1. HOW STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS USE ACS DATA

Using ACS Data for Planning

Establishing Priorities Through a Needs Assessment

Given competing demands and limited resources at their disposal, governments need to carefully ascertain appropriate funding levels for their initiatives. Governments also receive requests for help from community groups and civic organizations that must be evaluated and prioritized for funding. American Community Survey (ACS) data can be extremely useful in evaluating the overall needs of the community and identifying subgroups most in need of various services in order to prioritize requests for assistance.

- The town of Wenham, Massachusetts, used ACS data (e.g., household type and size, disability status, poverty, income, race, age, employment, units in structure, housing value, and rent costs) to help document priority housing needs and develop strategies to address them.[2]

- The District of Columbia incorporated ACS data (e.g., median family income, per capita income, marital status, unemployment, and means of travel to work) in their Community Health Needs Assessment, which was designed to identify key trends in health and well-being to inform "public health policies, programs, and interventions to strengthen community health."[3]

Developing and Implementing a General Plan

Once a government decides on its priorities, it needs to examine various alternative courses of action to come up with an effective plan. If, for example, a local government decides to make the alleviation of poverty a priority, it needs to examine where exactly to apply its resources. Should the alleviation of child poverty be a priority, or should the focus be on poverty among older adults? Or should resources be applied in some proportion to each of these groups? Examination of ACS data could be instrumental in formulating plans and actions to guide the distribution of resources.

For example, the California city of Milpitas relied on ACS data to help develop their draft Consolidated Plan for 2017 to 2022. Their draft plan proposes various strategies to meet the needs of community members, including maintaining and preserving existing housing, supporting public services for lower-income families and individuals, and improving access to public facilities.[4]

Once a plan is chosen, it must be implemented. If, for example, a local government decides to focus primarily on increasing resources for low-income older adults, ACS data could be used to target neighborhoods with the largest concentrations of older individuals in need of services.

Special Considerations: Environmental Justice and Social Equity Analysis

While state and local governments have a variety of resources they can use to ensure that plans and projects meet environmental justice and social equity goals, the ACS can play an important role. Sometimes the impact area for a project is fairly small. Census tract or block group data from the ACS can be used to identify the populations impacted by the project.

- The Minnesota Department of Commerce used tract-level ACS estimates of minority and low-income populations to help decision-makers identify the potential impact of a new pipeline project on vulnerable populations.[5]

- ACS data can also be used to measure English-speaking proficiency and languages spoken in a project area. Both measures can help determine whether a project is in compliance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discriminatory practices in programs receiving federal funds.

Using ACS Data for Program and Project Evaluation

While the ACS was not designed specifically for program evaluation, the comprehensive and timely nature of the data can make it a valuable resource for government analysts who want to assess conditions before and after a policy or plan change, or before and

[2] Town of Wenham, Housing Needs Assessment, 2017, <www.wenhamma.gov/docs/Wenham%20Housing%20Needs%20Assessment%202017%204-3.pdf>.

[3] District of Columbia Community Health Needs Assessment, 2014, <https://dchealth.dc.gov/page/dc-community-health-needs-assessment>.

[4] City of Milpitas, Draft Consolidated Plan, 2017–2022, 2017, <www.ci.milpitas.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Draft-Con-Plan_website.pdf>.

[5] Minnesota Department of Commerce, "Energy Environmental Review and Analysis: Final Environmental Impact Statement, Line 3 Project," Chapter 11: Environmental Justice, 2017, <https://mn.gov/eera/web/project-file?legacyPath=/opt/documents/34079/Line3%20FEIS%20Ch%2011%20Environmental%20Justice%20Complete.pdf>.

after the implementation of a project. For example, a city may use ACS commuting data to track trends in bicycle commutes to work before and after expanding a network of local bikeways.

TIP: Since ACS data are collected using the same methods across the United States, those who are evaluating programs can compare outcomes in communities where a policy change has occurred with communities that have similar characteristics but have not implemented the policy change.

Using ACS Data for Economic Development

Many businesses use ACS data to gauge the sales potential of products and services, better understand the workforce, and set strategies for growth. However, state and local governments can also influence economic development through policies to attract or retain businesses. State agencies, chambers of commerce, and other associations of businesses, like the Greater Houston Partnership, use ACS data to profile the economic, demographic, and workforce characteristics of their state's regions, counties, and cities to attract new businesses.

TIP: Because ACS data include comparable data for cities and counties nationwide, they provide a useful benchmark for businesses making decisions about site selection or strategies for growth.

Hawaii's Department of Business, Economic Development & Tourism uses ACS data to compare economic indicators for Hawaii—including unemployment, the old-age dependency ratio, women's share of the labor force, and income—with economic indicators for other states.[6]

Using ACS Data for Emergency Management

In addition to policy, planning, and economic development roles, state and local governments have important responsibilities in disaster response and emergency management. Data from the ACS can provide useful context for first responders and for disaster recovery personnel. For example, data from the ACS can help identify:

- Physical vulnerability (e.g., vacant and occupied housing units, mobile homes, and the year housing structures were built).
- Economic vulnerability (e.g., number of workers, industry sectors, earnings, and poverty).
- Social vulnerability (e.g., age, disability status, language proficiency, and vehicle access).

These pieces of information can assist local officials as they coordinate evacuations, conduct damage assessments, and carry out recovery plans.

For example, the Northern Virginia Regional Commission created a dashboard on population groups that may be vulnerable to the coronavirus, based on the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's 2018 Social Vulnerability Index. The index was developed using 2014–2018 ACS 5-year estimates.[7]

Using ACS Data for Local and Regional Forecasts and Modeling

State and local government leaders often work across jurisdictional boundaries through metropolitan and regional planning commissions. ACS data are vital for these commissions to help identify and address issues related to housing, transportation, land use, environmental protection, and economic development.

- The Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission uses ACS data, in combination with their own transportation survey data, to produce travel simulation models for the greater Philadelphia region.[8]
- Many metropolitan and regional planners also use data from the Census Transportation Planning Products, or CTPP, which provide a wealth of small-area estimates based on ACS 5-year data for transportation analysis and planning.[9] The CTPP program is designed to help transportation analysts and planners understand where people are commuting to and from and how they get there. The information is organized by where workers live, where they work, and by the flow between those places.

[6] Hawaii.gov, Department of Business, Economic Development & Tourism, Hawaii Rankings and Comparisons, <http://dbedt.hawaii.gov/economic/ranks/>.

[7] Northern Virginia Regional Commission, Northern Virginia Coronavirus Cases and Vulnerable Populations - Impact Planning Report, <https://nvrc.maps.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/d47407a16ebb46b5aec7df60af368a5f>.

[8] Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission, Data Sources, <www.dvrpc.org/transportation/modeling/data/>.

[9] American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, Census Transportation Planning Products Program, <https://ctpp.transportation.org/>.