

Church Planter Network Resource

# Deciphering Demographics



*Seeing the Unseen Neighbor  
Who Needs Your Church's Witness*

John B. Draper

Jesus took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village. Then spitting on the man's eyes, he laid his hands on him and asked, "Can you see anything now?" The man looked around, "Yes," he said, "I see people, but I can't see them very clearly. They look like trees walking around." Then Jesus placed his hands on the man's eyes again. As the man stared intently, his sight was completely restored, and he could see everything clearly. — Mark 8:23-25, *The New Living Translation*

The first time I read this passage, I felt surprise. I never dreamed that Jesus might need a second try. He bestowed this blessing of vision a little at a time. To this day it is a mystery to me why God chose to work in stages in that instance. Did He miscalculate the supernatural voltage the miracle required? No. But what a thought-provoking testimony He preserved for us. When people receive ability to see others as God means for them to be seen, it always happens by grace. It may happen progressively, and it may mean looking at people more than once. Ponder this—how would God touch our eyes so we could properly view the people around us?

Church planters "see people" all the time. It is an occupational necessity. When schedules get crowded, even those most desperate for our witness can become a blur. We see them en masse, like flesh and blood forests. "They look like trees walking around."

Chances are that you collected demographic data when you first developed your church planting strategy. What you saw then helped you get started. You will need to stay closely attuned to demographic realities as the church further develops—especially as you lead your new church to the joy of becoming a parent church.

This paper is a resource to tickle your skills of demographic interpretation. The issues discussed here may also help you explain the value of demographics to Christians who have a low view of such "worldly methods." My prayer is that church planters would show churches the richly varied missions fields around them and stimulate them to new initiatives. Even the best information and technology is sterile unless the Lord touches our hearts and vision. Yet the Bible tells of this man who received a new set of eyes to see the people around him. It happened

because he put himself completely in the hands of Jesus, and also because he looked more intently.

We now will explore some uses and abuse of demographic data, some quality sources for demographic data and consultation, some principles to consider when defining a demographic study area, and some suggestions on what to look for once you have this data in hand.

### **Reflecting on Church Planter Assessment**

One of the behaviors that interviewing teams ask about during Church Planter Assessment is called “Responsiveness to Community.” “Tell us the particulars of how you designed ministry plans to fit real local needs in past ministry situations. How did you actually learn about the social and spiritual realities around you? Then, how did you address them? What process did you use to collect and analyze information about community residents or workers? Whom did you involve in gathering, interpreting, and applying these new community insights? How could you evaluate your ministry’s relevance from the focus community’s point of view?”

Whether or not you heard these questions during assessment interviews, this is as good a time as any to ask them. Only now you are thinking in present and future tense. “How AM I learning about the social and spiritual realities around me?” “Whom WILL I involve in gathering, interpreting, and applying these new insights?”

### **Using Demographic Data**

A generation ago, Southern Baptist churches were becoming increasingly aware of community transition. Census figures were just beginning to show up at tables when committees made major decisions. Looking at social realities seriously has long been a standard business

practice. In the Master's business, it is also good stewardship to make the best use of all the information that the church has available—especially if the goal is to have all kinds of churches to reach all kinds of people.

**Evaluation and Planning.** It matters to a community that a church's worship, outreach, and ministry programming matches who they are and what interests them. Today it is quite common for churches to use demographics and to evaluate the relevance of their existing programs and ministries to surrounding populations. As population characteristics change, new staff and new ministry options may be advisable based on new community trends. Adjusting church life to community context always enhances a church's potential for vitality and impact because God's people have to seek God's will for new situations.

**Publicity.** When churches advertise and publicize ministry, they generally invest their money and energy where they believe they will see the strongest response. Knowing where to place ads and how to design them requires the church to get better acquainted with their audience. Before buying airtime on television or radio, or before designing a Web site that will attract hits from prospects, churches and church planters need to understand the preferences and needs of their public.

There are sincere souls who could protest, "Jesus didn't 'market' himself." However, the first-century church packaged its message in four gospels to appeal to different audiences and readers. This targeted communication approach came as the Spirit of God inspired both the words and the method, in perfect accord with the rest of the Trinity. Is it really all that remarkable that God discerns different population segments when He is working and speaking?

**Birthing New Congregations.** Because you are active in a Church Planter Network, you keep company with leaders who believe that new churches must beget new churches. The

Church Planter Network can become more than a leaders' support group. Your exchange of information and insight also means that your network can be a task force, helping leaders research and recognize focus communities that lack a strong gospel witness. As church planters who have been blessed through the prayers and missions giving of other Southern Baptist churches, encourage your network to use its growing demographic skill to help your association promote and pursue further church planting opportunities.

### **Abusing Demographic Data**

I like bicycles, but I do less cycling these days. I still go to bike shops and browse. I ask the shop guys about the hottest new componentry. I can talk about different types of terrain and equipment. I could name some top contenders for upcoming road race events. With a little techno-savvy, anybody can be a commentator—instead of a competitor.

Leaders who enjoy helping God's people see their mission also must help them seize it. One of the strange temptations that follows information technology is a sheer obsession with gathering information. This alone will not get the job done. If Christian workers become *too* dependent upon computer-generated data, they might feel this can make up for the on-site, personal community cultivation they didn't do.

Can demographics be used deceptively to hide facts that should be revealed? Can census data be summarized in such a way that it seems to justify the neglect of nearby groups that are dismissed as less dominant—even when there is clearly a God-given opportunity to reach them? It can happen; it has happened. But it shouldn't happen. By strengthening your own powers of demographic interpretation, you can empower others with a mission awareness that inspires action.

## **Defining Your Demographic Study Area**

Reliable data must be specific with respect to your focus community. Your prospective audience may live in a well-defined area or may be dispersed geographically. The researcher begins by deciding the parameters of his study area. The temptation to study too much territory in a demographic analysis is common. This approach will only give an aggregate description of a study field without necessarily revealing how one part of an area differs significantly from another. Doing multiple smaller studies of adjacent zip codes, census tracts, or block areas may be more practical for comparative purposes. You may also find it helpful to compare such area-specific studies with regional census reports of your city, county, parish, or borough. Some software such as SCAN/US will also support drive-time studies. This feature takes into account such factors as distance and speed of travel along major traffic routes to the location you select for your study.

The question is, are you looking at the overall population picture in a concentrated area, or are you looking for a highly specific demographic segment across a broad area? What you are looking for will naturally determine where you need to look.

## **Interpretative Issues and Questions**

Supposing that you now have or soon will have demographic data in hand, your eyes are met with a lengthy series of statistics and population segments. Isn't this fun?

But what kind of insights might abound when you jump into this pool of information?

**Increase or Decrease of Area Population.** During the past ten to twenty years, has the community seen positive or negative population change? What factors most likely caused these changes?

**Long-term Stable Trends.** What characteristics of the community have remained relatively constant for the past quarter-century?

**Sharp, Sudden Transitions.** What recent discontinuities have arisen in the community conditions and composition, and how has this affected the vitality and priorities of the community?

**Household Types.** How do patterns for married, single, and number of children per household compare to the broader household patterns in the region? Among couples, how common is it for both partners to work full-time? How do households follow or depart from whatever family patterns your community regards as traditional?

**Distribution of Age, Race, Economic, Education Level Among Area Population.** What are the dominant features of the overall population, and what do these facts suggest as to ministry opportunities? Who is being overlooked by existing congregations?

**Degree of Homogeneity and Diversity.** How strong is the sense of common identity, and how does the community describe its own response to diversity? One's parents may be from different parts of the world, or different social backgrounds. Others may acquire a sense of cultural belonging through prolonged relationship or residence as they travel from their place of birth. Census surveys change from one decade to the next, partly because "group belonging" is largely a matter of personal definition and preference.

**Identification of Distinct People Groups, Subcultures and Ethnic Concentrations.** What language or ethnic groupings stand out as you look at the area demographics? What agencies, businesses, or community services are catering to these possible focus communities? There is much to learn from others who live and work among the people God is preparing you to serve.

### **Rate of Mobility, Length of Occupancy, Percentage of Owned and Rented**

**Dwellings.** The turnover in residency will create both obstacles and opportunities to the church planter. For instance, churches near colleges, universities, and military bases may send out disciples as quickly as they can make them. To what extent does your church start strategy depend upon long-term residents? What options for reaching more less-permanent residents will your church offer?

**Unemployment/Poverty Levels.** How will these factors shape or steer your ministry focus? If unemployment in your area is higher than average, what ministries are needed, and what milestones must be met before the church can be financially self-supporting?

**Distribution of Percentages for Different Industries, Professions, and Service Jobs.** How are the places of employment reflected in the community identity? What issues and temptations are prevalent in the workplace? How are important decisions made, and does that influence the processes your church will use in making its decisions?

**Average Commuting Time and Patterns.** How much time do people spend coming and going in their weekday commute? What means of transportation are used most? How will this affect accessibility to your place of worship and ministry?

**Lifestyle or “Market” Segmentations.** How should awareness of leisure and lifestyle speak to the way a church presents its ministry? What kind of fellowship events or community cultivation events would express the preferences, pathos, or preoccupations of your focus community? Where does this group gather to socialize? How would they choose to dress? What musical tastes do they have? Will they fit in, or feel out of place, by entering your meeting environment?

**Information Gaps.** In light of the demographic data that you have gathered and studied, what new questions will be most relevant in shaping your church planting strategy?

### **Ethnographic Information Gathering and Strategy Analysis**

With all these new insights on your community, you begin to develop a summary. Actually, what you may have discovered through your study are multiple layers of community that might call for dozens of new ministry approaches. But how has God prepared and positioned you?

Your summary may show that several kinds of people stand out as a possible ministry or church planting focus. Perhaps you can better develop a composite-sketch of your typical church prospect, and the lifestyle that he or she leads. In either case, help others around you ask, what does faithfulness to our calling mean in light of what God has shown us about this community?

As Christ enables his servants to gain sight of those around them, may He use us to open many eyes so others have an unhindered view of Jesus. Now, what kinds of opportunities must be developed if these new multitudes are ever to see and follow?

### **Sources of Demographic Data**

North American Mission Board Research Unit  
Lifeway Christian Resources through State Convention Offices, SCAN US data  
US Census Web site  
Demographics  
Mapping Center for Evangelism  
Landrum Level Center for Church Growth Research at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary