Information about the American Community Survey

For decades, the Census Bureau has used two questionnaires to collect data for the decennial census:

1. A "short form" that is sent to 100 percent of American households for basic demographic information; and,
2. A "long form" that obtains the basic demographic information plus more detailed housing and socioeconomic information from a 17 percent sample of households.

The source of detailed information about American households—their income, education, employment status, disability, etc., at the state, county, city, and census tract level—is from the decennial census long form questionnaire.

Beginning in 2003 and every year thereafter, the Census Bureau is conducting a large national sample survey of households, called the American Community Survey (ACS). The Census Bureau intends to use the ACS to replace the "long form" in the 2010 census. This will have a tremendous impact on policy making, local government planning, and federal and state program evaluation. *Without understanding the true meaning of the ACS and its limitations, data users may be mislead in their analysis, evaluations, and interpretations of specific planning and policy issues.*

ACS data are tabulated and packaged in a very similar fashion as the decennial long form data. However, users must realize that the ACS data are NOT equal to the decennial long form data. There are significant and fundamental differences in the survey design and data collection definitions that affect the accuracy and comparability of ACS data across all levels of geography.

1. ACS *only provides shares and percentages. It provides no absolute values.* The numbers provided in the tabulations have an associated "range of sampling error." The actual error is felt to be considerably larger than presented. The error values presented in the tabulations only represent sampling error.

2. *The ACS samples are smaller than the long-form samples.*

3. *The ACS continuous sampling requires an on-going and less accurate update of the sampling universe*. U.S. Postal Service address files are used in combination with supplemental address lists and field work. ACS field work is minimal compared to the 100 percent field address verification in the decennial census.

4. *The ACS sample data are inflated with population and housing estimates.* These estimates contain substantial error and this error is not included in the "margin of error" provided by the Bureau. In contrast, the long form data have been collected at the time of the decennial census and inflated with actual census counts.

5. *The ACS interviews people who live in their residence for two months or more.* The decennial census enumerates people as residents of where they live most of the year. Thus, in each geographical location, the ACS includes part-time people who have another residence in another location where they usually live. The socioeconomic characteristics of these seasonal people included in the ACS may differ from those in the area where they are counted. Household size and occupancy rates also change with the different resident definition.

6. *The ACS collects information on persons living in households*. The decennial census collects data for household population and people living in nursing homes, dormitories, and other types of group living facilities.

7. *The ACS will eventually include persons in group facilities*. However, due to the inclusion of short-term care facilities, the group living persons interviewed will have marked duplication with the household population interviewed.

ACS data items may bear the same names as in the decennial census, but they are defined and collected differently. The New York State Data Center has provided a comprehensive list of the major differences between ACS and the census Long form and the impacts.

There have been many legitimate questions raised since Census Bureau started the effort to fully implement ACS.

- Will rural and other "small areas" have enough accuracy to be of any use?
- How do you deal with three and five year averages, etc.?

In all cases, published ACS tables will be based on smaller samples than similar long form tables for the same area. For example, a long-form table covering a single census tract will be based on a 1-in-6 sample (approximately 255 households for an average tract). The comparable ACS table will be based on a 1-in-8 sample compiled over five years (approximately 192 households for an average tract).

The precision of the data will suffer because of the reduced sample size and reduced accuracy of the sampling universe. This is more likely to be at smaller geography and rural areas. The article on the Missouri State Data Center website has listed ten things that users should be aware before using ACS for their analysis.