

Abstract

In 1996, the Census Bureau began field tests of the American Community Survey (ACS). This new survey is designed to produce timely estimates of population, demographics, income, and poverty rates for local areas down to the census tract level. After full implementation of the ACS, it would replace the current source of such data, the Decennial Census Long Form (Posey et al., 2003, Bureau of the Census, 2002). The ACS offers many positive benefits. To take full advantage of the opportunities it presents, users need to be aware of methodological differences between the ACS and other surveys before using this survey. This paper examines three features of the ACS which differ from the CPS and Long Form: a rolling sample, a rolling reference period, and Consumer Price Index (CPI) adjustments to the (rolling) income data – the ACS uses these adjustments to approximate fixed sampling and reference periods. The paper addresses the relative effect of these major methodological differences. Using the 1996 SIPP panel, pseudo ACS, CPS and Long Form estimates are constructed for 1998; replicating the sampling, reference period, weighting and CPI-adjustments of each survey as faithfully as possible. A stepwise approach in which one of the three features is changed at a time pinpoints the contribution to differences in estimates from each factor. The estimates all use SIPP income data, and cannot include differences in income and poverty estimates attributable to differences in the number of income questions, the recall periods or family relationship measures among the surveys. In order to approximate what is actually seen when these surveys are compared, additional adjustments reflecting the impact of differences in income questions, recall period and family relationship measures are made to the CPS, ACS and Long Form estimates obtained using SIPP.