Testimony before the House Committee on Government Reform, Subcommittee on Federalism and the Census

"Life in the Big City: What is Census Data Telling Us about Urban America? Are Policymakers Really Listening?"

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify today on Census data and demographic change in urban areas. I am Audrey Singer, Immigration Fellow at the Metropolitan Policy Program at the Brookings Institution. I will focus my comments on data about the foreign-born population and how they are used in research to inform public policy decisions.

The Metropolitan Policy Program's mission is to provide decisionmakers with research and policy analysis on the shifting realities of cities and metropolitan areas. To this end, the Program initiated the Living Cities Census Series and to date has published more than 50 reports and books using the most recent census data. Each research paper describes how a particular social, economic or demographic trend is affecting cities, suburbs and metropolitan areas. For example, we have published papers on poverty, aging and household composition.

Using Census data to understand recent trends in immigration

My own research has focused on documenting the changing destinations of the foreign-born population in U.S. cities and metropolitan areas. I will describe some of my findings as an illustration of what we can learn about immigration from Census data. Then I will discuss several advantages and limitations of the use of census data for understanding immigration.

In a recent paper called "The Rise of New Immigrant Gateways," I used historical census data to chart the changing urban geography of immigration during the 20th century and highlighted how immigrant destinations in the 1980s and 1990s differ from earlier settlement patterns.

The United States experienced unparalleled immigration in the 1990s that transformed many new destinations into emerging gateways and changed the character of more established immigrant gateways. Most large metropolitan areas across the country now need to meet the challenges of incorporating new immigrants with diverse backgrounds and needs.

I created a typology of six immigrant gateways based on historical settlement patterns and recent influxes of immigrants. ***Former gateways*** like St. Louis, Cleveland, Pittsburgh and Buffalo, attracted immigrants in the early 1900s but no longer do.

Continuous gateways such as New York, San Francisco and Chicago are long-established destinations for immigrants and continue to receive large numbers of the foreign-born**.**

Post-World War II gateways like Los Angeles, Houston, and Miami began attracting immigrants on a grand scale during the past 50 years.

Atlanta, Dallas, and Washington, D.C. stand out as ***emerging gateways*** with fast immigrant growth during the past 20 years.

Seattle, Portland, and the Twin Cities—places that began the 20th century with strong immigrant pulls—waned as destinations during the middle of the century, but are now ***re-emerging*** as important immigrant gateways.

Finally, Salt Lake City, Raleigh-Durham, and Charlotte are examples of very recent immigrant destinations, having attracted significant numbers of immigrants in the 1990s alone. These are the ***pre-emerging gateways***.

Other major findings include:

- **The U.S. foreign-born population grew 57.4 percent in the 1990s; by 2000 nearly one-third of U.S. immigrants resided outside established settlement states.** Thirteen states primarily in the West and Southeast—including many that had not previously been major destinations for immigrants—saw foreign-born growth rates more than double the national average. These states included Colorado, Georgia, Nevada, and North Carolina.

- **Newly emerging immigrant gateways experienced rapid growth of both the foreign- and native-born between 1980 and 2000, while the more established gateways experienced slower percentage growth of both– albeit from a larger base population.** The continuous gateways, for example, would have lost population or stagnated absent the arrival of the foreign-born. By contrast, emerging and pre-emerging gateways exhibited strong population growth while also watching their foreign-born populations surge by as much as 817 percent (Atlanta) and 709 percent (Raleigh-Durham) over the two decades.

- **By 2000 more immigrants in metropolitan areas lived in suburbs than cities, and their growth rates there exceeded those in the cities.** Most notably, immigrants in emerging gateways are far more likely to live in the suburbs than in central cities.

This new reality of a growing immigrant population in many places across the United States raises questions about the ability of local governments and institutions to aid in the social, economic and political incorporation of immigrant newcomers into local areas.

At the federal level, there is an absence of any uniform set of programs or policies designed to explicitly help immigrants and their families integrate into American communities. Cities, states, counties and other municipalities therefore have a very important role in developing and maintaining policies and programs that help immigrants become part of communities where they live. Along with nonprofit, faith-based and community organizations, local actors are a critical force for building capacity in their regions.

Census data can be used to understand local trends in great detail, and many of these organizations rely on those data to derive information on how many immigrants reside in their community, which countries they came from, the period in which they arrived in the U.S., languages spoken and English language proficiency, their poverty status and whether they have become U.S. citizens.

In rapidly changing emerging gateways, after all, it can be challenging if not impossible to design service programs without an understanding of who is living in the community and what their needs may be. Indeed, many community service and faith-based organizations are often "first responders" who have good "hands on" knowledge about what is happening in their areas. However, they may lack specific empirical data about their local service areas that they could use in fundraising proposals or in planning programs.

Current sources of data on the foreign-born from census

Census collects data that provide information on immigrants or, more precisely, the foreign-born. The Census Bureau uses the term foreign born to describe international migrants, or "people who are not US citizens at birth." The foreign-born population includes legal permanent residents, legal nonimmigrants (persons with temporary visas to work or study in the United States, for example), and, to the extent that they are counted, persons living illegally in the United States.

Traditionally, researchers and others have turned to the "long form" data from the decennial census to get fairly detailed data on immigrants, including the variables mentioned above, including country of birth, citizenship status, period of entry, residence five years ago, language spoken at home, and English speaking ability. It is the one source that can provide national and subnational level data so researchers can access comparable data at the state, county, and tract levels.

There are other surveys that the Census Bureau maintains such as the Current Population Survey (CPS) that have become important sources of immigration statistics. The CPS asks questions similar to the Census long form questions on the foreign born. However, the CPS also includes questions on parent's place of birth for each respondent. This information is one important way that we can track the children of the immigrants, a growing group that now represents more than one-fifth of all children. The last time parent's birthplace was used in the decennial census was in 1970, when the lowest levels of immigrants were recorded during the 20th century.

Census maintains other surveys such as the Survey of Income and Program Participation and the American Housing Survey which provide other sources of immigration statistics. None of these other surveys, however, are able to provide the kind of geographic detail that the decennial censuses do.

The American Community Survey (ACS) is a new source that promises to offer more timely data on the foreign born. The ACS–once it is fully implemented–will offer similar data on the foreign born on an annual basis.

Access to data on immigrants

Census 2000 marked a very important moment with regard to data access in this country. The Census Bureau made much of the 2000 data available through their website, along with 1990 data retrospectively. In the past, users accessed the data through tapes and CDs, which made the process considerably more cumbersome. The release of 2000 data on the Internet essentially democratized the information, so that local organizations–both governmental and private–could access and use it.

And many researchers, planners, community service organizations, and national and local groups interested in immigration issues do use these data to understand local immigration dynamics.

Until the advent of the ACS, most researchers interested in immigration trends between decennial censuses, and at geographies smaller than the national level looked to other sources to fill in the gaps. The choices have been limited to the Current Population Survey, admissions data from the Office of Immigration Statistics at the Department of Homeland Security (formerly the statistics branch of the Immigration and Naturalization Service), and local sample surveys, estimates and projections.

Advantages and limitations of available census data on immigrants

The census is the most widely used data source for statistics on the characteristics of the foreign born and the communities in which they live. It is an important resource for local planners and organizations because the data are provided for places such as counties, zip codes, and census tracts.

The downside of the decennial census is that it is, in fact, decennial. Once every ten years users are awash with data and for a couple of years, everyone is happy. But by 2005, local decision makers are no longer interested in 2000 data. They know that changes are taking place in their communities, and they want up-to-date information that captures the details of those changes.

The ACS should help. Once it is fully implemented, the ACS will provide essentially the same information that the decennial census does.

One drawback of the ACS is that it is much more limited than the decennial census in what it can tell us about smaller geographical areas. Although in the ACS, census long-form questions are available on an annual basis including those on the foreign born, smaller places will have to contend with less than annual estimates. For example, while annual information will be available for Dayton, places with populations smaller than 65,000, such as Kettering, also in Montgomery County OH, just miss the mark, and will have to use three-year averages. At the census tract and block group level, five-year averages will be the best available. So, planning departments in smaller places are disadvantaged relative to larger places. With the ACS we gain much in the timeliness with which we will have data, which is especially important for those who are concerned with immigrant populations, however, we will lose some geographic detail.

An additional challenge with the ACS is that the data will be published in a format that many users may not be familiar with. The data will be presented, not as a single number or point estimate, but as three numbers representing a “confidence interval” with a mid-point bounded by an upper and lower limit. This is necessary because data for the ACS

are collected from a sample, which is then used to produce estimates of the actual figures that would have been obtained by interviewing the entire population using the same methodology. It will be important for users less familiar with interpreting these kinds of numbers to learn how to use them properly.

There is also one limitation that both the census and the ACS share regarding birthplace of the foreign-born population. Approximately 80 countries are individually identified in the tabular results. Smaller country of origin groups are aggregated by Census to protect the identity of individual respondents. This can be a disadvantage in places like Washington DC which has one of the most diverse foreign-born populations in the country and where Africans from many nations live. The Census only identifies six African countries: Ethiopia, Egypt, Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and South Africa, the rest are grouped together by geographical region, for example, "other western Africa" or "other eastern Africa.." In this case, more detail would be very helpful for local service providers.

What census data do not tell us about the foreign born

Beyond the above-mentioned limitations is another constraint for users of census data interested in the economic characteristics of the foreign-born population. Most data users at planning agencies and community organizations use the convenient summary tables produced by census for all levels of census geography (available for both the decennial census and ACS). These popular tables have very few indicators of economic status tabulated for the foreign born. While one can access the poverty status of the foreign born in a specific area, it is not possible to know their educational attainment, household income, or individual income, arguably some of the most sought after data for those concerned about the well-being of this population. Given the importance of understanding the dynamics of the foreign-born population and their impact on communities, many more summary tables on the foreign born could be made available, both from the decennial census data and the ACS. More sophisticated data users can access this information from the public use microdata (PUMS), but the census geographies are much more limited.

Finally, census data do not explicitly tell us the size of the population living in the United States illegally. Because the Census Bureau is trying to achieve an accurate count of the U.S. population, it does not ask the legal status of people residing in the United States, which might prevent those who are undocumented from filling out a census questionnaire. I am not recommending this should change. Every effort is made by census to encourage the participation of all U.S. residents, regardless of legal status. And Census exerts extra effort to reach those with limited English proficiency. The best estimates of the undocumented population use a widely-accepted methodology that calculates the legal immigrant population and subtracts it from the total foreign-born population to derive the undocumented migrant population (See Passel, 2005).

Ultimately, the importance of census data for cities, states, counties and other municipalities to develop and maintain policies and programs that help immigrants become part of communities where they live can not be underestimated. Despite the limitations and challenges outlined above, researchers, local governments, and various organizations depend on census data to understand local areas and how immigrants fit into the picture.

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