

The American Community Survey: *What it Means for County Data*

March 2010

Introduction

2010 is a “Census year,” the point at which the government conducts its decennial count of population and housing units. However, this census year will be significantly different than any previous decennial census year – this year there will be no long form, only the short form.

Historically, there have been two parts to the decennial Census. The required count of all household and housing units in the United States is collected from all households on the “short form.” This is the data that forms the official count of U.S. population is used for Congressional apportionment. In the past, the Census Bureau has also conducted a “long form,” in which a sample of the population was asked questions regarding detailed socio-economic characteristics. In 2010, there will be no long form, only the short form. Taking the place of the long form is the American Community Survey, an ongoing survey of household taken throughout the decade, and therefore with more up to date data about communities.

The purpose of this brief is to explain the process of data released from the American Community Survey, and discuss implications to analyzing data for rural counties.

What is the American Community Survey?

As mentioned, the American Community Survey is an ongoing survey taken throughout the decade of a sample of households. Full implementation of the American Community Survey began in 2005. Households are surveyed throughout the year. Instead of releasing the detailed information about communities once every ten years, data will be released on an annual basis. The decennial Census short form, and the inter-census population estimates are still the official counts of population, but the ACS provide estimates of demographic, housing, social, and economic characteristics for states, cities and counties.

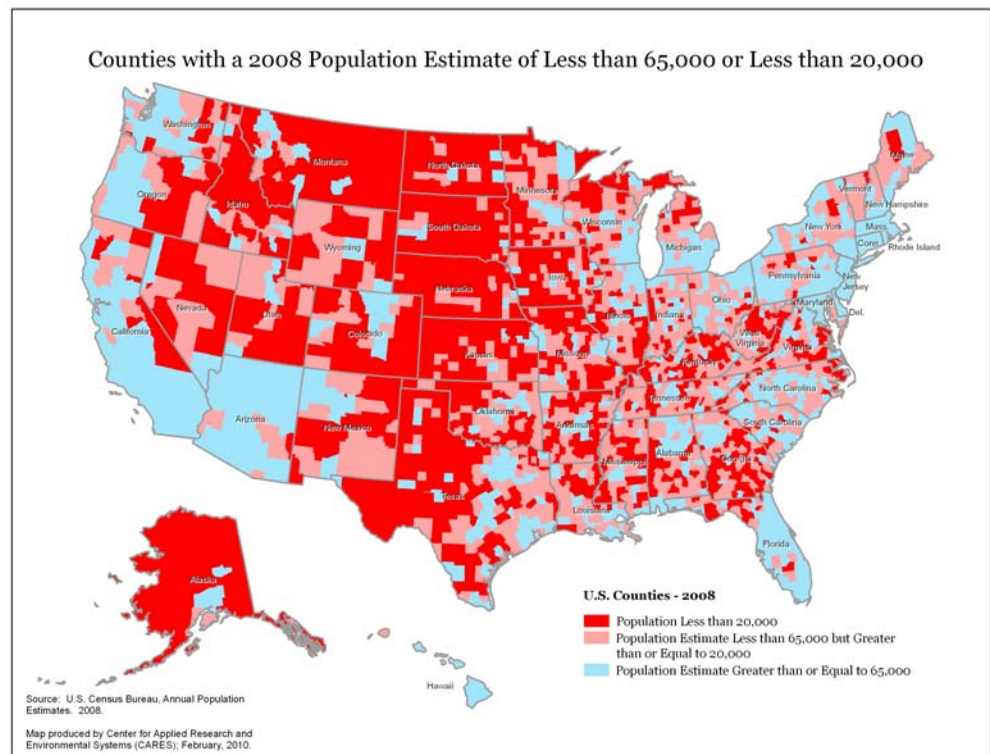
Truly, this sounds like a gold mine for users of data. Instead of waiting 10 years for characteristics of places across the country, data will be available throughout the decade. However, there is a catch. The catch is that not all areas will have annual data estimates to be released every year. For smaller population geographies, in order to achieve a large enough sample size, data must be collected over a number of years in order to provide statistically sound estimates. Those estimates will be released as a rolling three- or five-year average.

Data through the ACS is tabulated at a variety of geographic levels, from states down to Census block groups. Data for states and Congressional Districts are released every year. Data for Metropolitan areas, micropolitan areas, counties, urban areas, school districts, cities/towns, and American Indian areas are released based on their population size. For areas with a population of 65,000 or more, data is released annually. For areas with populations between 20,000 and 64,999, data is released as a three year average. For smaller areas (population less than 20,000), only five-year estimates will be available. For small geographies (zip code areas, census tracts, and census block groups), only five year estimates will be available, regardless of population size.

The ACS and County Data

Counties are often used as the unit of analysis of trends and conditions in rural America. Indeed, the use of county geography poses many problems with current structures of data. Large counties, especially in the West, see an averaging out of data across a vast and diverse space. The availability of county data through the American Community Survey now poses the problem of an averaging of data over time as well as space.

Of 3,141 counties in the U.S., only 25% have populations of 65,000 or more and will receive annual data released by the American Community Survey. Another third of counties receive data that is averaged over three years, leaving over 40% of counties with only five year data estimates from the ACS. The first such estimates for these counties will be released sometime this year. The distribution of these counties is shown in the following map. Only counties in blue will receive estimates based on annual data.



The implications of this data structure are significant. Counties that receive annual data estimates will be able to track indicators such as income, poverty, demographic changes, and social characteristics annually. The counties shaded in red will look at data that is averaged over three or five years, and therefore peaks and troughs of the various indicators will be smoothed out by the averaging. It will be difficult, if not impossible, to determine exactly when the recession peaked or the recovery began, in these areas.

Some Examples: Single Year and 3-Year Estimates

Some examples, below, illustrate the differences in poverty rate estimates between the single year estimates and the three-year average estimates for several counties in which both are available. Other than being nonmetropolitan, no selection criteria were applied to these counties.

County Name, State Name	ACS Estimate, 2006	ACS Estimate, 2007	ACS Estimate, 2008	ACS Estimate, 2006-2008
Navajo County, Arizona	23.3 (+/- 4.2)	22.8 (+/- 3.9)	21.1 (+/- 4.3)	22.4 (+/- 2.3)
Citrus County, Florida	10.6 (+/- 2.7)	11.8 (+/- 2.6)	18.3 (+/- 3.5)	13.4 (+/- 1.7)
Indiana County, Pennsylvania	16.0 (+/- 2.2)	20.8 (+/- 3.4)	16.1 (+/- 2.2)	17.9 (+/- 1.6)
Grant County, Washington	21.7 (+/- 3.8)	17.4 (+/- 3.3)	15.7 (+/- 3.6)	18.7 (+/- 2.8)
Isabella County, Michigan	22.7 (+/- 2.5)	24.7 (+/- 2.6)	32.0 (+/- 3.6)	27.3 (+/- 1.9)

Cautions (and Realities) to the American Community Survey

While the ACS expressly cautions against comparing single year to multi-year estimates, and stresses importance of confidence intervals, it is likely that multiple data points will be utilized and compared, without regard to confidence intervals. Policy targeting language rarely makes direct reference to the data source that should be employed, and it is likely that some geographies may pick and choose data from the multi year and single year estimates in order to meet criteria for programs. This puts the rural counties at a disadvantage for two reasons. First, most rural counties have fewer data points to “choose” from, and single year estimates are not available for most counties. In fact, for the majority of rural counties, five year estimates will be the only option. Large urban counties, on the other hand, will have single year, three year, and five year estimates available.

Second, since most rural counties have only data that has been averaged over a three or five year period, this will iron out peaks or dips in major indicators, which could be the very indicators targeted in policy language. This data averaging may make rural areas appear to be faring differently (better or worse) than in reality.