

Response to Federal Register Notice on ACS Products

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This notice asks only very general questions about the current ACS products, and how they should be modified for the delivery of 3-year data products. Of necessity, my response is somewhat more specific.

- **Detailed Tables**

As outlined in the enclosed paper, based on a presentation made last January at the Applied Demography Conference, I have identified a variety of problems with the detailed tables. It's difficult to summarize, but perhaps the most overriding problem is that they appear to have been designed for to be used for large population areas, such as the nation as a whole, states, and metropolitan areas. When working with small geographic areas, such as those under 100,000 in the one-year products, the tables are subject to a great deal of suppression which often makes them unusable.

In addition, most users want one-way (frequencies) or two-way tables *before* they are looking for more complex cross-tabulations. For example, a simple unemployment rate, or unemployment by sex, is needed far more often than the rates for narrow, specific, age groups.

In my opinion, the best solution to this problem would be to replace all of the detailed tables with a new set of tables based on 2000 Summary File 3. SF3 would need some modifications, including but not limited to:

- Inclusion of some SF1 tables for short-form items.
- New tables for new ACS data items, such as health insurance.
- A change to tables with data for children in households so that they report on *all* children, not "own" children.
- Inclusion of the special tables created for CTPP users.

In the main, however, SF3 provides an excellent model. Further, the programming required to get from the basic file to the summary file likely already exists. This change could be made with minimum effort, and would greatly benefit a large variety of users.

- **Summary File.** This isn't on your chart of proposed data products, but it should be. The SF, while it should be based on SF3, might be better organized if it had separate records for race/ethnic groups rather than simple iterated tables (A-H, or whatever). The data would be much easier to use in AFF if they were organized along the lines of 2000 SF2/4, where the desired records can be selected and looked at *side by side* in the output. That's what most users want to do.

- **Data Profiles**

The ACS community profiles are very difficult to use because they take up so many pages. The analogous 2000 profiles were much more compact. I recognize that the problem lies in the necessity to provide margins of error. However, I believe the profile layout can be redesigned to be more useful. It would also be very helpful if AFF could produce more than one profile at a time. It is often desirable to compare a smaller area to a larger area, such as a city to its county and/or its state. The only way for users to do this now is to download each profile separately, and then to cut and paste Excel columns. This is beyond the capability of many of the users for whom the profiles are intended, and is fraught with error.

- **Narrative Profiles**

Looking at AFF, I see that the narrative profiles are improved by delivering only whole percentage figures (no decimals). I also see some grammatical problems (e.g. "percent" referred to as singular). Also, I note that they *exclude* mention of margins of error, but do suppress certain data items say that to release them would violate confidentiality. In fact, releasing them probably makes no sense because the margins of error are too high.

I think it's important to know how much these profiles are actually used; are they worth the time and effort to create them?

- **Subject Tables**

I just went to AFF to look at subject tables for Southfield, MI. This happens to be my home community, and, at about 70,800 population, is near the bottom population limit for one year data. About half the subject tables are "NA"—something that would surely frustrate a "lay" user hoping to get the data easily. Of course, nothing on that screen tells the user *why* they are suppressed.

Again: how much are these tables used, and are they worth the effort to produce them? If the appropriate simple tables were available in the detailed tables data set, as they would be if the SF3 model is used, it would seem that the subject tables would not be necessary or useful.

- **Geographic Ranking Tables:** these tables are neither here nor there. Since they are being produced only for the nation by state, they have limited usefulness at the local level.
- **Geographic Comparison Tables:** these tables are more useful. They can be turned into ranking tables through a download to Excel, followed by a sort.
- **Thematic maps:** yes, keep them. They work for what they do, although I personally find them difficult to print out in a useful fashion.
- **PUMS**
 - I argue *strongly* for the inclusion of all cases. We need the sample in order to reduce the sampling error, which is high enough as it is. There is no advantage to preservation of confidentiality by omitting some cases, because no one knows who is in the ACS sample and has responded, much less when.
 - The file should include the month of the interview. (If it's there now, I apologize for this comment.) We need to be able to analyze seasonal patterns.
 - I'm not sure including the GQ cases is going to be helpful. The sample is so skewed! I think that any analysis I might do would exclude them in any event.
- **Selected Population Profiles:** we will make little use of these unless they are created for small area geography. Creating them only at the national/large state level does little for local users. Meanwhile, if I want them for the City of Detroit and the counties of our metro area, I have to make them myself from the detailed tables or the summary file.
- **Comparison Profiles:** these make me nervous because often the year to year differences are within the margin of error. They are not high on my priority list.

- **American Factfinder:** I recognize that some of my comments and suggestions have to do with the way AFF delivers the data, rather than the way in which the products are created. This is inevitable, and to most users, they are one and the same. ACS is the biggest contributor to AFF, and probably provides the most frequently used products, and so the needs of ACS and its users should be paramount in any improvements made to AFF.

- **Summary**
 - The most important products for local users are (1) the detailed tables, (2) the summary file, and (3) the PUMS file. The rest is essentially just window dressing. Therefore, limited resources should first be devoted to improving these products.

 - It is going to be difficult for casual/"lay" users to understand the differences between single year data presentations and multi-year data presentations for, e.g., the City of Detroit. Intermediaries will bear the burden of explaining and helping them to choose what to use. I'm not sure there's any way around this; educational materials will help, but people have to use them!

 - Finally, *nothing will substitute* for creating a small group of expert users to review the products and make detailed comments on them. I submit that it is *not possible* for census staff to understand the problems that local users encounter; we have to tell you.

 - A continuing dialogue is critical.