

BERKSHIRE PLANNING TOOLS



One in a series of “toolbox” items to accompany the Regional Plan for the Berkshires

June 2002

Census data for community decision-making

Census Data: Consistent and Comprehensive

Most people think of Census data as the information collected from the U.S. population every ten years from 1790 to Census 2000. This Census done every decade (called the Decennial Census) is the only national survey providing consistent measures and data from the national level down to the community and neighborhood (or block level). What the general public may not realize is that the Census Bureau conducts and collects data from more than 100 surveys and 20 Censuses every decade.

Census 2000 Data At Work in Communities

Census 2000 data represent a veritable gold mine for the regions and communities who can tap into it and use these datasets in policy and program discussions and decision-making. In addition to the more than 120 federal programs using Census data in their funding formulas, many state programs also rely on Census data for funding decisions or program eligibility thresholds. In the Berkshire region examples include Community Development Block Grants, the WIC program, Job Training Partnership Act, and other programs ranging from transportation to education to energy. Foundations and non-profit agencies regularly utilize comparative Census data in awarding grants, or planning and supporting programs critical to meeting an array of community needs.

Potential Community Users

Community Leaders and Decision-Makers

Select Boards and City Councils, Planning Boards, and other community departments or advisory boards can find Census data available and valuable for managing public services and tackling public problems. From libraries to public works, recreation, and school departments, strategic planning for future needs and programs depends on good information on population and housing trends, and the economic and social conditions of community members.

Almost any community discussion about present needs and future change can benefit from data available at a community level from the Census. Census data can help with community decisions ranging from library acquisitions (large print books? children’s books?) to the expansion or need for group quarters or other housing options for the elderly or disabled.



Decennial Census Data

Short Form or “100% Data”

While over time the content and length of Census questionnaires have changed, fundamental demographic questions asked of every household have remained fairly consistent, which provide the nation with data on the number of people in a household, their age, sex, and race/ethnicity, and family or household relationships. Housing questions asked of all

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households in the Census 2000 short form were fewer than in 1990 and limited to tenure (occupied by owner or renter) and vacancy/seasonal characteristics.

- Every household (100%) answered short form questions even if it received a long form questionnaire, since those questions were also included on the long form.

Long Form or “Sample Data”

Sampling techniques introduced in the 1940 Census split the Census questionnaire into two forms.

- Only a sample of households nationwide (1 in 6) receives the long form which contains many detailed questions about housing, social, and economic conditions and characteristics of the population.

However, Berkshire households in twenty-one communities got the long form at the rate of 1 in every 2 households. In order to get a representative sample of responses in places with fewer than 2,500 inhabitants, every second household was sampled.

If Census data is a gold mine, then the data from the sample or long form is the “mother lode.” Limited profiles of Massachusetts and Berkshire County level data have only recently been released (late May, 2002), but these offer a wealth of data for communities in their future planning efforts.

The long form collects data on population, households, and housing units in great detail:

- Education level, population migration, ancestry, disability, veteran status;
- Place of birth, citizenship, year of entry, language spoken at home, and ability to speak English;
- Employment, work status, occupation, commuting;
- Household and family income and poverty status;

- Housing values and rental cost, age and type of housing structure;
- Number of rooms, kitchen and plumbing facilities, heating fuel, and household costs from taxes, insurance, utilities.



What Census Data are Available for Community Use?

Demographic Characteristics

Short form data described on the first page (SF-1), compiled and cross-tabulated, yield an array of useful data tables for community planning. This data can be directly compared to other Census years to assess changes over time. A community can check out “how it’s doing” compared to other communities in the county or communities of similar size or other characteristics across the state or nation.

Communities engaged in open space and recreation planning can scrutinize data on the distribution and location of types of households (families with children of various ages) influential in planning programs and locating facilities. Other population and household data (household size and age) can offer direction in decisions about adding active or passive recreational opportunities, and help in matching people and parks, programs and facilities.

For those communities in the region with an interest in housing issues, much data is available describing households by type (family and non-family), age of the householder, presence of children. Data on the number of housing units occupied by owners or renters of various age cohorts offer another view of housing affordability and ownership.

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For example, a community with a large portion of homeownership by householders 65 or over could foresee sales and housing turnover occurring earlier than neighboring communities. Other communities might discover homeownership or rental patterns by age cohort or presence of children that point to a need. Has there been substantial growth in single person households, identified as elderly or not, which suggests another direction in planning?

Simply being able to get data and answer questions about changes in community demographic characteristics (age, sex, race) and trends in household types and housing occupancy related to those changes can go a long way towards understanding changing community needs – and making community-based decisions from objective data.

Knowing which other regional communities share similar characteristics (and face some of the same challenges (transportation for the elderly?) can further cross-regional discussions valuable in meeting the needs of people living beyond the reach of existing transit systems.

Social, Economic, and Housing Characteristics

Answers to long form questions clearly provide communities with a wide range of data on social, economic, and housing characteristics describing in detail the population, households, families, workers, and housing units in a community. These data fill in the picture with valuable facts important to policy-making, future budgeting, and community planning:

- Do the schools have sufficient space?
- Has the tax-base shifted
- What is happening with populations needing special services: newcomers in need of English language classes, single mothers without vehicles with commuting problems?
- Has the number of families in poverty remained stable or declined since 1990?

- What do the income statistics show, and how do those figures relate to housing ownership or rental costs?
- What shifts have taken place since 1990 in the use of home heating fuels in the region?

Tract Level Data

Pittsfield, North Adams, and Adams are the only regional communities large enough to be subdivided into multiple tracts. What this means is that the same detailed sample data released at the community level will also become available for their sub-community or neighborhood areas (about 4,000 people) in the next few months.

How Can Communities get Census Data?

As a State Data Center affiliate, Berkshire Regional Planning Commission receives regional Census data for community and public use in print, file, and CD-ROM formats.

The Census Bureau organizes the most requested data into one-page profiles (DP-1-4) containing a basic overview of community data available. These and the following Census data tables are available from the **Sources and Resources** noted at the end.

- **Demographic Profiles (DP 1-4)**
- **Quick Tables**
- **Geographic Comparison Tables**
- **Summary File Data (SF 1, SF 2, SF 3)**

For help in locating data useful in answering community questions,

- Contact your BRPC community liaison planner or project manager, or Information Services at BRPC;
- Consult the **Sources & Resources** list at the end for Census Bureau and other useful websites.

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More Timely Data Ahead

A major complaint about decennial Census data has been that the data gets “old” fast. Census 2000 long form data collected in April, 2000, even now in mid-2002 is not completely available. To address that long-standing problem the Census Bureau has begun to implement the *American Community Survey* or *ACS*. For decision-makers looking to base their actions (and expenditures) on more current data about their communities or the region, the *ACS* will meet the need with annually updated data.

This new survey will be conducted annually (3 million households) and be fully underway in every county in the U.S. in 2003. In 2004 yearly estimates of demographic, housing, social, and economic characteristics will become available for all counties, cities, and metropolitan areas with populations of 65,000 or more. Places with a population under 20,000 will require a longer sampling period of 5 years, so data for smaller areas will not be released until 2008 and yearly thereafter.

What this means for Berkshire County is that beginning in 2004 updated Census information will be released at the county level every year. The City of Pittsfield (falling in the 20,000 to 65,000 population range) can expect to see new estimates after a three year sampling period (in 2006), and the other 31 communities in the region will see their first data from this survey in 2008, followed by yearly updates based on five-year averages.

Data collected in the *American Community Survey* will be similar to current long form data collected every ten years on population and households: age, gender, race/ethnicity, family structure, income, poverty, education, work,

employment, commuting patterns, and housing characteristics.

Will there still be a Census in 2010? Yes. While the *American Community Survey* takes over the long form data sampling, the population count must still be done for reapportionment – distributing congressional seats fairly among the states – and for redistricting – redrawing political districts within states as population shifts occur. The *ACS* is now in the test and implementation phase and its future depends on Congressional approval and funding.

Sources & Resources

Berkshire Regional Planning Commission
www.berkshireplanning.org
(Information Services/GIS)

Tables of Census data for Berkshire County communities with comparative data for the North, Central, South sub-regions, MA. U.S. DATABOOK, 2001

State Data Center for Massachusetts
Massachusetts Institute for Social and Economic Research (MISER) at UMASS
www.umass.edu/miser

Website provides a list of “Free Data” available as data files or reports, including Census data from 1990 and 2000 for Massachusetts cities, towns, and counties.

U.S. Census Bureau
www.Census.gov
www.factfinder.Census.gov

Acknowledgements:

Credit for information presented above goes to a variety of publications from the U.S. Census Bureau (Dept. of Commerce) and its Boston Regional Office, as well as the State Data Center at the Massachusetts Institute for Social and Economic Research (MISER) at UMASS, Amherst; and “A Data Overview: Concepts, Collection and Resources,” published by the Pennsylvania State Data Center (Dec., 2000).

This publication is one in a series of “toolbox” items to support the Regional Plan for the Berkshires. If you would like to receive additional copies of this or other toolbox items, please contact the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission, 1 Fenn St., Pittsfield, MA 01201 or call (413) 442-1521. Copies of the toolbox items are also available on the web. Visit www.berkshireplanning.org

Funding provided by the Federal Highway Administration and the MA Highway Department

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