The Census of Governments: Cautionary Tales in Analyzing Government Data

Governments Division
Economic Programs Directorate
U.S. Census Bureau

Presentation for the Association of Public Data User’s Annual Conference

September 16, 2013

Disclaimer: This report is released to inform interested parties of research and to encourage discussion of work in progress. The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the U.S. Census Bureau.
Overview

- Census of Governments Introduction
- Government Organization:
  - Types of Local Governments
  - Criteria for Classifying Governments
- Making Sense of It All
- How We Collect Our Data
- Cautions in Analyzing Government Data:
  - Dependent Agencies
  - Fiscal Years
  - Service Delivery
    - Public Versus Private
    - Type of Government
- Conclusion
- Census of Governments Upcoming Dates
- How to Access Our Data
Census of Governments

Programs

**Quinquennial – Every 5 Years**

- Census of Governments – Years Ending in ‘2’ and ‘7’ (Government Organization, Government Employment, Government Finance)

**Annual**

- Federal, State, and Local Government Employment
- State and Local Government Finance
  - Includes Individual Products on Taxes, Public Pensions, and School Finances

**Quarterly**

- State and Local Government Tax Revenues
- Revenues, Expenditures, and Composition of Assets of the Largest Defined Benefit Public Employee Pension Systems
Types of Governments

Measured and Defined
(Preliminary Estimates)

Source: 2012 Census of Governments (preliminary estimates)
Criteria for Classifying Governments

Existence as an Organized Entity

• Possesses Legal Organization and Corporate Power

Governmental Character

• Public Officers and Accountability

Substantial Autonomy

• Fiscal Independence
• Administrative Autonomy
Making Sense of it All
Across 50 Different Political Structures

Thorough Study into Government Structure, and Function

Uniform Classification of Government Structure
- Types of Governments
- Defined set of Criteria

Uniform Classification of Government Functions
- E.g., Public Health, Welfare, Utilities, Highways

Uniform Set of Definitions Applied Across all States
- Take 50 Different States and Make Them Comparable
How The Data Are Collected and Processed

Collection
- Forms
- Admin Records
- Financial Statements

Processing
- Keying
- Crosswalks
- Compilation

Editing and Review
- Policy Impacts
- External Impacts
- Public Data Comparison
## How The Data Are Collected and Processed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tax Category</th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>Alabama</th>
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<th>Connecticut</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Property Taxes</td>
<td>12,994,218</td>
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<td>215,407</td>
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<td>Other Selective Sales and Gross Receipts Taxes</td>
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<td>72,656</td>
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</table>

**United States Census Bureau**

Economics and Statistics Administration

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Cautions in Analyzing Data

Dependent Agencies

• Census Bureau Definition of a Government
• “Legally Separate Entities”
• Example: New York City
Cautions in Analyzing Data

**Dependent Agencies**

- **Research**: Comparing New York City Census Bureau Financial Data to the New York City Comprehensive Annual Financial Report (CAFR)
- They Don’t Match!
- 40 Dependent Agencies Including
  - New York City Off-Track Betting Corporation
  - Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority
  - United Nations Development District and Corporation
Cautions in Analyzing Data

Fiscal Years

Varying Fiscal Year End Dates Lead to Complications in Defining Reference Period

- States Will Vary on Requirements for Fiscal Years
- Majority End on June 30
- Others May End in August, March, February, etc.

Challenge to Collect Snapshot

- Census Defined Reference Period
- July 1 through June 30
- Some Exceptions
Cautions in Analyzing Data

*Fiscal Years*

**Research**: Using Census Bureau Data to Analyze Government Revenues and Expenditures After a Natural Disaster

- 07/1/2012 to 12/31/2012
- 06/30/2013
- Springfield, IL FY13
- Des Moines, IA FY13

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Cautions in Analyzing Data

Service Delivery: Public versus Private

**Research**: Using Census Bureau Data to Compare Electric Utility Expenditures Across States

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Michigan State &amp; Local Government Amount</th>
<th>Nebraska State &amp; Local Government Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Electric Power Supply</td>
<td>975,025</td>
<td>3,300,044</td>
</tr>
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</table>

(Data in thousands)

**Hypothesis**: Michigan is More Efficient in Providing Electric Power to its Residents

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2011 Annual Surveys of State and Local Government Finances
Cautions in Analyzing Data

Service Delivery: Public versus Private

False!

Majority of Electric Power in Michigan Provided by Private Corporations

• 8 Private Corporations Provide Majority of Electric Power
• Some Municipally Run Utilities
• 2 Special Districts Provide Sole Function of Electric Power

Majority of Electric Power in Nebraska Provided by Government Entities

• Largest Provider of Electric Power is a Special District
• 35 Special Districts Provide Sole Function of Electric Power
Cautions in Analyzing Data

Service Delivery: Type of Government

**Research**: Using Census Bureau Data to Compare Public Education Expenditures Across Cities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elementary and Secondary Education</th>
<th>Chicago City Expenditure Amount</th>
<th>New York City Expenditure Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>18,655,319</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Data in thousands)

**Hypothesis**: ?!

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2011 Annual Surveys of State and Local Government Finances
Cautions in Analyzing Data

Service Delivery: Type of Government

New York City Provides Public Education Through a Dependent Public School System: Community School District

Illinois Has No Dependent Public School Systems:
Illinois had 912 School District Governments in 2007
Majority of Public Education in Chicago Provided by Chicago City School District 299

<table>
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<th>Chicago City SD 299 Expenditure Amount</th>
<th>New York City Expenditure Amount</th>
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<td>Elementary and Secondary Education</td>
<td>4,779,770</td>
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Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2011 Annual Surveys of State and Local Government Finances
Conclusion

• Census of Governments and Related Programs Provide a Rich Source of Data
  – Collect Publicly Available Government Data and Create a Dataset that is Comparable Across 50 States

• Appreciate Complexities of American Political Systems

• Intricacies and Complications Should Lead to Follow-up Questions:
  – Is it an Independent Government or Dependent Agency?
  – When did the Fiscal Year End?
  – How is the Service Provided?
2012 Census of Governments
Provides Economic Statistics about Governments
Acts as a Public-sector Counterpart to Economic Census
Tracks Activity of Governments Over Time

Organization — Number of and Type of Governments; Characteristics of Local Governments by State and Type

- September 2013

Employment — Number of Part-Time and Full-Time Employees; One Month Payroll

- March 2014

Finance — Revenues, Expenditures, Debt, Cash and Securities, Taxes, Pensions

- State Tax Collections: April 2013
- State-Administered Pensions: August 2013
- State Government Finances: December 2013
- State- and Locally-Administered Pensions: April 2014
- State and Local Government Finances: April 2015
How to Access Our Data

www.census.gov/govs
How to Access Our Data

American Fact Finder

### Advanced Search - Search all data in American FactFinder

1. Advanced Search
2. Table Viewer

#### STC001
State Government Tax Collections: 2012
2012 Annual Survey of State Government Tax Collections

**Table View**

This table is displayed with default geographies. Not all columns may be displayed below. Click Back to Search to select other geographies using the search options on the left.

The table contains a total of 53 data columns.

**State Government Tax Collections: 2012**
(Amounts in thousands)

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Thank You

Liz Accetta
Section Chief
Government Organization Branch
US Census Bureau
elizabeth.accetta@census.gov