Making the Case for Demographic Data in Extension Programming

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Recommended Citation

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Abstract: *Understanding one's community is essential for effective Extension programming across all program areas. The use of current and reliable demographic data is crucial for Extension to develop effective education and programming to track change and to uncover hidden community characteristics. We discuss what demographic data are, present examples of programming applications using demographic data and their importance for communities, and detail how to access demographic data.*

Importance of Demographic Data for Extension Programming

In his article on the utility of census data in decision-making, Preston (1982:6) stated:

> A critical issue for Extension is the extent to which lay program leaders and agents can and should anticipate and respond to population growth, or decline, and its resultant changes. The ability and willingness to anticipate changing local conditions and needs is imperative to the future of Extension.

This assertion applies to Extension programming nearly 30 years later. However, demographic data tells us more about the populations we serve than their size and whether they are growing or declining. These data also describe the characteristics of a population or community in terms of:

- Basic features – age, gender, race/ethnicity

- Social features – households/families, education, marital status

- Economic features – income, poverty, employment, occupation

- Housing features – tenure, type, value

Population characteristics, including age, sex, type of household, race/ethnicity, education, income, and employment, are central to the planning and delivery of most Extension programs. Demographic data help Extension understand communities and tailor or target effective education and programming to track change and allow comparisons (similarities or differences) and to uncover hidden characteristics, assets, or deficits. In one specific application, demographic data help guide programming and education with diverse communities and audiences. Further, data related to race and ethnicity can help set goals for participation and outcomes, determine the need for translation or interpretation for non-English speakers, and design culturally responsive programming.

Demographic data also help with evaluations or assessments that provide the basis for planning and decision-making. Examples include grant writing and other "making the case" evaluations. Additionally, demographic data help contextualize people in places of any size (nation to neighborhood) and can provide a framework for community input and participation. Practice has shown that community residents respond readily to data that describe the places they live and are willing to contribute local knowledge that helps contextualize, explain, and make linkages between the data and what is happening in their community.

Programming Applications

New approaches to Extension education are requiring Extension educators to adopt new educational strategies such as strategic planning education and facilitation. At the University of Wisconsin-Extension, some county-based community development educators are facilitating strategic planning and community visioning efforts for entire communities. Such projects rely heavily on reliable data to reflect changing trends among populations and sub-populations within and across jurisdictions, and to compare communities over time. The more current and reliable the data, the more confident community leaders and planning participants can feel about the plans constructed using demographic data. The fiscal and political implications for this type of application are enormous.

Demographic data often provide the rationale behind major municipal resource applications and does so across a broad array of service and infrastructure challenges and needs ranging from police and fire services, to planning for new and costly infrastructure such as libraries, community centers, roads, street and sewer improvements, business parks, and civic campuses. Demographic data also support planning activities focusing on elective services such as youth services, senior services, and a wide array of other social services. Moreover, this type of planning as community change education extends to non-profit organizations and other governmental agencies that, together or separately, tap into local Extension educators for planning assistance around issues related to the services they provide. Again, the currency and relevance of planning and trend data are fundamental for making targeted, accurate service provisions and collaboration decisions.

Finally, the more current the demographic data are, the more useful they are for officials who need to respond confidently to demographic changes that have significant local budgetary and even political impacts. For example, some communities grow more quickly than others, possibly much more quickly. Dane County, Wisconsin and a number of jurisdictions within Dane County are growing at some of the fastest rates in the state. These communities are faced with change-related, planning-related issues more consistently and more frequently than slower changing communities. Therefore, it is important for planners and local officials working within and on behalf of such communities to have access to data that are as current and as accurate as possible.

This is especially true in a funding environment that is necessarily more frugal and politically charged than it has been for perhaps decades. In this kind of environment, officials want to be

able to make a solid case why service and infrastructure improvements may need to be updated or changed in some way. Data that are both current and reliable are critically important for community leaders, decision makers, and citizens as they weigh tax issues and as local funding tools such as local referenda bring voters into the process of community change.

Accessing Demographic Data

One of the best places to access demographic data for all communities in the United States is through the American FactFinder on-line tool <http://factfinder.census.gov>. It is intended to be a one-stop portal for data from many of the Census Bureau's surveys and data programs. For no charge, users can access data from the American Community Survey as well as the 1990 Census, 2000 Census, 2010 Census, population estimates, and the Economic Census. Users can generate basic community profiles or download specific data for more detailed analyses and reporting.

Through the American FactFinder, users can link to technical documentation for each data source that should be reviewed because not all data sources are collected in the same way. One of the most dramatic changes in U.S. demographic data is the implementation of the American Community Survey (ACS). Today, and moving forward, most of the key demographic features of interest to Extension programmers are available through the ACS and not the 2010 Census. Details on the difference between the ACS and decennial census data and the practices necessary for effective and accurate use are discussed in Curtis, Veroff, Rizzo, and Beaudoin (2011).

References

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