

Special Note about Multi-year Estimates

Users of multi-year population counts should recognize that the estimates (e.g., the number of persons in poverty) are *average* counts across a number of years. Some areas may have experienced appreciable increases or decreases over a three- or five-year period (e.g., in the number of high school graduates, or persons below the poverty line), making it difficult to interpret what an average count for the period actually represents. For example, a three-year period estimate that 5,000 people in a PUMA live in poor families could reflect any of the following: a constant 5,000 in each of the three years, a steady increase from 3,000 to 5,000 to 7,000 persons; a corresponding steady decrease (7,000 to 5,000 to 3,000); or even a rise and decline in the percentage across the years, say 3,000 to 8,000 to 4,000; and so on. This means that multi-year averages for all variables will “flatten-out” underlying patterns that may be present in the data. To obtain an indication of the likely pattern that underlies a three-year estimate, users need to apply local knowledge of the conditions in an area over the period, such as shifts in economic cycles. For example, the onset of a recession may cause one to conclude that there was an increase in the number of persons below the poverty line over a three year period in a PUMA. Or the median value of owner-occupied housing units in a PUMA could vary greatly over the course of a three year period as a result of economic conditions. This means that the PUMA’s three-year average may not be a useful *current* indicator of its status for program planning or resource allocation.