

Dissemination of ACS Data: Looking Ahead—Discussion



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Both Presentations Are Excellent— Informative and Thought-Provoking

- A couple of comments off the top of my head:
 - ❖ On PUMS synthesizing, why not release 2- or 3-year PUMS, instead of 1-year/5-year? Not overlapping or knowing the interview date coupled with population mobility seems pretty protective. If synthesizing is done, then the FSRDC process needs to be improved *fast*.
 - ❖ The *data.census.gov* agile approach to updates is great, but the “send feedback” goes into a general FAQ site? Navigating geography to find detailed data for a city seems to be more difficult than it should be?
- Could offer more specifics, but my real concern is how decisions about specifics and the inevitable tradeoffs are made.

Focus on Census-ACS User Nexus

- Both presentations invite “input from users” — such is necessary but not sufficient to inform changes to ACS products and access.
- I have concrete suggestions for taking the relationship between the Census Bureau and users to the next level of *systematic, two-way interaction*. That relationship, in my experience going back over 50 years, is not yet there.
- I look forward to everyone’s reactions.

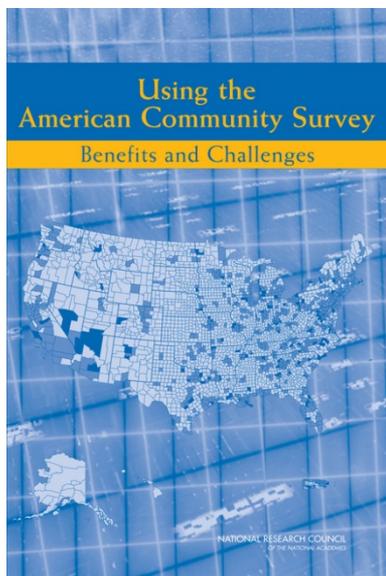
Fifty Years?

- 1970 was the first census to produce computerized data products on the same footing as traditional printed reports.
- ❖ I was there, landing my first “real” job in 1967 at the Census Bureau in the brand-new Data Access and Use Laboratory under Jack Beresford.
- ❖ There, and then at Data Use and Access Laboratories (DUALabs), our team developed software, documentation, training, et al. to help users take advantage of the richness of the census summary and PUMS files.

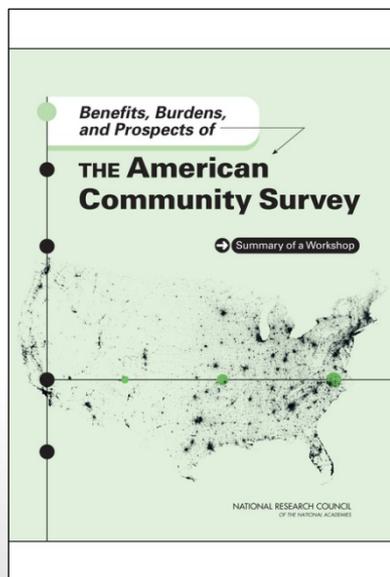
Fast Forward to the ACS

- Now, the ACS provides the richest data for small areas and population groups—and one of the largest communities of active data users.
- The Census-ACS user-nexus has strengthened in important ways since 2005:
 - ❖ This conference is a wonderful way for users and Census staff to share and learn. Kudos to the Bureau for its support, to Linda Jacobsen, PRB, and the ACS Data Users Group Steering Committee for pulling it off, and to all of you for your attention and energy.
 - ❖ And great job re Census outreach and activities of the Users Group (webinars, online user forum, sessions at professional meetings).

CNSTAT Contributions



2007—Comprehensive, technical primer on differences between new ACS and traditional census long-form sample. Focused on challenges in constructing and working with rolling-average estimates. *Recommended* tailored user guides (>*Handbooks*), outreach, education, *paths for systematic user feedback*, and dedicated ACS user staff at the Census Bureau.

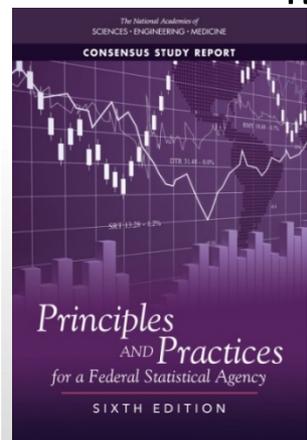


2013 (*on 2012 workshop*): First-of-kind wide canvass of *nonfederal* users and uses: regional/business economic development purposes, determining equity of social services (including enforcement of Voting Rights Act), and disaster response. Users were *ecstatic* about having the opportunity to present their uses and needs in the same room as Census staff.

CNSTAT again: *Principles & Practices for a Federal Statistical Agency*, 6th Ed., 2017

Four principles—

1. **RELEVANCE TO POLICY ISSUES**—A federal statistical agency must be in a position to provide *objective, accurate, and timely information* that is relevant to issues of public policy.
2. **CREDIBILITY AMONG DATA USERS**—A federal statistical agency must have credibility with those who use its data and information.
3. **TRUST AMONG DATA PROVIDERS**—A federal statistical agency must have the trust of those whose information it obtains.
4. **INDEPENDENCE FROM POLITICAL AND OTHER UNDUE EXTERNAL INFLUENCE**—A federal statistical agency must be independent from political and other undue external influence in developing, producing, and disseminating statistics.



Users are Fundamental

- Without data users, federal statistical agencies have no rationale to exist.
 - ❖ Of course, the Census Bureau and other federal statistical agencies know and appreciate this, BUT
 - ❖ Too often, statistical agencies interpret their relationship with users as show&tell/outreach rather than two-way interaction.
- Agency staff are:
 - ❖ Wonderful one-on-one—John Abowd and differential privacy staff have individually tutored many people, including me.
 - ❖ Also great in presenting at many venues—including this one.
- But, institutionalizing systematic, two-way, transparent interaction—*structured input, dialog, preliminary decision, [repeat], documentation of final decision*—has often seemed a step too far.

How Has the Census-ACS User Relationship Worked?

- I noted successes earlier, including:
 - ❖ ACS Data Users Group and these Conferences,
 - ❖ Users' Guides and other resources on the Web.
- Not-such successes include lack of structured two-way user input on ACS:
 - ❖ tables (forgetting 1990-2000 censuses, when APDU user groups provided real-time, focused, informed feedback to Census)—goal could be to streamline tables and thereby help privacy and efficiency,*
 - ❖ data access tools, including AFF and *data.census.gov*,
 - ❖ privacy protection techniques.

*I understand there is an ACS data products group but that it hasn't been asked to do much?

ACS Not Alone in Lacking Mechanisms for Two-Way User Interaction—WHY?

- I often hear from statistical agencies:
 - ❖ Users want the world and won't give up any data.
 - ❖ There are too many users and needs to track.
 - ❖ Users don't respond when asked for input via the *Federal Register!*
 - ❖ Our analysts know what users need (analysts are excellent, but they are inside, not outside).
 - ❖ When push comes to shove, our agency has to prioritize data collection/processing, particularly with falling response rates and tight budgets.
- Truth in all this, BUT, agencies need to step up to fulfill their mission, AND users need to proactively work with agencies to justify the agency investment in working with them.

Ways and Means to Step Up (1)

- Elevate the ACS user outreach/coordination staff.
 - ❖ Lead person should be as senior as possible, focused on the Census-ACS user nexus, and report to the ACS chief *and* the associate director for demographic programs (not sure where CEDSCI and the Chief Data Officer fit in).
- Give the ACS user lead (how about something like ‘user empowerment’ in the title) sizeable resources and staff.
 - ❖ Likely more resources than are allocated right now.
- Set a goal for the ACS user staff to work with the ACS Data Users Group to take it to the next level.
 - ❖ Priority: Establish focused user working groups to vet everything from data tables and other products to the web site and data access tools.

Ways and Means to Step Up (2)

- Allocate resources for two-way staff interaction via IPAs.
 - ❖ Send Census staff to ACS user organizations to learn about data uses, problems, and ideas at the source.
 - ❖ Bring in staff from user organizations to the Census Bureau to get an inside picture.
 - ❖ Set goals for, say, 4 such temporary assignments per year and specific issues for each to address.
- Make assignments (e.g., input on data quality documentation, subject-specific table content & format)—and establish *transparent process* for (online) user working groups.
- Require IT access systems contractors to set up user advisory groups to perform continuous assessment.
- Do all this in collaboration with the ACS Data Users Group Steering Committee.

Why Push for a Next Level for the Census-ACS User Nexus?

- New privacy protection techniques and a brand-new data platform are existential developments, which offer opportunities but—certainly initially—challenges for users and uses of the ACS.
 - ❖ Investing in transparent, systematic, two-way interactions can best ensure that new privacy protection techniques and the new platform are implemented with full consideration of alternatives and user needs.
 - ❖ User buy-in enables the Census Bureau to fulfill its fundamental mission as a federal statistical agency and have the full support of the user community—critical in these perilous times.

What Do *You* Think of My Assessment and Suggestions?

- I would love to hear—from users and Census:
 - ❖ Whether my arguments resonate (or not)
 - ❖ More suggestions for proactive, two-way Census-ACS user relationships—not only what Census, but also what users can/should do to step up
- I thank the presenters again for a great job of informing ACS users of the big changes that are coming. I'm sure they will get detailed feedback from many in this room!

Thanks for this opportunity— I look forward to the discussion

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CNSTAT Website <http://www.nationalacademies.org/cnstat>

CNSTAT reports on the ACS are available from
the National Academies Press:
<http://www.nap.edu>

