

# RESEARCH REPORT

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*Gathering, Interpreting, and Using Demographic Data:  
An Introduction*

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## ***Introduction***

In developing strategies for evangelism, church extension, and ministry in a community, it is important to know as much as possible about the people who live there. How many are there? What race are they? How old are they? What kind of housing do they live in? How much education do they have? It is also important to understand the community itself. Is it new or well established? Is it growing, stable, or declining? What is the unique identity of the community? The five-step process outlined below is one approach for gathering and interpreting data for your area.

## ***Step 1: Focus Attention***

### **Clearly define study areas**

In order to develop a deeper understanding of the people in a community, it is helpful to define that area geographically. These definitions may change as your understanding increases or as the work develops, but the process is important in learning more about the area.

The best geographical areas to use in defining your study area are those used by the U.S. Census Bureau. The following describes the various census geographies.

### **States**

The 50 states and the District of Columbia.

### **Counties and County Equivalents**

The primary divisions of most states: counties for 48 states; parishes for Louisiana; boroughs and census areas for Alaska; independent cities in Maryland, Missouri, Nevada, and Virginia; Yellowstone National Park in Montana.

### **Minor Civil Divisions (MCDs)/Census County Divisions (CCDs)**

Minor civil divisions generally are legally defined county subdivisions such as towns and townships. In 21 states where MCDs do not exist or are not adequate for reporting subcounty statistics, the Census Bureau, in cooperation with state and local officials, delineates county subdivisions known as census county divisions.

### **Census Tracts/Block Numbering Areas (BNAs)**

Census tracts are small, locally delineated statistical areas within selected counties, generally having stable boundaries and, when first established by local committees, designed to have relatively homogeneous demographic characteristics. Block numbering areas are delineated by state officials or the Census Bureau for the purpose of grouping and numbering blocks in counties without census tracts.

Census tracts and BNAs are the smallest geographical units for which the Home Mission Board provides census data. Data users are responsible for contacting

their local governmental agencies, libraries, or state data centers in order to access maps and determine which tracts or BNAs comprise their study areas.

### **Places**

Incorporated places are concentrations of population, such as cities, that have legally prescribed boundaries, powers, and functions. Densely settled population centers without legally defined corporate limits or corporate powers are defined by the Census Bureau in cooperation with state officials and local data users, and are called census designated places (CDPs).

### **Metropolitan Areas**

A metropolitan area (MA) contains either a place with at least 50,000 inhabitants, or an urbanized area and a total population of at least 100,000 (75,000 in New England). Contiguous counties (cities and towns in New England) are included if they have close social and economic links with the area's population nucleus.

Although the Census Bureau (and the Home Mission Board) makes data available for ZIP codes, these areas are postal geography, not official census geography units. A computer algorithm allocates the population to ZIP code areas. The resultant data and reports for ZIP areas are only estimates of the actual population within each postal area. ZIP code boundaries are also subject to change by the postal service between the decennial censuses. Data for ZIP code areas are less reliable than data for census tracts.

### **Is Geography Still Important?**

Many persons are now saying the geography is becoming less important for looking at the ministry areas of churches, old or new. What is important, according to them, are factors such as age, income, race/ethnicity, lifestyle issues, etc. Whether or not this is true, people still live somewhere! Identifying the specific geographical area of a church, whether that area is broadly or narrowly defined, remains an important first step in understanding the people that church hopes to reach. It may be that as you dig deeper (see below), you will want to identify particular demographic factors for analysis. Even then, these factors will be tied to geography.

### ***Step 2: Gather Data***

#### **HMB 1990 Census Report**

The Research Division of the Home Mission Board has prepared a five page report which summarizes key demographic items for any geography mentioned above. This report presents much of the data in a graphical format, with comparisons of the area to the entire United States. Twelve tables of information cover the following important demographic factors: population counts, population trends, age, race, Hispanic population, Asian and Pacific Islander population, household types, housing units, household income and persons in poverty, educational attainment, year housing units were built, and mobility of the population. This report is available at no charge to Southern Baptists. In addition, a one page demographic update, including recent estimates and five-year projections of key

items such as race, income, and age is available. Ordering information is found below (see *HMB Resources Contact* on page 6).

### **Key Questions**

The materials from the Home Mission Board are not the only sources of demographic data or of help in interpreting the data. No matter what your source, however, the data should aid in answering some key questions about your community:

- How many people live in the community?
- Is the community's population growing, stable, or declining? How does the rate of growth compare with other areas?
- What is the age structure of the community? Lots of children? Senior adults? Largely "baby boomers"?
- What is the racial/ethnic mix?
- What is the mix of household and family types? Married couples with children? Single parent families? One person households (persons living alone)? Other nonfamily households (roommates)?
- What kind of housing do people live in? Single unit? Multihousing (apartments)? Mobile homes? What percent of the housing is renter occupied?
- How much money do households and families make? Predominantly high income, middle income, or low income? How many persons are in poverty? What percentage of the population?
- How well educated are the adults in the community? High school graduates? College graduates?
- How new is the housing? When was most of it built?
- How mobile is the population? How many are relative newcomers to the community? Did recent movers move locally or come from out of state?
- What do people do for a living? Where do they work?
- What are the lifestyle characteristics of the households? What do they do for leisure, for fun?
- How is the community changing? Is there racial/ethnic, age, or socio-economic transition?

You may think of additional questions your data source does not answer. If you decide that answering those questions is vital for your strategy planning, you may want to dig deeper (see *Step 4: Dig Deeper*).

### **ACORN Report**

The ACORN report, made available by the Research Division of the HMB (through CACI Marketing Systems, Inc.), provides lifestyle or market segmentation data. ACORN (A Classification Of Residential Neighborhoods) is a consumer classification system developed by marketers to help identify the buying habits of households. ACORN analyzes, profiles, and classifies households according to the type of residential area in which they are located. The entire country's 226,000 neighborhoods (block groups, in

census terminology) were analyzed and sorted by 61 characteristics such as income, age, household type, home value, occupation, education, age, and other characteristics.

Using statistical techniques, neighborhoods with similar characteristics are grouped together. The result is a classification of every residential neighborhood into one of 40 residential types. While the added value of ACORN and other market segmentation systems is debatable, they do provide one more way of looking at and thinking about your community. ACORN reports and user guides are available for any of the geographies discussed above.

The ACORN report lists the percentage of households for each consumer type. The report also shows the base percentage, that is the percentage of all U.S. households that comprise each type. An index compares the local area to the U.S., with the U.S. base set at 100. Consider the following questions when analyzing the ACORN report. What are the major market groups? What are their lifestyle characteristics (see *ACORN User's Guide*)?

### ***Step 3: Analyze and Interpret Data***

#### **HMB 1990 Census Guide**

The Research Division of the Home Mission Board has produced an interpretive manual that accompanies the HMB 1990 Census Report. Its purpose is to enable church and associational leaders to use the 1990 Census effectively. The guide is a companion piece to the 5-page census report. On page 1 of the guide you will find a step-by-step process that will help you interpret census data using the HMB 1990 Census Report. Following the introduction, interpretive helps related to each table in the HMB 1990 Census Report contain questions, observations, and possible implications that will assist in making the data meaningful for your area.

#### **Interpretive helps**

The following hints may help in interpreting demographic data. Interpretation involves understanding the *meaning* of data and what its *implications* are for strategy planning.

- Compare with another community, with the state, or with the United States.
- Look at raw numbers *and* percentages. Note those categories that contain large numbers or high percentages. Identify the predominant characteristics for each demographic characteristic.
- Identify distinctive or unique characteristics.
- Pay attention to trends or patterns in the data.
- Begin to consider the implications of the characteristics of the community and its people for church starting, evangelism, and ministry.

## ***Step 4: Dig Deeper***

### **Local Sources**

Local agencies often have a wealth of data, some of which may provide further assistance in answering questions you may have about your community. A few examples are noted below.

#### **Planning or other governmental agencies**

- may have detailed census or economic data, as well as census tract maps; may also generate local population projections.

#### **Libraries/state data centers/universities**

- may have a reference section devoted to data on your community; may have local data or special research studies; may have data on economic trends.

#### **Builder groups/Realtors/utilities**

- may have information on development plans, recent movers, or fast growing subdivisions.

#### **Board of Education**

- may have demographic data on students or growth trends among the various schools in the community.

#### **Chamber of Commerce**

- often collects interesting information on the community.

#### **Community groups/social service agencies/council of churches**

- may have detailed information on people groups, or information on other ministries and programs in the community.

### **More Census Detail**

You may find that the census data in standard reports do not answer the questions that have emerged from studying your community. For example, you may want to know more about the ancestry of the population, income differences among racial groups, or occupations of persons in your study area. Much more detailed data are available from the 1990 Census. Your library or planning agency may be a repository of these detailed data. The Research Division of the Home Mission Board also has detailed census data and can help you find the information you need.

As discussed above, you may be interested in particular demographic factors. For example, you may want to know where in your county the highest concentration of baby boomers is located. This might involve separating your county into county subdivisions, or even census tracts, and finding those geographies with the highest percentage (or numbers) of persons between ages 25 and 44. Again, a visit with your local reference

librarian or a city planner may help in getting you the information to answer your questions.

### ***Step 5: Putting it All Together***

#### **Develop a Profile of Your Area**

After defining your area, gathering data, and interpreting the data, develop a profile of the community you have studied. This will likely be a summary of the important characteristics of the people and the community. These data, presented concisely, should give a quick picture of the area and its people. The profile needs to provide necessary information that will help in developing strategies for evangelism, extension, and ministry. You may need to alter the profile later as you continue to gather additional information and gain new insight into the community.

- An example: *The community is a growing area with a large number of highly educated, white, baby boomer families living in new, single unit, detached housing with household incomes generally ranging from \$50,000 to \$75,000.* It may be that the community has more than one population group (e.g., several racial/ethnic or socio-economic groups). A more specific, detailed profile might be necessary to give an accurate overview of the community.

#### **Implications for Strategy Planning**

Several important questions may arise from the profile. What factors may affect the development of new work? Are there unmet needs? Are there unreached people groups? If you are looking at a number of areas, are there entire communities without an adequate evangelical witness? What evangelism strategies will likely be most effective in reaching the people in the community? What kinds of churches and ministries will be best suited to reaching the community? What kinds of leadership will be most effective? Under the direction of the Holy Spirit, the *HMB 1990 Census Guide* may help you in surfacing the questions, and the responses, that are right for your area.

### ***HMB Resources Contact***

#### **Sources of data**

There are many sources for obtaining data on communities. The Research Division of the Home Mission Board provides several free resources designed to help you learn more about the people in your community. These resources give information on people, as well as help interpret those data for church and associational strategy planning.

- *HMB 1990 Census Summary*—A one-page report which provides basic demographic characteristics for a community, as well as population trends and projections.
- *HMB 1990 Census Report*—A five-page report which gives information similar to the *HMB 1990 Census Summary*, with the addition of graphs and comparisons with the entire United States.

- *HMB Demographic Update*—A one-page data summary which provides current-year estimates and five-year projections for key demographic characteristics such as race, age, and household income.
- *HMB 1990 Census Guide*—An interpretive manual that accompanies the five-page *HMB 1990 Census Report*. Interpretive helps relating to church planting, church growth, evangelism, and ministry are provided for each of the data tables in the *HMB 1990 Census Report*. These interpretive helps give questions, observations, and possible implications that assist in making the data meaningful for your area.
- *ACORN Report*—A one-page summary report which provides lifestyle or market segmentation data. Every neighborhood in the country is classified into one of 40 residential types (plus three nonresidential neighborhood segments). *The ACORN User's Guide* is helpful in interpreting the ACORN report (see below).
- *ACORN User's Guide*—An interpretive manual that accompanies the *ACORN Report*. This manual gives a two-page summary for each of the market segments, summarizing lifestyle, demographic, socioeconomic, residential, and location characteristics of the households in that segment. *The ACORN User's Guide* may be ordered (at cost) from CACI Marketing Systems, 1100 N. Glebe Rd., Arlington, VA 22201; 800/292-2224; 703/243-6272 (Fax).

If you wish to order any of these resources (except the *ACORN User's Guide*), or have questions about gathering, interpreting, and using data for your community, please contact:

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