In the next few months, the release of new census data will provide a wealth of demographic and socioeconomic information on various population groups. Both American Community Survey (ACS) and decennial census data will be released in December. This is going to cause some confusion because of differences between the two. The ACS measures the changing social and economic characteristics of the population. The decennial Census 2010 numbers to be released by December 31 will be for apportionment of seats in the House of Representatives among the states.

For an understanding of the American Community Survey, you need to know that the decennial census was conducted differently in 2010 than in 2000. The long form was dropped and only the short form was used. Think of the short form as a “snapshot” of the United States for 2010. So how are we going to get the detailed demographic, social, and economic information that was associated with the long form? The ACS has been and is now collecting and reporting this information.

ACS data will be produced every year. It makes sense to do the smaller survey every year and collect data over time to keep a current picture of population demographics between each decennial census. This means we don’t need to wait ten years for new data on such economic indicators as employment status (Table B23001 or S2301).

The American Community survey started releasing one- and three-year estimates in 2007 and is expected to release five-year estimates in early December. By necessity, the sample size of the ACS is smaller than that of the Census 2000 long-form sample. To produce statistics that can be released at local geographic levels, ACS data are combined to produce 12, 36, and 60 months of data that comprise the one-, three-, and five-year estimates. The population thresholds for the one-year and three-year estimates are 65,000 and 20,000, respectively, while the five-year estimates will be available for areas as small as census tracts and block groups. The primary advantage of using multiyear estimates is the increased statistical reliability of the data for less populated areas and small population subgroups.

How do you know when to use decennial census data or ACS? Consider that the main function of the decennial census is to provide counts of people for the purpose of congressional apportionment and legislative redistricting. The primary purpose of the ACS is to measure the changing social and economic characteristics of the U.S. population. Further, the Current Population Survey (CPS) is the official source of income and poverty data. The Census Bureau recommends that ACS information on income and poverty be used to supplement CPS data for areas below the state level and for population subgroups (such as age, sex, race, Hispanic origin, and type of household) at the state level.