

Introduction to the American Community Survey



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1 Short History of the American Community Survey

Every 10 years since 1790, Congress has authorized the government to conduct a decennial census of the U.S. population, as required by the U.S. Constitution. From 1940 through 2000, the decennial census included both a short and a long form. The short form included such basic questions as age, sex, race, Hispanic origin, household relationship, and owner/renter status. The long form, sent to about 17 percent of the population, included far more detailed questions about social, economic, housing, and demographic topics.

As the country continued to grow in size and diversity, and the pace of change increased, the U.S. Census Bureau began researching an alternative to the long form, which would collect such detailed information on an ongoing basis rather than once-a-decade. This alternative is the American Community Survey (ACS). After years of research, the ACS was approved by the Congress in 2005 and began collecting decennial census long-form-type information, culminating in the release of detailed information on all communities in 2010. This release made it possible for the 2010 Census to focus only on the collection of basic information on the nation's population.

The ACS collects long-form-type information throughout the decade. It is a nationwide, continuous survey designed to provide communities with reliable and timely demographic, housing, social, and economic information every year. The estimates will, for the first time, be an annual stream of updated information for states and local areas, and can revolutionize the way we use statistics to understand our communities.

2 ACS Mission and Vision

The ACS plays a critical yet broad role in the federal statistical system, delivering quality, timely demographic, economic, social, and housing statistics to a wide range of users. The **mission** statement describes what the ACS does and for whom:

The American Community Survey collects data and provides quality statistics for America about all its communities.

The **vision** for the ACS program describes the desired end-state for the program at the end of the strategic planning timeframe:

To be the leading source for current demographic, social, economic, and housing statistics on the nation's communities:

- **Trusted for our scientific methods**
- **Responsive to a changing world**
- **Innovative in our solutions**

It addresses both the ACS' impact on the federal statistical system and broader national policy and economic decision-making, and the ACS program's efforts to continue to improve its effectiveness as an organization.

3 ACS Program Goals

Over the next five years, ACS intends to achieve four goals tied to the Department of Commerce's balanced scorecard:

- **Goal 1, Mission (Information) Excellence:** The ACS program produces quality statistics for the nation.
- **Goal 2, Customer Service Excellence:** The ACS program is valued by data users, trusted by the public, and supported by stakeholders.
- **Goal 3, Organizational Excellence:** The ACS program is efficient, effective, and adaptable.
- **Goal 4, Workforce Excellence:** The right people want to work on the ACS program.

4 Who Uses the ACS and Why?

Federal, state, local, and tribal governments: Throughout the federal government, agencies use ACS estimates to inform public policy, distribute funds, and assess programs. For example, the U.S. Department of Justice, the U.S. Department of Labor, and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission use ACS estimates to enforce employment antidiscrimination laws. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs uses ACS estimates to evaluate the need for health care, education, and employment programs for those who have served in the military, and the U.S. Department of Education uses ACS estimates to develop adult education and literacy programs. Information from the ACS is critical for state, local, and tribal policymakers and planners as well. These up-to-date estimates are used to evaluate the need for new roads, hospitals, schools, senior services, and other basic services.

Nongovernmental organizations: ACS estimates are freely available to the public and are routinely used by researchers, non-profit organizations, and community groups. These groups produce reports, research papers, business plans, case studies, datasets, and software packages. Some of these activities are designed to inform the public, some are designed to further business ventures, and some are used to apply for funding in the form of grants and donations for community projects.

American Indians and Alaska Natives: ACS estimates are available for tribal planners and administrators, as well as national organizations serving American Indians and Alaska Natives. These planners use the information in planning for future economic development, housing needs, and access to health and educational services for American Indians and Alaska Natives. In

combination with information from tribal administrative records, ACS estimates complete the portrait of the community and provide an enhanced view of a community's current and future needs.

Businesses: Businesses use ACS estimates to inform important strategic decisions. ACS statistics can be used as a component of market research, providing information about concentrations of potential employees with a specific education or occupation, communities that could be good places to build offices or facilities, and information about people that might need their products or services. For example, someone scouting a new location for an assisted-living center might look for an area with a large proportion of seniors and a large proportion of people employed in nursing occupations.

Educators: ACS estimates are available for educators to teach concepts and skills, such as statistical literacy, social studies, geography, and mathematics. Because the ACS is updated annually, it provides timely information for students every year.

Emergency Planners: Emergency Planners use ACS estimates to find local statistics critical to emergency planning, preparedness and recovery efforts. When severe weather threatens or a natural disaster has occurred, ACS estimates provide important characteristics about the displaced population such as size, age and disability status, and the characteristics of housing that may be damaged or destroyed.

Journalists: Journalists use ACS estimates to highlight and investigate the issues that are important to each community. Articles and broadcasts frequently appear across the country on topics such as commuting and transportation, unemployment and earnings, education, and home ownership. Additionally, the wealth of ACS statistics allows journalists to paint a portrait of small communities as they respond to changes in population, employment, and housing outlooks.

5 How ACS Data are Currently Collected and Processed

5.1 Address Is Selected

One important fact to remember about the ACS is that the forms are not mailed to specific people, but rather to specific addresses. By focusing on quality geographic coverage, the ACS can produce a good picture of the community's people and housing by measuring a representative sample of the population. Therefore, instead of population and housing counts that are produced by a decennial census enumeration of every person and living quarters, the ACS provides estimates based on a statistically sound portion of the population.

The Census Bureau selects a random sample of addresses to be included in the ACS. Each address has about a 1-in-480 chance of being selected in a month, and no address should be selected more than once every 5 years. This is a small number of households considering there

are more than 180 million addresses in the United States. An address that receives an ACS form will not likely find a neighbor or friend who has also received one.

5.2 Questionnaire Is Mailed—Twice

The Census Bureau mails a pre-notice letter informing people living at that address that they have been selected to participate in the ACS. Shortly thereafter, a survey questionnaire is mailed. A few days later a reminder postcard is mailed. The Census Bureau mails questionnaires to approximately 295,000 addresses a month across the United States. They are asked to complete the questionnaire and mail it back to the Census Bureau's National Processing Center in Jeffersonville, Indiana. Research has shown that there is a significant increase in mail response attained by sending a second questionnaire to those who have not yet responded. Therefore, if the Census Bureau does not receive a complete questionnaire within a few weeks, a replacement questionnaire is mailed.

5.3 Telephone Follow-Up for Forms Not Returned

A telephone follow-up operation is conducted approximately six weeks after the questionnaire is mailed. The Census Bureau will attempt to obtain telephone numbers and conduct telephone interviews for all addresses that do not respond by mail, which includes addresses that have only a post office mail delivery.

The telephone calls are assigned to professional interviewers at one of the three Census Bureau call centers located in Hagerstown, Maryland; Jeffersonville, Indiana; or Tucson, Arizona. Census operators make numerous attempts at different times of the day, evening, and on weekends to contact an address to complete the form over the phone.

5.4 Personal Visit Follow-Up for Forms Not Returned or Addresses with Post Office Box Mail Delivery

Following the telephone operation, a sample is taken from the addresses that have neither returned a paper form nor completed a telephone interview, and for those addresses with post office box mail delivery. These addresses are visited by Census Bureau field representatives, who will conduct the ACS interview in person.

5.5 Personal Visit for People Living in Group Housing

A sample of people living in group quarters facilities, such as college dormitories, nursing homes, and prisons, are also interviewed in person to ensure coverage of everyone in the country.

5.6 Telephone Follow-Up for Forms Returned Incomplete

After the returned paper forms are delivered to the Census Bureau's National Processing Center, they are reviewed for completeness. Forms with missing items are referred to the telephone call

centers for telephone follow-up, and Census Bureau operators make numerous attempts at different times of the day and evening to contact an address to collect the missing information. All items on the form are important and the Census Bureau attempts to collect complete information.

5.7 ACS Estimates and Data Products

The ACS packages the over 11 billion estimates it produces every year in a variety of data products. ACS data products, described below, are available online using the Census Bureau's data access tools, American FactFinder at <www.Factfinder.census.gov> and DataFerrett at <dataferrett.census.gov>. People interested in using the estimates can use these tools to view the tables online or download data files to use in other applications.

Data Product	Description
Data profiles	Provide broad social, economic, housing, and demographic profiles.
Narrative profiles	Summarize the information in the data profiles using concise, nontechnical text.
Selected population profiles	Provide broad social, economic, and housing profiles for a large number of race, ethnic, and ancestry groups.
Ranking tables	Provide state rankings of estimates across 86 key variables.
Subject tables	Similar to data profiles but include more detailed ACS data classified by subject.
Detailed tables	Provide access to the most detailed ACS data and cross tabulations of ACS variables.
Geographic comparison tables	Compare geographic areas other than states (e.g., counties or congressional districts) for key variables.
Thematic maps	Interactive online maps that can be used to display ACS data.
Custom tables	Allow the user to extract specific rows of data from the ACS detailed tables.
Summary files	Provide access to the detailed tables through a series of comma-delimited text files on the Census Bureau's FTP site < www2.census.gov >.
Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) files	Provide access to ACS microdata for data users with SAS and SPSS software experience.

6 What's Coming and Concluding Remarks

The Director of the Census Bureau has commissioned a team to conduct a comprehensive review of the ACS program. The review includes engaging a large number of ACS program stakeholders to obtain feedback on the program and ideas for change. It also engages a National Research Council panel for methodological and data product review components. This document will be updated as ACS program changes are incorporated.