New Decade, New Estimates

Fifty years and still counting beads

MICHAEL SPAR

The Demographics & Workforce Group at the University of Virginia’s Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service has a long history of producing demographic data and analyses for the Commonwealth. Among all of the data, reports, and research we produce, the annual series of population estimates is probably the best known. However, while many have heard of and use population estimates, most people do not know just how widespread their use is or how critical they are to state and local government planning in Virginia.

POPULATION ESTIMATES WIDELY USED

The Cooper Center has a longstanding history of involvement with the population estimate program. In the early 1960s, the Cooper Center (then known as the Tayloe Murphy Institute) started producing the official population estimates for Virginia, which measure the number of people living in each county and city.

Over the past fifty years, use of the population estimates has grown tremendously by state agencies, local governments, private industries, and the general public. The state legislature and some agencies, such as the Department of Education and the Compensation Board, use population as the basis for the allocation and distribution of revenue and funds. Local governments use changes in population to measure growth and to plan and budget for the future. Retail businesses are always mindful of areas of population growth so they can locate near their customers. Even the general public uses population estimates every day when making decisions such as where to retire or considering topics like the increasing obesity rates of Virginia’s children.

CALCULATING THE ESTIMATES

Since the early 1960s, the population estimates have undergone many improvements. The Demographics & Workforce Group at the Cooper Center conducts ongoing research to ensure we are using current best practices and producing accurate results for our population estimates program. For the last ten years the Cooper Center’s population estimates have been produced using a methodology called “ratio-correlation.” The ratio-correlation method has been extensively tested and shown to be a reliable method for county-level population estimates. The method, in a nutshell, tracks population change in each locality since the latest U.S. decennial census based on five population indicators:

- Housing stock,
- Public school enrollment,
- Births,
- Drivers’ licenses issued, and
- Personal exemptions claimed on state income tax returns.

Changes in these population indicators provide statistical measures of population growth or decline and provide an accurate means for calculating the annual estimates of population size.

REFINING THE ESTIMATES

The Demographics & Workforce Group is nationally recognized for research quality and for the accuracy of our population...
estimates. For the last two decades the Cooper Center’s county and city population estimates have been shown to be more accurate than population estimates prepared by the U.S. Census Bureau. Furthermore, the Census Bureau recently contracted the Cooper Center to help improve the accuracy of Bureau estimates.

In 2007, the Demographics & Workforce Group was one of five organizations nationwide to be awarded a federal grant to conduct research and advise the Census Bureau on how to improve their estimates program. The Cooper Center’s research provided a detailed evaluation of the accuracy of several variations of the housing-unit method, and compared the results to the estimates produced by the ratio-correlation method. Our research suggested that while the housing-unit method generated highly accurate estimates in some localities, the ratio-correlation method was more accurate overall.

Earlier this year, the Demographics & Workforce Group became the only organization to receive multiple awards when it received two out of eight available grants from the Census Bureau. We are now conducting in-depth research on estimate methodology that will provide definitive answers to the question: What is the best method for making population estimates in the next 10 years? We will evaluate the ratio-correlation and housing-unit methods separately using the 2010 U.S. Census results as a benchmark.

FUTURE OF VIRGINIA’S ESTIMATES PROGRAM

The Census Bureau-sponsored research now underway will be completed in late 2011. At that time we anticipate making several enhancements to our own population estimates program. The first major improvement will be the elimination of the “preliminary” population estimate series. Every January the Cooper Center will release one official data series providing the final population estimates for each locality for the previous year. This will help reduce any confusion that exists among data users as to which estimate series should be used.

We are also working toward methodological enhancements, based both on the results of our research with the U.S. Census Bureau and the availability of information from a new data source, the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (See THE COLUMN Fall/Winter 2008). Information collected in this large survey may prove useful in producing reliable population estimates.

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The beat goes on

The Institute’s Email Broadcast Information Service (EBIS) remains active, handling a wide range of topics. While many questions focus on community and local government fiscal stresses, others concern providing quality citizen services. Recent topics include:

- Cemeteries that are abandoned by private owner
- Enterprise Zones used to assist distressed retailers
- Employee Training Plan templates
- Customer Service guidelines/manuals
- Abandoned Property registries

The Institute realizes that with recent staff reductions, many localities have decreased capacity for doing research, developing new programs and policies, and gathering data. We stand ready to help fill these gaps and encourage our members to ask for our assistance. Let us be your “invisible staff person.”

For CSS and EBIS contact Tedd Povar at 804/371-0202 or tep3e@virginia.edu.
SECOND WEDNESDAY SERIES, FALL 2010
See page 3 for details

Customer Service in the Public Sector
October 13, Richmond

Love ’Em or Lose ’Em—Motivating & Retaining Employees
November 10, Richmond

Staying Legal: Employment Law Basics
December 8, Richmond

To register:
Contact Billie Easton
at 804/371-0202 or bee2u@virginia.edu

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SEI (Senior Executive Institute)
SEI is an annual, two-week residential program for senior local government managers.
SEI 2011 Schedule
July 17–29
July 27–29 (Alumni)
Contact Melanie Gillies at 434/982-5512 or mbg4b@virginia.edu.

LEAD (Leading, Educating, and Developing program)
LEAD is a one-week residential program for department/division heads and senior staff.
LEAD Remaining 2010 Schedule
November 7–12

LEAD 2011 Schedule
February 27–March 4
April 3–8
October 16–21
November 13–19
Contact Carmie Rodriguez at 434/243-5031 or carmie@virginia.edu.