Dear Interactive News Team,

I am writing to you with some comments on the “Mapping America: Every City, Every Block” visualization of the Census Bureau's American Community Survey from 2005 to 2009. The URL is here:


Since the tool is built around Google Maps, I was pleased to find that the interface is very familiar. As you know, consistency between interfaces is very important for high learnability. Furthermore, the interface provides details-on-demand for tracts by hovering the mouse, which provides a very simple, easy-to-learn interface that allowed me to quickly begin exploring the data.

I found the visualization to be very effective for comparing one data field between census tracts that are near to each other. For example, I examined the distribution of racial and ethnic groups in the downtown area of Greensboro, NC. The visualization confirmed what I already knew: The areas north of Lee Street and west of Elm Street are predominantly white, and the areas south and east are predominantly black. The visualization also helped me identify an anomaly: Median monthly rent in the downtown core (tract 10801) is much cheaper than most of the surrounding tracts despite being an overall nice area. I believe this ability to easily identify trends and anomalies is the mark of a good visualization.

Unfortunately, I did not find a good way to compare different data fields between two or more census tracts. For example, in order to compare the racial composition and median monthly rent of two tracts, I must either remember the racial data or write it down before I change the map view to Median Monthly Rent. A related issue is that there is no way to select any census data to copy it to the clipboard.

Another potential problem is caused by the “hovering” interaction: The user’s ability to go back to a previous set of tract data is limited. If I do not remember exactly where a tract is, there is no way to search for it, add it to a group, or otherwise select it so that I can remember its location and data.

I think a potential solution to reduce the short-term memory load is to have a separate table view of tracts and support the following interaction:
1. Let users click a tract and add it to the table of tracts. This could be done similarly to the Google Maps interaction where users click a landmark and perform actions related to it.

2. Allow users to select which fields to show in the table view (e.g., monthly rent, household income, etc.). Users could then copy and paste the table into Excel to create charts or perform statistical tests. This also solves the current problem where users cannot select any tract data to copy it to the clipboard.

Overall, I thought the interface was well designed and easy to use, but I think adding a couple more features would allow users to go more in-depth in their analyses.

Warm regards,

Robert Gove