NATIONAL STATE DATA CENTER STEERING COMMITTEE

Representing a Network of 1,800 SDC/BIDC Data Centers and Affiliates Nationwide

We Bring Value-Added Census Data and Education to the User

March 3, 2015

Mr. James Treat
Chief, American Community Survey Office
U.S. Census Bureau
4600 Silver Hill Road
Washington, DC 20233

Dear Jim,

The State Data Center network has heard of the proposed elimination of the 3-year data products from the American Community Survey. As committed, local partners of the US Census Bureau, the SDCs know both the difficult budget pressure the Bureau is now experiencing but also the value the 3-year ACS products provide locally in serving local policy, planning, and economic development. As the chair of the State Data Center Steering Committee, I am writing to encourage you to keep the 3-year ACS products.

The Census Bureau deserves a great deal of credit for developing the American Community Survey to meet the increasing demand for reliable and transparent socioeconomic data by all communities in the nation regardless of population size. The 3-year ACS products provide valuable data for mid-sized communities as well as estimates with a smaller margin of error for larger areas that receive single year ACS estimates. The 3-year estimates provide 3 unique estimates per decade allowing for trend analysis that is not possible when considering only two unique estimates per decade as provided by the 5-year estimates. The proposed elimination of the 3-year estimates broadens the data service gap between the large communities of 65,000 or more and every other community. This would counter the forethought and commitment the Bureau created in the American Community Survey from the beginning.

I have attached examples of the 3-year ACS estimates applications from the State Data Center network. Your SDC partners know the value of the 3-year ACS products and regularly use them to serve our communities and demonstrate the value and relevance of Census Bureau data. On behalf of the State Data Center network, I encourage you to maintain the 3-year American Community Survey products.

Sincerely,

Bob Coats

cc: John Thompson, Director
Jeannie Shiffer, ADCOM
Stephen Buckner, ADCOM
Kendall B. Johnson, CLMSO
Thomas Edwards, CLMSO
State Data Center network

State Data Center Submissions on the Importance of ACS 3-Year Estimates

Nebraska SDC

We only have 3 of 93 counties that exceed the 65,000 threshold to get annual ACS data. Thus, the 3-year expands this greatly to 17 counties which are basically our non-metro regional centers (micropolitan counties and a few metro outlying counties). This gives them more current data they can use (rather than waiting for the 5-year) and see changes using the comparative profiles that have mutually exclusive 3-year timeframes. This link shows all sorts of statistically significant changes in economic conditions in Hall County (population 60,000) that we wouldn't know of otherwise: http://factfinder.census.gov/bkmk/table/1.0/en/ACS/13_3YR/CP03/0500000US31079

The other place the 3-year have been really useful for us is looking at values by race/ethnicity. The 1-year values split by race have too much variability to be reliable. There are outliers that can make you think a trend is increasing or decreasing but it really is reflective of sampling error. The 3-year data smooth out these fluctuations and we can see changes and trends, and in a timely manner vs. the 5-year data. You can see an example of such an analysis in an article we recently helped with on rising levels of Hispanic poverty in Omaha and Nebraska. See: http://www.omaha.com/news/metro/poverty-rate-among-hispanics-in-nebraska-soars/article_b421eb00-e0e0-5f68-a989-aa3dd27c2b56.html and click the image to see the graph of the trend in the 3-year ACS data.

I would also mention that you get the biggest reduction in margin of error from going form the 1-year to the 3-year estimates. You'll see on the attached that MOE is reduced by about half from going from 1-year to 3-year. It only declines slightly shifting from 3-year to 5-year. Thus, the 3-year create a happy medium between timeliness and accuracy. Cynthia Taeuber spoke to this in her 2006 book *American Community Survey Data for Community Planning* – she stated a couple times that she personally liked the 3-year data for this reason.

Arizona SDC

We do use the ACS 3-year estimates, and for one of our projects, the loss of the 3-year estimates would be very detrimental. The ACS accounts for a large amount of the data we exhibit on our MAP Dashboard, which was developed to compare Tucson/Pima County with other areas in the western U.S. as well as other areas of Arizona. We decided to use the 3-year estimates for the dashboard because it allowed us to develop a time trend for medium-sized areas (which is the case for several counties in our state). With the 2013 data, you can get four data points from 2000 on (2000, 2007, 2010, and 2013), which allows for at least a reasonable graph. If you have to rely on 5-year estimates, there would only be two data points available at this time (2000 and 2013) – not much of a trend! You would not be able to assemble a current time trend for areas below 65,000 in population without the 3-year estimates.

I am currently looking at the change over time in educational attainment by metro area. Ideally, I would use the single-year data, but for most metros, the sampling error is too large. The five-year data are not useful since the time periods of the initial 2005-09 and latest 2009-13 files overlap and because of the short four-year time span between the two. The three-year data provide an acceptable compromise.

Maine SDC

The primary focus of the Maine State Data Center is to promote the availability of reliable, useful, and timely Census data. The proposal to eliminate the 3-year data from the American Community Survey is concerning as these data are used for many reasons in Maine. The Center for Workforce Research and Information at the Maine Department of Labor notes that they almost never use 1-year data due to Maine's small population and low population density. The 3-year data are regularly used by that office to provide data and analysis to Maine citizens, policy-makers, and officials on many topics, specifically including reporting on county demographics and workers with disabilities.

County data are a particular area of concern with the proposed elimination of the 3-year data. Only six of Maine's 16 counties meet the population threshold for 1-year data, while 15 of the 16 meet the threshold for 3-year data. The elimination of the 3-year data means that ten of Maine's counties would only have 5-year data available. Given the need to use non-overlapping data sets for time series analysis, this elimination poses a considerable challenge for understanding trends in most of Maine's counties. If there were a way to continue to make mid-size (20,000 – 65,000 population) county-level data available, either at the 3-year or 1-year data level, the elimination of the remaining 3-year data would be more palatable.

The Maine State Data Center urges the Census Bureau to consider the implications of eliminating the 3-year data for geographies with smaller populations.

Some State Data Centers have submitted their own letters with additional submissions.