The Measurement of Internationally Adopted Children in the US: Evidence From the ACS

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines data from the American Community Survey to assess its utility as a data source for studying internationally adopted children. The group in question is relatively small in size – on the order of 8-10,000 children a year, based on recent administrative estimates. We use data from a five-year data file of the ACS (the 2008-12 file) in an attempt to assess both the overall level of the population, the nations of origin, and some of the characteristics of the children. In doing so, we provide further information for understanding and using the ACS as a source of small-scale subpopulations.

INTRODUCTION
When the Census Bureau made the transition of the traditional long-form instrument to the American Community Survey (ACS) in the early part of this century, it did so with the commitment that the ACS would fully replace the once-a-decade long form data.   Not only would the data be of similar statistical and content quality to the long form, but the recurring issuance of annually-updated five year files would offer data users far more analytic power in modeling trends over time, and detecting change in even relatively small areas. Much of the discussion of the value of the ACS centers around its ability to provide these ongoing estimates for smaller geographic units – tracts, zip code areas and block groups.

But there is an additional analytic value implied in the power of massively large sample data such as the ACS. Specifically, for small population subgroups, the ACS offers sufficient sample size to identify and measure these groups and the characteristics that surround them.   Often, these groups are identified in traditional demographic terms, such as persons of a specific numerically small race, or Hispanic origin. Other groups could be relatively small age ranges, such as 18-20 year-olds, or persosn with a narrowly-defined set of characteristics, for example, single mothers with children less than 2, not currently employed and speaking a non-English language. With the large sample of the ACS (about 3 million sampled households a year) it becomes possible to examine far smaller population groups than is possible in large national surveys such as the Current Population Survey (CPS). The CPS is routinely used for a wide variety of social, economic and demographic analyses, using a sample that at 60,000 households a month, is far smaller than the ACS.   Thus, the ACS looms large as an important tool for examining population subgroups that are well beyond the sampling scope of most existing national survey programs.

While there is value in knowing the estimated size of these subpopulations, there are more often many questions about the characteristics and correlated behaviors of the group. So, we not only want to know how many people are in the groups, but also what other things define them. Education, income, occupation, family structure – these are but a few of the characteristics that routinely come into play in trying to get a better understanding of what actually defines the members of the group. The ACS, as a general multipurpose survey, provides the ability to examine subgroups in fairly sizeable detail – oftentimes, much more so than the abbreviated information found in administrative record data. As such, a survey such as the ACS offers insights that administrative records cannot.

Questions remain, however, about the comparability of ACS data with these administrative counts, as well as the accuracy of the estimates themselves.   This research looks at one such substantive data issue – the number of internationally adopted children, using estimates from both the ACS, and the

administrative unit that records these adoptions, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).

DATA
The ACS data for this research comes from the 2008-12 one -year and five-year datafiles. ACS one-year files are the accumulation of monthly data collection operations brought together and weighted to the July 1 population estimates totals. There are about 3 million households sampled each year in the ACS. The five-year files serve the purpose of replacing the long form sample data that was part of the decennial census operations. While the sampling rate of these five-year data accumulations does not quite match that of the traditional long form, these files are produced annually, giving users a continuing sequence of datasets for very small geographic levels.

The ACS data will be compared with estimates taken from the USCIS administrative counts of international adoptions into the United States. The U.S. Department of State issues immediate relative visas for foreign-born children adopted abroad or to be adopted upon entry into the United States. IR-3 visas are issued to orphans adopted abroad. IR-4 visas are issued to orphans to be adopted after entering the United States. The Office of Immigration Statistics tracks IR-3 and IR-4 data as children enter the United States. The data shown in Tables 1 and 2 for numbers of IR-3 and IR-4 visas are from the Office of Immigration Statistics, of the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) in the 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, and 2012 *Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service*.[1]

One additional important aspect of this analysis has to do with the way "internationally adopted" children are defined in the ACS. . Internationally adopted children are defined here as foreign-born adopted children of the householder when those householders and their spouses (if present) are US citizens by birth. This definition eliminates foreign-born children who come to the US with their biological parent who marries a US native who then adopts the child. Including these children results in a much larger total of children who might be defined as an international adoption. In Table 1 we show both of these estimates to show how much variation this definition alone can cause. The bulk of our analysis uses the more restrictive definition to most closely match the common understanding of "internationally adopted"-- foreign-born children not related to the parents, who are adopted by US citizens.

ANALYSIS
This analysis pursues a strategy similar to that used in a recent analysis of non-English language speaking children in the Palm Beach Florida school district (Kominski & Julian, 2013). Initially, we look to see how the levels of internal adoptions compare across the two data sets. Then, we examine the specific origin nations that are identified in each of the two data sets. Attention is given to both the one-year and five-year ACS data sets in terms of the number of unique countries of origin of the adopted children that are reported. We then look at the distribution of adoptions across states, since both data sets provide this information. Finally, we present some of the basic characteristics of these internationally adopted children.

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[1] http://adoption.state.gov/about_us/publications.php

Of course, there are many reasons why estimates from the two data sources might differ. Key among these are the collection/reporting periods; the way in which children are defined as internationally adopted; and misreporting from survey respondents about related to the concept of 'adoption'. Some of these issues have been documented by Kreider (2011).

RESULTS

A complete tabulation of all international adoptees based on the ACS 5-year file, the individual ACS 1-year files from 2008-12, and the USCIS administrative reports, is provided as Table 1. As can be seen, this is a large table, showing persons from many countries around the world. In the sections that follow, we present a series of table summaries, all derived from the large Table 1 'base table', to highlight some of the key findings. Table A provides summary statistics about the number of unique countries and total adoptees.

Table A. Countries of origin & total adoptees

	USCIS	----------ACS 5yr------------		-----Summed ACS 1Yr ------	
		For born	Intl Adopt	For born	Intl Adopt
Origin countries	143	113	70	113	70
Adoptees	49,926	59,665	40,159	62,853	40,621

The USCIS data shows that children from 143 different countries were reported in the USCIS data in the annual reports from 2008-12. This compares to 113 nations in the 5 year ACS file of adopted children who were foreign born, and just 70 nations where the data indicate an international adoption to the U.S. has occurred in the past year. In the earlier Kominski/Julian research, it was found that the five-year ACS file identified more languages than any one-year data file, but that the five-year count of total specific languages was still less than the administrative data. Since our method here is to sum up across the five individual 1-yr files, the count of distinct languages is the same – 113 or 70, depending on the definition that is used, but in any individual 1-yr datafile the number ranges from just 13 to 20 languages per year.

Part of the variability in the overall total estimate of adoptees derives from the weighting of the ACS sample data in the 1-yr and 5-yr contexts. When using the ASC 5-yr file, the weights reflect an average weight over the five years, thus, the average overall weight is about 1/5 the size in any 1-yr datafile. But, by summing the estimates from each of the five 1-yr files, we get a slightly larger estimate of the total number of adoptees. The 5-yr based estimate is closer to the admin estimate, but it is the definitional rule (that is, Internationally adopted vs. foreign-born) that provides the greatest variability. While it is tempting to use the definition that provides a larger number of persons, that is not the choice we make here. The "foreign born" definition is far more inclusive, so for the remainder of this research, we focus only on the "internationally adopted" group.

TABLES for back end
1. Full table of international counts by country
2. State table
3. Adoptees by some basic characteristics