

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 Steve Romalewski, Director of the CUNY mapping service, a project of the Center for Urban Research at the Graduate Center CUNY. The CUNY mapping service is supporting a fair and accurate census 2020 count and is working with a coalition of national civil rights groups, philanthropic foundations, and others to map the hard to count communities in advance of the 2020 census. Welcome back to the Thought Project, Steve Romalewski, the census guy.

Steve Romalewski:

Greetings. Thanks for having me.

Tanya Domi:

So what have you been up to? You're Director of the CUNY mapping service and what have you been doing to support the recent launch of a nationwide census?

Steve Romalewski:

We're doing lots. We have had an online map for the past couple of years that stakeholders, census advocates, foundations, civil rights organizations around the country have been using to prioritize where they should be focusing their get out the count campaigns. We're working really closely with all of these organizations in pretty much every state, as well as elected officials and the media to try to get the word out about really where groups should be prioritizing their education and outreach so that the hardest to count communities and populations know why it's so important to fill out the census questionnaire and especially why it's so important to fill out the questionnaire on your own when you get a mailing or a hand delivered packet from the census, not to wait or not to blow it off and ignore the mailing. Fill it out once you get that mailing or get the hand delivery packet and then that means you avoid having a census enumerator, census taker come into your door and you don't have to talk to them. You just do it on your own. That's how the census really gets its best data.

Tanya Domi:

So if you fill it out, you get it in the mail and you fill it out, you won't get a knock on your door?

Steve Romalewski:

That's correct.

Tanya Domi:

And so you've been focusing on hard to count. You have this working partnership with the leadership conference on civil and human rights based in DC to prepare for this census. For the past two years we've been talking, you and I have been talking. Why is this partnership so important to census integrity and the goals and objectives of the census?

Steve Romalewski:

Well, the leadership conference has really taken, as the name implies, a leading role, the leading role in working with stakeholders, which includes business associations, community groups, the media, elected officials, everyone that has a stake in making sure the census is a fair and accurate count in 2020. And so they have invested a huge amount of time and effort into preparing materials that these organizations can use on the ground and testifying before Congress and making sure that the congressional reps know the importance of the census and they fund it at an adequate level. So we're really lucky and honored to be able to work so closely with them. And when we launched our online map, they put out a news release on it to highlight it. They featured it in testimony to Congress and they featured it through their census counts online resource that organizations around the country are using. So it's really great, and they have really spearheaded the effort to make sure people understand how important the census is, how important it is to everyone at the local level and at the national level.

Steve Romalewski:

And so it's great to be able to work with them. And it's really a wide ranging, comprehensive coalition of organizations around the country. It's really impressive. And the philanthropic foundation community has really stepped up for the 2020 census, investing tens of millions of dollars to help these organizations, including us, to get the word out and educate everyone.

Tanya Domi:

It's really commendable. Full disclosure, I've worked with the leadership conference in past years, my time in Washington and it is the most prestigious coalition of civil rights groups that was launched in the 1950s to take on racial injustice in this country. And so I'm commending the Center for Urban Research and your project to have a partnership with such a prestigious group. As you've mentioned, it's over 150 civil rights organizations around the country. But there's also been some concern, has there not? I mean you're working on the hard to count communities and I want to get into that a little bit more later, but there's been concern about the political manipulation of the census in the run-up to actually launching it. There was even legal action. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Steve Romalewski:

So first of all, trying to take a census account of every single person in the country is a huge, daunting, expensive, complex task. It's not easy, but the constitution requires it. It's absolutely essential for determining how congressional seats should be apportioned throughout the states and where the congressional and other legislative district lines should be drawn. So it's important for political power and representation.

Tanya Domi:

Very, very.

Steve Romalewski:

Census data from the decennial census that we're talking about is used to figure out how to allocate hundreds of billions of dollars every year to states and localities throughout the country. So it's really, really important. But on top of the just logistical and bureaucratic challenge of doing the count, the politics of Washington are just crazy, and it really has thrown a monkey wrench in the works and it's made it that much more daunting and challenging and complicated to make sure that there's enough funding so that the Census Bureau can carry out the task, to make sure that the Census Bureau has the leadership it needs. That's been a challenge. And now it finally does, but it's a little late in the game. The

effort of the administration to try to cause all sorts of problems as far as immigration policy has caused a lot of fear and worry among localities and people in key communities. They're worried that the administration is going to try to use the census data for nefarious purposes.

Tanya Domi:

Yeah, turn it over to ICE. That's a big concern.

Steve Romalewski:

Right. And the administration tried to inject this last minute question on the census that would have asked about citizenship, and luckily the leadership conference and others took the administration to court and the US Supreme Court said, "No, you can't do that. It's too late in the game. It's problematic. You can't include this question."

Tanya Domi:

Yeah, and as you state, it's interesting, I did look up the history of the census, and I thought it was really interesting that Thomas Jefferson, who was Secretary of State at the time was also the Chief of the Census Bureau in America. It is a line in the constitution. It says, "Every person will be counted," not every citizen, every person. And at that time it was only 13 states, nearly four million people, but he carried out the first census and it continued that way up until 1830 and they added additional questionnaire. And then later in 1940 they created two census forms, one about the population counting it and one to collect housing information. And then it was changed again in 1960 where it combined all these changes into a short term survey.

Tanya Domi:

I do want to note that while the administration was defeated in placing this question about citizenship on the form, they did remove the count of our LGBTQ citizens. So I'm not going to be counted this time, but I'm going to write it in. I think there will be a lot of people writing it in. Now that won't constitute a legitimate census, but it's a way of resisting.

Steve Romalewski:

Well, everyone will still be counted. It's just a question of how many opportunities you have to self-identify and indicate that in the form. But you still will be counted as a person.

Tanya Domi:

Of course, as a person. One of the ways that people marginalize gay people is they say, "Well I don't know them and they don't exist," or that kind of thing. So if you're not counted, as Secretary Hillary Clinton once said, as the State Department Secretary of State, "That which is counted matters."

Steve Romalewski:

Yeah, it's very true.

Tanya Domi:

It's very true. So speaking of which, you with the LCCR have been focusing on hard to count communities. And I did get a listing of them according to the Census Bureau. Children under the age of five, immigrant and refugee communities, homeless people, Native American, Latino, Latinx, Hmong

African-Americans, people with disabilities, rural residents without broadband access, renters and people with non-traditional housing and not least, but LGBTQ populations. There we are. That's the official list.

Steve Romalewski:

Yeah, yeah. So a couple of things just to follow up on what you've been saying. So one thing is, so we were talking for a moment about how complicated it is to do the census and on top of that, there's the political complication of what's going on in Washington. And so that's why it's so critically important that groups like the leadership conference and many, many others around the country are really stepping up and doing a huge effort to try to make sure people understand that despite all of those challenges and political complications, the census matters. It matters that you get counted and that you need to fill out the census questionnaire. There's no citizenship question on it. The data is not going to be used. There's steep fines.

Tanya Domi:

Against you personally.

Steve Romalewski:

Right, exactly. And a lot of these organizations have also enlisted groups that have signed a pledge that they're going to do everything they possibly can if there's any funny business with the data.

Tanya Domi:

To protect people.

Steve Romalewski:

So even if the administration tries to do that, there's a huge army of organizations out there that will do everything they can to prevent that. So it's safe, it's necessary and it's essential. And so-

Tanya Domi:

So this mobilization really is really a wonderful thing.

Steve Romalewski:

Oh, it's amazing.

Tanya Domi:

Yeah, amazing. Yes.

Steve Romalewski:

It's tremendous.

Tanya Domi:

So, in my other hat that I wear at the Graduate Center as Director of Media Relations, I have the pleasure of seeing your digital interactive maps appear in newspapers across the country from Alaska to Wisconsin to New Mexico to Texas to Mississippi. There will be maps that give appropriate credit to the

CUNY mapping service at the graduate center CUNY. It's wonderful to see. Tell us, that's got to be an enormous amount of time that you create these digital interactive maps. And how does that go to and help establish a more accurate census count?

Steve Romalewski:

Sure. So against the backdrop of all of this education and outreach that the leadership conference and others have been spearheading throughout the country of why it's so important to fill out the census. We know that because of the way the Census Bureau does its counting that some areas it will be easy to count and other areas, other communities, other populations, as you went through that list, will be harder to count because what happens is the Census Bureau sends out a mailing to almost every household in the country. And this time for the 2020 census, you'll have an option of filling out the census questionnaire online or by phone or some places you'll get the actual paper questionnaire in the mail and you can fill it out and mail it back in. That's the best way of responding to the census and participating in the census and it's the best way the census gets its data.

Steve Romalewski:

If you don't do that, and we know that historically a lot of these populations and a lot of these communities, there are a lot of households that just don't fill out the form for whatever reason. And if that doesn't happen, that means the Census Bureau has to hire hundreds of thousands of people around the country because they still have to count everyone. So if you don't fill it out on your own, the census enumerators are going to come to your door and ask you to fill it out right there in person. That's hard. That's challenging. It's expensive and it's the greatest risk where people will be missed or counted inaccurately. So that's why for our online map at censushardtcountmaps2020.us.

Tanya Domi:

There we go, shout out. Shout out.

Steve Romalewski:

You can zoom into any part of the country and you can see in detail if the area that you're looking at had a lot of the households last time in 2010 that didn't fill out the form online and therefore had to be counted door to door, household to household. That's hard. And we also provide all sorts of information about is that particular community, are there a lot of households that don't have internet access, which is going to be an opportunity for 2020 but a challenge for people that if they don't have internet access and it's going to be harder for them.

Tanya Domi:

Especially in rural areas.

Steve Romalewski:

And then we provide all sorts of other population information about, is there a large share of people that don't speak English well in the community, a large share of immigrants, a large share of single parent households, a large share of people who are lower income.

Tanya Domi:

Or nobody's at home for long periods of time.

Steve Romalewski:

Yeah. So all of this ... and we also show the location of public libraries. Public libraries play a key role in the 2020 census because if you don't have internet access at home, you can go to your public library branch and they have free wifi. You can fill it out through them.

Tanya Domi:

So speaking of which, your website has a whole section on libraries and why they're important to the census count. And as a matter of fact, the American Library Association put out a press release and they linked to your interactive map.

Steve Romalewski:

Yeah, no, we worked very closely with them because they want to make sure libraries are playing that role locally and across the country. So we incorporated all of that information. And so the idea is that as a local group that's interested in the census and really wants to make sure your community is counted accurately and fairly, you could use our map to zoom in to your area and get all of this information so you can figure out where to prioritize your outreach and education, what the messaging should be based on who lives there and what the concerns might be as far as the population goes for a fair and accurate 2020 count. And you could use the information to then reach out to your local legislators. You could show them a map of their district and why it's so hard to count communities in their district. And then when the census starts sending out its mailings in March, we're going to be showing on the map the share of households that have filled out the form on a day to day basis.

Tanya Domi:

Oh, so you're going to be updating every day?

Steve Romalewski:

Yep. So the Census Bureau is going to publish that information every day. And so you'll be able to change around your strategy on a day to day basis to figure out-

Tanya Domi:

On where to go.

Steve Romalewski:

Right.

Tanya Domi:

On where to go.

Steve Romalewski:

So, if this neighborhood over here is doing pretty well, but this one over here isn't, you can focus on that one.

Tanya Domi:

So what we're seeing, speaking of which, this dovetails very perfectly into my question, my next comment, is that now we're seeing all of these cities, here in New York City, the mayor just announced the census launch and his team, they're going to go out into the neighborhoods. And this city of course has the highest number of immigrants probably of any city in the United States, where you have different neighborhoods and different groups throughout the city to make sure there's an accurate count. So we keep talking about why it's so important. But let's really get down to the brass tacks here. It's important because if you lose population, you could potentially lose a congressional seat. And I was actually at a speech on Sunday where Tish James was there, the Attorney General, who was speaking about the census, and she does not want to see New York state lose in reapportionment a seat, congressional seats.

Tanya Domi:

You could have a diminishment of political representation, but also an accurate count also will inform how much public services you can get from federal government money and apportionment in terms of the budget. So we're talking about schools, we're talking about streets, we're talking about hospitals, we're talking about these kinds of services that are part of day to day life in America. Is that right?

Steve Romalewski:

That's exactly right. And so, one way to think about it is you might live in a community and you might think, well, there are a lot of recent immigrants in my community and if they're not counted, whatever, it's not going to affect me. But that's not right. That's wrong. Because let's say there is a large share of kids under five that don't get counted in your community and it's mainly in the areas where a lot of recent immigrants live. So then next fall when all of those kids are going to go to school but they haven't been counted, the school is going to be basing how many classrooms they have and how many teachers they have on the official count. And so there aren't going to be enough classrooms, there aren't going to be enough teachers, and that's going to affect everyone. So it's really important for everyone.

Tanya Domi:

Really critical.

Steve Romalewski:

Yes. And it's the same idea for transportation. It's the same idea for healthcare. If there's not an accurate count of everyone in the community, everyone will get hurt. It's not just one group or another. Everyone is going to be impacted. And so that's why it's so critically important to fill out the questionnaire.

Tanya Domi:

So speaking of which, the member of Congress in this district is Carolyn Mahoney.

Steve Romalewski:

Maloney.

Tanya Domi:

Maloney rather, excuse me. And she just assumed the chairmanship chairwoman-ship of the House Oversight Community in the wake of Elijah Cummings' unfortunate passing, and she's been holding a

series of hearings about the census. As a matter of fact, yesterday the Census Bureau Director testified before her committee and, as I just said, Tish James and the mayor and the governor has been talking about this quite a bit. So this oversight function, as the count gets ready to be launched, I am sure that the hearings will yield to the thinking about this as an attempt by the committee to really get a handle on what they're thinking and how they're going to be counting and carrying out this constitutional function of the government.

Steve Romalewski:

And congressional leaders like Congresswoman Maloney have been really great in terms of holding the Census Bureau accountable. So not only providing enough funding finally for the Census Bureau that it needs to do its job, but also to make sure that the Bureau is going to have enough staff in the right places to make sure that there's extra resources for areas that, let's say don't have good wifi or good internet access or areas where there's a lot of hard to count populations, the congressional leadership has been using our maps to help figure out where they should be prioritizing their work and they've really been across the country highlighting the importance of the census. So it's really critical for not just the federal government, or even the state government or the city government to say, "You should be counted, you should participate in the census." It's really important for trusted messengers to get the word out.

Steve Romalewski:

People that you as a homeowner or a renter or a householder trust, and that could be your congressional representatives. It could be your city council member. It could be the local community group that you're involved with. It could be the bodega you go to on the corner, your school group, your Parent Teacher Association, all of those groups that you're going to listen to. It's really great that they're taking the cue from organizations at the federal level all the way down locally.

Tanya Domi:

To local.

Steve Romalewski:

And one thing to point out also is that CUNY itself is playing a very important role in the city effort.

Tanya Domi:

Well I was just going to ask you about that. So how are you working with the CUNY project, which is a really robust undertaking by the university? It's really quite admirable. One of our alums is running the project for the university and it seems to be a big mobilization by the chancellor and the leadership.

Steve Romalewski:

So CUNY has partnered with the city and the city's census office to help administer a lot of the funding that the mayor and the city council have talked about that local groups are going to be using to do their outreach and their education. CUNY has enlisted a core of students that will be helping these organizations. And the other big thing is that with the several hundred thousand students and on top of that faculty that are out there in the community, CUNY itself and all of its participants, they are the trusted messengers too. And so they can get the word out to their local areas. And a lot of students and

faculty live in areas that are hard to count and have at risk populations are being under counted. So it's really great for the university to be involved like that.

Tanya Domi:

And I understand, I've been told that it's like \$27 an hour, people going door to door. So a lot of people who are retired or if you're a student, if you could work part time, it's not a bad job.

Steve Romalewski:

Yes, it's true.

Tanya Domi:

Not a bad paying job. So my last question is, vast areas of the United States are rural. I mean vast areas. When you think about places like Alaska, Montana, Idaho, even in Michigan, upper peninsula in Michigan is, I can't even describe it. I mean, I went to school in Michigan. You could drive for 30, 40, 50 miles and not see a gas station. It's pretty desolate almost. And you think about Appalachia in southeastern Ohio, you get down into Kentucky and Tennessee. I mean it just is really formidable. What has the Census Bureau done, if you're aware, how has it adjusted for counting these rural communities?

Steve Romalewski:

Well, everyone counts, whether it's a rural community or a big city, and the Census Bureau has regional offices around the country that are working closely with organizations that represent a lot of these rural areas. And the Census Bureau, they've tailored their outreach strategy. So in a lot of places where let's say the street addresses aren't traditional street addresses or it's hard to get mail to places, they're going to be hand delivering the census packets and that will include the paper questionnaire. So if you don't have internet access, you can just fill out the paper questionnaire and mail it back.

Tanya Domi:

Yeah, like people who are on reservations, Native Americans as an example.

Steve Romalewski:

And the Bureau is working really closely with organizations who are advocates for these areas. So American Indian groups and groups representing farmers in rural areas and the like. So they really developed a lot of these partnerships that again, are just critical to getting the word out.

Tanya Domi:

Well, Steve Romalewski, thank you so much for coming on. This is a really important time. People have to be ready to fill out their forms and mail them in. We will have you come back later in the count.

Steve Romalewski:

Sure. Happy to be here. Thanks so much.

Tanya Domi:

Thanks for tuning in to the Thought Project and thanks to our guest, Steve Romalewski, Director of the CUNY mapping service, a project of the Center for Urban Research at the Graduate Center CUNY. The

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Thought Project is brought to you with production engineering and technical assistance by Kevin Wolf of CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.