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Interview with Tom Louis - New Chief Scientist at the Census Bureau

Tom Louis



[Tom Louis](#) is a professor of Biostatistics at Johns Hopkins and will be joining the Census Bureau through an interagency personnel agreement as the new associate director for research and methodology and chief scientist. Tom has an impressive history of accomplishment in developing statistical methods for everything from environmental science to genomics. We talked to Tom about his new role at the Census, how it relates to his impressive research career, and how young statisticians can get involved in the statistical work at the Census.

SS: How did you end up being invited to lead the research branch of the Census?

TL: Last winter, then-director Robert Groves (now Provost at Georgetown University) asked if I would be interested in the possibility of becoming the next Associate Director of Research and Methodology (R&M) and Chief Scientist, succeeding Rod Little (Professor of Biostatistics at the University of Michigan) in these roles. I expressed interest and after several discussions with Bob and Rod, decided that if offered, I would accept. It was offered and I did accept.

As background, components of my research, especially Bayesian methods, is Census-relevant. Furthermore, during my time as a member of the National Academies Committee on National Statistics I served on the panel that recommended improvements in small area income and poverty estimates, chaired the panel that evaluated methods for allocating federal and state program funds by formula, and chaired a workshop on facilitating innovation in the Federal statistical system.

Rod and I noted that it's interesting and possibly not coincidental that with my appointment the first two associate directors are both former chairs of Biostatistics departments. It is the case that R&D's mission is quite similar to that of a Biostatistics department; methods and collaborative research, consultation and education. And, there are many statisticians at the Census Bureau who are not in the R&D directorship, a sociology quite similar to that in a School of Public Health or a Medical campus.

SS: What made you interested in taking on this major new responsibility?

TL: I became energized by the opportunity for national service, and excited by the scientific, administrative, and sociological responsibilities and challenges. I'll be engaged in hiring and staff development, and increasing the visibility of the bureau's pre- and post-doctoral programs. The position will provide the impetus to take a deep dive into finite-population statistical approaches, and contribute to the evolving understanding of the strengths and weakness of design-based, model-based and hybrid approaches to inference. That I could remain a Hopkins employee by working via an Interagency Personnel Agreement, sealed the deal. I will start in January 2013 and serve through 2015, and will continue to participate in some Hopkins-based activities.

In addition to activities within the Census Bureau, I'll be increasing connections among statisticians in other federal statistical agencies, have a role in relations with researchers funded through the NSF to conduct census-related research.

SS: What are the sorts of research projects the Census is involved in?

TL: The Census Bureau designs and conducts the decennial Census, the Current Population Survey, the American Community Survey, many, many other surveys for other Federal Statistical Agencies including the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and a quite extraordinary portfolio of others. Each identifies issues in design and analysis that merit attention, many entail "Big Data" and many require combining information from a variety of sources. I give a few examples, and encourage exploration of www.census.gov/research.

You can get a flavor of the types of research from the titles of the six current centers within R&M: The Center for Adaptive Design, The Center for Administrative Records Research and Acquisition, The Center for Disclosure Avoidance Research, The Center for Economic Studies, The Center for Statistical Research and Methodology and The Center for Survey Measurement. Projects include multi-mode survey approaches, stopping rules for household visits, methods of combining information from surveys and administrative records, provision of focused estimates while preserving identity protection, improved small area estimates of income and of limited english skills (used to trigger provision of election ballots in languages other than English), and continuing investigation of issues related to model-based and design-based inferences.

SS: Are those projects related to your research?

TL: Some are, some will be, some will never be. Small area estimation, hierarchical modeling with a Bayesian formalism, some aspects of adaptive design, some of combining evidence from a variety of sources, and general statistical modeling are in my power zone. I look forward to getting involved in these and contributing to other projects.

SS: How does research performed at the Census help the American

Public?

TL: Research innovations enable the bureau to produce more timely and accurate information at lower cost, improve validity (for example, new approaches have at least maintained respondent participation in surveys), enhancing the reputation of the the Census Bureau as a trusted source of information. Estimates developed by Census are used to allocate billions of dollars in school aid, and the provide key planning information for businesses and governments.

SS: How can young statisticians get more involved in government statistical research?

TL: The first step is to become aware of the wide variety of activities and their high impact. Visiting the Census website and those of other federal and state agencies, and the Committee on National Statistics (<http://sites.nationalacademies.org/DBASSE/CNSTAT/>) and the National Institute of Statistical Sciences (<http://www.niss.org/>) is a good start. Make contact with researchers at the JSM and other meetings and be on the lookout for pre- and post-doctoral positions at Census and other federal agencies.

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November 08, 2012 - Author: rafalab

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[Some academic thoughts on the poll aggregators](#)

The night of the presidential elections I wrote a [post](#) celebrating the victory of data over punditry. I was motivated by the personal attacks made against Nate Silver by pundits that do not understand Statistics. The post generated a little bit of (justified) [nerdrage](#) (see comment section). So here I clarify a couple of things not as a member of Nate Silver's fan club (my [mancrush](#) started with [PECOTA](#) not fivethirtyeight) but as an applied statistician.

The main reason [fivethirtyeight](#) predicts election results so well is mainly due to the idea of averaging polls. This idea was around way before fivethirtyeight started. In fact, it's a version of [meta-analysis](#) which has been around for