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Camp Session 1: ACS Play-Doh

Led by Norma Garza

Notes by Mychal Cohen

Present: Norma Garza, Anthony Galvin, Laura Simmons, April Urban, Sarin Adhikari, Erik Woodworth, Camille Seaberry, Kathy Pettit, Mychal Cohen, Shahrukh Farooq, Michael Williams, Greg Sanders, Denise Linn Riedl, Jake Cowan, Kelly Davila

**Norma**: Are there any questions about the tool?

**Anthony:** Is the tool specific to San Antonio?

**Norma:** No

**Norma**: It is a prototype, so it lives on a computer. It is not live yet. Right now, it aggregates [ACS data up to custom] geographies, but we want it to aggregate variables and calculate margins of error. We want to know if it is useful for everybody. Any ideas for more features? thoughts? We are currently working to make sure the calculations are correct, and that it is showing up correctly. Plan to have it ready before the end of the year. We are working with a programmer, who is donating his time. Getting it to calculate percents and variables. If there is something that an NNIP partner is interested in, they could have a conversation with the programmer

**Anthony:** Is it open source?

**Norma**: We haven’t discussed that yet. But once it goes live it will be available for everybody. Anyone can create custom geographies. If you are interested in specific zips or council area, you can save it, and use it at any time for some other indicator.

**Laura:** Does it know the relationships? Like if you want all counties in NC do you have to type all those in? or does it know what to do?

**Norma**: Yes, that is an option. We had that issue with zip codes, and so we added that into the features

**April:** Do larger geographies need to be selected out? Can I select the eastern half of a census tract

**Norma**: You cannot divide a census tract. Only aggregate them.

**Sarin**: How does your tool handle the different geographic distinctions over time? 2000 vs 2010, the census tracts will be different. Some of them will not match. E.g. this census tract in 2010, was actually two census tracts in 2000. So then we have to go back and create these custom tracts.

**April:** there are two databases that can be used to cross reference.

**Kathy**: The NCD is a proprietary dataset, but now that things have moved on, Brown published a similar dataset for free. NCD is now more of a legacy product. Kathy has a dvd, with the Neighborhood Change Database data, if you sign an agreement you can have access.

**Norma**: Our data will start at 2010 onwards, using ACS and census. We are downloading the datasets and uploading them to the server. Not using an API. So we are double checking the data when we upload. The larger the data sets the more it costs to upload.

**Sarin**: What does the background server look like?

**Norma**: Not sure. Can look and let you know.

**Sarin**: So the output is mostly dropdown files?

**Norma**: Yes

**Anthony:** Do you get to pick what data set you are using depending on geographies, or does it just choose for you?

**Norma**: Yes, you can choose.

**Erik**: How does it deal with medians for the custom geographies? E.g. median household income?

**Anthony:** We have done it by aggregating income, and then weighting by number of households

**Erik**: You can also find the median value based on bend by households, then you interpolate by that bend.

**April:** How can NNIP partners engage with this product?

**Norma**: We are still building it. Has all of the US for 2015. We want to know if NNIP partners would find this useful. What features are needed. And we want to make it useable for everybody. Also, if folks would be willing to share hosting cost, or help with the updating process once a year. But that is pretty much where we are at. If you are interested in specific tools, such as dividing the tract, you could talk to him and see if that is possible.

**April:** If it is helpful, I can say that our agency would not be interested unless it does that. We are balancing against our current process. For us it is really finding the best way to use it.

**Anthony:** I think the aggregating function is really useful.

**April:** Sure think I think it is great, we just wouldn’t buy into it unless it could do that splitting.

**Laura:** So can you get the indicators aggregation without doing geographic aggregation?

**Norma**: Yes

**Erik**: Do you do age aggregation?

**Norma**: We have lists, so you can save the query (aggregations) to use in the future or for others to see.

**Camille:** Is there a way someone who doesn’t know what exactly they are looking for to get an overview of an area? We have things like that where we provide a list of a dozen indicators, that provide a basic overview.

**Norma**: We don’t have that, we wanted to make it as simple as possible

**Laura:** I think Census Reporter would be more useful for those kinds of basic overviews.

**Camille**: I was thinking more of some way of joining those two. Where you can combine these custom geographies with the profile functionality from Census Reporter.

**Norma**: We don’t have neighborhoods, because they are not census geographies. But you can create a list of the zip codes or census tracts that belong to the neighborhood once and save it, and the list would be there forever.

**April:** Am I wrong in saying that this tool is targeted towards someone like an NNIP partner, but there might also be a sophisticated user out there who might want to use this tool?

**Norma**: Yes

**Erik**: One of the issues we come across, are there ways to look at folks outside of the pre-existing sub-groups.

**Anthony:** That would require using PUMS.

**Shahrukh:** Is there a limit to the number of custom geographies?

**Sarin**: How many people, how many hours were needed to create this?

**Norma**: We have spent six months so far, getting it up to this point. Not sure how long its going to take him to finish? He is working on his own, we provide feedback, but he is developing it.

**Erik**: Sounds like it would be very useful in a number of ways. I think it would be very useful to have the unique geographies. Disaggregation, and then reaggregation. Would save us time and money.

**April:** The question is really would this be faster than what we do already.

**Kathy:** I think if you have an existing process, then you maybe don’t need this update.

**Anthony:** I think one benefit is the ability to aggregate across categories. We have a partner that wants data on all parents who have a job. So, then you have to get a bunch of different tables and aggregate them together, and this tool seems like it would do that for you.

**April:** Our person has to process a lot of data in addition to ACS, and we keep wanting to take that off her plate.

**Kelly:** Curious how many other folks have a dedicated person to update this data? We have a singular person on staff whose whole job is iterating these data.

**April:** We have two people

**Laura:** We have a half person.

**Erik**: No one. One full-time staff for neighborhood nexus. I am actually employed by ARC. So neighborhood nexus, ends up pulling staff time from other areas.

**Kelly:** Are there solutions, that reduce the time and cost of updating this data?

**Laura:** For us, it is about how much do you invest in that ongoing process, when it changes a bit each year. How much do you invest in replication when it is going to change?

**Erik**: As a university, you maybe have access to computer science folks.

**Kelly**: We want one, just don’t know how to advertise.

**Anthony:** We ended up with one by accident. We ended up employing a student who worked on our website, and when he graduated he found a friend to take his job. They were from the school of arts and technology. We had a computer science student who just approached us, who is working on the front and back end of our work.

**Erik**: It seems like there might be students who are in these computer science programs, whom you could attract because they could get huge authorship over some of the NNIP work.

**Anthony:** I have a notepad from this organization, Creative Circle, that has a list of resumes, where you can say I want this design or product, and they offer temps to do that work.

**Kathy:** We are going to be building out a list of consultants who are NNIP alumni. People have done a lot of thinking about making NNIP partner organizations attractive to developers. The kind of environment they are looking for and the language that attracts them is not what you think. You should think about using the job positions that NNIP has collected. Developers often don’t want to be alone, they want to be with other developers, so it can be a hard sell for folks. You aren’t necessarily on a clear career path.

**Anthony:** That is one of the benefits of this organization, is you just describe to them what product you want, and then they go and speak to the developers in their language. There is a language difference with developers.

**Kathy**: The Census folks did offer to do a webinar around the city SDKs or the Census API. They could give a presentation on what is available from the Census.

**Kathy**: I had high hopes for the ACS users group as a model. Nobody really posts things, people don’t really use it. Because I have thought you could have HMDA, LED users group as well.

**Anthony:** A lot of people use stack overflow.

**Sarin**: Is it a good idea to have a forum?

**Kathy**: We have a google group, and a public forum that no one uses. We need to figure out what to do with those

**Erik**: You could think about sending out an intro email, that just lists the functionality of the NNIP website.

**Kathy**: We have one email that goes out that is all about the communication. But we could add the functionality of the website.

**Erik**: There were a lot of things there that, I did not even know to look for. That forum could be useful, because you could have forums by data set.

**Sarin**: How do you all use margins of error in your maps?

**Kathy**: Leah grays them out if they are above a certain percentage.

**April:** We use the Census variation guide.

**Laura:** 30 percent is what come to mind.

**Anthony:** For all the things we have in a table, we have an appendix in the back listing out reliability.

**Erik**: A lot of what we are doing isn’t like deciding whether a plane is taking off or not, we are guiding a discussion.