

How the American Community Survey Will Improve Census Statistics

The American Community Survey (ACS) is ushering in the most substantial change in the decennial census in more than 60 years. The American Community Survey is a nationwide survey designed to provide communities with reliable and timely demographic, housing, social and economic data every year.

Recent censuses have consisted of a “short form” and a “long form.” The short form included basic questions about age, sex, race, Hispanic origin, household relationship and owner/renter status. The long form was sent to a sample of housing units and people living in group quarters and included additional detailed questions about socioeconomic and housing characteristics. The ongoing American Community Survey will replace the decennial census long form in 2010 and thereafter by collecting long form-type information throughout the decade rather than once every 10 years.

Here are some of the reasons why the American Community Survey will improve census statistics:

- 1. A Short Form-Only 2010 Census Will Streamline Decennial Operations.** Counting every man, woman and child living in the United States once — and only once — and in the right place, is a daunting undertaking. Without the long form, all households will receive a short form in the 2010 Census. It’s just 10 questions that take about 10 minutes to answer. Not only will filling out the census take less time overall, but follow-up interviews with households that don’t mail back the form will be faster, too.
- 2. Professional Year-Round American Community Survey Interviewers Can Obtain More Accurate and Complete Responses.** The nearly 800,000 temporary census workers who followed up in person with every household that didn’t respond to the 2000 decennial census did an admirable job; the 2000 Census produced the most accurate population count ever conducted. But the tight timeframes of the decennial census are not conducive to the gathering of detailed long-form data. The year-round American Community Survey interviewers have in-depth knowledge of the survey questions. They use that knowledge to elicit more accurate responses from the people they interview. And without the pressure of the short decennial time frame, they are also more likely to get more *complete* survey responses.
- 3. ACS Data Will Be More Current Than the Old Long-Form Data.** Under the old system, long-form data were collected at the beginning of each decade. Like a snapshot that becomes increasingly faded with age, the value of long-form data diminished with each passing year — as did the relevance of the data. While American Community Survey data are not as *precise* as the long-form data — the margin of error is generally higher — it is more *current* and therefore more relevant.

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