



INTEGRATING USERS AND THE CENSUS BUREAU FOR THE FUTURE OF THE AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY

Constance F. Citro, *Director, CNSTAT*

ACS Conference – Washington, DC – May 13, 2015

First, Congratulations to the ACS on its 10th Anniversary !!



ACS has **clearly proven essential** for users

- Provides frequent, timely updates for a wide range of subject areas
- Critical for understanding composition and trends among the population and housing stock for the nation, states, and small geographic areas

ACS has **innovated** for relevance, accuracy, and to contain costs—e.g., Internet response, new content (e.g., health insurance coverage)

But, Neither Users nor Census Bureau Can Rest on Laurels



ACS (still) presents **data use challenges**—
wrestling with implications of large variances;
trying to compare estimates over time; coping
with difficult-to-use data access tools

ACS viability is **threatened**—by perceived/real
burden and costs that agitate Congress

Vital to **integrate** users into Census processes to
preserve and enhance ACS for the future

My Remarks Based on Work of Committee on National Statistics

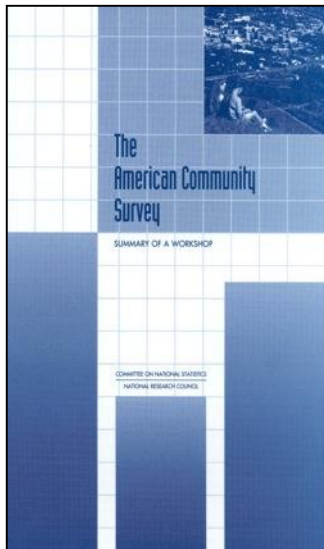


Established in 1972 at the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine to improve statistical methods and information on which public policy decisions are based

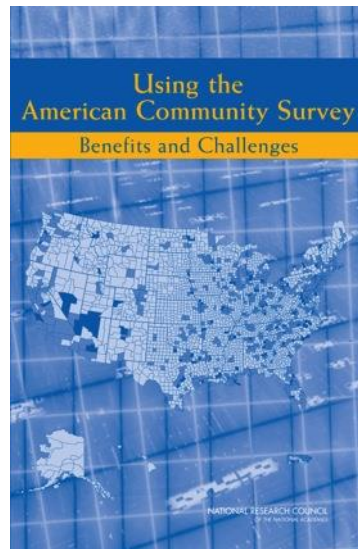
CNSTAT evaluates ongoing federal statistical programs to foster better measurement and add value for users

Census and ACS are big foci of work

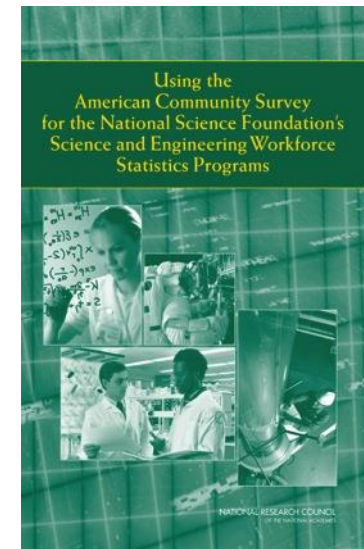
CNSTAT ACS Reports



2001 (CNSTAT's core sponsors): Workshop on technical issues

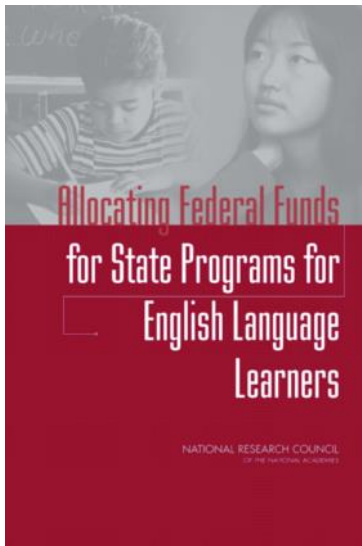


2007 (Census Bureau): Moving to ACS from "long form"

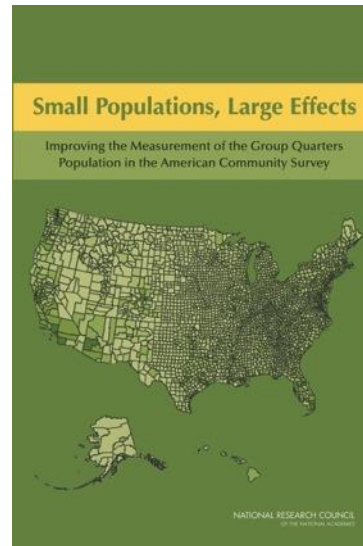


2008 (NSF/NCSES): ACS sample for S/E workforce

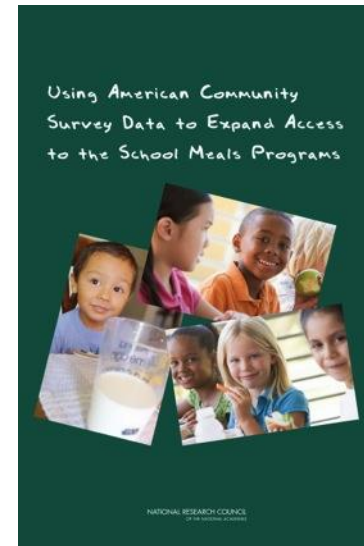
More CNSTAT ACS Reports



2011 (Dep't of Education):
Using ACS for
Limited-English
Programs in states

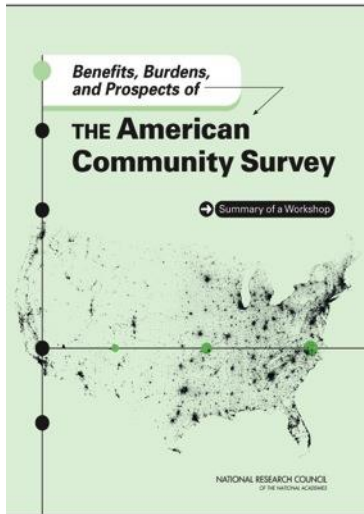


2012
(Census Bureau):
Improving group
quarters estimates
for small areas



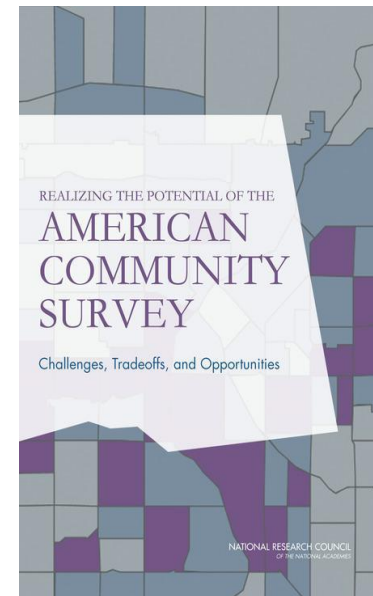
2012
(Food and Nutrition
Service, USDA): Using
ACS for school lunch
eligibility estimates

More CNSTAT ACS Reports



2015 (Census Bureau):
Panel on improving
usefulness of small-
area data and
process for
adding content

2013 (Census Bureau):
Workshop that showcased wide
range of **non-federal** users and uses;
Commonly voiced concern was
reliability for small areas



Integration of Users—Why?



“A statistical agency [exists to] provide information that is relevant to issues of public policy and useful to a broad range of public- and private-sector users. . . .To establish priorities for its programs, a statistical agency must . . . engage a broad spectrum of users.”

Committee on National Statistics, *Principles and Practices for a Federal Statistical Agency*, 5th ed., 2013, p. 2

Integration of Users— What and How?



I've become convinced that, to “engage” with users, statistical agencies need not only to reach out, but also to actually integrate users much more directly into key processes

- Content determination
- Data sources and estimation methods
- Data products and tools

Two-way street—users need to be realistic and supportive

Integration of Users— Content Determination



Recent content review useful but limited exercise

I agree with Joe that non-federal data users are as important as federal users given history of census—and now ACS—data use in the U.S.

Applaud Census Bureau for listening to user comments and retaining field-of-degree and marital history questions

Review also demonstrated that key threat to the ACS—perception/reality of respondent burden—is not easily addressed by trying to cut data items

Integration of Users— Data Sources & Methods



Applaud Census Bureau for proactively addressing burden in other ways, which may also improve cost-effectiveness

Multi-pronged approach outlined by Lisa—matrix sampling, simplifying questions, using government records and commercial data to substitute for questions—is essential to save ACS

Users need to be consulted but also supportive of feasible strategies, including those that might seem problematic (e.g., matrix sampling, modules)

Integration of Users— Data Products & Tools



ACS Data Users Group with its conference, webinars, online forum, et al. is great, and I hope will expand and flourish

But I argue for a much more intensive & extensive interaction of users in determining data products & tools than is common to the Census Bureau or other statistical agencies

Integration of Users— Data Products & Tools



Integration strategies to pursue include:

- IPAs for users to spend significant time at the Census Bureau (similar to long-standing arrangements for survey researchers and statisticians)
- Contracts to rotate users into the Census Bureau for short periods to kick the tires of new products and access tools
- Incremental development, testing, and release of data access tools, using prototypes/modules/alpha/beta versions, and iterating with users (big flaw of AFF2 was adding capabilities without user testing and not ensuring that capabilities in original AFF still worked)

Integration of Users— ACS Data Products



Optimal sets of period estimates—what to do about 3-year product abandonment?

- Understand decisions had to be made in a short time, but if users had been more integrated, Census Bureau might have learned importance of 3-year products, not only for areas between 20K-65K, but also for larger areas—indeed, 34% in user survey said decision would hurt their work
- Census Bureau should commit to working with users toward a solution, such as software for averaging 3 years of 1-year estimates for areas 20K+
- An APDU group is holding conversations with Bureau staff, and yesterday's lunch roundtable gave me good ideas to report back

Integration of Users— ACS Data Products



Optimal sets of tables

- Current set is overkill (e.g., 44% “B” & 29% “C” person tables were suppressed in 3-year products); Census should ask users to specify optimal tables (and eliminate quality suppression in 1-year products to facilitate aggregation)

Optimal geographies

- Could consider user-specified areas (e.g., “neighborhood tabulation areas” in cities) to include in 3-year product solution

Integration of Users— ACS Data Access Tools



Delighted to see words, such as alpha and beta testing before roll-out of data access tools, in Amy's CEDSCI presentation

Worried, however, that without full integration of users, data dissemination priorities won't be recognized or fully met

Integration of Users— ACS Data Access Tools



Clearly, a priority is user-friendly facility for aggregating small geographies and populations and generating MOEs—understand that Microdata Analysis System will be ready for user testing soon

Another priority is a functional AFF—other tools are useful, but need basic fact-finding capability (AFF development contractor should be required to involve users in serious way)

Be careful that different data streams (e.g., ACS and Economic Census) can be accessed separately, as well as linked

Integration of Users— ACS Data Access Tools



Don't get carried away with trendy tools, such as social media

“Federal Statistical Office's Reputation and Acceptance by Selected Target Groups” (Stirner , DESTATIS, Germany, 2015) found in an on-line survey:

- Journalists want telephone support and API
- Young academics want everything on-line plus detailed documentation; availability of data on smart phones a plus
- **No one** placed high priority on social media for getting/learning about data

Future of ACS Depends on User-Census Relationship



- Census has a duty, within cost constraints, to continually work toward ever more relevant, high-quality, usable ACS data
- To this end, Census must invest time & resources to seek out and **integrate** user input
- Users, in turn, have a duty to contribute to and support realistic solutions for optimizing ACS content, sources, data products & tools



I URGE CENSUS BUREAU & USERS TO GO FORWARD TOGETHER

Thank you!

Connie Citro

ccitro@nas.edu

CNSTAT reports available at www.nap.edu