

# 4\_Stats Policy CUT2

Mon, 9/20 11:01AM 20:15

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

data, agencies, statistics, asa, federal, statistical, statistical agencies, statisticians, people, census bureau, pat moynihan, facts, population, experienced, census, new orleans, katherine, committee, community, recovery

## SPEAKERS

Joe Hotz, Katherine Wallman, Denice Ross

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Katherine Wallman 00:15

I'm Katherine Wallman, the former chief statistician of the United States and president of ASA, way back in 1993. What I want to do today is introduce two of my great colleagues ... who have on-the-ground experience with what our issues and concerns are about trust and credibility and federal statistics. Before we get there, let me start with a very brief introduction of what we're talking about when we talk about federal statistics, or some people even refer to them as official statistics. These are data that some of which are extremely familiar to many of you, some of which are probably less familiar. They range from economic statistics, such as the gross domestic product and the consumer price index, to some of the population and demographic data, most notably the Decennial Census of Population and Housing and the American Community Survey. Not to be forgotten, data on health and education, criminal justice in a variety of areas that are important both for policy officials and planners for private businesses, but also for individuals, as they make decisions about their lives and the resources and services that they will have access to. Many people probably are aware that something like the census, for example, is used to determine the allocation of seats in the Congress and how the districts for voting are drawn. They are probably less aware that data from the census in the American Community Survey can be used for things like deciding where schools will be built, or where fire stations may be needed, and all kinds of services that individuals and households take advantage of. I am reminded constantly of the statement by Senator Moynihan, which I have looked up recently and realize was actually a play on words that had been offered by someone previous to him, but I will always remember it as Pat Moynihan's, who said that everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts. I think that's at the hub of what we're trying to talk about here, when we talk about trust and credibility in the federal statistical activities. My desire today was to get two real people, real users of federal statistics to talk to you a little bit about their experiences. One is Denice Ross, who is one of my favorite people from the local level originally, although she's not doing that activity specifically now. And another of my favorite people is Joe Hotz, who represents, in my thinking, more on the research side of the activity, as opposed to on the ground using the data to make decisions about what needs to happen immediately next. Denice is currently a senior fellow at the National Conference on Citizenship and as well as a fellow at the Beeck Center for Social Impact and Innovation, which is based at Georgetown. But my relationship with Denice goes back for many, many years now, which she likes to remind me of periodically, when she was a Presidential Innovation Fellow and she just wowed me completely with the way that she was helping people in New Orleans recover from Katrina using data, and I hope she'll share a little bit of that with us today. Joe is the Arts and Sciences Distinguished Professor of Economics at Duke University and also the principal investigator on Add Health Parent Study. At the present time, he's been involved not only with the census issues of late, but also in his role ... as the head of the PAA committee, one of our sister organizations, if I might, that works closely with federal statistical agencies, in particular, in addition to the Census Bureau, for example, with the National Center for Health

Studies. I'm hoping that Joe will enlighten us a bit on some of his work more from the research perspective. Maybe Denice, you would like to talk first about some of your experiences, not only in New Orleans in 2005, if that's too long ago, but bringing us up to date on some of the things you're doing now with the National Conference and so on. Thank you, Denice.

D

Denice Ross 05:26

Thank you. Hi, Katherine. It's great to be here. So, for a little bit of background, I moved to New Orleans in 2001 to work for a local data intermediary. Our role was to identify what data people needed locally to make decisions, and then sort through all the available federal statistics and other data sources to pull out the data that people needed so that they didn't have to become data experts to do their day jobs. I moved to New Orleans right after the 2000 Census was taken and just as the data were starting to be released. We organized the data into really easy-to-use neighborhood profiles and tested it with users, so that we could really reduce barriers to folks using data. The idea was that, instead of decisions being made about communities behind closed doors by people in power who had access to statistical experts, can we democratize the data so that neighborhoods had access to data about themselves and they could advocate on behalf of their own destinies? So that was all well and good until 2005, when Hurricane Katrina came, and the federal levee system failed. For the record, we got the good side of the storm. But there was a failure of infrastructure, and 80% of the city flooded and all of those federal statistics that we had been relying on and really taking for granted, I'll admit, they were instantly historical. So, we were flying blind with that recovery, and we couldn't answer really basic questions like, "Where should we put pop-up clinics to give people tetanus shots when they injure themselves rebuilding their houses?", or "Which childcare centers should we prioritize reopening?", and like, "Where are the children going to be?", "Which parks and playgrounds should we make sure that we rehab so that there's not arsenic and lead from the flooding in the dirt anymore?". We just didn't have those basic questions. At the time, I really wish that we had the Star Trek Enterprise that could just scan the city to tell us how many life forms there were and what their characteristics were, but we didn't. So, what we did is we started looking at alternative data sets. It certainly gave me an appreciation for how important federal statistics are, because we ... the best proxy for repopulation after Katrina was the data from the company that sends you junk mail--the missing children's postcards that you get in the mail. It turns out, they know when you move into a place! You get the postcard, you start getting the junk mail. It doesn't make financial sense for them to send junk mail to an empty address. So, we used the junk mail data to track recovery block by block. At one point, the police chief was even using that as the denominator for crime rates, because the population estimates--the intercensal /every-year population estimates--just weren't able to keep up. They weren't designed for the type of rapid change that we experienced post-disaster. Since then, I've really taken to heart the fact that we can't take our federal statistical system for granted. So, that's what I've been doing, especially over the last five years, is helping to do my part to help shore up the statistical system and support from the outside and also from the inside. I served on the Biden-Harris transition team for the Department of Commerce.

J

Joe Hotz 08:57

Katherine's already alluded to the fact that one of our connections is that I currently chair the Population Associations Committee on Population Statistics and I'm a former member of the National Academies Committee on National Statistics (CNSTAT), which are two vantage points which have allowed me to have some really interesting looks at the Census Bureau and many of the statistical agencies and what they do. I think one of the things I want to stress is that I've been impressed in those discussions with agencies which are really trying to do all they can to improve access and dissemination of the data. It's worth noting that these efforts are part of a piece of legislation--which ASA was certainly a supporter of and Katherine was involved in the early phases of--which is the Evidence-Based Policy Act that passed and has also further mandated greater access to data and is in the process of being implemented now. One of the things I learned is there are real challenges that these agencies face. And some of them are really ones in which there's a great deal of controversy about. One in particular is some changes that the

Census Bureau has made in the release of the 2020 Census data products, which is the use of a new what's called disclosure avoidance system that's based on a concept called differential privacy. When one agency does something, it has consequences for the other ones. So, let me give you an example. It relates to the health statistics, which are distributed. Health statistics agencies like NCHS collect data from different states and so forth on things like mortality and the causes of death and diseases. They are able to get that information and put it together for different demographic groups, by age, by different localities at the county and state level. But to be able to figure out rates, like what is the mortality rate in an area, or what's the mortality rate associated with particular causes, they need denominators. Those denominators typically come from the Census Bureau, and the Census Bureau's changes that are in process to use differential privacy have run the risk of these agencies changing trends, and what you're really interested in, as we can see in the pandemic. Also, as we can see because of the changes that have occurred in life expectancy in the United States because of declining deaths and amongst certain groups in the population--certain localities--and of course the opioid crisis, these agencies are now faced with a real challenge to figure out how to fix these rates so that we can see what's happened to trends, what were real changes versus artifacts of a changed data system. This illustrates, I think, a real challenge that the system faces, and it has a widespread impact. Notwithstanding all of this, I've been impressed in my conversations and dealing with them [these agencies] through the committee on population statistics and CNSTAT, about how serious they are about trying to make innovations.

K

Katherine Wallman 12:17

Thanks, Joe. I'm going to push just a little bit on something that I think has already been touched upon, and that is, why should the man and lady on the street, or even the statisticians and data scientists on the street care about what we care about so passionately?

D

Denice Ross 12:39

In New Orleans, obviously, we had experienced disaster and our neighborhood leaders realized that they needed data in order to guide an equitable recovery. Now, the whole nation has experienced what it's like to be in a disaster, and we've all been in at the same time. And it's not just, not just COVID. It's the compounding crises of climate change, and fires, and hurricanes, and whatnot. Not to mention civil unrest and other other stressors that we're experiencing. What happens is, if you don't have good data and data that you can trust, then we end up arguing about the facts, rather than talking about what the solution should be. So, I think we have a fantastic window right now to to really infuse data and evidence into the way that we, as a society, discuss the challenges that we're facing and what solutions we might [have]. One fantastic thing that we've seen happening in the federal statistical system is that they're starting to really get their stride in the balance between timeliness and quality.

J

Joe Hotz 13:51

You know, in the end, citizens have to make decisions on their own. That's part of what a well-functioning democracy requires. And the goal I hope would be that it's fact based, that those decisions are informed by facts. Your earlier quote of Pat Moynihan, I think, is really apt for the situation we face today. So, all of the reasons that Denice indicated, and you could add more--one of the big messages out of the release of the 2020 Census over the last several weeks and month has been the changing composition of the American population--that our communities are different than they were 20 years ago. Our neighbors are different than the ones we had 20 years ago. And that's important to understand as we started as a functioning democracy to figure out how people will work and what their needs are going to be, who you're going to be going to school with, who you're going to end up marrying, etc. I think it's so terribly important that facts are trusted, and that the public knows about this and that they worry about this.

To make sure that, indeed, that kind of integrity of information is preserved, and that they can have those facts and hopefully take them into account when they think about the challenges and issues that they face at the local or the national level.

K

Katherine Wallman 15:26

Thanks, Joe. I think the last thing that I really kind of hope that we can get some advice on from you guys--guys and gals--is there are a few folks who are deeply involved, and we're among them in this little panel I'm looking at right here. But what can other folks do to get involved? Why should they want to get involved? I think Joe and Denice, you've spoken to that some, but are there things they could and should be doing to be more involved? Maybe in committees and so on and maybe through ASA, but maybe even as ambassadors locally, in their everyday sort of work and community activities.

D

Denice Ross 16:17

I'm a huge proponent of joining the frontlines and turning data into action in the community in which you live. I will say, you know, we need the next generation of census watchers or federal statistical system watchers in place, and especially statisticians who represent the communities that are most impacted by the challenges that we're facing as a nation. We need solid representation in the community, helping the statistical system along. I'll just end with my last recommendation, which is consider doing a tour of duty inside a federal statistical agency. I think that's the best way to build trust. And we are government, just jump inside. There's some fantastic fellowships and data science roles that are available. We will need, over the next 10 years, some fresh talent inside federal agencies to help chart a path toward an equitable recovery. Eyes wide open, right, that's what the data can do for us.

J

Joe Hotz 17:20

I completely agree with everything that Denice just said. I think the challenge, the issue here is, first and foremost--and I speak to maybe the members of the ASA who are more research oriented, although not exclusively--that, first of all, get informed. There are things going on with statistical agencies and release of data--some positive, some controversial--but get informed. I think the ASA and its website and its podcasts and its different ways of disseminating information is a great source, as other professional organizations are. Secondly, I think it's really appropriate to use one's expertise. We're not all able to [know what all the issues are]. There are issues I don't have the slightest understanding of at issue in the Census Bureau and there are other ones where I think I have some expertise and can help. Everybody can do that. This is an organization with extraordinarily talented individuals, and use it. Enter into this debate. Third, don't hesitate to reach out to these agencies when you think something's not right or you have an idea that there's a way to do some of this better. Statisticians have a real impact, sometimes controversial, but we've improved things from sampling to a range of other issues. So, when you have an idea, don't hesitate to get it. Agencies don't always respond--there's a bureaucratic aspect to them, and they don't always necessarily respond with warm and fuzzy reactions--but this is an opportunity to impact it. I have found that while sometimes frustratingly slow, these agencies listen. With that, I think the organization [the ASA] and its membership can really have an impact to shape the future of these agencies, to help them provide better information and to provide objective facts, as opposed to--going back again to that quote--your opinions.

K

Katherine Wallman 19:28

Thanks very much. I can't think of better messages for our membership. Frankly, I think that the agencies in some cases, in many cases, were a little bit slow getting to the party. But now, I think you're right. They're at the party and

they really will benefit from folks who have a little bit of a different lens and can help them see some things more clearly, or some additional opportunities to contribute. I hope that everyone will do that. Thank you so much, both of you.

J

Joe Hotz 20:08

Thank you.