Delivering What Users Want: the Evolution of Census Bureau Small Area Data

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This presentation is released to inform interested parties of ongoing research and to encourage discussion. The views expressed on statistical issues are those of the author and not necessarily those of the U.S. Census Bureau.
The Issue

- Users of Small Area Data Heavily Influenced the Creation of the American Community Survey (ACS) to Provide Timely and Reliable Small Area Data

- When Did the Need for Small Area Data Arise? How Has Their Usage Changed?
Outline

- Early Attempts to Expand Data Products: the 1880 and 1890 Censuses
- Uses of Newly Available Census Tract Data, 1910-1945
- Extension Beyond Large Cities, 1946-1964
- Demands for Data to Document Programs and Empower Communities, 1964-2010
- Small Area Data Users in the Creation of the ACS, 1993-2010
Early Attempts to Expand Data Products: the 1880 and 1890 Censuses

- Pre-1880: Civic Boosterism
- John Shaw Billings and Public Health
Map of Billings's Sanitary Districts in New York City

Detail of Manhattan from 1894

Uses of Newly Available Census Tract Data, 1910-1945 (Part 1)

- The Problem with Data by Wards
  Rev. Dr. Walter Laidlaw
- Invention of the Census Tract
- Request for Block Data
Uses of Newly Available Census Tract Data, 1910-1945 (Part 2)

- Howard Whipple Green & Health Agencies in Cleveland
- Green’s Outreach
- Expansion of Municipal Services
- Grants in Aid
Uses of Newly Available Census Tract Data, 1910-1945 (Part 3)

- Business Site Selection
- Marketing Products
- Increasing Business Requests for Block Data
Firsts in Publication of Small Area Data

- Deaths by wards (1886)
- First central business districts (1886)
- First ZIP code data (1893)
- Sanitary districts in NYC (1913)
- Census Bureau assumes cost for tracts and blocks (1920)
- 1st census county divisions (1940)
- GFB/DIME* created (1960)
- Standard metropolitan areas & urbanized areas (1980)
- Entire nation tracted (2000)
- American Factfinder launched (2000)
- ACS released (2000)
- Select ACS test site data (2000)

*TIGER is Topologically Integrated Geographic Encoding and Referencing

*GBF/ DIME is Geographic Base File/Dual Independent Map Encoding

United States Census Bureau
Measuring America
Growth of Census Tracts
1910 - 1960

Source: Swift, “Dr. Laidlaw’s Vision,” 1956 and U.S. Census Bureau, Census Tract Manuals
Extending Beyond Central Cities, 1946-1964

Forces Leading to Demand for Data

• Suburbanization

• Movement West & South

Census Bureau Responses

• Standard Metropolitan Areas (SMAs)

• “Tracting” entire SMAs
Growth of Census Tracts 1910-1960

Source: Swift, “Dr. Laidlaw’s Vision,” 1956 and U.S. Census Bureau, Census Tract Manuals
Pittsburgh’s North Side: an area slated for renewal

Source: Pittsburgh Regional Planning Association and the Pittsburgh City Planning Commission, “North Side Study,” April 1954, p. 44.
Demands for Data to Document Programs and Empower Communities, 1964-1975

- Economic Opportunity Act
- New Haven Census Use Study
- ADMATCH & Geographic Base File/ Dual Independent Map Encoding
Use and Accessibility Extends as Computing Power Expands 1970-2010

- Redistricting & Public Law 94-171
- Voting Rights Act
Growth of Small Area Data 1960-2010

Number of Census Tracts/BNAs 1960-2010

- Census Year
- Number of Tracts

Number of Census Blocks

- Census Year
- Number of Blocks

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, *1960-2010 Census of Population and Housing Histories*
Creation of the American Community Survey

- Efforts to Simplify the Decennial Census
- Lobbying by Data Users for More Frequent Release of Data
Creation of the American Community Survey

• Look for the forthcoming, U.S. Census Bureau, *History of the American Community Survey*
For More Information

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