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American Community Survey Enhances Rural Research

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AMBER WAVES

The American Community Survey (ACS), a new nationwide household survey produced by the U.S. Census Bureau, will significantly enhance researchers' and policymakers' knowledge about rural communities. Whereas the decennial census collects data every 10 years, the ACS collects monthly samples to produce data on age, race, education, income, migration, commuting, housing, and other socioeconomic characteristics. ACS data for metropolitan and nonmetropolitan populations are now available by State for 2005, and, as additional data are collected, more detailed information will be released in the years ahead.

ACS findings confirm the demographic portrait of rural and small-town America as captured in decennial census data—slightly older, less educated, and poorer than the metropolitan population. Beginning in 2008, data averaged over multiple years will provide even more detailed information about the Nation's small towns and rural areas. For instance, current data reveal that, for the U.S. as a whole, 3.4 percent of the residents in nonmetro areas

are foreign born, compared with 14.2 percent in metro areas. Multiple-year averages will reveal the concentration of immigrant settlement in selected rural communities and its uneven socioeconomic impact.

The ACS will be an important resource for rural researchers and policymakers who currently rely heavily on data collected in the long-form questionnaire of the decennial census. Whereas the short form counts the entire U.S. population, the long form gathers detailed social and economic information from a sample of U.S. households. Information derived from the long form is used to administer Federal programs, allocate billions of dollars of Federal tax revenues, and support critical State and local decisionmaking, but the data quickly become outdated. The ACS replaces the decennial long form and provides roughly the same data every year instead of once in 10 years.

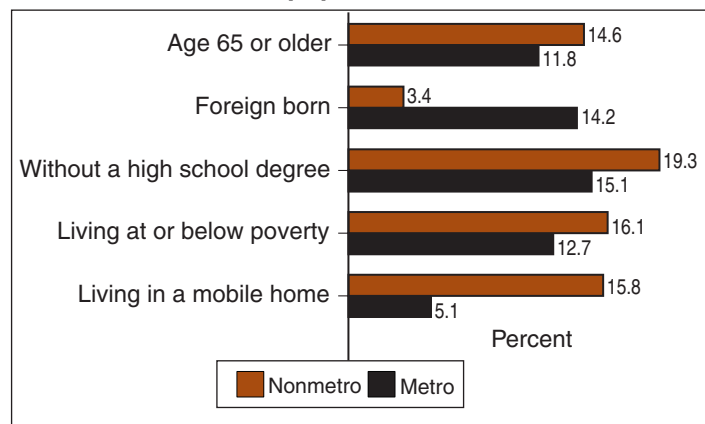
The switch to the continuous measurement approach of the ACS poses a number of challenges for users. First, most census items use April 1 of the census year as the reference period; ACS produces annual averages of data collected throughout the year. Second, demographic trends consisting of multiyear, moving averages may be difficult to interpret, especially in areas undergoing rapid change. Third, the ACS includes questions that are similar to those found on other Federal surveys, such as the Current Population Survey (CPS), which will still be the basis of official estimates of poverty, income, and the number of people with health insurance coverage. The CPS provides greater detail on the sources of household income than the ACS; however, it is a much smaller survey and does not provide reliable estimates below the State level. *W*

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This finding is drawn from . . .

Data Options for Rural Research, a chapter in the ERS Briefing Room on Measuring Rurality, www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/rurality/dataoptions.htm

ACS data confirm distinct differences between nonmetro and metro populations



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2005.