in the moment;

(b) Communicating critical updates to the 2020 Census timeline;

(c) Ensuring that campaign messaging, imagery, and outreach spoke sensitively and authentically to a changing country where significant health and economic concerns were taking root and where new public health practices, such as wearing protective face masks and maintaining six feet of distance from others, were becoming common;

(d) Refining messaging, creative, and tactical efforts, as necessary, to respond to emerging trends in response across our diverse and complex audience at large.

19. Public relations, media outreach, partner outreach, and frequent website updates were critical in conveying information on operational changes to the public. While messaging in some elements could easily be changed—in social and digital media advertisements, for example—other elements of the campaign, such as television and radio commercials, required significant time and resources to adjust.

20. The Census Bureau also pivoted rapidly to adjust the campaign's paid media plan. Adjustments included shifting channel placements for campaign ads and reallocating portions of the paid media budget. For example, when sports games and entertainment events, such as awards shows, were cancelled, television commercials planned to run during those events shifted to other channels, programmes, and broadcast dayparts, such as morning news and daytime programming.

21. Because televised games and events typically attract large numbers of viewers from diverse audience groups, it was important, too, to reallocate the media budget to other tactics that would reach target audiences in the changed environment. Accordingly, the Census Bureau secured advertisement placements on video streaming platforms and increased the campaign's use of paid digital media, including paid search advertising. In addition, some materials, such as television commercials, had to be completely reworked.

22. Scenes of public crowds and large gatherings were removed from visual materials and instead showed people maintaining six feet of distance from each other and staying at home. The Census Bureau also developed some entirely new commercials. In terms of messaging, the Census Bureau revised materials to emphasize safety, promote community recovery and resilience, and encourage self-response to the 2020 Census. Other campaign communication tactics, such as media briefings, partnership events, and SIS programme events, were cancelled or, when possible, held virtually.

23. Media events were adapted for social media platform livestreaming, and the Census Bureau conducted and participated in interviews remotely. Because months of research and planning had gone into preparing the campaign's creative platform and related assets, the Census Bureau had to ensure that any strategic, creative, or messaging changes would still align with the "Shape your future. Start here" creative platform, while also speaking to pandemic circumstances with sensitivity.

24. As the count and the pandemic continued, the Census Bureau kept a close eye on response rates. The agency identified trends in response, considered the pandemic's influence on census participation, and sought to gain an understanding of the potential impacts of campaign messaging, creative, or tactical changes on response. When necessary, further changes were made. In addition, Census planned and conducted integrated communication surges to encourage census participation among specific audience segments, multicultural audience groups, and the campaign's audience at large.

25. Through partnerships, the Census team also engaged new and existing health and wellness-focused partners and activated social media influencers to use 2020 Census branded content and invite followers to "pledge" to complete the census.

26. During this phase the extended Motivation surge was executed. Activities associated with this effort took place in July and were rolled out in a series of locally targeted tactics in the six census regions (Atlanta, Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, New York City, and Philadelphia). Development of region-specific and cross-region videos was one of many tactics that supported this surge.

27. During this time, Census collected content from individuals who represented various communities, organizations, local governments, and academic institutions, and who were trusted voices in their regions. These "trusted voices" recorded short clips of themselves speaking about why the census mattered to them and their region. The videos were then published on Census Bureau social media, web, and other properties. The videos were also shared with local outlets throughout the regions to help generate earned media coverage.

28. In addition, the 2020 Census website featured tailored landing-page art depicting cityscapes of or landmarks from each census region. The extended Motivation phase surge also included a paid sponsorship with the internet-based show "Wonderama." Under this arrangement, the show produced a series of Friday night concerts called the "2020 Census Friday Night House Parties" in each of the six census regions. The webcast concerts featured noteworthy performing artists and public figures and were immensely popular, garnering more than 2.4 million unique video streams.

29. The communication surges were successful in building on the integrated activities that were originally planned for the Motivation phase; the surges also boosted public awareness of the census, and they helped contribute to increased response rates.

VI. Campaign optimization: a key tool during an unprecedented census

30. The Census Bureau conducted monitoring and optimization efforts to ensure that the 2020 Census communications campaign was operating efficiently and effectively. In monitoring the campaign, the Census Bureau observed audience interactions with social and digital communications assets and reviewed available reach and frequency data for traditional media placements. Census also analyzed response data and trends in audience perceptions of and participation in the 2020 Census. To optimize the campaign, the team then acted on the information gathered in our monitoring efforts. The agency used the data collected, analysis conducted, and insights contributed by subject matter experts to inform critical decisions that affected all areas of the campaign as it progressed.

31. All monitoring and optimization activities built on the campaign's early research, planning, and testing efforts. Specifically, the Census Bureau analyzed and applied the predictive models, audience segments, and campaign platform and creative testing results at optimization decision points throughout the campaign. The effectiveness and efficiency of the campaign was evaluated continually—as well as our adjustments to the campaign—as the campaign progressed.

32. As noted in previous sections, the communications campaign encountered unprecedented challenges during enumeration, including a contentious election cycle, nationwide protests, and the COVID-19 pandemic. These circumstances necessitated campaign adjustments to help the 2020 Census break through the cluttered information and media environment to motivate response. As a result of campaign monitoring and optimization activities, the Census Bureau responded to more than 200 recommended actions and executed more than 120 concerted optimization efforts across communication channels. Campaign data and analysis guided these interventions and led to significant paid media spending beyond the original plan. Despite the challenging environment, this data-driven approach—and the interventions resulting from it—helped the Census Bureau achieve a self-response rate of 67.0%, exceeding both its 2020 self-response goal (66.6%) and its final 2010 self-response rate (66.5%).

VII. Examples of how campaign optimization supported operation changes

33. The campaign monitoring and optimization team worked across all areas of the campaign—integrating activities wherever possible—to adjust messaging, materials, and outreach accordingly. This section presents three different examples of how communications were optimized in light of operational changes during the COVID-19 crisis.

A. Example 1: Update-Leave²

34. With the suspension of field operations in March 2020, delivery of census forms to households in Update-Leave areas was delayed. However, these areas were covered by paid media, and households were likely to encounter ads that urged timely completion of the census questionnaire. The Census Bureau identified this discrepancy as a situation that could

² Update-Leave was a special operation to drop 2020 Census invitation packets at households in areas where the majority of households may not receive mail at their home's physical location, such as small towns where mail is only delivered to post office boxes or areas recently affected by natural disasters. This operation was expected to reach approximately 6.8 million households in the United States and Puerto Rico.

cause confusion among census respondents. This was concerning because many communities counted through Update-Leave are in rural or remote areas that have historically been hard to count and were, at that point in the 2020 campaign, beginning to show lagging response levels.

35. The Census Bureau aimed to ensure that all members of Update-Leave communities would be counted in 2020 and that they would not be discouraged from responding by the communication discrepancy. Accordingly, the agency deployed updated messaging that clarified census completion instructions to households in Update-Leave areas, and targeted digital and earned media outreach to the communities. Print materials were also developed and distributed through local partner outreach, where possible.

B. Example 2: Group Quarters

36. In March 2020, many colleges and universities closed due to the pandemic, and students left their campuses and student housing to live with family or friends. Given that on-campus students would have been counted by their schools and, therefore, would not have been targeted by the communications campaign's paid media, this created public confusion about how students should be counted in the census. In response, Census modified messaging for college students across communication channels—including on the 2020 Census website, through earned media press kits, in paid search advertisements, and through higher education partnerships—to ensure that students understood that they should be counted where they would have been living on April 1, even if they were temporarily staying elsewhere.

C. Example 3: Puerto Rico

37. Puerto Rico faced a unique set of circumstances related to 2020 Census operations and communications. Puerto Rico was enumerated through the Update-Leave operation, which required census takers to locate and visit all households across the island. Conducting this operation was especially challenging because Hurricane Maria, along with other storms and earthquakes in recent years, had destroyed many homes, forced some families to relocate, and prompted hard-hit communities to rebuild. With so many changes to Puerto Rico's land and infrastructure since the last decennial census, and since many households lacked a physical address, census operations required coordinated, on-the-ground efforts by enumerators.

38. With the onset of COVID-19, Puerto Rico was subject to stay-at-home orders beginning in March 2020, and Census Bureau field operations were suspended. The Census Bureau resumed the Update-Leave operation in late May. However, Puerto Rico's self-response rate was only 8.8 per cent at the end of May, and its response rate growth was much slower than the U.S. national rate overall. Accordingly, the Census Bureau convened a task force to adjust the communication strategy. The agency aimed to ensure that messaging to Puerto Rico was accurate, aligned with operations, and reflected local conditions. Census launched Public Service Announcement (PSA)-like creative assets on digital media and deployed clear calls to self-respond when households received Update-Leave-provided questionnaires. The agency also pitched key media outlets, secured interviews, and relied on Census Bureau employees in Puerto Rico to encourage response. Materials were developed and distributed to Puerto Rico partners, and media personalities emphasized that census takers were conducting the count safely. In addition, Puerto Rico-based visitors to the 2020 Census website were directed to a customized page about the island's Update-Leave operation.

39. Encouragingly, Puerto Rico experienced the highest response rate growth of all states or territories during this period. Puerto Rico's total enumeration continued to rise as non-response follow up (NRFU) took place, and Puerto Rico surpassed many states to achieve a 99.9 per cent total enumeration rate by the end of September.

VIII. Lessons learned: a research-based approach

40. The Census Bureau immersed itself in a thoughtful study focused on engaging Census Bureau managers, staff, contractors, and other internal and external stakeholders supporting the partnership and communications effort for the 2020 Census through research to identify key successes and opportunities for improvement with the 2020 IPC operation. This was of particular importance due to the numerous changes experienced by the campaign during the pandemic. The following sections intend to summarize the methodology and main recommendations from participants to inform planning and execution of the partnership and communications operation for the 2030 Census.

A. Research Methodology

41. Given the scale and reach of the 2020 Census IPC operation, a variety of data collection instruments and methods were used to engage individuals with varying levels of involvement, including Census Bureau employees, contractors supporting the Integrated Communications Contract (ICC) as well as national partners and stakeholders. In view of the global public health crisis, the data collection approach was focused intentionally on virtual engagement and consisted of:

(a) An online questionnaire administered to more than 250 of the 2020 Census IPC's staff and contractors (prime and subcontractors) supporting the IPC campaign via the ICC;

(b) An online questionnaire administered to more than 1,000 Census Bureau national partners and stakeholders;

(c) A series of more than 50 individual and group interviews with Census Bureau programme managers and executives, and representatives of national partners and stakeholders;

(d) A series of more than 30 virtual workshops for each unique element of the IPC operation to gather feedback while promoting a mutual learning environment for IPC's 2020 Census staff and ICC contractors.

B. Overview of Findings and Lessons Learned

42. We gathered the thoughts of hundreds of people involved in the IPC, and presented successes, opportunities for improvement, and recommendations for the entire programme to Census Bureau leadership. In this section, we summarize the most prominent of these, categorized by programme area.

1. Programme management

(a) *Successes and recommendations for continued success:* Among the many successes collected during this Lessons Learned study relating to the 2020 IPC operation, there was a lot of positive feedback regarding the matrix structure developed for IPC. Many individuals at the Census Bureau felt that early implementation of the structure was conducive to the overall success of the operation and should not only be replicated for 2030 but should inform maintenance of staff continuity during intercensal years to prevent loss of knowledge and skills;

(b) *Challenges and recommendations to address opportunities for improvement:* An overwhelming number of participants expressed frustrations about resource allocation in the crucial beginning stages of the operation. According to participants, funding for the operation was made available too late in the cycle, which drastically impacted staffing activities. Regarding additional challenges, there were many criticisms voiced about the IPC structure, despite the successes noted above.

2. Contract planning and management

(a) *Successes and recommendations for continued success:* Having a structure that stood up a designated Program Management Office (PMO) to manage the various work orders enabled consistency and integration across work orders. A series of regular meetings with leadership enhanced collaboration and allowed for decision-making throughout the campaign and ensured alignment between the Census Bureau and the ICC prime contractor;

(b) *Challenges and recommendations to address opportunities for improvement:* While the contract structure received a significant amount of positive feedback, participants noted that the structure inadvertently created silos and inhibited integration across the different work orders. In addition, the timing of when contractors were sourced and started supporting IPC areas actively was delayed; some key IPC functions went unsupported.

3. Research and analytics

(a) *Successes and recommendations for continued success:* Research and analytics emerged consistently, across all data collection activities, as one of the main successes of the 2020 Census. The 2020 Census IPC operation was widely recognized as a data-driven effort, informed by robust research efforts and products driven by the IPC's cross-directorate Communications Research & Analytics Team. Many participants felt that research must continue to underpin the development and execution of future decennial census campaigns;

(b) *Challenges and recommendations to address opportunities for improvement:* Opportunities for improvement were noted in terms of expanding the use of research across all campaign elements and improving integration across Census Bureau employees and ICC contractors.

4. Paid media and media review

(a) *Successes and recommendations for continued success:* The media landscape has evolved dramatically since the 2010 Census, and our research showed the multichannel communications approach for the 2020 Census paid media campaign reached diverse audiences effectively through a variety of different formats;

(b) *Challenges and recommendations to address opportunities for improvement:* The use of multicultural agencies was critical in informing paid media content and the strategy to connect with historically undercounted populations. Participants posed recommendations about continuing to refine the balance of advertisements for diverse mass audiences as well as hard-to-count (HTC) populations. There was also high favourability for obtaining resources for the effort earlier in the cycle.

5. Creative review and development

(a) *Successes and recommendations for continued success:* The Creative Review Team put in place a strategy to review and approve creative assets, which was generally noted as a great success. Participants voiced recommendations to continue having a designated Creative Review Team and to expand the team's scope to include review of all creative content for streamlined review and consistent messaging;

(b) *Challenges and recommendations to address opportunities for improvement:* To prevent misalignment of content and messaging, participants recommended diligent planning and establishment of media requirements and guidelines early in the cycle. It was also recommended to promote early planning, and improved alignment and integration between the creative and the media buying components of the operation, prior to planning creative executions. A plan should be presented to Census Bureau leadership by ICC PMO and the selected contractor. Participants also recommended allowing the Creative Review Team sovereignty over final approval decisions to minimize the impact of review and approval delays from upper management.

6. Events, earned media and public relations

(a) *Successes and recommendations for continued success:* The editorial calendar and the content hub received strong praise. Lessons Learned participants recommended

maintaining a centralized location for content and key dates that is accessible to all those working on the programme. Other specific successes include interactive and reusable exhibits, operational announcements, regional media strategies, and media training;

(b) *Challenges and recommendations to address opportunities for improvement:*

Some participants felt that different task orders and material releases were siloed, resulting in coordination challenges and missed opportunities. The roles for the content review process could be reassessed to improve effectiveness and timeliness of reviews. Similarly, there are opportunities to strengthen the research-driven approach to the buying of the media and the development of creative assets.

7. Social media

(a) *Successes and recommendations for continued successes:* For the first time, the 2020 Census campaign utilized social media influencers to spread awareness and motivate response. Response from Lessons Learned participants praised the approach, especially the ability of influencers to reach populations that historically held low response rates. Efforts dedicated to combat mis- and disinformation and to customer care, as well as the digital nature of the social media content review process, were noted as successes to be repeated;

(b) *Challenges and recommendations to address opportunities for improvement:*

A plan to identify and engage influencers with an authentic voice should be launched earlier to aid outreach, particularly with HTC audiences. Lessons Learned participants also noted a need for content that is customizable and sharable in digital formats (e.g., a more “flexible toolkit”). It was suggested that a social media hub be created for this purpose. Participants further noted that expanding and integrating digital review methods would also speed up content creation.

8. Trust and safety/crisis

(a) *Successes and recommendations for continued successes:* Overall, Lessons Learned participants felt that the preparation and planning of activities geared toward addressing crisis and reputational threats were helpful. Exercises and drills received praise for equipping staff with the necessary knowledge in relation to potential threats and crisis response. Lessons Learned participants were pleased that social media played a unique role in crisis and reputational threat management. According to Lessons Learned participants, the Census Bureau could create a census-wide crisis response structure to ease confusion related to roles and responsibilities in crisis planning and management;

(b) *Challenges and recommendations to address opportunities for improvement:*

Internal and external communication were negatively impacted by the COVID-19 public health emergency during the 2020 Census. The challenges in communication caused by the pandemic were also visible to external stakeholders. Several Lessons Learned participants reported not being aware that there were plans and processes in place or expressed doubts about their use when a crisis arose and disrupted operations. Many participants recommended having one crisis team across the entire agency that includes reputational threat/trust and safety.

9. Recruitment advertising

(a) *Successes and recommendations for continued successes:* The diversity of communication channels used for advertising were overwhelmingly recognized as a success (e.g., combination of paid advertising, dedicated and frequently updated website, and social media). The implementation of a monitoring strategy allowed the team to focus on communication channels that yielded the best results. Additionally, communication and integration across the 2020 IPC teams and with the contractor were noted as successful (e.g., planning meetings). This integration could be further strengthened in the future by building upon synergies identified between campaign elements and roles;

(b) *Challenges and recommendations to address opportunities for improvement:*

The Recruitment Advertising Team was one of the first teams to launch their activities, at the start of the communication and outreach campaign for the 2020 Census. Timing and planning

were noted as a significant challenge by Lessons Learned participants: planning should start earlier (e.g., requirements gathering, staffing and allocation of resources, and decision-making). Additionally, the contract could have been used differently for better outcomes: it is recommended that a national and a local campaign is planned under the same contract to prevent overlaps and, most importantly, promote synergies in the future.

10. Partnerships and promotional materials

(a) *Successes and recommendations for continued successes:* Structures for both national and local partnerships were independently successful. Participants had positive feedback specifically for the NPP portfolio structure, and recommended that the structure serve as a resource to inform the partnerships structure for the 2030 Census. This should consider evolutions in the partnership space over the decade and should be implemented earlier in the cycle;

(b) *Challenges and recommendations to address opportunities for improvement:* The most overarching point of feedback for opportunities for improvement was greater coordination between the partnership sub teams and other work orders developing any external relationships to reach audiences (e.g., Statistics in Schools [SIS], media teams). Inconsistencies between the national and local levels were pain points expressed by all participants. There was duplication of effort and disruption with all partnership sub teams (e.g., NPP, CPEP, Technology, Census Open Innovation Labs [COIL]) working to engage partners across the nation but in silos. Recommendations to enable greater coordination included: 1) more advanced, user-friendly tools to track partnerships activities and history, and 2) clearly-defined roles, responsibilities, and performance metrics. In addition, the need to start partnership engagement, particularly the national programme, earlier in the decade was emphasized.

11. Statistics in schools

(a) *Successes and recommendations for continued successes:* Feedback for the 2020 SIS programme suggested that the engagement with teachers through the Teacher Ambassador Programme enabled successful alignment of materials to communities and curriculums. Many Lessons Learned participants recommended maintaining engagement with partners in the academic community across the nation throughout the decade;

(b) *Challenges and recommendations to address opportunities for improvement:* One of the greatest pain points for the SIS programme that was uncovered during this 2020 Lessons Learned exercise was that materials were distributed too late to schools for teachers to be able to integrate them into lesson plans. Opportunities for improvements were also noted for the Ambassadors Programme (e.g., planning, recruitment of ambassadors).

12. Web & digital

(a) *Successes and recommendations for continued successes:* Key successes highlighted by participants included a clean website design (in multiple languages), the ability to gather user insights through A/B testing, and strong coordination with teams across the IPC programme and the Census Bureau. Participants emphasized the importance of repeating many of the web team's practices in terms of workflow, testing, and planning/requirements gathering, which should begin two years before the next decennial census;

(b) *Challenges and recommendations to address opportunities for improvement:* Participants on the web team frequently noted the importance of allowing web to function with its own schedule and workflows, as the requirements to adhere to timelines established by the Associate Director for Decennial Census Programs (ADDCP) and to participate in the IPC structure required an unnecessary use of time and resources. Both contractors and Census Bureau employees also highlighted integration as a key area for improvement in terms of integrating with Internet Self-Response (ISR), for which they recommended more regular meetings and touchpoints between the teams.

13. Non-English language materials and translation

(a) *Successes and recommendations for continued successes:* Availability of non-English materials online for external partners and Census Bureau staff helped outreach to non-English audiences. The translation glossaries and language guides promoted consistency in translating materials;

(b) *Challenges and recommendations to address opportunities for improvement:* Lessons Learned participants flagged the creation of content, messaging, and translations that consider language nuances based on regional dialect or other cultural differences as a significant opportunity for improvement. Recommendations covered topics such as resources, communication, and integration across Census Bureau teams and with external stakeholders.

IX. Conclusions

43. The 2020 Census was a massive undertaking requiring coordination and cohesion among many stakeholders; efficient planning; and flexibility to allow for changes to goals, schedules, and timelines. It was a geographically dispersed, highly visible effort that could not afford to fail. The Census Bureau's approach relied on team members and activities that worked simultaneously toward the overall campaign goals of engaging and motivating people to self-respond, preferably via the Internet, and raising awareness and keeping it high throughout the entire 2020 Census. It was a far-reaching, collaborative effort bringing together staff from across the Census Bureau to conduct a variety of partnership and communications activities to reach, educate, and motivate the entire population of the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and United States territories to participate.

44. The 2020 Census was the first time we provided an online response option as the preferred primary response mechanism. It was also a first for our integrated partnership and community activities, and, above everything else, the first time that the census took place during a global pandemic. Even during these difficult circumstances, the combined efforts of the IPC operation helped the Census Bureau to achieve a final self-response rate of 67.0 per cent for the 2020 Census, exceeding the final 66.5 per cent self-response rate in 2010. 99.9 per cent of all housing units were accounted for in 2020.

45. Successes, opportunities for improvement, and recommendations were gathered from Census Bureau employees, ICC contractors, and national partners and stakeholders using various methods of engagement. This broad engagement resulted in the collection of input from more than 1,000 individuals based on their experience working across the 2020 Census campaign. Successes were numerous and recommendations formulated by Lesson Learned Participants to replicate these successes will guide the planning of 2030 Census activities. Most importantly, the 2020 Census was a data-driven campaign informed by robust research, a campaign optimization strategy, and monitoring activities. The diversity of channels and formats used to disseminate outreach materials among diverse audiences, using both tradition and digital methods, contributed to IPC's mission and allowed teams to adapt to constraints caused by external factors.

46. Strengthening communication and collaboration continuously across programmes and directorates but also externally, with partners and stakeholders, including in non-decennial years, would promote continued successes of partnership and communication activities. Investing in training staff in intercensal years and establishing evergreen decennial operations would better ensure that skilled personnel are onboarded and available at project outset.

47. Despite these notable successes, Lessons Learned participants faced several challenges during the planning and execution of the campaign, due to resource and time constraints, organizational and integration challenges, but also the historical and unprecedented challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Recommendations formulated by Lesson Learned participants to mitigate these challenges or plan and execute activities differently for better outcomes will also guide the planning of 2030 Census activities.

48. Most importantly, Lessons learned participants identified timelines, and what has been referred to as a “late start,” as one of the major challenges encountered during the 2020 Census. According to participants, the funding and launch of 2020 Census activities happened too late in the decade. Maintaining outreach programmes and partnerships in intercensal years, through evergreen functions, would be beneficial. Additionally, Lessons Learned participants mentioned opportunities to improve how the ICC supports the IPC operation and campaign elements (e.g., structure, requirements gathering) as well as opportunities to improve non-English language materials and to better target existing hard-to-count audiences and target additional sub-components of these groups.

49. In light of these strong recommendations, the U.S. Census Bureau has already started implementing some of these ideas with the goal of having a stronger communications and outreach operation in support of the 2030 Census. Two of the ideas implemented so far are:

50. *Census Barriers, Attitudes and Motivators Study*: The Census Bureau is leveraging the success and lessons learned from the 2020 Integrated Partnership and Communications Campaign research to inform early planning for the 2030 Census. This includes, specifically, starting campaign research early through implementing the CBAMS six years earlier than in the past decade and at multiple times, giving the Census Bureau the opportunity to answer questions such “What worked from the CBAMS questionnaire?” or “What questions need to be updated because they only applied to the context of the 2020 Census?” Based on these general goals, the agency plans for CBAMS to concentrate on two main objectives:

- (a) Establish a CBAMS that it is conducted every two years instead of every ten years as has been done in the past. Our objective is to have four CBAMS in total before 2030;
- (b) Identify and set priorities to advance research on our understanding of historically undercounted populations.

51. *Office of Strategic Alliances (OSA)* – For the last several censuses, national partners have helped the Census Bureau to understand how best to collect data and assist in spreading messages about the importance of the Decennial Census. The OSA has been established to extend these partnerships into intercensal years to benefit other Census Bureau programmes and to have partners already on board for the 2030 Census. OSA is looking to connect other Census Bureau programmes with diverse and influential organizations to leverage knowledge and data assets as we modernize Census Bureau data products, collection, acquisition methods, and dissemination. OSA has focused the last 18 months on promoting the Economic Census, looking to improve response rates, and on disseminating 2020 Census data. In the near future, OSA will leverage what has been learned to apply these lessons to the American Community Survey, and the demographic and economic surveys.

52. The U.S. Census is already developing the 2030 Census Integrated Partnerships and Communications Operation through a working group that it is developing the programme management, scope and contractual aspects that will shape the 2030 Census’ future outreach and communications efforts
