

The Use of Census Bureau's Official Population Estimates and Projections in Policy Design and Program Implementation:

Signe I. Wetrogan
and
Lisa Blumerman

US Census Bureau
Washington, DC

The Population Division of the US Census Bureau prepares and releases annual sets of population estimates for the nation, states, counties and functioning governmental units. These estimates are used for a variety of purposes including the allocation of federal funds, as denominators for important statistical indicators, as population controls for various federal surveys, and as tools in public and private program planning.

Title 13, Section 181 of the U.S. Code requires the Census Bureau to produce annual data on the population size and certain population characteristics (age, race, ethnicity, and sex) for the nation, states, counties, and local units of government with a population of 50,000 or more. This law also requires the Census Bureau to produce biennial estimates of total population for all local units of general-purpose government, regardless of their size. Further, the law specifies the use of such estimates by federal agencies when allocating federal benefits to states, counties, and local units of government when they are based on population size.

Among the federal programs that use these intercensal estimates to allocate funds are the Department of Health and Human Services= Medical Assistance Program (Medicaid) and Social Service Block Grants/Entitlement Grants Program; the Department of Housing and Urban Development=s Community Development Block Grant Program; and the Department of Labor=s Employment and Training Administration – WIA Dislocated Workers Program. About \$200 billion in federal funds is distributed to states and other areas based in some part on intercensal estimates.

This paper will examine the major federal programs that use population estimates in whole or in part to allocate program funds to subnational governmental units. The paper will describe the various uses of the population estimate values in the funding allocations. It will distinguish between the use of population estimates as threshold values in some federal allocation programs and their use as direct inputs in other funding allocation programs

In addition to their use in program fund allocation, the various series of population estimates are used as denominators for important statistical indicators like vital statistics, cancer incidence rates, and per capita income values. Trends over time and differentials among demographic groups and geographic entities in these indicators are often the basis for important policy decisions and program placements.

In addition to their direct use in funds allocation and as denominators for statistical indicators, the population estimates are used as independent population controls in several federal surveys. The monthly population estimates of the US population by age, sex, and sex are used to weight the monthly Current Population Survey and can impact the outcome of sensitive economic measures like the unemployment rates. The estimates by various demographic characteristics are used as controls by a variety of other federal surveys including the National Health Interview Survey and the new American Community Survey,

Although the population estimates produced by the Census Bureau are used on a routine basis for a variety of policy and program purposes, the constraints imposed by a federally consistent and continuously updated set of estimates present challenges to the program administrators. Faced with the need to produce timely and very current population estimates, the Census Bureau often has to accept preliminary or extrapolated data to develop the estimate. When the final or revised data become available or when new data series are developed, the Census Bureau will reproduce an entire time series of population estimates. These final or revised data are likely to improve the accuracy of the population estimates. However, program administrators can not easily reallocate funds to coordinate with the revised population estimates. This challenges as well as others faced by program administrators in merging the constraints and limitations of demographically defensible population estimates with real program and policy needs. dealing will be addressed as part of the paper.