

Using Surveys to Replace Censuses: The Successes and Failures of the American Community Survey in the United States

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In an effort to minimize costs while creating databases of current and detailed national-level demographic information, many nations around the world are currently attempting to replace the demographic data they collect from their periodic national censuses with information from more frequent and less expensive, large national surveys. To this end, the United States implemented in 2006 the American Community Survey to provide a running monthly survey of demographic variables that would eventually be tabulated down to the census tract level. While we will continue with our basic decennial census (next one scheduled for 2020) the results of the American Community Survey are intended to replace the information usually gathered in the detailed long form of our census.

The results of the American Community Survey have been decidedly mixed. This presentation will examine the successes and failures of the survey in regard to providing timely and accurate demographic data on a regular basis. For example, the American Community Survey provides better results than previous national surveys like the Current Population Survey and provides superior and detailed demographic data for geographic areas with populations of at least 60,000. However, the data provided for all smaller areas are problematic and the procedure has many shortcomings as a replacement to data from the long form of the decennial census.