

Questions and Answers

American Community Survey



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U.S. CENSUS BUREAU
Helping You Make Informed Decisions

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U.S. CENSUS BUREAU

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What is the American Community Survey?

It is a new survey the U.S. Census Bureau developed as part of the decennial census program.

- The American Community Survey (ACS) will provide critical economic, social, demographic, and housing information to this country's communities every year, instead of once in 10 years. Communities tell us the American Community Survey helps them make informed decisions and is a key to their future.
- The Census Bureau plans to conduct the American Community Survey in every county, American Indian and Alaska Native Area, Hawaiian Home Land, and in Puerto Rico, once it is fully implemented, pending Congressional funding. It will replace the long form in the 2010 census and greatly simplify operations, so that the focus of the 2010 census is solely on counting the population.

In response to the need policymakers and community leaders say they have for accurate, timely, and comparable information, the Census Bureau successfully reengineered a portion of the decennial census by developing the American Community Survey to provide updated social, economic, and housing information for local areas every year instead of once in 10 years. In addition, this reengineering means a better census in 2010.

I have not heard of the American Community Survey. How long have you been conducting it? How can I see the results of the survey?

The American Community Survey has been tested in a sample of counties across the country since 1996. The information collected from these tests is published on the Census Bureau's Web site at www.census.gov/acs/www and American FactFinder® at <http://factfinder.census.gov>.



The data are provided in several formats for everyone from beginners (who may just want to look at the data) to experienced researchers. The American Community Survey Web site provides easy to read “Narrative Profiles” with text, charts, and graphs, as well as “Tabular Profiles” that show the data in tables.

American FactFinder® provides “Quick Tables” that provide an overview of the data quickly, “Geographic Comparison Tables” that compare data for different places, and “Detailed Tables” that provide more extensive data for more detailed research.

I feel that the American Community Survey is intrusive. Why do you have to ask such personal questions?

Every question on the American Community Survey is required to manage or evaluate government programs or to conduct the

survey. The questions on the American Community Survey questionnaire are essentially the same as those that have been asked as part of the decennial census. It is simply a change to collecting and updating the data annually, instead of once in 10 years at the time of the decennial census. For example, through the American Community Survey:

- **Income** information makes it possible to compare the economic levels of different areas. Many federal and state programs use such data to distribute funds for community development.
- **Military service** information is used primarily by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to measure the needs of veterans and to evaluate veterans' programs dealing with education, employment, and health care.
- Responses to questions about **income and housing** are summarized into profiles that the



U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development uses to assess the need for housing assistance for elderly, handicapped, and low-income homeowners.

- Information about **age, race, Hispanic origin, and language** spoken at home is used to determine bilingual election requirements under the Voting Rights Act.

Are the data confidential? Can the police, the local government, or other regulatory agencies see my answers to the survey?

Your data are confidential under Title 13, United States Code, Sections 9 and 214.

- Title 13 specifies that the Census Bureau can use the information provided by individuals for statistical purposes only and cannot publish or release information that would identify any individual. Instead,

data are released as profiles of groups of individuals within broad geographic areas.

- The police cannot see it; the Immigration and Naturalization Service cannot see it; no other government agency can see it; and no court of law can see it. No one can see or use individual information for regulation.
- Congress has imposed severe criminal sanctions of up to 5 years' imprisonment and/or up to a \$250,000 fine, for any Census Bureau employee who violates those provisions (13 U.S.C., Section 214, as amended by Title 18 U.S.C., Sections 3559 and 3571).



Do I have to answer the questions on the American Community Survey?

Congress's decision that citizen participation in the decennial census is so important that there is a mandatory duty to respond also applies to the American Community Survey. This is analogous to the mandatory responsibility of all citizens to serve on a jury if called to participate. The duty to respond is set forth in several sections of federal law, specifically Title 13, sections 141 and 193. This decision means that the administration of federal programs is based on more than guessing about the needs and resources of a community. At the same time, the respondent's confidentiality is strictly protected by law, as discussed above.

I am elderly, disabled, or otherwise unable to complete the American Community Survey questionnaire.

What do I do?

If a respondent is unable to complete the questionnaire, the respondent may designate another person to help complete the questionnaire. Or, a Census Bureau representative may call the respondent, or a field representative may come to your house and assist you in completing the form. Respondents may also call 1-800-354-7271 for assistance in completing the survey.

An individual address has a chance of selection only once in a 5-year period. Most households do not receive the survey. We include only a small percentage of addresses in the survey each year. That is why it is so important that each household that is part of the survey responds.



How do I benefit by answering the American Community Survey?

Federal agencies, states, and communities say they do not have the up-to-date information they need to better understand community issues, respond to needs, and allocate programs and resources. A community leader said, "Guessing is always fun, but seldom effective."

By responding to the American Community Survey questionnaire, you are helping your community establish community goals, identify community problems and solutions, locate facilities and programs, and measure the performance of programs.

The American Community Survey data are used by:

- *Local governments* for budgeting, evaluating programs, and

planning for community development projects.

- *Community programs*, such as those for the elderly, scout programs, libraries, churches, banks, hospitals, and other community organizations, to provide services to the community and to locate buildings, services, and programs.
- *Transportation planners* (using summarized journey-to-work information) to plan for peak volumes of traffic in order to reduce traffic congestion, plan for parking, and develop strategies, such as carpooling programs and flexible work schedules. Decisions are made to build new roads or add capacity to existing roads; and to develop transit systems, such as light rail or subways by projecting ridership.



- *Utility companies* to understand their customer bases, so they can project future needs. Every time you turn on your water faucet or a light in your home, summarized census data are behind the services you receive.

Why do you ask questions about Spanish/Hispanic/Latino origin and race?

The Census Bureau collects and publishes data on Hispanic origin and race based on guidelines that were revised by the Office of Management and Budget in October 1997.

The American Community Survey provides updates of the changing diversity of the American population at the local level and will provide more current demographic and economic profiles than have been available from the decennial census—

- For people of Hispanic origin: for example, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and Dominicans.
- For major race groups: for example, White; Black or African American; American Indian and Alaska Native; Asian; and Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander.
- For ancestry groups: for example, German, Italian, Irish, Arab, and French-Canadian.
- For the foreign-born population.

Do I have to answer these questions every year?

No. An individual address has a chance of selection only once in a 5-year period. People who move may get the survey more than once in 5 years, but an individual address will not be in the sample again for at least 5 years. Most households do not receive the survey. We include only a small percentage of addresses in the survey each year.



I am only staying at this address temporarily. Do I still have to complete the questionnaire?

If you are staying for 2 or more months at your temporary address, please fill out the information for everyone living there **and** answer the housing questions on pages 4, 5, and 6 about the temporary residence (not your regular residence). If you are at the temporary residence for less than 2 months, complete **only** pages 4, 5, and 6 about the temporary residence and return the form. This information helps communities plan as the population changes at different times of the year.

How do I contact someone from the American Community Survey directly if I have questions or concerns?

There are two easy methods. If you have Internet access, simply send an e-mail to <cmo.acs@census.gov>. You may also contact American Community Survey staff toll-free at 1-888-346-9682.

AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY

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E-mail: cmo.acs@census.gov



Phone: 1-888-346-9682



Internet:
www.census.gov/acs/www