

The *Studying Congregations* Tool Kit

# WHO'S OUT THERE?



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This resource is made possible by a generous grant from the Lilly Endowment, Inc. Visit [www.studyingcongregations.org](http://www.studyingcongregations.org) for further research and resources.



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### ***About Studying Congregations***

StudyingCongregations.org is the premier resource for understanding religious congregations in the United States. A collaborative project of leading scholars in the fields of sociology of religion, history, and practical theology, the strategies, resources and tools you will discover at StudyingCongregations.org have been designed specifically for theological educators, future religious leaders, and anyone else who wants to go beyond the received wisdom to discover what is happening in religious gatherings today.

This resource is offered to you as a gift of the Congregational Studies Team, an informal research group that has led the way in researching US congregations. Their work is generously funded by The Lilly Endowment.

*Every organization depends on people, and when the characteristics of a population change, the possibilities for the organizations in that community change as well. Some characteristics of a community are readily observable in driving down the street, but others are not. We may be able to guess at what kinds of people live or work in a particular neighborhood, but there are ways to get much more accurate information about current demographics and trends over time.*

# WHICH COMMUNITY?

Before gathering demographic information, it is critical to define your geography. Is it most important to understand one immediate neighborhood or a whole county or metropolitan area? Is there a section of a city that is more relevant? Your answers to these questions may depend partly on whether you are targeting a neighborhood or population group for outreach and/or whether you are thinking about how to expand your membership. That is, geography is as much a matter of mission as of destiny.

You might want to start by mapping your current participants. A large wall map with pins or sticky dots for participant households can be very revealing. If you color code the markers for how long the participants have been part of the group, you may also get a picture of how things have



# GETTING THE DATA.

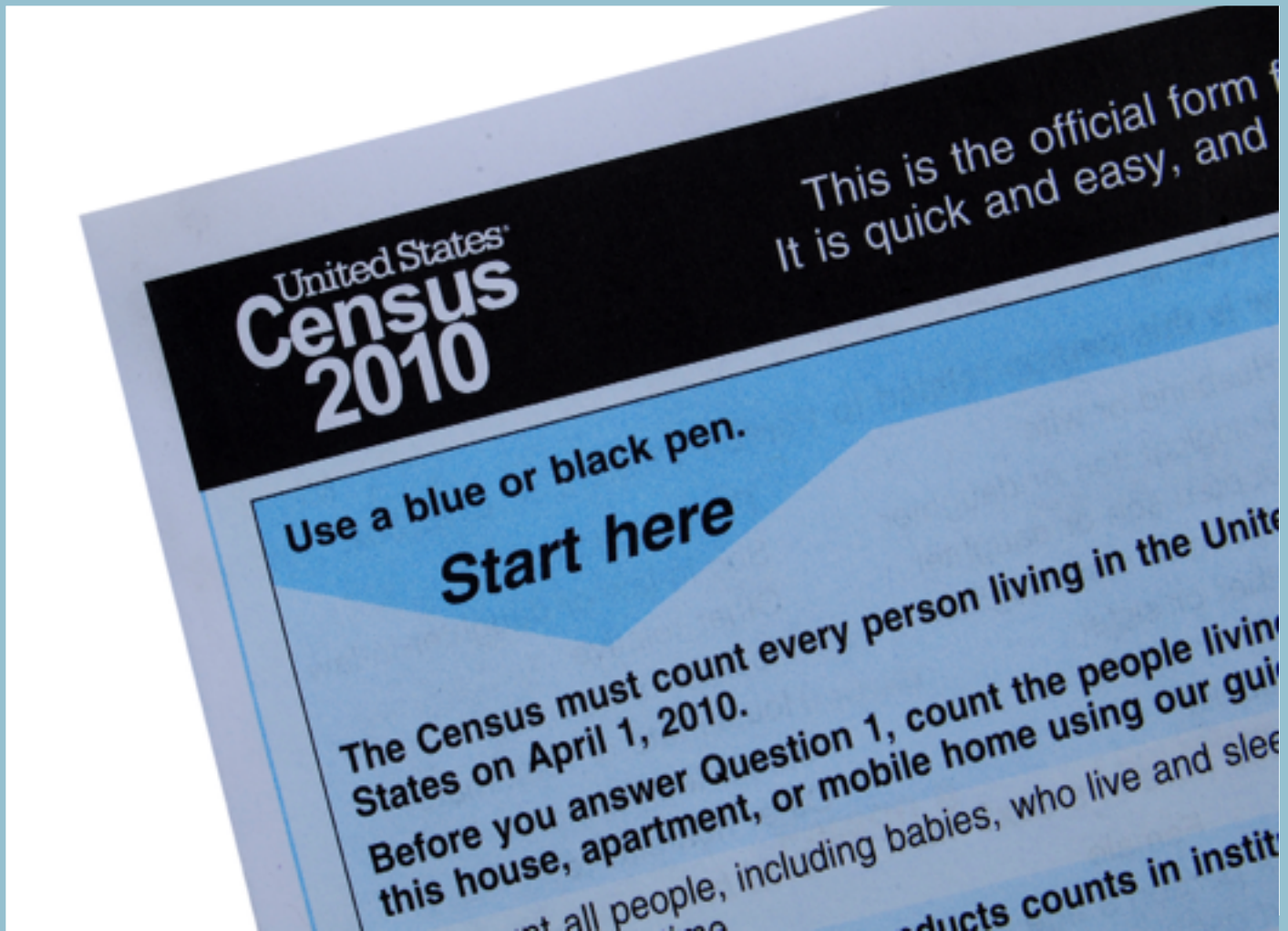
The Census of the United States provides detailed information about income, education, ethnicity, language spoken, household types, age distributions, and much more. You can look at a whole metropolitan area or just your immediate neighborhood (usually a “census tract” or zip code). While the full census happens just once every ten years, there are more frequent “community surveys” that fill in estimates for how things change in the meantime.

All of this is available on the [Census website](#) and is constantly being updated. Log on and look around to see what sorts of resources you can find. If you click “QuickFacts,” for example, you can take a look at some general statistics from your state or local community. Let’s examine Austin Texas, for instance. [screen shot below] While the city’s age, gender, and racial profile looks pretty typical for Texas, that means that a significant proportion of the population (35.1%) identifies as Hispanic or Latino, and a portion of the population that identifies as white (68.3 – 48.7=19.6%) also claims Hispanic descent. That’s probably not a surprise, but it means that white non-hispanic people and the combined Hispanic population are roughly equal in size.

You might then want to go on to map the distribution by race in the county, or examine tables showing poverty rates, or any of dozens of other data points you can find. You might also note in this “Quick Facts” table that there are more multi-unit housing structures and fewer persons per household in Austin than in the state as a whole – perhaps owing to its large student population. Those who do own homes pay more for them than others in the state, however. Just a few items like this may send you looking for more detailed information as you think about how your organization is connected to its larger context.

## Sample Census Data Table: Massachusetts

People QuickFacts	Massachusetts	USA
Population, 2014 estimate	6,745,408	318,857,056
Population, 2013 estimate	6,708,874	316,497,531
Population, 2010 (April 1) estimates bases	6,547,817	308,758,105
Population, percent change - April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2014	3.0%	3.3%
Population, percent change - April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2013	2.5%	2.5%
Population, 2010	6,547,629	308,745,538
Persons under 5 years, percent, 2013	5.5%	6.3%
Persons under 18 years, percent, 2013	20.8%	23.3%
Persons 65 years and over, percent, 2013	14.8%	14.1%
Female persons, percent, 2013	51.5%	50.8
White alone, percent, 2013	83.2%	77.7%
Black or African American alone, percent, 2013	8.1%	13.2%
American Indian and Alaska Native alone, percent, 2013	0.5%	1.2%
Asian alone, percent, 2013	6%	5.3%



# BEYOND THE CENSUS.

**Other Sources.** Some denominations assemble data from various sources and can provide a community profile for you. Additionally, most locales have some sort of planning office. These departments of local government (or offices in a Chamber of Commerce) often extract Census information and add in data of their own. You may find information gleaned from housing sales or produced as part of a development plan, for instance. A school board may have projections for what support services will be needed. Call around – you may be surprised at what you find. And in the process, you may discover some likely allies for whatever future plans you have in mind.

**Reporting what you find.** Once you dive into demographic data, it can be hard to figure out how to communicate the big picture of what you've found. Start by writing up notes in prose about the story you think this information tells. Then think about the half dozen or so statistics that capture the essence of that story. Find someone who is good at graphics and get them to create a few charts that will help you communicate your story.