



## Policy on Purpose

### Episode 26: U.S. Census Director Dr. Steven Dillingham

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**Dean Angela Evans:** Hello everyone, this is Angela Evans, the Dean of the LBJ School and we're in another podcast on Policy on Purpose, and today I'm extraordinarily honored to have Director Steven Dillingham, who has taken on the enormous task, scary, I think, in some ways, of being the head of the US Census Bureau in the time that we're getting ready for the 2020 count. And the Director came to the University of Texas and the LBJ School to really talk to us and the students about the importance of the census count and how it's used and to solicit information and get ideas of how we can make this work the best. And as we said earlier, it's one of the few places in the Constitution that directs us to do something in terms of counting our population, Article I, which is the most important article, in my opinion, and so we're here today. So, Director Dillingham, tell us a little bit about what your real wishes are in terms of getting the youth involved in this movement.

**Dir. Dillingham:** Absolutely, and Dean, thank you so much for having me here. It's a great honor to be here at the LBJ School of Public Affairs, to be at the University of Texas, to be here in Austin, and to be here in the great state of Texas. One of the messages, as you said, we're communicating about the census and what it's about and helping to educate and motivate people but, particularly this week, and the upcoming weeks, and recent weeks, we're trying to reach out to the higher education community and reaching out to the college students. There are some 20 million students across the nation and we want them to know the census is coming, April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020 is Census Day, but we have almost half a million census jobs. It's the greatest mobilization since World War II. It happens every ten years and higher education and college students are uniquely positioned. For many, it would be their first jobs, they can go to [2020census.gov](http://2020census.gov), apply online, and it's a great opportunity, either a first employment opportunity or a part-time employment opportunity. It pays well and we reimburse for mileage, so we're making a special appeal to the college students to take part in this great civic event.

**Dean Evans:** One of the things we talked about earlier in a breakfast was the importance of census data for the research that is undertaken at the universities and how the students study -- and the information they will use when they go out into the sector, whether they go into a public sector, or whether they go into a business or non-profit, they are going to be using this type of data. So being a university, it is really important for us to support this type of thing.



**Dir. Dillingham:** Absolutely. I think it is the most used data in the country. When you think about public policy analysis and research of all types, public and private sectors, you usually think about how many people are being served, or how many customers do you have. And almost all data for public policy reasons, are associated with the people and population data. It is just extremely important. Universities are great partners with us, we have special relationships with universities and we very much appreciate their support and their use of our data.

**Dean Evans:** I want you to share with the listeners some of the new initiatives that you started in terms of gaining trust for people so that they will actually participate in the Census. You have an amazing array of things that you have undertaken and are beginning to undertake. So, explain a little bit of that to people who are listening to this.

**Dir. Dillingham:** Alright. Well trust is so important. We do communicate the very basic message that the Census is so easy, we now have these two new -- you can do it on paper, you can do it on the internet, or by phone. It's also so safe and we can have long discussions about the laws that prevent anyone in the Census Bureau from sharing that information with anyone. We don't share it with other federal agencies. We take in-data, personal data, and we produce statistics and we only share statistics. That is governed by very stringent federal laws, also by culture and by practice within the Census Bureau. We have an excellent track record, but Congress passed those special protections in the 1950s and they are enforced today, and everyone should be aware their data is safe. And the importance, as you pointed out, the data is used for everything from education to infrastructure to medical services, whatever you can think of, usually, behind it somewhere is census data and population data. So those are very important messages that we send out to the public and others, and to the higher education community.

**Dean Evans:** And I think some people don't understand, as well, that some of these communities use these for community development in terms of getting -- attracting business and to getting services like hospitals. Having that data that shows the need. I think people need to understand that as well.

**Dir. Dillingham:** You are exactly right. And we have special training programs and dissemination programs with those days -- we have people in every state that coordinate the census data with those states. They are our customers and we work closely with them, they identify needs for us and we work with them in making sure that they can apply our data to meet their public policy needs and their public service requirements.

**Dean Evans:** Director, when you think about what is going on now with the scares of fake news or people intruding into our systems, and that the technology is moving more toward online or cellular types of collection of the data, what are some of the things that you are worried about, and what are some of the things that you are doing to try to prevent that being corrupted, the data being corrupted?



**Dir. Dillingham:** Sure. It gets back to that trust factor. People really need to know that the data is safe and that it's accurate. We have elaborate systems for dealing with protection of data, we have special contingency plans and we work with some of the leading organizations, private sector and public, to make sure that we counter misinformation and that the public really understands the importance of the census data and how -- what its true uses are. So, we are -- As I mentioned earlier this morning with you, we have the largest ever communications campaign, about a quarter of a million dollars in paid advertising as well as the enormous amount of public service announcements that explain this to the public. And hopefully they receive that message, that again, it's easy, it's safe, and it's so important. That kind of counteracts misinformation or sometimes apprehensions that they may have.

**Dean Evans:** Talk to us a little bit about how you are using communities, you have the big effort that you started in terms of using grassroots communities to help as well.

**Dir. Dillingham:** Communities are vital. Communities -- and by communities certainly at the local level, but also cities and counties and state governments -- they make the difference. I always explain, the Census cannot be conducted by the federal government alone, and it never has. If you go back and study the history in 1790, it really relies on the public willing to come forward and provide the information that's needed. It is our mission as a federal agency, but in many ways, we are sort of a coordinator and sometimes we are the beneficiary of the great efforts going on at the community level. So, we work with community groups. We have what we call -- generally what we call Complete Count Committees, and we have about 7,000 of those across the nation. We have a goal of having more than 300,000 partners. We want every university to be our partner, we want every school district -- we actually would like every school to be our partner. Our partners stretch far and wide in very diverse groups, but they make all the difference in the world because people trust the people in the community. If we have the trusted voices in those communities explaining the census, it goes a long way.

**Dean Evans:** I'm seeing 2020 as really a pivotal year in many ways. One is -- you know, the difficulty that some people are talking about in terms of getting an actual head count of people who are here. But the other thing is what you are trying to do is move us away from this image of a person coming to your door with the questionnaire on a clipboard, and starting to use technologies and new kinds of information technology. So, this is going to be a very pivotal census year where you are trying to move people that way so the success of that is very important.

**Dir. Dillingham:** Absolutely. We want the vast majority of people to self-report their data. Whenever a household self-reports its data, it saves the American taxpayers a hundred dollars plus per household. We don't have to send someone out to knock on the door to collect information. We will send five different mailings to every household if we haven't heard back from them, and in the fourth mailing for most of the country, they will receive the questionnaire. They can decide, "Do I want to answer by mail? Do I want to



do the written form, do I want to use the internet, or do I want to make a phone call?" And we have ten customer service centers around the country that can handle the high-volume calls and take the information over the phone. You can complete your census in less than 10 minutes for most households.

**Dean Evans:** And you were talking too, if you can do it by cellular phone, you can do it anywhere. In a football stadium, in a basketball court, whatever.

**Dir. Dillingham:** It's too bad it is not during football season. But you are absolutely right, you can basically answer the census anywhere at any time. We are so pleased to have these new options, and it helps us. There are tools for reaching the hard to count populations.

**Dean Evans:** Yes. One thing I want to talk about a little bit before we have to end this is, when you think about 2030, what are the things you are looking at the 2020 census that give you previews for 2030? Is it the emerging information technologies, is it the fact that we have very isolated populations, is it -- what are a couple things that you are focusing on to really see what the 2020 census projects?

**Dir. Dillingham:** Sure. It is all of the above. And change, in many areas in this country change is just enormous in our society. So, the census relying on the public has to be able to accommodate change. This time we are using these new technologies and we will have this experience under our belt. How well did it work, what are the lessons learned? We will need to document the practices and see if this would be used, and maybe improved and enhanced in the future.

But there may be other challenges too. You know, there is enormous administrative data that the federal government has, and the state government has, et cetera. So, sometimes that data is very important to getting to the accuracy of our count. We are looking at options, and we are always looking at the bottom line, the tax dollars, and there may be new ways and new approaches in the future that can save more money and perhaps enhance the accuracy.

**Dean Evans:** Well your career as a public servant has really gone into data and the importance of data and collecting data. And so, we are very fortunate to have you as the Director. And I want to end on one thing, if you had to tell the people who are listening to this, if you had a message for them, what would that be?

**Dir. Dillingham:** You can trust the Census, please support the Census and help others participate in the census.

**Dean Evans:** Simple. Three little lessons and I hope everyone does it. This is an extremely important event that we do in our country, and it is important for our democracy. I really appreciate you coming here, I appreciate you taking time and we wish you the best of luck as you take on this enormous challenge. Thank you so much.



**Dir. Dillingham:** Dean, thank you so much. I appreciate it.

**Dean Evans:** Thank you.

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