

Answers to Common Questions Submitted by Constituents

The Census Bureau only mails ACS questionnaires to approximately 1 out of every 40 households during the year, thus many people have not heard of this survey. Here are answers to the questions respondents ask most frequently.

1) What is the ACS?

The ACS is part of the 2010 Decennial Census Program. It is a survey that is sent to a small percentage of our population on a rotating basis. These data previously were collected only in census years in conjunction with the decennial census. Since the ACS is conducted every year, rather than once every ten years, it will provide more current data throughout the decade.

The ACS is conducted under the authority of Title 13, United States Code, Sections 141 and 193. The Census Bureau may use the information it collects only for statistical purposes. Title 13 requires the Census Bureau to keep all information from all respondents strictly confidential.

2) I've never heard of the ACS. Is this survey authorized by the government of the United States? Is the survey legitimate?

Yes, the ACS is a federal survey conducted under the authority of Title 13, United States Code, Sections 141 and 193. Response to this survey is required by law (Section 221 of Title 13). The Census Bureau may use the information it collects only for statistical purposes. Title 13 requires the Census Bureau to keep all information about respondents strictly confidential. Any Census Bureau employee who violates these provisions is subject to a fine up to \$250,000, a prison sentence up to five years, or both.

3) Do I have to answer the ACS questions?

Yes. Response to this survey is required by law (Section 221 of Title 13). Respondents are required to answer all questions on the ACS to the best of their ability. Your answers are very important because they represent the answers of many other similar households in your community. The data that you and others provide in response to this survey are required to manage or evaluate federal and state government programs. If you submit an incomplete form or provide data that are unclear, the Census Bureau may contact you by phone or in person to obtain or clarify the missing information.

4) Can you remove my address from the ACS sample?

No. The validity of sample data would quickly deteriorate if selected households could request that another household be selected because they didn't want to participate. However, the Census Bureau tries to keep the number of households in the sample as small as possible in order to limit the cost of the survey and reduce the impact on respondents. An address will not be included in the ACS survey more than once in a five-year period.

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5) Why am I getting phone calls from the Census Bureau Staff?

In order to collect the required information, the Census Bureau uses mail, telephone calls and personal visits to collect the ACS data. First, the Census Bureau sends a prenotice letter to let households know that they will soon receive a questionnaire. Soon after the questionnaire is mailed, a postcard reminder is mailed. In order to improve response, a replacement questionnaire is mailed to nonrespondents about three weeks after the initial questionnaire was delivered.

If the Census Bureau does not receive a completed questionnaire after the replacement questionnaire is delivered, the case is referred to one of three call centers in Jeffersonville, IN, Hagerstown, MD, or Tucson, AZ. Since many people work during the week, the telephone interviewers call nonrespondents in the evening and on weekends. If the Census Bureau is unable to reach an address by telephone, a field representative may be sent to the address to complete the interview in person.

6) I am unable to respond because of my age and poor health.

The Census Bureau tries to assist where possible with respondents in difficult situations. However, response to the ACS questionnaire is required by law. If it would be easier for constituents, they may call the Census Bureau toll-free on 1 (800) 354-7271 and complete the questionnaire over the phone. If they are not able to complete the questionnaire, a relative or other trusted individual may be asked to help.

7) Why does the Census Bureau ask such detailed questions on the ACS?

The ACS questionnaire asks detailed questions because the Census Bureau is required to collect specific information for Federal and state government programs. For example, long-term care providers and community planners use information about disability to help them decide where to locate services and facilities. Federal and state government transportation planning agencies use journey-to-work information for roads and public transit development. You can find Fact Sheets that explain why the Census Bureau asks each question on the ACS Web site at <http://www.census.gov/acs/www/SBasics/SQuest/factsheet.htm>.

8) The government already collects a lot of this information. Why does the Census Bureau ask for this information again?

Although other government agencies collect some of the same information, the Census Bureau cannot use it for several reasons. First, the Census Bureau cannot obtain all of the required data from administrative records. Second, administrative records do not contain the data for everyone. Third, data may not be usable because of differences in collection periods or definitions. In addition, the ACS was designed to provide up-to-date information for federal and state agencies. Administrative records usually are not as current as the data that the Census Bureau collects.

The Census Bureau is prohibited by law from sharing any of the information it collects with any other government agency.

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9) The ACS questionnaire took longer than 38 minutes to complete.

The Census Bureau estimates that for the average household, the ACS form will take about 38 minutes to complete, including the time for reviewing the instructions and answers. Since this is an estimate, it will not hold true for every household that receives the survey.

10) What are the penalties if I do not respond to the survey?

Both Title 13 and Title 18, United States Code, provide for monetary penalties for failure to respond. Title 18, U.S.C., Section 3551, et seq., the Sentencing Reform Act of 1984, establishes uniform penalties for all federal crimes. Title 13 U.S.C., Section 221, makes it a misdemeanor to refuse or willfully neglect to complete the questionnaire or answer questions posed by census takers and imposes a fine of not more than \$100. This fine is changed by the Sentencing Reform Act of 1984 from \$100 to not more than \$5,000.

The Census Bureau is not a prosecuting agency. Failure to provide information is not likely to result in a fine. The Census Bureau staff work to achieve cooperation and high response rates by helping the public understand that responding to the ACS is a matter of civic responsibility, and prefers to encourage participation in this manner rather than prosecution.