

# **Assessing the Accuracy of Data Collected on the Foreign Born: Findings from an Evaluation of the American Community Survey**

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## **Abstract for the 2005 annual meeting of the Population Association of America**

This paper will summarize quantitative and qualitative findings from a multi-year, Census Bureau-funded evaluation of the foreign-born data collected by the American Community Survey/Census 2000 Supplementary Survey (ACS/C2SS). The ACS/C2SS is in line to become one of the most important sources of information on the foreign-born population living in the United States. With the end of the Census long form, the ACS will become the primary data for the foreign born at the state and local level. The evaluation represents one of the few external reviews of ACS/C2SS data quality. It employs a number of data evaluation techniques, including a review of ACS methodological documentation, focus groups of the Census Bureau field representatives administering the survey, data consistency checks, and benchmarking analyses. The findings have uncovered a number of sources of non-sampling error particular to the foreign-born population. Given the importance of the ACS to those wanting to understand the changing nature of immigration, our work is both relevant and timely.

## ***Methods***

The methods used for the evaluation attempt to uncover sources of non-sampling error and were designed to take into account the complex sampling design of the survey. One of the most innovative aspects of the research design was a series of intensive focus groups conducted with a representative sample of field representatives both at the Bureau's national calling centers and in the Houston area. These individuals, who are on the "front lines" of data collection, provided a rich source of information on the administration of the survey.

In addition, a host of data consistency checks were conducted on unedited ACS/C2SS data to determine the extent to which foreign-born respondents offered implausible and/or inconsistent responses to survey questions. The C2SS employs a complex data collection method: different modes of data collection are employed, including mail-in questionnaires, and for those who fail to return the questionnaire, follow-up telephone interviews and in-persons interviews are conducted (if necessary). Because the mode in which data are captured influences the weighting and creates potential interview effects, the evaluation explores the probability that the foreign born will be captured later in the modes of data collection. Finally, an extensive series of

benchmarking checks of ACS/C2SS were conducted against other data sources both at the national, state, and local level. These benchmarking analyses were conducted using the 2000 Census and the reweighted March 2000 CPS

### ***Findings***

While internal reviews of the overall quality of the ACS have been conducted, our evaluation to date has uncovered a number of important new findings that go well beyond those reported by the Census Bureau. For example, the focus group data indicate a number of sources of non-sampling error in the administration of the survey. Issues surrounding language are a significant barrier to data collection. Moreover, the results of the focus groups also indicate that coverage error and selection bias may exist in the administration of the ACS/C2SS. Interviewer training and question wording were also found to be sources of non-sampling error.

In addition, the multi-nominal logit analysis reveals that even after controlling for a variety of factors, the foreign born are much more likely than natives to be captured in the in-person phase of data collection, increasing the standard errors for the foreign born and increasing the potential for in-person interviewer effects. In fact, preliminary results from internal consistency checks show strong evidence of interviewer effects. Results from the benchmarking analyses, however, suggest that the ACS seems to produce similar estimates as the Census and CPS at the national level. However, initial findings indicate significant differences at the state level.