

10-1-2013

The American Community Survey: Resources for the Occasional Data User

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Recommended Citation

Zimmerman, J. N. (2013). The American Community Survey: Resources for the Occasional Data User. *The Journal of Extension*, 51(5), Article 31. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol51/iss5/31>

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The American Community Survey: Resources for the Occasional Data User

Abstract

The American Community Survey provides detailed demographic data on local communities and populations. While the American Community Survey provides data useful for Extension, the data are more complicated, users must understand data reliability, and many resources are designed to help the regular, not the occasional, user. The Kentucky: By The Numbers program focuses on increasing the skills and abilities of Extension audiences to access and use secondary data. As part of this larger focus, a series of easy-to-read and easy-to-reference resources have been developed to assist the occasional user to effectively and accurately use data from the American Community Survey.

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Today, local communities are faced with addressing ever-complex issues and needs. To be able to effectively respond to and participate in local programming and decision-making processes, it is important that Extension agents and leaders have the ability to reliably use locally relevant secondary data.

Demographic data have a wide array of uses in Extension (Curtis, Veroff, Rizzo, & Beaudoin 2012a; Preston 1982). In addition to programming, data are used in local community planning, developing plans of work, and grant proposals. Data are also used in Extension administration activities, including program reviews, determining parity, and establishing funding priorities.

While the needs for locally relevant data have grown, the landscape for public access and use of secondary data has become increasingly complex. An important part of that data landscape changed when the American Community Survey replaced the Decennial Census as the main source for comprehensive detailed data on the demographic and other characteristics for counties and local communities.

The American Community Survey

Even though the Decennial Census (conducted every 10 years) still tells us "how many" people there are in the U.S., detailed data on the population now comes from the American Community Survey. The distinction between the two data sources, as the Census Bureau puts it, is that the American

Community Survey "shows *how* people live" (emphasis original) (U.S. Census Bureau 2013). As a result, the American Community Survey provides detailed estimates on characteristics such as educational attainment, families and youth, housing, income, and other characteristics, including English speaking ability.

Despite their usefulness and detail, estimates from the American Community Survey are more complicated than data that used to come from the Decennial Census Long Form (Curtis, Veroff, Rizzo, & Beaudoin, 2012b; U.S. Census Bureau 2008). For example, the American Community Survey not only provides 1-year, 3-year, and 5-year estimates, but each estimate has its own measure of reliability. This means that in order to accurately use and avoid misinterpreting their local data, Extension agents and local communities not only need to understand the differences between the types of estimates, they also need a basic understanding of data reliability.

To help data users understand and accurately use estimates from the American Community Survey, the Census Bureau produced a series of publications (called the Compass Series). These publications are lengthy but comprehensive discussions designed for a variety of audiences (including media users, rural users, etc.) (e.g., U.S. Census Bureau 2008). In addressing the wide array of issues that data users could encounter, these publications contain detailed information including statistical formulas, sampling theory, and assistance with measures of reliability.

However, while useful for regular users of the American Community Survey, the Compass Series is not well suited for users who draw on the data on an occasional or as-needed basis.

Responding to the Challenge

To assist Extension agents and local audiences in accurately using county and local data from the American Community Survey, a series of resources were developed as part of the Kentucky: By The Numbers program.

The Kentucky: By The Numbers program was developed with two overarching goals: (1) to enhance locally based skills and tools for navigating the increasingly complex landscape of secondary data and (2) to develop skills needed so that demographic and other secondary data can be translated into information for informing locally based decisions.

To address the need for easy-to-use and easy-to-reference materials designed for the occasional user, brief (4-pages maximum) resources were developed that explicitly address basic issues faced in accurately using American Community Survey data in local planning, programming, and decision-making. The resources use a question/answer format and graphics so that they are easy to follow and reference, and are available on the Kentucky: By The Numbers website <<http://www.ca.uky.edu/snarl/>>.

Even though examples are drawn from Kentucky, the brief publications can be used by occasional users of the American Community Survey regardless of the state in which they are located.

"[New Kid in Town...](#)" provides a basic overview of the American Community Survey, some of the changes associated with it, as well as what those changes mean for using data locally. Included are answers to questions such as: how estimates from the American Community Survey are different;

what topics are available; and why some data may not be available.

"[And Now for the Grain of Salt...](#)" is an overview of what is meant by margin of error and what it means for assessing the reliability of estimates from the American Community Survey. In this publication, readers can find answers to questions such as why margins of error are important, what is a margin of error, and when is a margin of error too big for the estimate to be useful.

"[More than the Top 10...](#)" provides answers to commonly asked questions about the American Community Survey as well as information on filling out the questionnaire. This is useful because Extension not only uses data from the American Community Survey, but can also face questions from residents who receive the questionnaire.

"[A Picture is Worth...](#)" provides practical help and step-by-step instructions on how to display margins of error in charts and graphs. With instructions designed for both newer and older computer programs, readers can learn how to show estimates' margins of error using a popular spreadsheet program. Visually displaying a margin of error can be particularly important if estimates with large margins of error are utilized in local decision-making.

Conclusion

With access to resources designed for the occasional user, Extension agents and audiences can be better prepared to use the American Community Survey's detailed demographic data in activities such as programming, planning, evaluation, or grant proposals. With this assistance, Extension agents and audiences can be assured of accurately interpreting data for their programs and communities. In addition, having access to easy-to-reference materials that address the basic questions on the American Community Survey, Extension professionals can also be a better resource for their state and for their communities.

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