The United States Census and Community Planning

Every ten years, the United States Census Bureau conducts a headcount of the American population. Authority for this census (Latin for count) is established in the U.S. Constitution (Article 1, Section 2) and requires this process to ensure an accurate registration of the American populace. The first census of the United States occurred in 1790 where four million individuals were identified. This year, the Census Bureau estimates that about 300 million individuals will be identified within 120 million households. The census projects that sometime during the 2010 year that America will reach 310 million individuals.

The census is conducted through a mail survey asking residents of that address to respond to ten questions regarding the (1) number of residents at the current time, (2) number of past residents, (3) type of residency, (4) telephone number, (5) names of residents, (6) gender, (7) current age and birth date, (8 and 9) ethnicity, and (10) other locations of residency. In addition to this basic census, a random sample of addresses also receive the American Community Survey that inquires about residents’ education, housing, employment, military service, income, and other more detailed questions. A certain percent of the recipients of the basic census form and the more detailed survey are contacted by phone or in person to ensure follow up and quality of responses.

The primary purpose of the census is to ensure fair representation of citizens through the number of members of the U.S. House of Representatives that serve that population district. Another significant value of this headcount is to fairly distribute federal resources to local communities in which the distribution is population formula based. Additional values of the census data is that community planners have up-to-date critical insights into the current population and how to better understand the dynamics of their community.

The following is offered as a way to more effectively use this census data. Go to www.census.gov and click on the sidebar link entitled American Fact Finder. Enter a zip code, city, county or state.

Demographic Estimates:
This section of the census data presents the total population for the entry (for example, Bakersfield, CA) and also displays the number and percent of the population by gender, median age, and race. In addition, if a user clicks on the “show more” button, those
same demographic factors are presented but with much more detail. For example, the population is broken down by each age category (such as 10 to 14 or 65 to 74, etc.). The entry also presents the number and percent of the population by 48 different ethnic categories. The gender is presented by a few age categories.

**Social Characteristics:**
This section describes a number of specific characteristics about the entry such as average household size, education levels, marital status, civilian/veterans, and primary language spoken in the home. There is also a “show more” link that goes into even more detail on these factors such as fertility rates meaning birth by age, grandparent status including where they live, school enrollment by type and attainment level, disability status, citizenship rates by number and percent of population, and ancestry from 27 different backgrounds.

**Economic Characteristics:**
This section of the data provides information concerning the labor force, work travel time, household/family/per capita income, and poverty levels for the community under investigation. There is a “show more” link that reveals additional information on these key areas such as employment status by age and by type of work, gender in the work force, and civilian versus military status, work status by occupational category, industry, and income by differing categories. Many of these factors are broken down by family, by household, and by individual.

**Housing Characteristics:**
This last main section of the census data details the population by the type of housing. The “show more” click provides data on occupancy rates versus vacancies, type of housing structures such as homes versus apartments, specifics of the structure (number/type of rooms), vehicles at the household, housing values, and cost rates. Other data sets include dates of occupancy, type of home heating, and occupants per room.

The community planner can access this website for free and, in addition to the data sets presented here, are many other sites that provide additional information such as past population patterns as well as future projections. The data can be as specific as a zip code or as large as the country. The investigator can even create more specific data set zones such as combining several zip codes together. Each state also has a state population site that is likewise helpful.

For California, the website is [www.dof.ca.gov/research/demographics](http://www.dof.ca.gov/research/demographics)