



Economic Opportunity Maps

Discussion Guide

Points to consider in using secondary data*

Secondary data are convenient because they are already collected, often by government agencies. Secondary data are often less expensive and faster to assemble than primary data, and many government agencies provide free data. For example, the U.S. Census Bureau publishes County Business Patterns data at no charge.

However, secondary data have drawbacks. There is often a lag between when secondary data are collected and published because the data must be vetted and organized. For example, the Census Bureau released the 2018 county business patterns data in June 2020. Publication of the 2020 Census will begin in Spring 2021. Combining and analyzing datasets, such as we've done with this mapping tool further delays data publication; 2014 data are used in this tool.

You may have additional information about changes in your community that do not yet appear in the published data. It is important to note and discuss those changes when considering the data. You can also look at multiple years' data to consider trends over time. You can compare the data in this mapping tool with County Business Patterns data at <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/>. This YouTube [video](#) includes a brief introduction to the Business Patterns data on the Explore Census Data website.

Secondary data may not answer your specific question. You may be interested in a town or city rather than county data. Some data are available for smaller areas. Census data is available at much finer detail, and business patterns data are available by ZIP code. However, agencies providing data may not disclose information at finer levels of aggregation to prevent displaying identification that could identify specific businesses or people's private information. Agencies also aggregate data over multiple years to improve statistical validity using a smaller sample size. As a result, you should interpret secondary data with caution.

* Adapted from Stronger Economies Together Module 5: Examining Current Demographic Features of Your Region, Alison F. Davis, University of Kentucky, http://srcd.msstate.edu/set/curriculum2/module5/module_5-instructors_guide.pdf and Developing Critical Thinking Leaders Module 4: Strategies for Obtaining and Using Qualitative and Quantitative Data, Greg Clary, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service

Questions to Ask in using Secondary Data

- Do these data represent the region I am studying (e.g., a county)? If not, what can I observe from these data relative to my area of interest?
- Does the timeframe for this data align with my needs?
- Do the data address the topic I'm studying (e.g., changes in grocery stores)?
- What immediately stands out to me in this data set?
- What do I know about recent events in the region that may differ from the time period of the dataset?
- What trends do I see in my region? How strong are those trends, and are they affected by other trends in the community or in the global market.
- How does my region compare other locations?
- Where do I see my region in 5, 10, 25 years?

Discussion Questions for the Economic Opportunity Maps Tool

- Does your county appear to have below, near, or above the predicted number of establishments for this industry based on local population characteristics?
- Why might the estimated number of establishments differ from the number of establishments I can identify in my county? What other ways might businesses identify their industry? For example, could a grocery store be coded as a convenience store or vice versa?
- Why might actual business differ from predicted levels? Does a neighboring county have a strong presence in this industry, or does my county serve a unique niche in the market?
- Is a strong industry presence the result of unique local assets and competitive advantage or a industry diminishing in national prominence?
- If my county is performing below expectations (yellow), are there barriers preventing the growth of a beneficial industry or are residents commuting to or shopping in a neighboring county with many establishments in this industry?
- For industries where establishments are near predicted levels, is the local industry healthy or could it taking advantage of local strengths to grow? Are there threats or opportunities for these businesses?
- What do these data imply about the potential need for and presence of businesses in my area?

Questions or Comments?

Craig Carpenter, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist
Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service
Michigan State University Extension
(carpe224@msu.edu)

Anders Van Sandt, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist
University of Wyoming Extension
(avansand@uwyo.edu)

Scott Loveridge, Ph.D.
Professor and Extension Specialist
Michigan State University Extension

Rebekka Dudensing, Ph.D.
Associate Professor and Extension Economist
Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service

Linda Niehm, Ph.D.
Professor
Iowa State University Extension and Outreach

This project was supported by the Agricultural and Food Research Initiative Competitive Program of the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), award number 2017-67023-26242.

