

census data for decision making

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The success of Extension programs depends to a great extent on how well we identify and know our actual and potential clientele. If you agree with that statement, then perhaps you'll also agree that the 1980 Census of Population and Housing and other census materials offer much information that we should use to improve program planning and management in Extension. The question is: Will we take advantage of relevant data available from census sources and, if so, how?

Using Census Data

In recent years, the fastest growing use of census statistics has been by the private sector, where demographic changes have had an impact on private business. According to Walsh,

In the days when department stores served basically homogeneous customer populations in two or three neighboring communities, "seat of the pants" retailing worked well enough. But today, department stores serve diverse geographic areas populated by a range of socioeconomic, age, and ethnic groups. They need to base merchandising on more than instinct.¹

Perhaps we should take a lesson from private business. Corporations use census information to make decisions about forecasting, personnel management, advertising, sales force management, and site location. Firms whose products (diapers, roller skates, or dentures) are sold primarily to specific age groups use census data to analyze relevant age-specific trends. Personnel managers also use sex, race, and ethnic information to avoid discrimination in employment. Extension also is required to provide equal opportunity in both employment and programs—and similarly should use census data.

Managers in private business recognize that as they gain more and better information about their customers, they "become more responsive to opportunity, better control their resources, and more efficiently direct them toward consumer needs."² The use of such knowledge, I believe, applies equally

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to the marketing of Extension programs. No longer can we afford, anymore than private business can, a "seat-of-the-pants" approach to program planning and management.

Program Planning

Extension prides itself on its ability to plan programs with and for individuals and special interest groups. Programs have to be targeted. To do this, agents and lay program leaders need to know the characteristics of the people in their county from the perspective of different areas of program focus. Extension, with increasing frequency, is asked hard questions by local government officials and others—questions whose answers require evaluation of Extension's program outreach and impact relative to its mission. Among the questions we must ask ourselves are: Whom are we trying to reach? Why? With what impact?

Program Profile Model

A new approach to providing population information for program planning and management is needed, one more in line with private firms' use of census information as an aid in making marketing decisions.

A new model for identifying the specific data needed and to provide population information for decision making and general educational use in Extension has been developed and is being used in New York State. This model, intended for application to all program areas, should be useful in other states.

The Cornell Population Information Program was established, with financial support from the director of Extension, within the Department of Rural Sociology. The department has for some years made available general county population profiles. Two part-time departmental staff members, with a combined commitment equal to that of one full-time person, are responsible for the program—one is a social demographer, the other specializes in Extension program development and methodology. Thus, the information program isn't a large, expensive one.

The primary focus of the program is twofold: (1) to identify and develop general and specific program profiles by use of census data and (2) to provide in-service education and other help to the field staff in the interpretation and use of the population information developed. The intent is to provide information that the agents can use.

Here's how the process works. A specific program area such as youth, agriculture, expanded food and nutrition, land use, housing, or local government is identified. A member of the population program staff meets with the administrative

program coordinator in the program area. Together, they discuss the need for a specific program profile and how best to involve agents and faculty in the planning process. One approach is to refer the questions to an appropriate program committee of agents and faculty. In case such a committee doesn't exist, an ad hoc committee comprised of agents and faculty is appointed to determine the specific program's population information needs. This aspect of the process is very important because it brings together the provider of population information (population program staff) and the consumers (agents and faculty) to determine the information needed.

A critical issue for Extension is the extent to which lay program leaders and agents can and should anticipate and respond to population growth, or decline, and its resultant changes. The ability and willingness to anticipate changing local conditions and needs is imperative to the future of Extension.

No attempt is made to identify all the data that might possibly be needed the first time. Specific program profiles will be added to, or otherwise modified, over time as new information becomes available and new needs are identified. To provide for such updating, the material is prepared for use in a loose-leaf binder entitled "People of New York" (PONY). Each county and regional Extension office and interested faculty members are given a PONY notebook.

Profile Examples

Here are two examples of how the census data were used in the profile approach: the first in the area of a youth development program; the second, in an Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP).

4-H Club Profile

The items included in an initial profile for 4-H Club youth development programs were determined using an ad hoc committee approach. The committee was particularly concerned with the need to increase program enrollment among 9-to-19-year olds despite their declining number in our society and the changing characteristics of their families.

For long-range program planning purposes, a profile was chosen that included the number of youth 9 years old and younger, in single year groupings by race and ethnic origin. Also included was information on trends in family characteristics thought to be affecting the ability of the youth to participate in 4-H Clubs and other special interest groups . . . for example,

trends in the number of children living in low-income families, single-parent families, families where the mother worked, or some combination of these. This information, it was believed, would help agents and others to evaluate, among other conditions, the potential number of young clients and the degree to which Extension's program would be successful in enrolling them.

EFNEP Profile

The profile for the EFNEP program demonstrates the variation in data needs for specific program areas. The profile for this program area included the following: the number of families, by race, with children under 18 years of age; the income characteristics of low-income families, by race, and with children under 18 years of age; the number of low-income people 18-59 years of age not enrolled in school and not high school graduates; the number of overcrowded housing units as a percentage of all housing units; and the number of single-parent families in the labor force with children under 18 years of age.

Other Profiles

County Extension staff response to the Population Information Program has been supportive. County program use, for example, has included the analysis of population profiles with Schuyler County leaders (including Extension program leaders) and school administrators as they consider new programs for youth. In Chemung County, the selection and analysis of census data with municipal, county, and regional planners were part of a study of demographic changes occurring in the county and implications for local programs, including Extension's.

Staff Development

A second, equally, important part of the Population Information Program is the matter of interpretation and analysis of the census data once they're identified. Agents are expected to use the data in program planning and management. The Population Information Program sponsors in-service education for agents to increase their ability to interpret, analyze, and use census data. The program also provides limited reference material, census tape processing, and general analytical support for application of census information to Extension program needs. Some of the training is conducted directly with agents and some in cooperation with the staff associated with specific program areas.

Toward the Future

A critical issue for Extension is the extent to which lay program leaders and agents can and should anticipate and respond to population growth, or decline, and its resultant changes. The ability and willingness to anticipate changing

local conditions and needs is imperative to the future of Extension.

To reach out to people, we need to know the characteristics of our actual and potential clientele. Doing a better job of targeting programs to clientele could, in addition to being more cost effective, increase the ultimate impact of our programs. Perhaps the population information model outlined here, or some adaptation of it, will be of value in other states. Whatever approach is used, Extension agents can't afford to ignore the vast source of information about people that is available through census data. After all, reaching people is our business.

Footnotes

1. D. L. Walsh, "Department Store Demographics," *American Demographics*, III (September, 1981), 22-24.
2. M. L. Cohen, "Getting To Know You," *American Demographics*, I (January, 1979), 16-21.