

# DEMOGRAPHICS FOR CHURCH PLANTERS

## Do Demographics Really Matter?

*Demographics* is a word used to describe statistical information about people and populations. Since church planters give their lives ministering to people, demographics data is very important. This data can help the church planter answer questions like these about an area:

1. How many people live here?
2. How has the number of people changed (population trends)?
3. How is the number of people projected to change?
4. How old are the people?
5. How much money do they make? How much do they pay for their homes? For rent?
6. Where do they work?

7. What race and nationality are they?
8. What language(s) do they speak? English only; bilingual; no English?
9. What are the age and racial trends? Are older people moving in or out? How is the racial mix changing?
10. How well educated are the people?
11. What churches are in the area?
12. What institutions or companies impact the area?

Finding answers to these question is a vital component of planning church planting.

## How to Find Accurate Data

When most people think of demographics data, they think of information about cities, counties, states, and nations. All of this data is available and valuable for a church planter. However, demographics data must be accessed for smaller geographic areas in order to be accurate.

For example, suppose you have identified an area of north central Los Angeles as a potential church planting site. You want to use demographics information to help determine how many tracts you will need to purchase to distribute to the homes in the area and what languages you will need.



The area you have selected is not nearly as large as all of Los Angeles – nor is it as small as an individual suburb. There is a lot of demographic information available about the greater Los Angeles area, and that will all be very helpful for you. For example, you could learn that there are about 16.3 million people and that 40.3% of these are Hispanics. This is helpful, but not accurate for your area. The smaller area

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### SPECIAL POINTS

#### OF INTEREST:

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- *Utilizing the resources on the internet—p.3*
- *Finding growth projections—p.3*

which you have selected is 74.1% Hispanic. If you have only the Los Angeles statistics, you might buy 40% Spanish tracts. If you have more accurate statistics, you'll know you need a lot more than that! Hacienda Heights is an individual city in this area. It has a population of about 53,000. This is helpful, but not accurate for the specific area. The whole area has about 375,000 people. If you have only the Hacienda Heights statistics, you might budget about \$250 for tracts to distribute to the homes. But if you have more accurate statistics, you'll know that you might need \$1000 for tracts. These examples illustrate how *accuracy* is important. *Any* number isn't sufficient; you need the *accurate* number. Avoid the temptation to find any number that sounds good and start quoting it!

How do you find accurate information? By using the smallest possible units of information. For example, for this area I selected a set of zip codes that approximate the area. Zip codes are smaller (and thus more accurate) than cities or counties. Keep reading for explanations of the "units" that the Census Bureau uses.



"Any number isn't sufficient; you need the *accurate* number."

## Sources for Finding Demographics Information

### U.S. CENSUS BUREAU

- How census information is organized
 

The Census Bureau starts with very small areas called "blocks." These aren't quite as small as actual city blocks, but they are still very small areas. "Blocks" are grouped together to form larger units called "block groups," which have 1500 - 3000 people. "Block groups" are grouped into "tracts," which have 1500 - 8000 people in them. "Tracts" then act as subdivisions for zip codes, cities, or counties. The Bureau also delineates Metropolitan Statistical Areas, or large areas of several cities that comprise one urban area. Sometimes these MSAs are grouped into Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Areas (CMSA), which are even larger areas formed when MSAs are adjacent to one another.
- Timing and availability
 

After the census year (on the decade), the Bureau processes and releases information gradually over the next several years. This information is free for public use. It takes several years for all of the information to be readily available. Other companies also take the data, package it in ways that are helpful for the public, and then market it.
- [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov) is the official Census Bureau website
  1. The most basic form to find on the website is the "Summary File" page, available in the "American FactFinder" section of the website. This page has information about population, age, race, households, and housing. These pages are available for cities, counties, MSAs, states, and the entire U.S.A. These pages are very simple to understand, except for the racial information, which is complex because the 2000 census (for the first time) allowed an individual to list more

than one race. There are three different racial sections of the summary form. The first section provides statistics regarding those who listed only one race. The second section includes those who listed multiple races. The third section focuses on the Hispanic population.

2. The website can help you identify the census tracts in an area you are considering. Go to "Maps," "Map Products," and then select "Census Tract Outline Maps."
3. For detailed information, go to "2000 Summary File 1," and then select "detailed tables." From here you can find the same data that is on the "Summary File" pages down to the individual census tract. This is the most accurate way to find demographic information about a specific area.
4. The "Briefs and Special Reports" section gives you access to many of the reports which analyze the census data. For example, CENSR/01-1 provides fascinating maps explaining America's racial mix.
5. The Bureau also has data from older census counts. This information is valuable because (when used in conjunction with newer data) it can reveal demographic trends in an area.

**WWW.CENSUS.GOV**  
is the primary source for Cen-  
sus 2000 data

### PACKAGED CENSUS INFORMATION

Some web sites will package the census information for easy access. Some of these sites are by paid subscription only, while some are free. For example, [www.freedemographics.com](http://www.freedemographics.com) makes it easy to enter a list of zip codes, census tracts, or even block groups and find accurate 1990 and 2000 Census information about that area. You can find information here about such things as employment, housing, and education. Use a search engine to find similar sites.

### PERCEPT

Percept, a company in Rancho Santa Margarita, California, brings together multiple sources to provide excellent demographics studies designed specifically for churches. Their website is [www.perceptnet.com](http://www.perceptnet.com). Percept allows a church planter to define any area: by block groups, census tracts, zip codes, radius from a certain point, or even drawing a shape on a map. Once the area is defined, Percept provides a 27-page report of nearly all of the information a church planter could want. They even provide information about unusual features, such as religious receptivity and the greatest community concerns. This excellent service costs about \$350. They also have a simpler service for less than \$100. This provides a 6-page report on a zip code. All of these materials are professionally presented in full color.

### OTHER WEBSITES

- Individual states have websites that can provide helpful information. Especially valuable are the state "data centers," which study demographics information for that state. You can find a state data center website by searching for "[state] data center" in a search engine. These websites often produce growth projections for the next 10-25 years for the counties in the state. Occasionally they also provide this information by city.
- Individual cities usually have websites. These can sometimes provide important information about key employers, relocation, etc.
- Online phone books provide helpful lists of area churches. If a church has its own website, this will often be listed.



**Finding accurate  
information is vital for  
accurate planning.**



- Most denominations have a website and online directory of their churches. For example, at [www.sbc.net](http://www.sbc.net) you can find the Southern Baptist churches in a city or zip code.
- Many cities have a website for their chambers of commerce. The chamber of commerce has always been a standard source for demographics data. While the Internet has made this less important, contacting the local chamber can still provide very valuable information. See [www.uschamber.org](http://www.uschamber.org) or [www.2chambers.com](http://www.2chambers.com) for a directory of chambers of commerce. Some cities provide information for free, while others charge a small fee.
- Religious research services sometimes provide statistics about church membership. For example, the American Religion Data Archive ([www.thearda.com](http://www.thearda.com)) provides membership statistics for churches in the 280 Census Bureau MSAs.
- Internet search engines are your gateway to this information and much more. Try searching for “[city] demographics,” “[city] statistics,” “[city] relocation,” etc. Try using different search engines to find different information.

### **ROAD ATLASES**

A simple road atlas may tell you something all the other sources didn't. For example, you might find that a community college, a baseball stadium, or the state capitol building is in your area!

### **BOOKS**

A public library will have books that provide information about individual cities. For example:

- *County and City Extra: Annual Metro, City, and County Data Book*
- *Statistical Abstract of the United States*
- *County and City Data Book*
- *Cities of the United States* (released every 4 years)

## **Conclusion**

Proper demographic research is a vital component of planning church planting. Every church planter interested in an area should exhaust the available resources to find every bit of information possible. In combination with a survey trip for on-site analysis, this investment of time will reap great dividends for the church planter.