Table 13.7. "Typical" MAPEs for Population Projections by Level of Geography and Length of Horizon

	Length of horizon (years)					
Level of geography	5	10	15	20	25	30
State	3	6	9	12	15	18
County	6	12	18	24	30	36
Census tract	9	18	27	36	45	54

projections. Projections that extend very far into the future simply cannot provide highly accurate forecasts. This may be disheartening news for the users of population projections, but it is a realistic portrayal of forecast accuracy, given the current state of the art.

Given this high degree of uncertainty, why should the analyst even bother making small-area projections? There are several reasons. First, the projection process itself is educational, teaching a great deal about changes in geographic boundaries over time, demographic and socioeconomic trends, special population subgroups, the occurrence of unusual events, and the potential impact of growth constraints. Second, projections are useful for analyzing the impact of alternative scenarios and combinations of assumptions, regardless of their forecast accuracy. Finally—and perhaps most important—there is really no alternative to making population projections. If people are not willing to make projections, they must either ignore potential change or assume that no change will occur. Neither of these options is particularly attractive. Ignoring potential change is not likely to be helpful; ignorance generally is *not* bliss. Furthermore, the assumption that no change will occur is itself a projection, albeit naïve and perhaps ill-founded. Projections based on no-change assumptions often lead to less accurate forecasts than can be obtained using other projection methods (e.g., Tayman, 1996a). Although population forecasts are almost always in error—sometimes by a wide margin—they represent our best hope of planning intelligently for the future.

Forecast accuracy is an important characteristic of population projections. However, it is not the only criterion upon which projections should be judged. In the final analysis, projections can best be judged according to their overall "utility," or their value in improving the quality of information upon which decisions are based (Swanson & Tayman, 1995). Even though they cannot perfectly predict future population trends, projections can point to potential growth constraints, highlight areas that are likely to lose population or grow very rapidly,

Reference

Smith, Stanley K., Tayman, Jeff, Swanson, David A. 2001. State and Local Population Projections: Methodology and Analysis. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers.