Govt considering using Internet, smartphones for 2020 census

January 8 2015, byJesse J. Holland

In this photo provided by the U.S. Census Bureau, tabulators in Washington record the information from the more than 120,000 enumerators who gathered data for the 1940 U.S. Census. The days of the census taker with a clipboard in hand may be numbered. Instead, the U.S. Census Bureau is testing digital means of counting Americans this year, from asking people to fill out their forms on the Internet instead of through the mail to giving their employees smartphones instead of paper to complete their counts. (AP Photo/National Archives and Records Administration)

The days of the census taker with clipboard in hand may be numbered. The Census Bureau plans to test digital tools in preparation for the 2020 census, a change that could save millions of dollars.

People may be asked to fill out their census forms on the Internet instead of sending them through the mail. Census takers may use smartphones instead of paper to complete their counts.

The once-a-decade count is used to draw congressional maps and helps determine how the government spends $400 billion on infrastructure, programs and services each year.

Despite outreach and advertising campaigns, the share of occupied homes that returned a form was 74 percent in 2010, unchanged from 2000 and 1990. The majority of the money the bureau spends during a census goes to getting everyone else to fill out their forms, Census Director John H. Thompson said.

In the Savannah, Georgia, area and in Maricopa County, Arizona, census workers this year will be asking people to respond on the Internet instead of filling out the traditional forms with such questions as age, race and homeownership. During follow-up visits for those who don't answer, census workers will forgo using paper and instead input answers directly into their smartphones for instantaneous collection and analysis.

In addition, in Savannah and nearby South Carolina, census officials will test an Internet response system that will only require a person to input a home address to answer questions, instead of using a government-generated identification number.

"All you need to have is an address where you live," Thompson said. "If we do that, it opens up all kinds of new ways to promote the census in targeted ways. If we contact someone at a sporting event and they have a

smartphone, we can get them to respond right then and there."

The Census Bureau plans to discuss its upcoming tests in a webcast on Friday.

Americans are ready for an Internet-driven census, officials said. During 2014 tests in in Washington, D.C., and nearby Montgomery County, Maryland, 55 percent of the families who were asked to fill out their census tests on the Internet responded without major prodding, an "exceptional response," Thompson said. Census workers used iPhones to collect information in follow-up visits.

Census workers will use Android phones during the test this year, Thompson said. "Everything will be on those smartphones. No paper," he said.

For government officials, going digital means they can do real-time analysis on areas to figure out which households have not responded, and be able to use their workers on the ground more efficiently, he said.

"You now can electronically control the flow of information all the way, from when you get people to self-respond, hopefully by the Internet, to when you give it to the interviewers to when you get it back from the interviewers," he said.

The Census Bureau will also test using electronic records from other government agencies to help fill in gaps in responses, Thompson said.

More information: Census Bureau: www.census.gov

Census webcast: www.census.gov/newsroom/census-live.html

Citation: Govt considering using Internet, smartphones for 2020 census (2015, January 8)
retrieved 25 April 2024 from
https://phys.org/news/2015-01-govt-internet-smartphones-census.html