Web site brings population figures home

People from demographers to market researchers can't wait to say goodbye to outdated figures and bring in the new.

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By VALERIA GODINES
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It's been a 10-year drought for those who make their living off the latest numbers. This week, the rain comes.

California results of the 2000 census -- detailed down to each of Orange County's 22,000 blocks -- will be released this week, offering insight into how much we've grown and how diverse we've become.

There is an air of excitement among demographers, sociologists, market researchers and others who rely on census numbers for everything from selling homes to studying immigration. Tired of searching old data for new meanings, these professionals are ready for the information that was collected from every household a year ago.

"I've been checking the Web site every day," said Philip Cohen, a University of California, Irvine, sociologist who studies inequality in the labor market. "The fact that the census is so big allows us to look at smaller geographic areas ... any group that is small or regionally concentrated or hard to enumerate."

This week, population counts and race and Hispanic-origin data down to the block level will be released. It's just one wave of information, though. More details, such as income levels, migration patterns, languages spoken at home and occupation will be released later this year or next year.

The census is the statistical foundation for most surveys, and the decennial census is the most comprehensive tally of the nation.

This national head count is being dubbed the "Internet Census," making it the most accessible ever.

"The possibilities for getting data online are mind-boggling," said Kenneth Chew, associate professor of urban and regional planning at UCI who teaches his students how to use the census.

"I reminisce about my dissertation, which analyzed the 1980 census. I had to pay a programmer to work three days full-time to extract the data that I needed from the only set of census tapes that existed in Northern California."

Professionals who use the census regularly expect that these results will be studied by far more people than ever before.

"It will make it more accessible to the average Joe, the small-business owner trying to look at demographics of the people who live within a couple of miles of his store," said Steve Doig, professor of journalism at Arizona State University. He has spent the past year helping train 400 reporters and editors on how to make good use of census data.

They won't be the only ones taking advantage of the information. "The smart high school student will be doing essentially original demographic research term papers this spring," said Doig.

The accessibility of this census means it is the most heavily used ever by the media. Journalists, as much as sociologists and market researchers, are eagerly awaiting data. Already, data for about 35 states have been released.

While many tout the accessibility of the census Web site, some college professors and their students say it is hard to navigate the data.

"It's not that hard," said Doig. "It's not perfect. You can't type in a question and get an answer back. Wait until 2010."

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