

1 **Applying Geographic-Based Demographic Targeting in Household Travel Survey**
2 **Sampling Plans: Case Study from the Phoenix, Arizona Region**

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31 **ABSTRACT**

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33 Response rates in household travel surveys are declining nationwide, yet data requirements to
34 support model estimation continue to become more complex – especially in areas that are
35 migrating to activity-based models (ABM). Segments with complex travel behaviors, such as
36 transit users, large households, auto-deficient households, increasingly need to be oversampled to
37 support ABM frameworks. In response, a slew of operational improvements have been considered,
38 including higher incentives, use of new technology, relational databases that minimize respondent
39 burden, and design of questionnaires that only focus on the most needed information.

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41 However, there has been limited focus to-date in the US on the development of more fine-grained
42 sampling plans, and on the ways to refine sample purchase that could help stratify the geographic
43 area and identify the concentration of key markets of interest. The authors showcase a sampling
44 plan that builds on the best practices of geography-based sampling and introduces two new
45 concepts: the use of demographics/groups of interest and the use of non-contiguous boundaries to
46 help enhance survey efforts. This method employs oversampling and block-group based
47 monitoring integrated into the survey plan. The objective is efficiency in getting sufficient
48 representation of hard-to-reach or low responding populations as well as supplying models with
49 enough information on the choices of those with more complex behavioral patterns or choices.

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52 **keywords:** household travel survey, sampling plan, household demographics, hard-to-reach
53 populations, address-based sampling,

54 INTRODUCTION

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56 The goal of any survey is to obtain a representative sample of a population. In household travel
57 surveys, the travel behavior of individuals in all households in a region is measured.
58 Demographics, location, economics, and transportation options heavily influence the choices
59 people make. With this in mind, sampling plans are usually designed around proportionally
60 measuring segments of a population that are divided by a selection of these characteristics.
61 Traditionally, sampling plans have been developed at a regional level. However, more recent
62 efforts have broken down the regional totals geographically to support targeted approaches that
63 ensure representativeness across the region, either by establishing targets for counties (in the case
64 of multi-county MPOs), or by breaking down the region into large contiguous superdistricts for
65 sampling purposes.

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67 For instance, a geographic random sampling plan may aim to get 10% of its responses from
68 zero vehicle households in the central business district (CBD), because 1 in 10 households in the
69 population are in this group. For this group in a survey targeting 1,000 responses, this goal could
70 be met by randomly sampling until 100 are received from zero vehicle CBD households.
71 Therefore, there is great value in replacing the random sample with a more efficient sampling
72 method that is random, yet allows targeting geographies where households of desired
73 characteristics may reside prior to sample purchase.

74

75 This process may still be limited as it is unknown which exact households do not have
76 vehicles until they are contacted. Continuing with this example, if after 1,000 household responses
77 are received, and it is observed that only 75 come from those CBD households with no auto
78 ownership, surveyors will need to continue to collect more data, or employ survey expansion
79 methods that account for this undersampling. Sometimes, the simple random probability-based
80 method, which created this uneven result, can run out of the purchased sample and never meet
81 survey targets. If there are households yet to be contacted, they may not be in the areas with higher
82 numbers of the desired demographics.

83

84 There is thus a need for enhanced geography-based sampling that provides surveyors with
85 detailed insights that influence sample purchase. In an era where survey response rates continue to
86 drop due to general respondent fatigue, providing critical insights at the sampling stage could help
87 determine the success of the sample. The method described in this paper applies this idea of
88 extending a geographically-targeted oversampling process by anticipating the practical concerns
89 of gathering responses from key market segments. Recognizing that certain households are likely
90 to respond at a lower rate, small non-contiguous geographies in which they are more highly
91 concentrated were identified. In addition to demographics targets, these special non-contiguous
92 areas were given goals for a number of responses. The surveyor begins the mail outs with a strategy
93 for finding those who are hard to reach and making adjustments as progress is made. In this way,
94 the region can be randomly sampled, achieve a representative and proportional sample, and
95 increase surveying efficiency. A case study from the Maricopa Association of Government's
96 (MAG) MPO region, that includes the Phoenix Metropolitan Area in Arizona, is presented.

97

98 This paper starts with an overview of previous surveys in Phoenix. In the next section, the
99 data used and the region of interest are described. This is followed by an explanation of the
100 methodology put into practice. The results of the application are presented and illustrated with
101 maps and tables. The conclusion discusses the advantages of this new approach as well as future
102 considerations.

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106 **BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION**

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108 *Activity-based Modeling Needs*

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110 Activity-based microsimulation models (ABM) have truly arrived in the US. Currently, many of
111 the largest metropolitan areas including New York, Houston, Denver, Minneapolis, Miami,
112 Baltimore, Los Angeles, Chicago, San Francisco, Tampa, San Diego, Atlanta, Portland, and Seattle
113 have either implemented or in the process of implementing an ABM for their region.

114

115 As ABMs become ubiquitous, the degree to which they depend on household travel and
116 activity surveys is becoming increasingly apparent. They are and will continue to be the primary
117 source for model estimation, and for the calibration of a majority of the individual models as well.
118 Because the model frameworks that need to be estimated are complex, sufficiently large data
119 samples are required to support model estimation. Robust samples are needed even for under-
120 represented choices such as bike-ped or transit use (which previously relied on transit on-board
121 surveys), joint travel, and travel choices made by young adults – who are tech savvy and rely on
122 shared modes of transportation.

123

124 As a result, there is a great and pressing need to employ a procedure that targets such users
125 within the household survey process. It is not merely enough to set targets for such groups; there
126 must also be a multi-faceted plan in place to attract users of such groups to the survey process.
127 Some of these efforts are driven through a smart implementation plan that utilizes technology,
128 incentives, and outreach. However this targeting must also be driven by the use of a smart sampling
129 plan.

130

131 *Targeting Demographics*

132

133 Based on reviews of other surveys, it is apparent that survey administrators and modelers
134 identified their hard-to-reach populations. In Minneapolis-St. Paul, these were “single respondents
135 without a car in suburban or rural locations”, “couples without a car available”, and larger
136 households with one or no cars. Son, et al., identified Hispanics, younger people, and single person
137 households as under-responding though improved by address-based sampling (which was used in
138 this survey). Bradley, et al., also expected a lower rate from zero vehicle, lower income, and single-
139 per/non-family households. In Bradley, et al., the authors used a similar method to that applied
140 here of block group categorization that focused on the income in the Seattle metropolitan area.
141 They developed their oversampling based on response rates in a previous survey in that region. A
142 block group expected response rate was estimated using a regression based on local demographics.

143

144 In designing the 2011 Census for England and Wales, as described in Brown, et al., the usage of
145 non-contiguous geographic sampling units was considered to reduce the grouping of heterogenous
146 areas together, but not used in favor of a smaller basic geographic unit. A 3-tier rating system was
147 created based on the expected difficulty of reaching the people in the area. Stewart and Moudon
148 suggest analyzing built environment to target desired populations. In their example they compared
149 an already completed survey to area classifications focusing on environmental variables associated
150 with bike, walk, and transit. Mode choice

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152 *Previous Survey Efforts in Phoenix*

153

154 The National Household Travel Survey (NHTS) 2008-2009 sample included 4707 households for
155 the MAG region (consisting of samples from National Survey and Add-on Survey). The survey
156 has data on households, persons, vehicles and trips by all modes of transportation. Most of the data
157 for the MAG region was collected in the Fall of 2008. MAG conducted extensive analysis for the

158 purposes of analyzing data applicability for estimation of MAG activity-based model and trip
 159 based four step modeling procedures maintained by MAG. The identified deficiencies included
 160 insufficient representation of transit users and biases in the raw data sample in terms of special
 161 data distribution.

162

163 Overall, the performed analysis demonstrated general applicability of the survey data for
 164 analytical purposes as well as for the purposes of models estimation, calibration and validation.
 165 However, it was documented that any following survey efforts must address the issues of spatial
 166 distribution, as well as capturing under-represented users effectively.

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168 DATA PREPARATION AND USE

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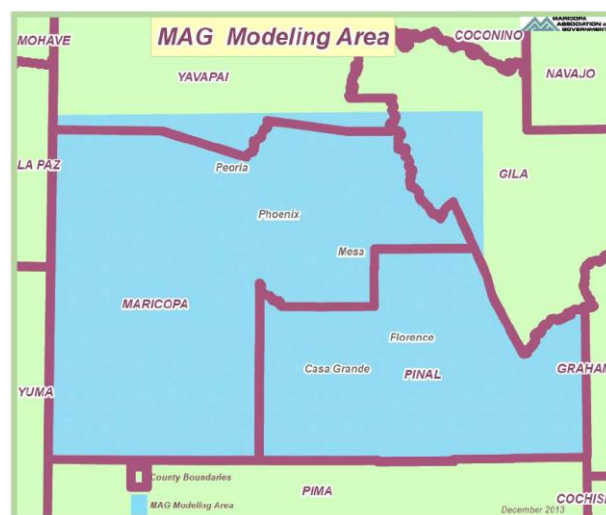
170 *Area of Interest*

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172 The population of the MAG MPO region is 4.3 million (July 1, 2015, estimate), which is 64% of
 173 the population of the state of Arizona. The MAG MPO area is 10,654 square miles and consists
 174 of 27 cities and towns, three Native American Indian Communities, all of Maricopa County, and
 175 portions of Pinal County. Phoenix, Mesa, and Chandler are the three largest population centers in
 176 the region. The current survey covers the entirety of Pinal and Maricopa Counties as well as
 177 small portions of Gila and Yavapai, as shown in *Figure 1*.

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Figure 1: Modeling and survey target area

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183 Maricopa County contains almost 90% of the population in the region. Since 1980, it has
 184 been among the fastest growing counties in the nation. Average annual growth had slowed
 185 during the recession, but has begun to pick up, increasing from 1.1% in 2012 to 1.7% growth in
 186 2014. The county continues to show stronger annual growth than the state, which grew 1.4%
 187 from 2014 to 2015. In June 2015, total non-farm employment for the Phoenix MSA was
 188 estimated at 1.87 million, which is 73% of total non-farm employment in Arizona.

189

190 The Valley Metro Regional Public Transportation Authority (RPTA) operates bus and
 191 light rail service in Maricopa County. This includes 102 commuter and local bus routes with an
 192 annual ridership of over 56 million. The light rail service runs a single line from Mesa to the
 193 north side of Phoenix, through Tempe and downtown Phoenix, with an annual ridership of 14.3
 194 million. Transit share in the region translates to about 0.2-0.3 percent of total travel. So, despite
 195 the fact that half of the county's population lives within a quarter mile of a bus stop, the number

196 of users is very small and special strategies are required to target these users within a household
197 travel survey.

198
199 *Segmentation Variables*

200
201 There is a deep and exhausting body of research that identifies key determinants of travel. From
202 this household size, number of workers, vehicle ownership, and household income were chosen as
203 the backbone of the Phoenix sampling plan.

204
205 In addition to these traditional variables, the team determined that the distribution of transit
206 users, auto “deficient” households (fewer vehicles than workers), and Hispanic individuals should
207 be considered when developing the sampling plan. This was determined based on the NHTS survey
208 in Phoenix, other survey efforts throughout the country, and a general understanding of the data
209 required to updated the ABM in the MAG region.

210
211 *Data Used*

212
213 The majority of the data used in this and other HTS sampling plans comes from the US Census
214 American Community Survey (ACS). For this effort, the 2009-2013 ACS data were used, to take
215 advantage of the robust sample sizes of 5-year summaries. The ACS data provides summaries of
216 a variety for different variables at either a single variable level or using crosstabs at the tract, block
217 group, and block level. These geographic units average 4,300, 1,570, and 45 residents, respectively,
218 in this region. **Table 1** shows the spatial level at which certain variables used in sampling are made
219 available.

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Table 1: Example of ACS data of interest by geography type

Description	Geographic Unit
Workers by Vehicles	Tract
Workers by Household Size	Tract
Population Hispanic/Latino	Block Group
Number of Household Vehicles	Block Group
Workers by location of work	Block Group
Income	Block Group
Household Size	Block
Age and Sex	Block

222
223 The block group is used as the primary unit of geography because it is small enough to
224 capture a good deal of neighborhood effects while still having segmented characteristics for key
225 variables. Where necessary, block groups were assumed to have similar shares of segments for
226 variables as the tract in which they reside. This is the case with vehicle deficiency which is only
227 available at a tract level. The survey area includes 2,715 block groups. A summary of their
228 demographics can be found in **Table 2**.

229
230 **Table 2: ACS block group data summed by county (ACS 5-year summary 2009-2013)**

	Households	People			Block Groups
	Total	Total	Hispanic	Workers	
Maricopa	1,411,727	3,889,161	1,155,592	1,705,638	2,505
Pinal	123,733	379,128	109,232	130,542	199
Gila	2,374	5,020	579	1,589	6

Yavapai	4,067	8,675	652	2,429	5
Total	1,541,901	4,281,984	1,266,055	1,840,198	2,715

*Includes only the portion of Gila and Yavapai in the study area.

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To aid in locating transit users, bus and train stop data were acquired from the MPO and the transit agency. Initially, bus stops were mapped to the block groups, and the number of stops was considered as the indicator of transit usage in the region. Later, stops were replaced by boardings activity from the regional model to better reflect transit activity. While increased bus usage in a block group suggests more transit users living there, this is only part of the story. Local residency information was compared to better understand zones where they live versus attractions where they are going.

241 **METHODOLOGY**

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The first step for any sampling plan is to establish the area of interest and obtain data for its population. The geographic boundaries may be customized, but having them match to aggregate Census borders – county or tract – makes planning easier. The household and person totals are then summarized by any variables of interest for fairly small selected geography. For this case, block groups were used, due to their size and availability in Census data. Geographic analysis as well as tabulations were developed to help understand the demographic and geographic makeup of the area’s population.

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In addition to segmentation variables, groups of interest must be identified. These groups can be hard-to-reach populations, a small niche market, or people with a more complex set of choices or behaviors. For this study, after a preliminary investigation, three groups of interest were chosen to target – transit users, vehicle deficient households, and Hispanic households. As discussed previously, even though transit users and vehicle deficient households constitute a minority of the population, activity-based modeling requires a large enough sample in order to analyze their decisions and use them for model estimation. Hispanic households are often hard to reach, as per Son et al., and can have unique travel patterns as described in FHWA NHTS brief “Hispanics and Transportation”.

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Large households and low income households were also considered. Large households make up one quarter of the population and can respond at lower rates due to the difficulty in recording every member’s trip. They are targeted in segmentation and sampled at the average rate, but excluded in favor of the aforementioned groups of interest. Low income households can also be less likely to complete travel surveys, however they correlate highly with the other groups already identified (in the case of Phoenix).

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Block groups were analyzed for concentration of transit stops and usage, zero and low vehicle ownership, and Hispanic household (all are groups of interest). They were then rated by the percentiles of those concentrations. A single block group (BG) type was then assigned by this rubric:

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- If a block group is above a threshold of transit intensity and usage, its BG type is 1 – i.e. Block Groups belonging to this classification scheme have a much higher share of transit demand and supply than do other TAZs in the region;
- Else if it is above the 75th percentile for a share of vehicle deficient households, its BG type is 2;
- Else if it is above the 50th percentile for percentage Hispanic, its BG type is 3;
- Else it is 4.

281
 282 This resulted in a non-contiguous geographic distribution of distinct BG Types. Following
 283 this, segmentation variables were chosen to reflect the characteristics which most influence travel
 284 behavior. The households are divided by size, number of workers, Hispanic/non-Hispanic, and
 285 number of vehicles. The population totals of these variables are used to set the targets for
 286 completed surveys. Small segments were combined with others or their targets were artificially
 287 inflated to meet a minimum representation or due to special interest in the behavior of a group.
 288 The segmentation does not necessarily have to represent all of the hard-to-reach groups, and vice
 289 versa.

290
 291 A target of 7,000 responses was determined by MAG for the survey effort. BG type 1 was
 292 assigned the highest sampling rate to ensure enough information about choices involving transit.
 293 Vehicle deficient areas were also oversampled, but at a rate much closer to the overall rate. Note
 294 that the Hispanic households group was not oversampled. While it is important to ensure a
 295 proportional response from these locations, it was not deemed necessary to get more than that.
 296

297 **Table 3: Sampling rates of BG types (Proxy for High Incidence of Groups of Interest)**

	Population	Rate	Totals
BG Type 1	108,551	1.10%	1,194
BG Type 2	501,211	0.55%	2,757
BG Type 3	435,192	0.33%	1,424
BG Type 4	496,947	0.33%	1,626
Total	1,541,901	0.45%	7,000

298
 299 Tables were set up which summarized totals by segmentation variables as well as the
 300 aforementioned BG type. These show the number of households by BG type and apply the
 301 sampling rates to produce a schedule of expected surveys. The shares of households in each BG
 302 type are summed by segment to show the resulting segment totals. This also reveals correlation
 303 between the types and segments.

304
 305 The result is a roadmap of what to target and how to do it. It is important to note that the
 306 summaries of BG and of segments have different purposes. The segment sums give the number of
 307 households in each type which are needed, like a standard sampling plan. The BG type totals direct
 308 the surveyor in purchasing data from the sampling frame to efficiently meet survey responses
 309 needed.

310 311 **RESULTS**

312 313 *Household Travel Survey Sampling Plan*

314
 315 This method produces a geographical distribution of households in non-contiguous block groups,
 316 as well as totals by segment. Unlike some sampling plans, this does not have a county or city
 317 component (though the geographic distribution of recruitment is monitored). Figure 2 shows
 318 expected clustering for some BG Types, as well as some, mixing of the groups. Rather than a map
 319 of political boundaries, this is a map of transportation behavior and expected survey
 320 responsiveness.

321

BG Type 1	28,661	50,716	29,174	108,551	1.10%	315	558	321	1,194
BG Type 2	136,431	216,686	148,094	501,211	0.55%	750	1,192	815	2,757
BG Type 3	89,049	180,864	165,279	435,192	0.33%	291	592	541	1,424
BG Type 4	157,005	181,617	158,325	496,947	0.33%	514	594	518	1,626
Total	411,146	629,884	500,872	1,541,901	0.45%	1,871	2,935	2,194	7,000
	27%	41%	32%	100%		0.45%	0.47%	0.44%	0.45%
Area/People*	Hispanic	Non-Hispanic	Total	Rate	Hispanic	Non-Hispanic			
BG Type 1	144,621	152,595	297,216	1.10%	1,591	1,679			
BG Type 2	583,266	802,515	1,385,781	0.55%	3,208	4,414			
BG Type 3	454,962	905,233	1,360,195	0.33%	1,488	2,961			
BG Type 4	83,206	1,155,586	1,238,792	0.33%	272	3,780			
Total	1,266,055	3,015,929	4,281,984	0.45%	6,559	12,834			
* People, not households	30%	70%	100%		0.52%	0.43%			

341
342 The transit intense area type comprise less than a tenth of the population, but due to the
343 increased sampling rate, were expected to complete more than 15% of the surveys from that area.
344 In addition to having the highest share of transit-user households, these block groups also have the
345 highest share of low income (see Table 5) and single worker households. The second type, vehicle
346 deficient block groups, has similar shares in household size, income, and number of workers,
347 although skews slightly higher in income.
348

349 **Table 5: Population and targets in BG types by household size and income**

Area/HH Size	Population				Target			
	1	2	3	4+	1	2	3	4+
BG Type 1	37,892	30,756	15,017	24,886	417	338	165	274
BG Type 2	160,310	147,647	70,773	122,481	882	812	389	674
BG Type 3	87,685	137,480	74,102	135,925	287	450	242	445
BG Type 4	122,020	215,368	64,419	95,140	399	705	211	311
Total	407,907	531,251	224,311	378,432	1,985	2,305	1,008	1,703
	26%	34%	15%	25%	0.49%	0.43%	0.45%	0.45%
Area/HH Income	\$0-25k	\$25-50k	\$50-100k	> \$100k	\$0-25k	\$25-50k	\$50-100k	> \$100k
BG Type 1	42,905	32,286	24,300	9,060	472	355	267	100
BG Type 2	157,671	148,012	136,066	59,462	867	814	748	327
BG Type 3	66,551	110,972	161,482	96,187	218	363	528	315
BG Type 4	66,607	100,012	159,490	170,838	218	327	522	559
Total	333,734	391,282	481,338	335,547	1,775	1,859	2,066	1,300
	22%	25%	31%	22%	0.53%	0.48%	0.43%	0.39%

350
351 The surveyors aimed to collect 2,757 surveys from area type 2 (as per the rightmost
352 column), but most of these will not be vehicle deficient households. 80% of households there have
353 as many vehicles as workers. However, they are much more likely to be deficient in BG Type 2
354 than in BG Type 3 and BG Type 4, where they only make up 5% of total households. Therefore,
355 surveys received from there are counted towards the type 2 goal, 2,757, and towards the deficient
356 goal, 380, only if they report that to be the case.
357

358 Due to lower expected response rates, the rates vary by the block group type. The rates by
359 segment (at the bottom of the green tables), resulting from the BG type rates, indicate correlations.
360 Targeted auto ownership rates were higher by design. Low income is oversampled because it is
361 more common in block group types 1 and 2. The third type, which focuses on concentration of

362 Hispanic population, is not oversampled, but Hispanic households are oversampled owing to their
363 prevalence in the first two BG types.
364

365 The BG type targeting produces resulting segment targets that do not match population
366 shares, even for variables which are not related to the BG types. For example, 53% of households
367 in the region have an income above \$50,000, but this demographic comprises only 48% of the
368 survey target. Three points should be taken into consideration regarding this.

- 369 • First, the survey will be weighted and expanded to the population totals. The segments used
370 in expansion can be the same as those used here, or other segments may also be included
371 to better represent regional population. This ensures that the model will consider
372 respondents' behavior in proportion to the share of the population they represent.
- 373 • Second, households not designated hard-to-reach live in each of the BG types. They may
374 be contacted at a lower rate, but their higher responsiveness often results in an excess of
375 completed surveys above the targeted number for that segment.
- 376 • Finally, higher income households in an auto-centric area such as Phoenix are likely to
377 have simplified travel decisions, and it is unlikely that any additional advantage may be
378 gained by collecting a few additional surveys from these segments.
379

380 Early analysis of a portion of responses from the ongoing survey shows robust response
381 from households with fewer vehicles. The share of zero vehicle households in the survey is 9%,
382 on target and several points higher than the population. Other households with fewer vehicles than
383 workers are responding at such a high relative rate that actively reducing their recruitment could
384 be considered. Larger households and those with 2+ workers are responding at a rate lower than
385 intended resulting in underrepresentation. This correlates with a skew towards the more wealthy
386 that is common to household travel surveys. The dearth of larger and lower income households
387 likely relates to lack of response from Hispanic households. Despite oversampling there has been
388 very low participation from those who identify as part of this group – less than 10% of the sample
389 in a region where they comprise almost 30% of the population. Through the remainder of the
390 survey, the more Hispanic BG types will be targeted and monitored with the intention of closing
391 this gap.

392 393 **CONCLUSIONS** 394

395 The paper presents a case study of using non-contiguous boundaries to target hard-to-reach
396 demographics and capture critical-to-understand behaviors in support of an activity-based model
397 development. This type of small area oversampling allows survey firms to purchase their sample
398 purchase effectively. This can have cost implications – both during the purchase of the sample and
399 then during the mail-out of the household recruitment letters as well. This method calls for
400 oversampling and block-group based monitoring from the outset of the survey process. The
401 objectives are threefold: first, to ensure that hard-to-reach or low responding populations are well
402 represented in the data; second, to provide modelers with enough information on the choices of
403 those with more complex behavioral patterns or choices; and third to meet all the targets efficiently.
404 These are achieved by rating block groups and placing each one in a category based on the amount
405 of transit activity or demographic make-up of households.

406 The difficulties of reaching certain groups will always be a part of household travel
407 surveys. As it is not clear what demographics a household has until it is recruited, there is still the
408 possibility of coming up short. This method gives the planners the option of prioritizing and
409 oversampling groups they expect will be elusive. Starting with a sample frame based on this
410 method that is set up to avoid this problem will help. Rates can be further adjusted during the
411 survey to adapt to results.

412 This process produced four block group types, three of which were each just over a quarter
413 of the population. By sampling the small set defined by its high level of transit activity at a rate
414 more than double the overall rate, the survey will oversample those for whom transit is a chosen
415 or at least viable option. The second BG type specifies places of high levels of vehicle deficiency
416 (fewer cars than workers) which can have lower response rates, but is not nearly as oversampled.
417 The focus for this group, as opposed to the first, is to represent the demographic, which is expected
418 to be easier to find and have a narrow variety of behaviors. The last group is Hispanic, which was
419 identified but not oversampled.

420 The BG types are set such that each one contains a sizeable share of the block groups.
421 Aside from transit intense, each comprises of at least 760 (28%) block groups. Focusing on a
422 narrower set of zones by using a higher threshold value can be considered. This would increase
423 the likelihood of contacting the household type of interest. However, the overall sample sizes for
424 such a custom zone set would be low and this would likely increase the risk of not achieving
425 sample targets. The size and dispersion of the groups presented in this case study keeps this risk
426 low. Future surveys in other regions may shape theirs differently to align with specific needs, such
427 as: multiple small population niches of importance, less correlation between groups of interest, or
428 more clustered block group types.

429 Another consideration might be the separation of segmentation targets from the
430 oversampling of BG types. In this case the segment rates resulting from BG type rates were
431 maintained. This could be considered more malleable, with segment targets being merely
432 proportional to the population and disconnected from BG type rates. As previously discussed,
433 underrepresentation is a problem for modeling, while overrepresentation is merely inefficient and
434 fixable in expansion.

435

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441

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