Household Incomes in Tax Data: Using Addresses to Move From Tax Unit to Household Income Distributions

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Background

• IRS tax return data increasingly common for measuring income distributions
  • Income inequality and income mobility (Piketty and Saez, 2003; Chetty, Hendren, Kline, and Saez, 2014)
  • Tax liabilities (JCT 2012, Tax Policy Center 2017)

• Two major limitations
  • 15% of adults do not file a tax return
  • No links to others in household (Atkinson, Rainwater, Smeeding 1995; CBO 2016)
Goals of this paper

1. Overcome these two limitations of tax data
   • Incorporate non-filers
   • Combine tax records into households

2. Determine how the limitation of not observing households affects income inequality measurement

(Focus on 2010 to match Decennial Census)
Data: IRS Compliance Data Warehouse

All individual tax forms received by the IRS

• Annual tax returns (e.g. Form 1040)
• Information returns
  • W-2
  • SSA-1099
  • 1099-INT, 1099-DIV, etc
  • 1099-Misc
Population coverage of tax data (2010)

Decennial Census: 308.7 million
IRS (resident filing population only): 281.3 million
Population coverage of tax data (2010)

Decennial Census: 308.7 million
IRS (resident filing population only): 281.3 million
IRS (all residents): 307.9 million
State level population
Creating Households

All tax forms contain a mailing address
• Clean addresses to a uniform style
• Link all returns with the same mailing address and ZIP code
Creating Households (continued)

Check validity of unmatched 1-person addresses with a master list of valid street-ZIP code combinations

- Replace invalid street name with neighboring year if similar and valid
- Replace remaining invalid street names with most similar valid street (if any) in ZIP code

Similarity of text strings defined using Levenshtein distance method

- Count number of replacements, insertions, and deletions between text strings
- Example: [Suoth Street] to [South Street] = 2
Household Counts

March CPS: 117.5 million
Decennial Census: 116.7 million
Tax Data: 113.5 million

About 2 million households would be added if dependents with different addresses were counted independently rather than with claimant
Households vs. Tax Units

Percent of households with each combination of filers and non-filers:

| Filing tax units | Non-filing individuals | 0 | 1 | 2+ |
|------------------|------------------------|---|---|----|
| 0                | ---                    |   |   | 10%|
| 1                |                        | 59%| 4%| 1% |
| 2+               |                        | 23%| 2%| <1%|

Note: dependent non-filers are included as part of the tax-unit who claimed them on their return
Income distributions

Income centile

Households (March CPS)

Tax units (tax data)
Income distributions

![Graph showing income distributions by centile for Households (March CPS) and Households (tax data) compared to Tax units (tax data).]
Top 5% distribution

Mean income by centile

Income Centile

Households (tax data)
Tax units (tax data)
Households (CPS)
### Inequality Statistics

|                  | Tax data (HH) | Tax data (TU) | March CPS (HH) | % difference using tax units | % difference using March CPS |
|------------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Gini             | 0.516         | 0.570         | 0.483          | +10%                          | -6%                           |
| P90/P10          | 13.2          | 18.8          | 13.7           | +42%                          | +4%                           |
| Top 20% share    | 54.6          | 59.5          | 51.0           | +9%                           | -7%                           |
| Top 5% share     | 27.9          | 31.4          | 21.8           | +13%                          | -22%                          |
| Top 1% share     | 14.0          | 16.2          | ---            | +16%                          | ---                           |
Conclusions

• Using universe of tax-record data, possible to:
  • Incorporate non-filers
  • Observe complete households

• CPS understates inequality (greatly understates incomes of the top 2%)

• Tax-units are not a sufficient proxy for households in tax data – assuming equivalence overstates inequality