Mining the Census for Every Beat

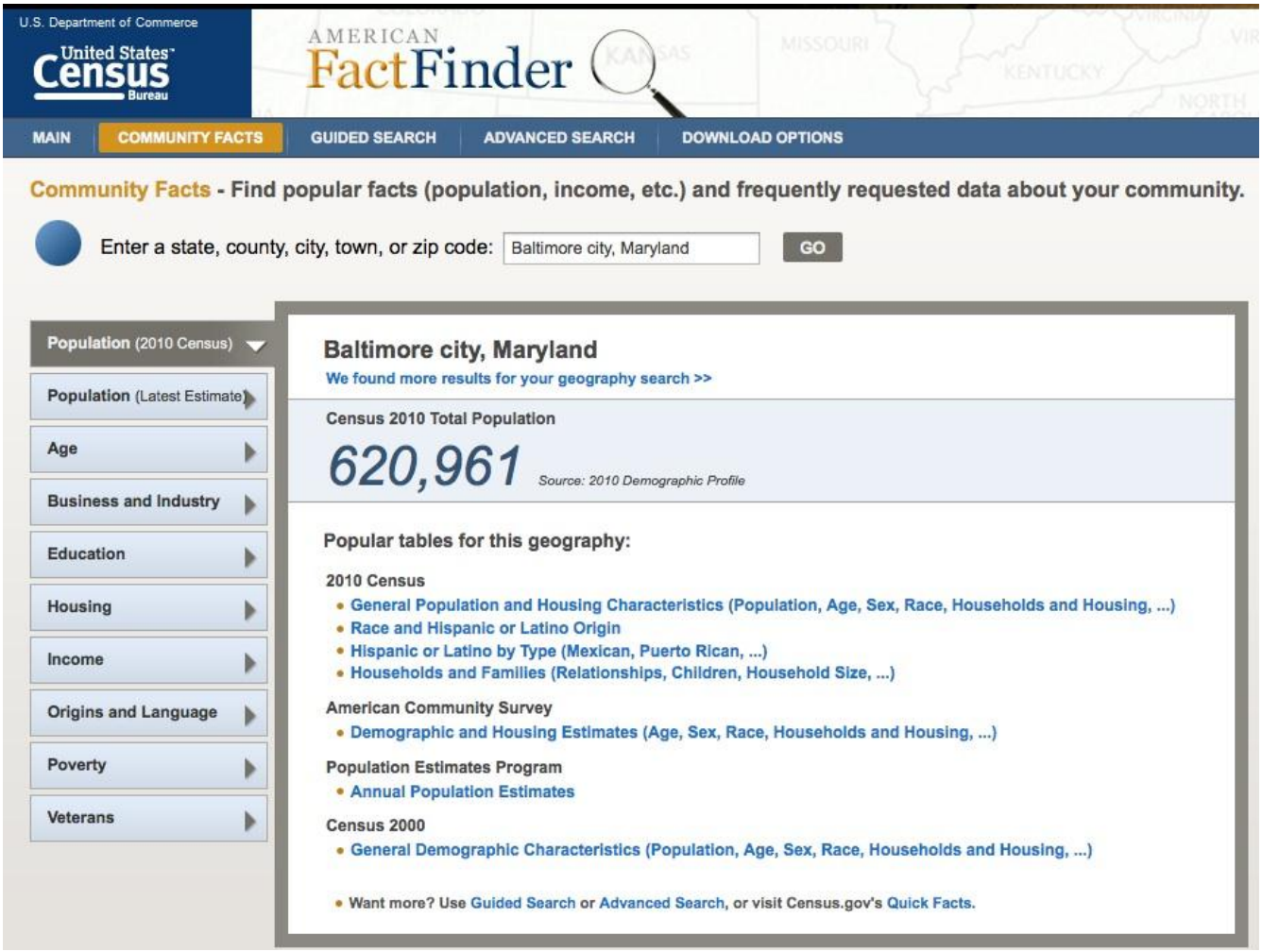
Ronald Campbell
714/425-5169
campbellr@verizon.net

The U.S. Census Bureau collects an astonishing variety of information and makes it available for free on the Web. To understand what's available, it helps to know how the Census gathers information in the first place. Here are my four favorite sources:

- Decennial census: Taken, as the name implies, once a decade in years that end in zeroes. It attempts to count every man, woman and child in the United States. Provides population data by age, sex, race and household for just about every geography conceivable, from the nation down to a city block. Semi-guaranteed to be 100% accurate.
- American Community Survey: The Elvis of surveys, the ACS samples 3.3 million households a year. ACS asks about housing, economics and social demographics. Its huge sample size makes ACS highly accurate for states and big cities, less so for mid-size and smaller cities and towns. To get around that problem, the Census combines data from several years for smaller geographies:
    - 1-year ACS: Excellent for most states and large cities; margins of error become problematic with smaller populations. Not reported for cities or counties under 65,000. You should probably ignore 1-year ACS for jurisdictions under 100,000 residents.
    - 3-year ACS: Combines three years worth of data; data is normed to the latest year. In theory this product is good for cities and counties with populations as small as 20,000. Again, however, the margin of error can be quite large, especially for smaller subgroups within those jurisdictions.
    - 5-year ACS: Good down to the census tract level, a geography that typically has 4,000 to 6,000 residents in boundaries that remain stable from decade to decade in all but the fastest growing regions. Again, however, beware the margins of error.
- Annual Population Estimates: You can probably guess what this is -- yearly population estimates for all states, counties and incorporated cities. Includes estimates of births, deaths and net natural increase, net domestic migration and net foreign immigration. The estimates are further broken down to the county level by age, sex and race.
- Current Population Survey: Run by the Census in partnership with the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the CPS is the source for the monthly unemployment rate. A key part of the CPS, the Annual Social and Economic Supplement or ASEC, is an expanded survey taken each March since the mid 1960s. Widely used by scholars, ASEC is a gold mine of information about the American economy. But the sample size is too small to use for all but the largest states.

The easiest place to tap these resources is American FactFinder (factfinder2.census.gov).

FactFinder offers several ways to access data. The simplest of the many FactFinder tools is **Community Facts**; just type a state, county, city or ZIP, hit the GO button, and you'll get a list of information. For a deadline story, much of what you need is probably here.



Notice those 10 tabs on the left side? You can click on each tab to bring up a window of data. So if you're working on a story about, say, education, click on the Education tab and you'll discover that 79.6% of Baltimore residents have graduated high school. A second mouse click will bring up a table on educational attainment from the ACS showing that among Baltimore residents aged 25 to 34, 39.4% have at least a bachelor's degree -- nearly twice the rate of residents aged 45 to 64.

Bottom line: If you cover a city or county, you should spend an hour or two exploring Community Facts for your beat. You'll probably find enough new story ideas, or hard facts to back up story ideas that were already on your list, to justify your trip to NICAR.

But wait, as the breathless infomercial announcer says, there's more!

Community Facts delivers information pre-packaged. The real deal in the Census is its tables, thousands upon thousands of tables with data sliced and diced in almost every imaginable way:

- By year
- By dataset (decennial, ACS, etc.)
- By geography
- By topic

Take for example Table B25001 - Housing units. It contains two numbers, the estimated housing units in a given geography for a given year and the margin of error for the estimate. It appears in 18 versions of the ACS (2005 through 2012 in 1-, 3- and 5-year flavors) and for thousands of geographies. Pick a year and a state, county or place, and you'll find a Table B25001 to match.

Now suppose you want to know the number of homeowners and renters by race in your county. In Census-speak, "tenure" is the word for home ownership. Table B25003 breaks down tenure -- owner-occupied vs. renter-occupied for all occupied housing units, again with margins of error. There is also a series of tables that displays tenure by race, each identified by a letter: B25003A (white) through B25003I (Hispanic). And again, those tables are available for several years and thousands of geographies.

Census has literally thousands of tables like these on hundreds of topics. But you won't find them in Community Facts. To get the key to the Census treasure chest, you must learn to navigate the often-balky search tools at FactFinder. **Guided Search** will get you partway there, though I find it clumsy. The real power tool for finding tables is **Advanced Search**. I described Advanced Search thoroughly in a 2012 NICAR tipsheet (#3767), back when it was almost the only feature of FactFinder. As IRE members, you have free access to that tipsheet. Some details of Advanced Search have changed since I wrote the tipsheet, but overall it works much the same as it did then.

Finally, here are some general tips for mining the census:

- Alphabet soup: Many tables are repeated in a series -- first for the geography and then by race with the table number followed by a letter. The lettering is consistent: A is for white. B is for black or African-American. C is for American Indian and Alaskan Native. D is for Asian. E is for Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander. F is for some other race. G is for two or more races. H is non-Hispanic white. I is for Hispanic or Latino.
- The search tools are literal rather than conceptual. If you search for tables from the 2012 ACS concerning "tenure" and "race", you will get just three selections; several other tables that are implicitly about tenure and race, for example "Tenure (White Alone Householder)", don't appear in this search because the word "race" is absent from the table's title and subject. If a result appears too narrow, eliminate a search term and try again.
- Beware margins of error. My private rule is to discard any results where the margin of error exceeds 10 percent of the estimate. Other reporters tolerate a wider MOE. Ask

yourself this question: If the real number were the worst that the margin of error allows, would you still write a story?

- Read the manuals. Yes, it may give you a headache, but you will never truly understand what's in the ACS until you read at least one of the technical documents explaining which field is which and where it came from. One suggestion among many: 2012 Subjects Definitions for the American Community Survey.

COOL CENSUS LINKS:

American FactFinder: factfinder2.census.gov
A Swiss Army Knife for census reporters.

Census Bureau mothership: http://www.census.gov/
The home page, contains a variety of resources; useful for browsing or quick features.

Census Newsroom: http://www.census.gov/newsroom/
The public information officers at the Census Bureau are, in a word, professional. They get back to you quickly, and if they don't have the answer they can usually put you in touch with someone who can. Which brings me to two other newsroom features:

- Embargoed releases. If you cover census-related topics, sign up. You'll get 24 hours or more head start on complicated stories. But this head start comes with a warning. Census takes its embargo very, very seriously. News organizations have lost their embargo privilege for months at a time for a single violation.
- Access to subject experts. The Census Bureau is rolling in experts. Got a question that a PIO can't answer? He or she will hook you up with an expert - somebody who is intimately familiar with the data and who can talk on the record about it. Or you can find an expert yourself here: http://www.census.gov/aboutus/subjectslist.html

Census Flows Mapper: http://flowsmapper.geo.census.gov/flowsmapper/map.html
This makes tracking county-to-county migration -- once a difficult task -- incredibly easy.