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DSSD AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY MEMO SERIES CHAPTER METHODS PANEL
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MEMORANDUM FOR Susan Schechter
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Subject: American Fact Finder-American Community Survey Multiyear
Data Release Information Sharing Session at the Brookings
Institute – Summary Report

This memo summarizes the feedback given by participants attending the information sharing session held at the Brookings Institute, October 21, 2008, discussing the changes to the American Fact Finder (AFF) that coincide with the December release of the American Community Survey (ACS) multiyear data products. Organizations that participated in the session include the Urban Institute, National Multi Housing Council, National Low Income Housing Coalition, DC Fiscal Policy Institute, Economic Research Service (United States Department of Agriculture), National Association of Home Builders, Northeast Midwest Institute, Social Compact, National Retail Federation, National Association of Regional Councils, Population Reference Bureau, National Education Association, Center for Economic Development, Child Trends, NeighborWorks America, National League of Cities, and the Brookings Institute.

Feedback:

- The Census Bureau's assumption of how a novice uses the AFF website may not necessarily match the novice user's ultimate objective. Novices may be interested in using larger datasets. If we are focused on the novice only obtaining data for one town or one city and using a very limited set of data, we may not be exploring the full range of tools to help novices navigate larger datasets.

- The main focus or direction given for the novice user, using the AFF, is to direct them to the 2005-2007 (3-year) estimates. In the case where the novice data user wants to look at individual trends between years (e.g., 2006 and 2007), the guidance and direction is not readily apparent. The comparison profile between single-year data is available at the novice level, but this may not be easy to find. Some of the places where there is a link between the AFF and the ACS website will give the data user the opportunity to learn more about all of our data products which we describe on our website. However, these links are currently hard to find in the AFF. The ACS web page provides other help or guidance on comparisons, but this information is geared more towards the sophisticated data users. The “show more” link in the fact sheet or the narrative profile in the fact sheet, both display the single-year comparison profile as a choice, but these links are not easy to find.
- Both novice and experienced data users may not be aware the ACS website exists and that it is separate from the AFF website. The ACS website is accessible through the Census Bureau’s main page by clicking on “American Community Survey,” however navigating to the ACS homepage through the AFF website may not be as apparent. Thus, data users may not take advantage of the additional materials, located at the ACS website, on the 2005-2007 release as well as other information about other ACS data products.
- Having the 2005-2007 data selected as the default on the datasets page may cause some confusion for data users that have accessed ACS data prior to the 2005-2007 data release. For example, someone who is not an experienced data user that navigates to the datasets page to retrieve a one-year data table they accessed prior to the 2005-2007 release may inadvertently access the 2005-2007 data. As a result, the user may get frustrated not realizing that they need to back out and then select the 2007 one-year data underneath the 2005-2007 data to get to the data they accessed before. This problem may be addressed by releasing both the one-year and three-year data together, however one could argue either way as to the advantages or disadvantages of releasing the two together or separate.
- Novice data users whose objective is to access newly released single-year data may have difficulty since data accessed by navigating through the fact sheet will only include the data with the broadest geographic coverage (multiyear data). More experienced data users that access ACS data through the datasets page will have the newly released 2009 single-year data as the default selection and the 3-year data will be available underneath. However, the novice user that accesses the fact sheet is going to get directed to a page that displays the 2005-2007 data. This follows the logic of providing the data with the most extensive geographic coverage to the novice. However, some thought needs to be given to what is going to happen to novice users during the periods between the single year and multiyear data releases, since the novice data user may want to find the newly released single year data but only find the multiyear data through the fact sheet. As a result, novice data users may end up calling organizations for help on how to find, in the AFF, the new single year data (e.g., a press release of income and poverty rates on income and poverty day). In addition, after the single-year data release, the multiyear data will be released and the novice will see another different set of data. For novice users, it may be confusing to understand the Census Bureau’s goal in how they want to direct the novice data user.
- The description of the 3-year data products on the data sets page could be a little more clear by including a phrase that states that the data are the average over the 3 years and that data

are one set of data not 3 separate data sets. It is difficult to “break” the data users in with the limited amount of space, but having the link “explain 1-year vs. 3-year” is helpful.

- On the datasets page, create a drop down menu where novice or experienced users can enter parameters of their research as it relates to the differences between the 1-year and 3-year, and in the end, gives the user an answer as to which data set they should use.
- On the 1-year vs. 3-year explanatory text web page...
 - The issue of reliability should be addressed. The currency of the data is emphasized by saying that one dataset is more current than the other. The difference in the sample size between the two data sets is addressed as well, but nothing about reliability.
 - Using “2008” in the very first sentence may be confusing for a novice - use a more generic term such as “currently.”
 - Data users might benefit from an example that focuses on how a particular variable might be represented using 1-year versus 3-year data.
 - Rather than embed examples in the two columns highlighting the differences between the one-year and three-year data, make the examples accessible as a separate link since the screen is already dense with text. If someone comes to the explanatory text page and they are not familiar with the differences between the 1-year vs. 3-year data products, we do not want them to feel overwhelmed by the amount of text and conclude that this is too hard. Place a heading underneath the two columns, so that they first read about the differences. Then, if they feel that they need to read further to decide how to choose between them, they can click on the link. The user should only have to process one piece of information at a time.
 - Introduce the fact that the data are collected monthly, so the 3-year data are not that different from the 1-year data except that the data are averaged over 36 months rather than 12 months.
- On the AFF main page, the location of the “What’s New” box is at the bottom right side of web page which is the least clicked on and least looked at part of a web page. Consider putting the “What’s New” box below “Getting Detailed Data” or below the “Fast Access to Information” box to get more people browsing it.
- If the “What’s New” is moved to a location that captures attention, the experienced users will see the ‘2005-2007 American Community Survey’ and think they can click on that to get some background information before they get the data. To not have any clickable links other than a link that goes to the fact sheet does not seem like useful navigation. The “What’s New” box says pay attention to this box, whether you are a novice or experienced data user. Make the “2005-2007 American Community Survey” a clickable link that links to the “forthcoming” web page or the “Explain 1-year vs. 3-year” page. This would allow the data user to get a quick snap shot of whatever the Census Bureau wants to highlight. In addition, add a link to get back to the AFF main page.
- For novice users, provide an example of interpretation of a 3-year estimate, maybe on the fact sheet or the help page. Data users, novice or not, are going to struggle with interpretation. Note that this may be addressed by the compass series of handbooks, PowerPoint slides, online tutorials, and Power Point training scripts developed to help people interpret the multiyear estimates. The biggest challenge will be determining how best to get people to find these materials.

- Develop an “Ask ACS” website or feedback loop to get feedback directly to ACSO staff rather than a customer service liaison prior to the 2005-2007 data release.

cc:

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