

# The Role of the American Community Survey in Re-engineering the United States Census of Population and Housing

**U.S. Census Bureau**

**Joint ECE-EUROSTAT Work Session on  
Population and Housing Censuses**

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# U.S. Census of Population

- Decennial
- Traditional self-enumeration mail-back method
- 5 in 6 households given the short form
  - 7 questions
- 1 in 6 households given the long form
  - 70 additional questions

# Drivers of change

- Privacy and confidentiality concerns
- Massive effort required to collect data
- **TIMELINESS** - 10 years too long given rapidly changing demographics and socio-economic characteristics

# Re-engineering the U.S. Census Program

- 2010 Census
  - focus now only on the short form
- American Community Survey
  - timely housing, social and economic statistics updated each year
- Master Address File (MAF/Tiger)
  - critical to success of Census and ACS
  - global positioning system to ensure positional accuracy

# American Community Survey

- First tested in 1996 (4 regions)
- Supplementary survey to 2000 Census (C2SS)
  - test feasibility of simultaneous Census and ACS
  - compare 2000 Census results with ACS (1999-2001)

# ACS fully operational in 2004

- Annual sample of 3 Million housing units
- Content similar to current long form
- Collected monthly with 3-month cycle
  - Month 1 - questionnaires are mailed
  - Month 2 - non-reponse follow up (targeted 2nd mailing, telephone call)
  - Month 3 - personal interview for sample of remaining non-respondents
- Annual results available within six months

# ACS annual estimates

- States, large cities (population 65,000 +)
  - annual demographic and socio-economic characteristics
- Smaller cities (pop between 20K and 65K)
  - three-year moving average updated each year
- Small towns, rural areas (pop below 20K)
  - five-year moving average updated each year

# Benefits of ACS

- The decennial census
- Intercensal Population Estimates Program
- Wide variety of data users

# Benefits to Decennial Census

## - now only a short form

- Simpler, more focused and cost efficient
  - questionnaire design and printing
  - collection, processing and dissemination
- Improved coverage
  - ACS can identify and profile new areas
  - MAF/Tiger allows targeted second mailings
  - ACS provides ongoing community presence

# Benefits to Decennial Census

- Permits development of potential new technologies for collection
  - hand-held computers
  - reporting via the Internet
  - Voice recognition on the telephone

# Benefits to Intercensal Population Program

- Indirectly
  - ACS distributions for small areas will facilitate estimates of population change.
- ACS weighted by census counts or intercensal estimates.

# Benefits to Data Users

- More timely and better quality long form data
  - required by a large number of federal government laws and programs
  - used extensively by state and local governments and by the private sector.
- ACS already strongly endorsed by participating communities.

## Issues raised

- Users of small area data must adapt to concept of annual moving averages.
- Cost - ACS is expensive. “A long-term fiscal commitment to this program is critical to its success.” ...Congressional funding is pending.

# Discussion