

U.S. CENSUS

T H E D A T A T H A T

C R E A T E S P O L I C Y & W H Y I T M A T T E R S ?

—Dale Knapp, Director of Research & Analytics, Wisconsin Counties Association

The U.S. Constitution requires a census of population every 10 years to determine each state's allotment of members of the House of Representatives. The first census was conducted in 1790.

Shortly thereafter, the decennial census was used to collect other information. In the 1810 census, U.S. Marshals gathered information on manufacturers. By 1900, just before Congress created a Census Office within the Department of the Interior, there were demographic, agricultural, and economic segments of the decennial census that collected information on hundreds of topics.

Today, in addition to the decennial census, the U.S. Census Bureau surveys individuals, businesses, and governments annually. It collects and publishes information used widely by demographers, economists, and other social scientists, government officials, and others. While data is gathered for a variety of geographies, this article focuses on the bureau's state and county data.

DEMOGRAPHY

When thinking about economic development, county officials may want to know the size of the working-age population, average education levels, and commuting patterns. On issues related to low-income households, information on poverty in the county is important.

The Census Bureau publishes data that is useful for both. In its population section, the bureau provides annual population estimates by age, sex, and race. It also publishes information on educational attainment of those 18 or older. In many cases, education levels within smaller age groups are also available.

Nearly all of the bureau's demographic data comes from one of three surveys, with the most well know being the decennial census. The other two are the American Community Survey (ACS) and the Current Population Survey (CPS). Without getting into the details of the differences, ACS data are generally preferred over CPS data for most demographic applications.

Sometimes, the Census Bureau will use detailed ACS data to create other data sets. Census data on commuting is one example. While this information would be useful for economic development issues, it is only published occasionally; the last commuting data was for 2015.

If county poverty data is needed, The Census Bureau's Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE) program is the



place to go. SAIPE provides poverty levels of the overall population and for the under-18 population. It also provides median household income, which is often a useful statistic to have.

BUSINESS & ECONOMY

A deeper dive into an economic development issue may require data on businesses in the county. Generally, one might not think of the Census Bureau as a source for business data. However, it has detailed information on both businesses and jobs.

Its Business Dynamics Statistics provide 41 years of county information on the number of firms and employees. It also has information on the number of jobs created by new or growing companies and the number of jobs lost by closures or downsizing.

The Economic Census, conducted in years ending in two or seven, provides industry data on sales, cost of materials, and value added. Combined, these two data sets can help paint a detailed picture of a county's economy.

GOVERNMENT EMPLOYMENT & FINANCE

Public policy researchers often like to analyze public sector taxes and spending. County officials may want to compare their county's spending with other counties in the state or across the country. The Census Bureau's Annual Survey of State & Local Government Finances is useful for these analyses. It was these data that were used in Forward Analytics' most recent report on county revenues.

State data on government finances are published annually along with aggregate local government numbers (city, county, and school district combined). In years ending in two or seven, detailed local data are available.

A TREASURE TROVE

The data discussed above is often relevant for counties. However, it is only the tip of the iceberg in terms of Census Bureau data. If you are looking for data to help solve a problem or develop a program, one of the first places you should look is the Census Bureau. Just direct your internet browser to [census.gov](https://www.census.gov) and at the top of the page you will find a search function. Type in the subject matter you are looking for and go. Odds are you will find something useful. ♦

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