Kelly A. Holder
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Exploring Language Use: A Comparison of the Decennial Census and the American Community Survey

Introduction

According to data from Census 2000, the number of people in the United States who speak a language other than English at home increased 47 percent between 1990 and 2000 and more than doubled from 1980 to 2000.[1] Accurate and consistent data on language status and specific languages spoken are necessary to describe this population and its characteristics.

The American Community Survey (ACS) is part of the Census Bureau's plan to redesign the 2010 Census. The ACS will provide data users with timely demographic, housing, social, and economic data. It is important to test the accuracy of this new data source. Language use is a suitable characteristic for this task, first, because of its increasing prevalence in the United States. Second, an examination of language assesses one of the important functions previously accomplished by the decennial census—the tracking of a detailed and rare population characteristic at varying geographies.

Objective

The purpose of this analysis is to perform a detailed comparison of the language data collected from Census 2000 with data collected from four years of the American Community Survey. I will look at levels of estimated language use, specific languages spoken, and trends in these levels at both large and small geographies.

Data

Census 2000 collected detailed population and housing characteristics using the long form that went to a 1-in-6 sample of households and individuals living in group quarters. Currently, the ACS is being conducted in 31 diverse sites across the country and has sampled between 800,000 and 900,000 addresses annually since 2000. The ACS will eventually collect long-form data from a national sample of 3 million households a year. This analysis uses data from Census 2000 as well as ACS data collected from 2000 to 2003.

1

There are three parts to the language question on the survey instrument for both data sources. The first part of the question asked respondents whether they spoke a language other than English at home. Those who responded "Yes" to this part were asked what language they spoke. The third part of the question asked respondents to indicate how well they spoke English. English ability will not be addressed in this analysis.

Methods

The first part of the analysis compares national level data from both data sources on the percentage of people 5 years and older who speak a language other than English at home. This section also examines the most common and least common languages spoken to see whether the two data sources capture this level of detail equally.

Next, state level data is examined briefly to determine which states have high and low proportions of non-English language speakers. This will facilitate the analysis of the smaller geographies.

The final part of the analysis focuses on two ACS test sites from the states with high proportions of non-English speakers and two sites from the states with low proportions to see how these data on language status and language spoken at home perform over time. ACS test sites are used because they mirror what the full implementation of the survey will look like. This analysis will look at the percentage of the population 5 years and over who speak a language other than English as well as the percentage speaking the most common languages in these sites over the four-year period. The ACS test site data will be compared to county data from Census 2000.

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[1] See Hyon B. Shin and Rosalind Bruno. *Language Use and English-Speaking Ability: 2000*. Census 2000 Brief C2KBR-29. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2003.