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The New Census Data

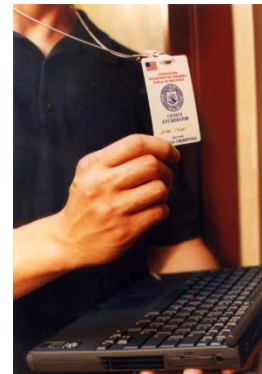
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Local planners should be aware of changes that have occurred with how census data is being collected and reported.

The decennial census is required due to the provision of Article I Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution, which mandates “enumeration” of persons within the country in order to permit apportionment of the U.S. House of Representatives. Since 1790, the decennial census has been conducted in every year that ends in zero. Since almost the beginning, the federal government has taken the opportunity while collecting the “enumeration” data to collect other information about the people of this country as well.

From 1940 to 2000, the census data was collected in two parts. In April of the years ending in zero, most of the households in the country received the “short form,” a questionnaire listing basic questions about the composition of the household, each member’s age and relationship to the head of household, etc. At the same time, approximately one in seven households received a “long form,” which in addition to the short form questions was an inquiry about income, education, housing, and other characteristics. The short form data was reported as the “100 percent count data.” The results of the long form were used to generate estimates regarding these characteristics of the population as a whole and reported as “sample count data.” These represented snapshots of the country and its various components in April of the census year.



This approach changed after the 2000 census. While the 100 percent count data was collected in 2010 as usual, starting in 2005, the Bureau of the Census began collecting the long form data every year, throughout the year, sampling a very small portion of the population. This program is known as the American Community Survey (ACS). For communities with populations of more than 65,000 people, this small sample was still statistically valid enough to be used to provide sample count data, with the added advantage that it could be reported annually. For communities with a population between 20,000 and 65,000, it is necessary to collect three years-worth of data before a statistically valid sample can be compiled. This data is then averaged over that three-year period. For communities under 20,000 the same process is followed, but a five year sample is collected.

The data is different in several ways from the old sample count data:

- Rather than being a snapshot collected in April of each year, the data is an average of information collected during 12 months in the course of the one-year data to 60 months in the case of the 5-year data.
- Rather than being reported once every 10 years, the data will be reported every year (the three- and five-year average data will “roll” one year so the three-year average data reported in 2009 was for 2006-2008, and the data reported in 2010 was for 2007-2009).
- While the previous sample count data also included a margin of error for each reported piece of data that information was only found in the background material on the census data. The ACS data includes the margin of error information in front of the report tables.

One point of caution in using the new ACS data is to make sure to compare “apples to apples.” Do not try and compare five-year average data from one community with three-year average data from another. All communities that are part of the one-year data also have data reported in the three-year average, and both one- and three-year communities are included in the five-year average report to allow comparisons of equivalent sample data.

A guidebook on using the ACS data is available at:

<http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Downloads/handbooks/ACSGeneralHandbook.pdf>

For a guide to the 2010 decennial census describing the data collected and how it is being reported:

<http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/doc/sf1.pdf>

Other helpful sites for information include:

Site	Address
Bureau of the Census	www.census.gov
Census of Population and Housing (PDFs 1790-2000)	www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial
Population Estimates	www.census.gov/popest/estbygeo.html
Local Area Unemployment Statistics	www.bls.gov/lau/#tables
The Census of Agriculture	www.agcensus.usda.gov
American Planning Association 2010 Census Blog	www.planning.org/census/

For attendees of the 2011 Planning Michigan Conference, additional information about the changes in the 2010 Census and how to use and not use the data was presented in the session titled **Making Sense of the Census** with Sarah Traxler, AICP, from McKenna Associates and Joshua Long from Data Driven Detroit. Their handout outlining additional resources and other useful information is available to conference attendees on the MAP website.



Author Doug Piggott, AICP, PCP, has more than 30 years of experience in the planning profession. He joined ROWE in 1990 and was soon named an associate (owner). Responsibilities include assisting cities, villages, townships, and counties in preparing land use plans; zoning ordinances and maps; and providing a variety of other essential land use services.