

# American Community Survey

## Information Guide



United States™  
**Census**  
Bureau

U.S. Department of Commerce  
Economics and Statistics Administration  
U.S. CENSUS BUREAU  
[census.gov](https://www.census.gov)

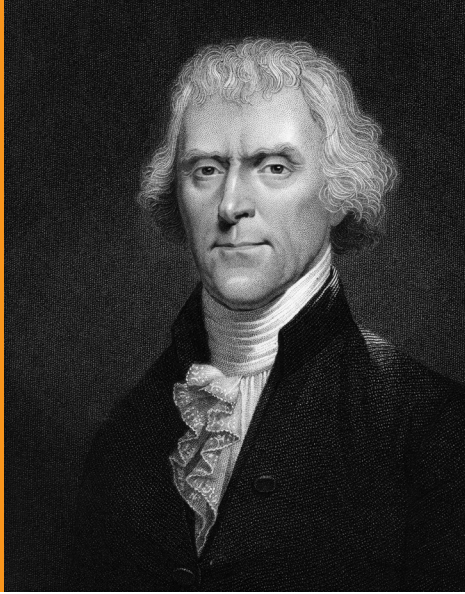
# American Community Survey



Introduction . . . . .	1
Short History of the ACS . . . . .	1
Importance of Participating in the ACS . . . . .	2
How the ACS Works for Your Community . . . . .	3
Who Uses the ACS and Why? . . . . .	4
How ACS Data Are Collected . . . . .	6
Address Selection . . . . .	6
Address Contacted by Mail . . . . .	6
Personal Visit Follow-Up for Surveys Not Completed or Addresses With Post Office Box Mail Delivery . . . . .	7
Personal Visit for People Living in Group Housing . . . . .	7
Telephone Follow-Up for Questionnaires Returned Incomplete . . . . .	7
The U.S. Constitution, Title 13, and the ACS . . . . .	8
Frequently Asked Respondent Questions . . . . .	9
ACS Subjects and Data Products . . . . .	10
ACS Geography . . . . .	11
ACS Data Releases . . . . .	12
Data User Resources . . . . .	13
Need Help With ACS Statistics? . . . . .	14
Contact Information . . . . .	15
U.S. Census Bureau Regional Offices . . . . .	15

## Contents





## Introduction

This information guide provides an overview of the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS). The ACS is a nationwide survey that collects and produces information on social, economic, housing, and demographic characteristics about our nation’s population every year. This information provides an important tool for communities to use to see how they are changing. When people fill out the ACS form, they are helping to ensure that decisions about the future of their community can be made using the best data available. Decision-makers require a clear picture of their population so that scarce resources can be allocated efficiently and effectively.

Every year, the Census Bureau contacts over 3.5 million households across the country to participate in the ACS. To help those responding to the ACS, this information guide contains information on the survey aspects that affect the American public the most: ACS collection procedures, questions asked in the ACS, uses and importance of each question, and tools to access ACS estimates.

## Short History of the ACS

Every 10 years since 1790, Congress has authorized the government to conduct a national census of the U.S. population, as required by the U.S. Constitution. James Madison ensured that the Constitution gave Congress the authority to collect additional information beyond the population count in order to “enable [future legislators] to adapt the public measures to the particular circumstances of the community.”<sup>1</sup> In the twentieth century, the questions were divided between a “short” and “long” form. Only a subset of the population was required to answer the long-form questions.

The most recent census consisted of a short form, which included basic questions about age, sex, race, Hispanic origin, household relationship, and owner/renter status. After the 2000 Census, the long form became the ACS, and this survey continues to collect long-form-type information each year. The ACS includes not only the basic short-form questions, but also detailed questions about population and housing characteristics. It is a nationwide, continuous survey designed to provide communities with reliable and timely social, economic, housing, and demographic data every year. Since its start, the ACS has been providing a continuous stream of updated information for states and local areas, and has revolutionized the way we use statistics to understand our communities.

<sup>1</sup> Summary of debate on Census Bill, House of Representatives, 25–26 Jan., 2 Feb. 1790. (*The Founders’ Constitution*, 1987, University of Chicago, Volume 2, Article 1, Section 2, Clause 3, Document 19).

# Importance of Participating in the ACS



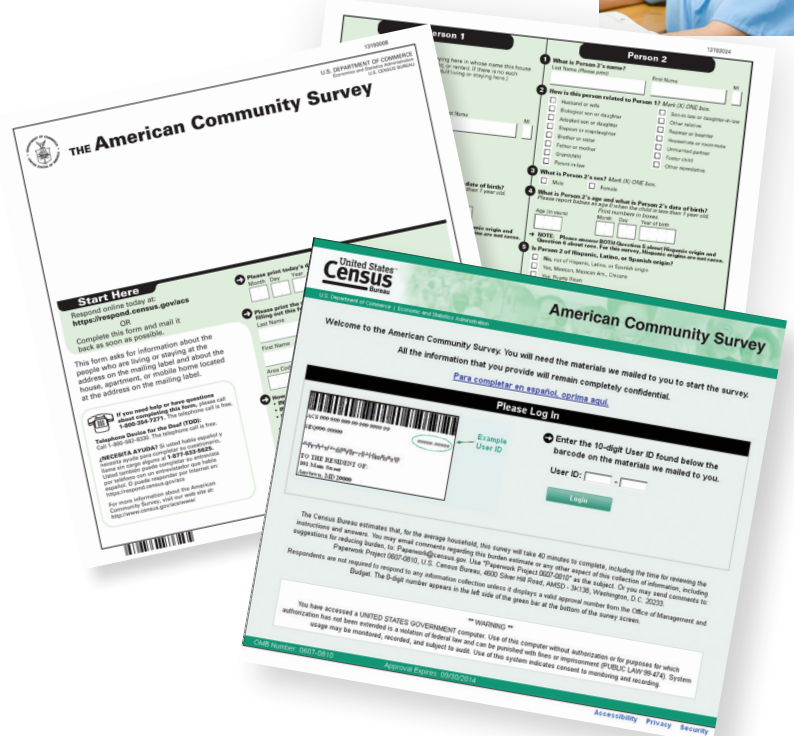
Most people probably never think about how local planners know where to target new development, or where businesses get the data they need to plan for expansion. Most probably do not think about where policymakers get the objective information they need to make sure programs are on track, or that local services are keeping pace with their community's changing demographics. It may not be at the top of our minds for most of us, but it becomes an important consideration when someone receives the ACS in the mail.

Each completed survey is important because it is a building block used to create statistics about communities in America. The information, collected from all over the United States by the ACS and throughout Puerto Rico by the Puerto Rico Community Survey (PRCS), serve as an impartial measuring stick that is used as the basis for decisions that affect nearly every aspect of our lives. People who receive the ACS have the responsibility of responding so that the statistical portrait of their community is as complete and accurate as possible. Every ACS survey is an opportunity for a respondent to help affect what their community receives.

An individual's responses are combined with others' responses to create and publish statistics for communities nationwide, which can then be used by community and local governments and

the private sector. ACS estimates are often used to help establish priorities through a needs assessment, to develop general plans, research, education, and advocacy work.

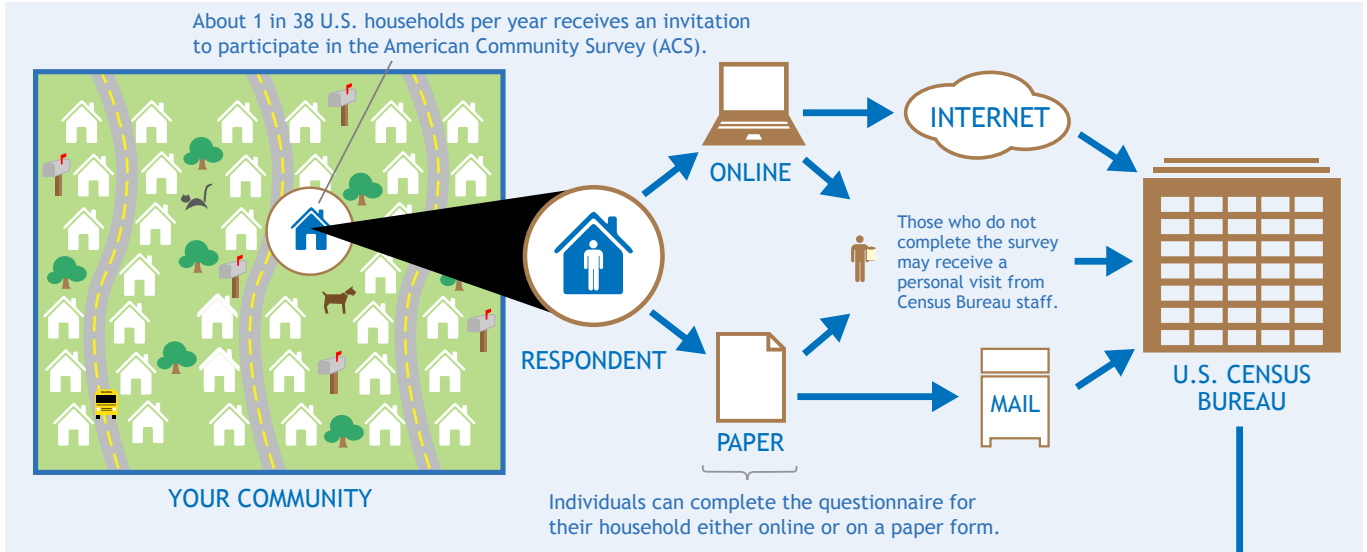
Given competing demands and limited resources, it is more important than ever that communities base their governance decisions on an accurate portrait of the current nation. ACS estimates can be analyzed to prioritize proposed initiatives and to reassess existing programs. Local governments also receive requests for help and assistance from a variety of community groups and civic organizations that need to be assessed—ACS estimates are an extremely useful tool for evaluating these requests.



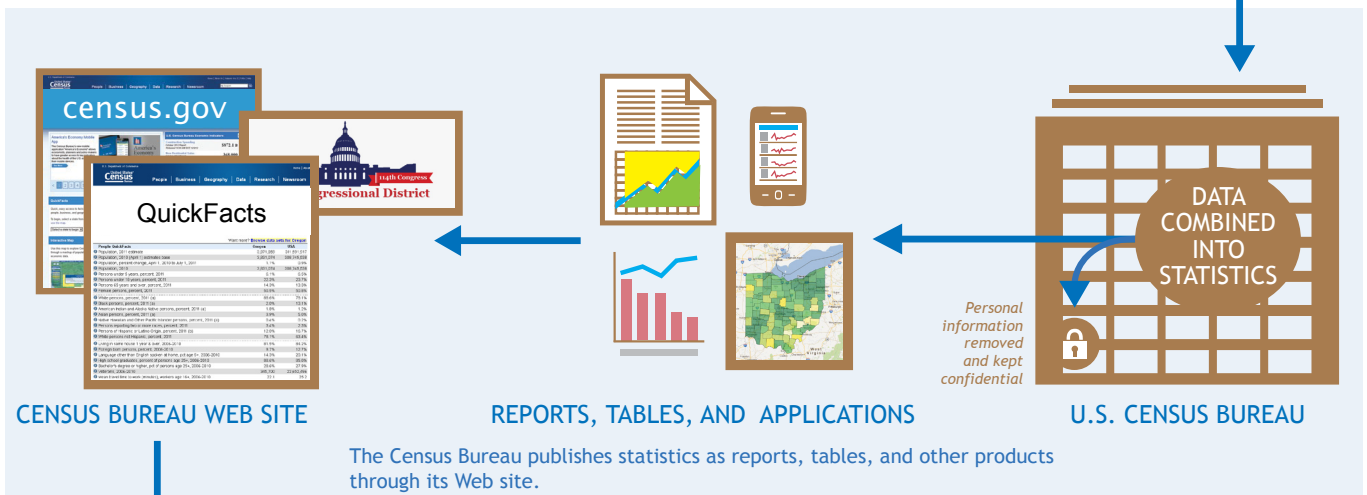


# How the ACS Works for Your Community

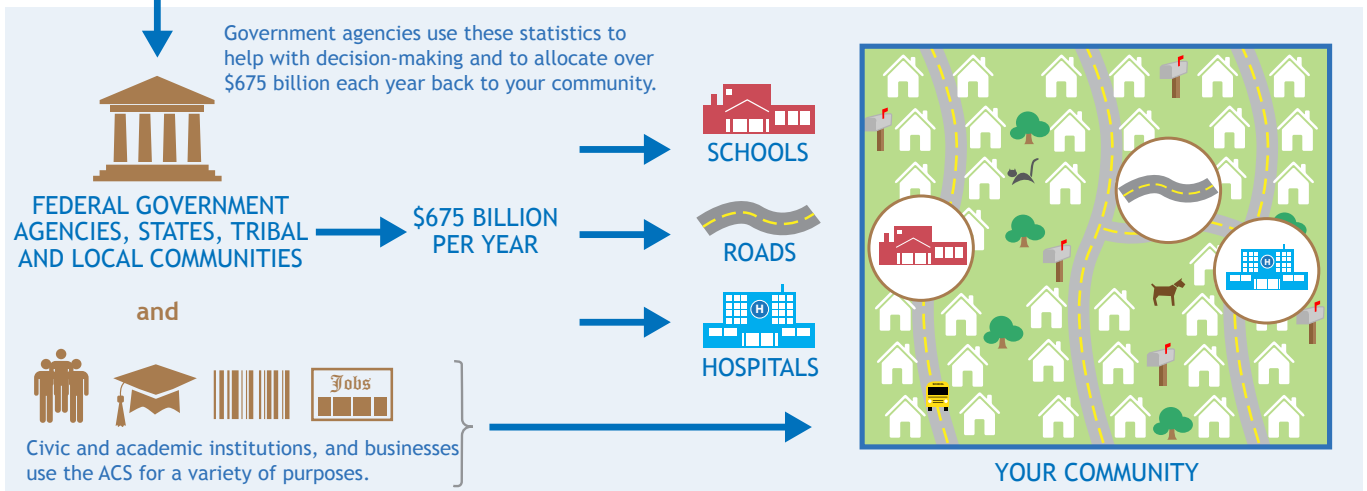
COLLECTION



PROCESSING & DISSEMINATION



DATA-DRIVEN DECISIONS



The ACS is an official Census Bureau survey that is part of the decennial census program. It is sent to a small percentage of U.S. households monthly.

# Who Uses the ACS and Why?



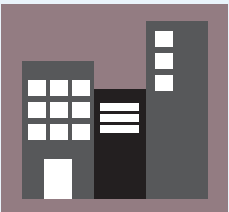
## **Federal Agencies:**

Throughout the federal government, agencies use ACS estimates to inform public policymakers, distribute funds, and assess programs. For example, the U.S. Department of Justice, the U.S. Department of Labor, and the U.S. 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.



## **State and Local Agencies:**

Information from the ACS is critical to state and local agencies. Planners and policymakers use the up-to-date estimates to evaluate the need for new roads, hospitals, schools, senior services, and other basic services. In addition, ACS data provide local communities with important information about their citizens, such as educational attainment, work commuting patterns, and languages spoken.



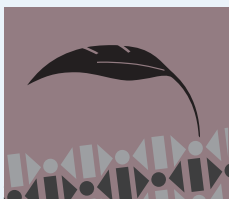
## **Nongovernmental Organizations:**

ACS estimates are available to the public and are routinely used by researchers, nonprofit 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.



## **Emergency Planners:**

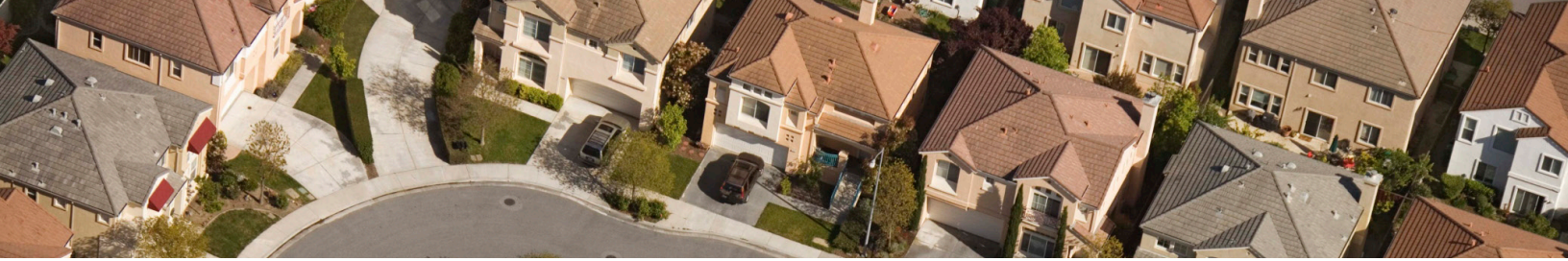
Emergency planners use ACS estimates to find local statistics critical to emergency planning, preparedness, and recovery efforts. When severe weather threatens or a natural disaster has occurred, ACS estimates provide important characteristics about the displaced population such as size, age, disability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



## **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, to use in planning for future economic development, housing needs, and access to health and educational services. 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 decision-making. ACS statistics can be used as a component of market research. They can provide 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.



### **Journalists:**

Journalists use ACS estimates to highlight and investigate the issues that are important to each community. Articles frequently appear, across the country, on topics such as commuting and transportation, unemployment and earnings, education, and homeownership. 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 needs.



### **Public:**

People use ACS estimates to answer questions they have about their own community and other communities. If a person wants to see how they compare with their neighbors or find a new place to live, they can look to the ACS to provide a wealth of information. The ACS provides useful statistics about the median income of an area, the median age of the residents, the median house value, and monthly household expenses. The ACS is a good source of information on commute to work times and types of transportation used by the community. These statistics, and many more, are available to the public for communities across the United States.



Address selected



First month:  
Mail survey  
instructions for  
online or paper  
response



Second month:  
Select addresses  
for nonresponse  
follow-up personal  
visits



Third month:  
Visit nonresponse  
addresses for  
personal interview



Case Complete



## How ACS Data Are Collected

### Address Selection

One important fact to remember about the ACS is that the forms are not mailed to specific people, but rather to specific addresses. The sample is designed to ensure good geographic coverage and does not target individuals. By focusing on quality geographic coverage, the ACS can produce a good picture of the community's people and housing by surveying a representative sample 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. The Census Bureau mails questionnaires to approximately 295,000 addresses a month across the United States. This is a small number of households considering there are more than 140 million eligible addresses in the United States, and an address that receives ACS instructions will not likely find a neighbor or friend who has also received them.

### Address Contacted by Mail

The Census Bureau mails letters to inform people living at an address that they have been selected to participate in the ACS and to provide instructions for completing the survey online. In Puerto Rico and some hard to reach areas in the United States, only a paper questionnaire is mailed. Households are asked to complete the survey online or to mail the completed paper questionnaire back to the Census Bureau's National Processing Center in Jeffersonville, Indiana. If the Census Bureau does not receive a completed survey within a few weeks, it will mail an additional paper survey questionnaire.





## **Personal Visit Follow-Up for Surveys Not Completed or Addresses With Post Office Box Mail Delivery**

Following all mail contacts, a sample is taken from the addresses that have not responded online, by mail, or for those addresses with post office box mail delivery. These addresses are visited by Census Bureau field representatives, who will conduct the interview in person.

## **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.

## **Telephone Follow-Up for Questionnaires Returned Incomplete**

After the returned questionnaires are delivered to the Census Bureau's National Processing Center or via the Internet, they are reviewed for completeness. Questionnaires needing clarification are referred to the Census Bureau's telephone call centers for telephone follow-up.

## **Most U.S. addresses selected for the ACS may receive in the mail:**

- ☑ Instructions to complete the ACS online
- ☑ A reminder card
- ☑ A replacement ACS paper packet (if the questionnaire is not completed online within 2 weeks of mailing)
- ☑ A second reminder card (if a survey is not completed within 4 weeks of initial mailing)
- ☑ A third reminder is sent to households that do not respond prior to personal visit follow-up





## The U.S. Constitution, Title 13, and the ACS

Conducting the ACS is covered by the constitution. The U.S. Constitution states that “[An] Enumeration shall be made within three Years after the first Meeting of the Congress of the United States, and within every subsequent Term of ten Years, in such Manner as they shall by Law direct.” Pursuant to this constitutional directive, Congress passed separate laws for each decennial census and specified the information to be collected. In 1954, Congress codified earlier census acts and all other statutes authorizing the decennial census as Title 13, U.S. Code. From the very first census act, Congress sought the collection of more information than just a headcount.

The current legal authority for collecting this information resides in Title 13 of the U.S. Code or the “Census Act.” The Census Act provides the Census Bureau with legal authority to conduct the decennial census and delegates broad discretionary authority to the Secretary of Commerce for determining the manner of conducting the census. This authority has been redelegated by the Secretary to the Director of the Census Bureau.

Courts routinely have upheld the constitutionality of collecting census data, characterizing as unquestionable the power of Congress to require both an enumeration and the collection of statistics in the census. The courts have held that the Constitution, including the fourth and fifth amendments, does not prohibit the gathering of other statistics in addition to the enumeration every 10 years.

**Title 13, U.S. Code, §141(a).** “The Secretary shall, in the year 1980 and every 10 years thereafter, take a decennial census of population as of the first day of April of such year, which date shall be known as the “decennial census date,” in such form and content as he may determine, including the use of sampling procedures and special surveys. In connection with any such census, the Secretary is authorized to obtain such other census information as necessary.”

**Title 13, U.S. Code, §193.** “In advance of, in conjunction with, or after the taking of each census provided for by this chapter, the Secretary may make surveys and collect such preliminary and supplementary statistics related to the main topic of the census as are necessary to the initiation, taking, or completion thereof.”



# FAQs

## Frequently Asked Respondent Questions



### **Do I have to respond to the ACS?**

Yes. Responding to the ACS is about helping federal, tribal, state, and local officials make informed decisions with timely and accurate data. Just as people are required to respond to jury duty, get a drivers license in order to drive, pay their taxes, and report their income, they also have the obligation to respond to decennial census surveys.

### **Someone came to my home to interview me for the ACS. Is this legitimate?**

If someone has contacted you about the ACS and you would like to verify that the visit or phone call you received was legitimate, you may call your regional census office. You can find contact information for your office at [<census.gov/regions/>](https://www.census.gov/regions/).

### **Why was my address selected for the ACS?**

Addresses selected for the ACS come from the Census Bureau's official inventory of known living quarters and selected nonresidential units in the United States and Puerto Rico. Each scientifically selected address represents other households in the surrounding community.

Interviewing a small sample of addresses, rather than all addresses in the United States, allows the Census Bureau to measure the whole population while limiting the cost of the survey and reducing the overall impact on respondents.

### **What if I do not know the exact answer to an ACS question?**

On the ACS, if no one in your household knows the answer to a question, and the information cannot be referenced in a bill or other document, please give your best estimate.

### **I am concerned about identity theft. How does the Census Bureau protect my ACS information?**

We understand your concerns about privacy and identity theft and want to assure you that we respect your privacy and will ensure that only authorized persons with a work-related need-to-know view your personal information. Title 13, United States Code (U.S.C.) prohibits the Census Bureau from giving or selling your personal information to anyone, including companies, other federal agencies, and law enforcement. When we process the information on the ACS questionnaires, individuals' names and other personal identifiers are deleted from the files used to tabulate the information.

Additionally, we employ statistical methodologies to ensure that the statistics we release do not identify individuals or businesses. These methods include extensive review and analysis of all our data products, as well as disclosure avoidance methodologies (such as data suppression and modification) to screen out information that might identify a specific individual or business.

### **Doesn't the government already have the information requested on the ACS?**

The Census Bureau does use statistics from other government agencies for research and evaluations to improve our surveys and censuses and better understand the information we are collecting. We also use such information to help develop estimates of the population between census years. However, we have not yet used information from other agencies in place of actual responses to the ACS for several reasons:

- Only a few of the items on the ACS could be obtained from other agencies.
- These data do not contain information for everyone, so we may still have to ask some people for all items.
- The ACS was designed to provide up-to-date information. The information available from other agencies is not usually as current as the information that we collect.

The Census Bureau is conducting research exploring the use of information from other agencies in surveys and censuses, with the goal of incorporating them into our data gathering and analysis efforts. This will lower the burden on respondents by reducing the amount of information we request from them.

### **Why does the ACS ask for my name and telephone number?**

We ask for a person's name for two reasons. First, we have found over many years of research that it is easier for a respondent to make sure everybody in the household is included and to keep track of which person they are reporting for if the names are used. If a respondent is interrupted while completing the survey, it will be easier to resume reporting if they know which person they are working on— particularly in larger households. Second, having a name and phone number allows us to call if the questionnaire needs clarification.

# ACS Subjects and Data Products



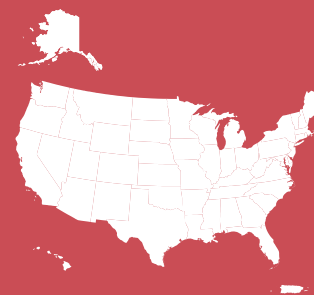
## Population

Age  
Ancestry  
Citizenship Status  
Commuting (Journey to Work) and Place of Work  
Disability Status  
Educational Attainment and School Enrollment  
Employment Status  
Fertility  
Grandparents as Caregivers  
Health Insurance Coverage  
Hispanic or Latino Origin  
Income and Earnings  
Industry, Occupation, and Class of Worker  
Language Spoken at Home  
Marital History, Marital Status  
Migration/Residence 1 Year Ago  
Period of Military Service  
Place of Birth  
Poverty Status  
Race  
Relationship to Householder  
Sex  
Undergraduate Field of Degree  
VA Service-Connected Disability Status  
Veteran Status  
Work Status Last Year  
Year of Entry



## Housing

Acreage and Agricultural Sales  
Bedrooms  
Computer and Internet Use  
Food Stamps/Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)  
House Heating Fuel  
Kitchen Facilities  
Occupancy/Vacancy Status  
Occupants Per Room  
Plumbing Facilities  
Rent  
Rooms  
Selected Monthly Owner Costs  
Telephone Service Available  
Tenure (Owner/Renter)  
Units in Structure  
Value of Home  
Vehicles Available  
Year Householder Moved Into Unit  
Year Structure Built



## Key ACS Data Products

### Data Profiles

Provide broad social, economic, housing, and demographic profiles.

### Comparison Profiles

Similar to Data Profiles but show data side-by-side from the five most recent years of the ACS.

### Selected Population Profiles

Provide broad social, economic, housing, and demographic profiles for a large number of race, ethnic, ancestry, and country/region of birth 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.

### Summary Files

Provide access to the Detailed Tables through a series of comma-delimited text files.

### Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) Files

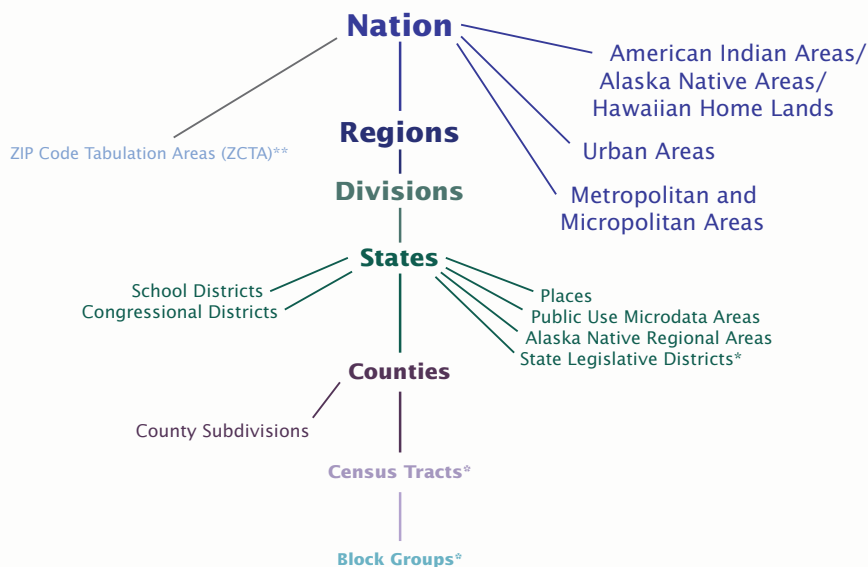
Provide access to ACS microdata for data users with statistical software experience.



# ACS Geography

Geography plays an important role in Census Bureau activities, including supporting the American Community Survey. The ACS is unique in its ability to produce estimates on a wide range of geographies, including low geographic levels such as census tracts and block groups. Geographic areas are organized in a geographic hierarchy. Larger units, like states, include smaller units, like counties and census tracts. Block groups are the smallest building block for the ACS.

## Hierarchy of Select Geographic Entities in the American Community Survey



**Notes:**

\* 5-year estimates only

\*\* 5-year estimates only, first release in 2012 for the 2007–2011 5-year estimates

This graphic does not represent the full set of entities for which the ACS publishes data.

This geographic hierarchy influences how the Census Bureau identifies geographic areas. A system of geocodes - numeric or alphanumeric codes - are used to represent specific geographic areas.

## Geography Tools

### TIGER/Line

**Shapefiles:** Most comprehensive dataset designed for use with GIS (Geographic Information Systems)

### TIGER/Line with Selected Demographic and Economic Data:

Shapefiles prejoined with ACS data in geodatabase format

### TIGERweb:

Web-based system that allows users to visualize TIGER data

For more information on census geography, please visit [census.gov/geography.html](http://census.gov/geography.html) or [census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/geography-acs.html](http://census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/geography-acs.html).

# ACS Data Releases

ACS data are very timely because they are released in the year immediately following the year in which they are collected.

The ACS creates period estimates, which means they represent the characteristics of the population and housing over a specific data collection period. These are the 1-year and 5-year estimates.

## 1-Year Estimates

- 12 months of collected data
- Data for areas with populations of 65,000+
- 2005 ACS 1-year estimates first released in 2006

## 1-Year Supplemental Estimates

- 12 months of collected data
- Simplified versions of popular ACS tables
- Data for areas with populations of 20,000+
- 2014 ACS 1-year supplemental estimates first released in 2016

## 5-Year Estimates

- 60 months of collected data
- Data for all areas
- 2005–2009 ACS 5-year estimates first released in 2010

For more information about the release schedule, new and notable items related to each release, and changes to tables and geographies, please visit [census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/news/data-releases.html](https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/news/data-releases.html).

Note: ACS 3-year estimates have been discontinued. Previous ACS 3-year estimates will remain available to data users, but no new 3-year estimates will be produced.

## Which Estimate to Use?

### 1-Year Estimates

- Reflect most current data
- Larger margins of error than 5-year estimates
- Useful for geographic areas with rapidly-changing characteristics

### 5-Year Estimates

- Less current as larger samples include data collected in earlier years
- Smaller margins of error than 1-year estimates
- Increased statistical reliability for smaller geographic areas and small population groups

For more guidance on using ACS data, please visit [census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/guidance.html](https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/guidance.html).



# Data User Resources



## Handbooks

You can use ACS estimates in different ways and for different reasons. Each one of our downloadable PDF handbooks helps a particular group with specific how-to instructions and case studies. There are ten different handbooks available with updated versions starting in 2017. Access the handbooks at <[census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/guidance/handbooks.html](https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/guidance/handbooks.html)>.

### Available handbooks include:

- General Data Users
- American Indians and Alaska Natives
- Researchers
- Media
- Federal Agencies
- State and Local Government
- Business
- Rural Areas
- Congress
- Puerto Rico Community Survey

### Special modules include:

- American FactFinder
- Application Programming Interface (API)
- Geographic Products/Applications
- Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS)
- Summary Files



## Presentations

Training presentations are available online for you to learn more about various aspects of the ACS. Each presentation consists of PowerPoint slides, accompanying speaker notes, and a Webinar transcript. The presentations cover a variety of content levels ranging from beginning to advanced ACS data topics. Access the full list of presentations at <[census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/guidance/training-presentations.html](https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/guidance/training-presentations.html)>.



## Data Tools

Find out more about your community using free data tools from the Census Bureau! Popular tools include QuickFacts, American FactFinder, and the Application Programming Interface (API). View the complete list at <[census.gov/acs/www/data/data-tables-and-tools/](https://www.census.gov/acs/www/data/data-tables-and-tools/)>.

# Need Help With ACS Statistics?

## **Ask Census**

[ask.census.gov](https://ask.census.gov)

Select "American Community Survey" on the left hand menu to view questions and answers on the ACS. You can also send a message with your question to a Census Bureau support representative.

## **Customer Service**

Call the Census Bureau's Customer Services Center at 301-763-INFO (4636) or 1-800-923-8282 from 9 a.m.–5 p.m. EST, Monday through Friday.

## **Data Dissemination Specialists**

Our regional data staff can help you access local statistics from the ACS or offer training to help build your skills. Contact them at 1-844-ASK-DATA (1-844-275-3282) or [census.askdata@census.gov](mailto:census.askdata@census.gov).

## **ACS Web site**

[census.gov/acs](https://census.gov/acs)

The ACS Web site provides a wealth of up-to-date information about the ACS program, data collection, and research.

## **ACS Data Users Group (DUG) and Online Community**

[acsdatacommunity.prb.org](https://acsdatacommunity.prb.org)

The purpose of the ACS Data Users Group is to improve understanding of the value and utility of ACS data and to promote information sharing among data users about key ACS data issues and applications. Membership is free and open to all interested ACS data users.

The Population Reference Bureau (PRB), in partnership with the U.S. Census Bureau, maintains an online community, organizes webinars and special sessions at professional meetings, and holds ACS Data Users Conferences.



# Contact Information

## For assistance completing the survey:

Please call 1-800-354-7271.

## Telephone Device for the Deaf (TDD):

TTY users can dial 1-800-877-8339 to use the Federal Relay Service.

## Did the Census Bureau call me?

Census Bureau calls originate from one of three contact centers:

Hagerstown, MD: 1-800-392-6975

Jeffersonville, IN: 1-800-523-3205

Tucson, AZ: 1-800-642-0469

## Did the Census Bureau visit me?

Please contact your regional office to verify a visit from a Census Bureau employee. View contact information to the right.

## Necesita ayuda?

Llame 1-877-833-5625.

## News Media

Please call 301-763-3030.

## Sign up for e-mail updates at:

[public.govdelivery.com/accounts/USCENSUS/subscriber/new](http://public.govdelivery.com/accounts/USCENSUS/subscriber/new).

# U.S. Census Bureau Regional Offices



## Toll-Free Phone Numbers

- ATLANTA** <[census.gov/about/regions/atlanta.html](http://census.gov/about/regions/atlanta.html)>  
Alabama, Georgia, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina  
**1-800-424-6974**
- CHICAGO** <[census.gov/about/regions/chicago.html](http://census.gov/about/regions/chicago.html)>  
Arkansas, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Wisconsin  
**1-800-865-6384**
- DENVER** <[census.gov/about/regions/denver.html](http://census.gov/about/regions/denver.html)>  
Arizona, Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Montana, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Wyoming  
**1-800-852-6159**
- LOS ANGELES** <[census.gov/about/regions/los-angeles.html](http://census.gov/about/regions/los-angeles.html)>  
Alaska, California, Hawaii, Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, Washington  
**1-800-992-3530**
- NEW YORK** <[census.gov/about/regions/new-york.html](http://census.gov/about/regions/new-york.html)>  
Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Puerto Rico, Rhode Island, Vermont  
**1-800-991-2520**
- PHILADELPHIA** <[census.gov/about/regions/philadelphia.html](http://census.gov/about/regions/philadelphia.html)>  
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