Tanya Domi: Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to the Thought Project recorded at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting-edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world. This week's guest is Steven Romalewski, Director of the CUNY Mapping Service at The Center for Urban Research at The Graduate Center. Welcome, Steven.

Steven R.: Thanks, Tanya, glad to be here.

Tanya Domi: The CUNY Mapping Service is supporting a fair and accurate Census count in 2020, and The Center is working with a coalition of civil rights groups, philanthropic foundations and others in hard-to-count communities. Can you explain why you're doing this? Can you tell us who are the hard-to-count communities and why so far in advance, it's more than two years out?

Steven R.: Sure. The first thing, the overall reason is that the decennial Census, every 10 years, is critically important, it's a full count. The only time that the entire population of the country gets counted, and the Census numbers are used to determine congressional apportionment, political power across the states, a huge amount of funding gets determined based on the Census numbers. So it's really important that the Census Bureau get it right, and they can't do it over, they just do it once, and that's it. So, the ability to count everyone is, I guess you could say, it's uneven around the country. There are some parts of the country where most or almost all of the household in a particular community will get the Census questionnaire, and they'll mail it back. They'll fill it out right away, and mail it back.

Steven R.: Or in 2020, actually, the response is mainly going to be via the internet. They'll go online and send in their information. That's great. That's really the way that we could be sure that the population just counted fairly and accurately. But, there are other parts of the country, other communities, where there might be a lot of households that have a lot of other priorities about their everyday lives that doesn't include filling out the Census form. Maybe they're single moms, maybe they're in poverty, maybe they're suspicious of the government, and so they're not going to fill out the forms. Then, the Census Bureau, because they still have to count everyone, they're going to send out people into communities and knock on doors, and ask them to fill out the forms in person. That's expensive, it's time consuming, and that's where people get missed.

Steven R.: In order to make sure that this Census count, it's done once every 10 years, can't do it over, is done right, it's really important to try to prioritize outreach efforts, and community partnership efforts in areas where the populations that may be harder to count are more concentrated. That's what our mapping service is doing, we're taking information from the Census to identify these communities. We've developed a nationwide interactive map that anyone can use to zoom in on areas and see where the hard-to-count communities are, where they're not, to use that information if they're going to be talking to their congressional representatives to urge that equity funding for the Census and also for outreach plans thinking ahead to 2020 itself.
Tanya Domi: Tell us how the technology that you're using is helping establish a more accurate Census count. What does your technology, instrumentation of your technology, how does that help?

Steven R.: The Census Bureau provides this list, a big database, a table that has information on each Census tract, and how many households are considered hard to count in that tract. Having that list is nice, if you know how to use databases. But in terms of giving that information in an actionable way to a community organization, they need that in a different format. What we do is we map that information. We create very powerful visuals that are not just pretty to look at, but analytical, and are rich in information. We then also take those maps and make them interactive and put them online. Anyone on the country with internet access could just access that information, zoom in to any part of the country and find out the details. We take these boring, daunting lists and turn them into useful information.

Tanya Domi: Just recently, you participated in a webinar with the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights about the 2020 Census. What was the purpose of that and how did you participate? What did you share with the map to these vulnerable communities?

Steven R.: The webinar was mainly for media representatives to let them know that this research and this resource exists. And to let them know that there are parts of... the areas of the country where they're reporting on might be considered hard to count. It's important for them to then tell their readers or viewers about this information. We also participated in the webinar with a Center at Georgetown University that has done some analysis of technologies related to the 2020 Census. In particular, looking at the question of using the internet as the main way that people in 2020 will submit their Census information, and that's also a concern because internet access is also uneven around the country. Some people have great access, some people don't.

Steven R.: If you don't have good access, you could be as eager to fill out your Census information as possible, but that's going to be a barrier. The Georgetown team was presenting that information to the media as well. So we were basically trying to get the word out about this-

Tanya Domi: Isn't true that the rural communities are actually at risk for being not counted because of the lack of access to broadband internet?

Steven R.: Yeah. The idea of a community that might be considered hard to count for the purpose of the Census, they're really in a lot of different places. They don't meet one profile as it were. A lot of urban, densely populated urban areas, where there are a lot of renters, or people in poverty, or people that are recent immigrants and can't speak English that well. There are rural communities where it's hard to get to, or it's hard to provide internet access, and they're going to have a hard time filling out the Census. It's suburban communities. It's really everywhere.

Steven R.: One of the media, one of the media representatives that participated in the webinar was from Texas, they're right along the border of Texas that's some of the hardest-to-
count communities in the country. They were really interested. This is something that's not just an urban Northeast thing, it's right there smack in the middle of Texas.

Tanya Domi: Census counts can be very political and in this year, this year in June, the Census Director actually resigned, who it operates out of the Department of Commerce, and right now the Secretary of Commerce is potentially in some legal jeopardy and they even resigned himself. We're a little bit more than two years out, what do you say about the political implications, especially with this administration that has seemed to target undocumented people, immigrants, they've also insinuated that they won't be counting LGBT people either.

Steven R.: The Census is supposed to be non-political, straightforward thing. Let's just count everyone. But, as you're pointing out, there's a lot of issues around that, a lot of issues behind that, and people who have been involved in prior censuses are really concerned that this time around there's not enough money, there's not enough planning, there's not enough testing, there's not enough support in Congress, and there's not enough support in the administration. We'll see what happens. It's definitely a big concern. That's why we're starting, hopefully early enough, to try to get the word out with resources like this hard-to-count interactive map. We were involved, our team at The Graduate Center was in 2010 with similar mapping application and working with the same organizations. But everyone got involved late, almost close to 2010 itself, because I think there wasn't as much of a concern.

Steven R.: Now, we're really worried several years out that the Census Bureau needs to ramp up in a lot of ways. They need to hire a lot of people. They need to do testing so when they hit the ground running in 2020 with internet access and all that there's no issues. They need to ramp up their work with partner organizations, so these groups can go into communities and tell people, "Don't be concerned, it's important to fill out this information." Because all this stuff has to be done. There's no one at the helm, and people are really concerned. Hopefully, there's still the opportunity to right the ship, but we'll see.

Tanya Domi: Right now, anybody can have access to your interactive map. Anybody. Researchers, members of the media, members of the public.

Steven R.: Yes.

Tanya Domi: It's on a website.

Steven R.: It's online at CensusHardtoCountMaps2020.us. Anyone can access it, we designed it so the map is very easy to use. You just start clicking around and getting information and easy to search. We're going to continue to update it with more and better information as it gets closer to 2020.

Tanya Domi: Thanks very much, Steven, I think it was very informative.

Steven R.: Thank you.
Tanya Domi: Thanks for tuning in to the Thought Project and thanks to our guest, Steven Romalewski. We'll check back in with Steven as the Census 2020 Project has updated news to share with the public.

Tanya Domi: The Thought Project was produced in partnership with CUNY TV, located at The Graduate Center in the heart of New York City with production, engineering, and technical assistance by Sarah Fishman and Jack Horowitz. I'm Tanya Domi, tune in next week.