ISSUES AND ANSWERS:

QUALITY AND COMPARABILITY OF AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY (ACS) ESTIMATES

Confirmation of Good Quality and Plausibility of Estimates:

The Census Bureau has had confirmation of the general good quality and plausibility of the ACS estimates from the ACS development program so far. During the Demonstration Phase, starting with four sites in 1996 and expanding to nine in 1998, it was possible for local experts to compare the estimates from the ACS to the 1990 census and see that the ACS results were generally plausible, given what they knew about changes in the area since 1990. Also during this period, basic measures of survey quality, such as rates of missing data, standard errors, and measures of coverage/completeness of the sample were collected for these sites.

The Census Bureau also has examined national measures of survey quality from the Census 2000 Supplementary Survey (C2SS), and compared C2SS estimates for basic ("short form") population characteristics with the Census 2000 counts. The Census Bureau also has compared C2SS state and national estimates to some of the ongoing household surveys. We will soon be comparing C2SS and Census 2000 long form estimates.

The C2SS and comparison site data have met or exceeded expectations as far as the basic measures of survey quality, using the 1990 census long form as a benchmark until comparable 2000 long form measures are available. The Census Bureau has reported on these results to advisory committees, improving our analyses based on their comments. A future Survey Data Quality report will give a comprehensive review of this information.

Different Surveys of Good Quality Can Give Different Results

As far as comparability with other surveys and censuses, it needs to be recognized that different surveys of good quality can give different results depending on what questions they ask, what time periods they cover, and how the interviews are conducted. In previous censuses, there have been significant measurement differences between the general-purpose census long form and some of the special-purpose national surveys.

In general, the Census Bureau expects the ACS to give results more similar to the long form than to other surveys, but there are some deliberate differences in definitions that we expect to cause the ACS to give somewhat different results than Census 2000 for some questions. To put this in context, note that there were major changes in data collection between the 1960 and 1970 censuses, and a major change in the measurement of race between the 1990 and 2000 census.

For very clear-cut characteristics such as whether a housing unit is owned or rented, consistent results are expected across surveys. For characteristics that are not always clear-cut, some moderate differences can be expected. Examples are:

1) who is "living and staying" at an address, which can affect whether the unit is classified as occupied or vacant, and

2) whether a person without a job is searching “actively” for a new one, which determines whether the person is unemployed or “not in the labor force.”

For very subjective items, such as whether a Hispanic respondent’s self-identified “race” is reported as “White” or as “Hispanic,” which is ultimately recorded as "Some Other Race," the results may be very sensitive to exactly how the question is presented to the respondent.

Exact Agreement Is Not Expected

Exact agreement of the ACS with either the long form or other surveys is not expected, for the reasons just discussed. What is important is whether the differences have sensible explanations that do not reflect poorly on the quality of the ACS data collection, taking into account that it is meant to be a general-purpose survey to produce sub-national data comparable in quality to the census long form.

The Census Bureau has observed some differences between the C2SS and Census 2000, and between the C2SS and other household surveys. The causes of these differences are being studied in depth.

Next month, Issues and Answers Number 2 will discuss deliberate changes, subtle measurement differences, and sampling error.