
American Community Survey Design and Methodology (January 2014)

Chapter 14: Data Dissemination



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Chapter 14: Data Dissemination

14.1 Overview

This chapter provides a description of the release schedule and dissemination process for ACS estimates. As in the past, the primary data dissemination system for ACS tabulated data products is the American FactFinder (AFF): <http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml>. ACS Summary Files and Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) files are available through the Census Bureau’s File Transfer Protocol (FTP) site that can be accessed through links on AFF and through the ACS website, www.census.gov/acs. Also, as was the case in the past, the ACS 5-year Summary Files and PUMS are also available via Data Ferrett: <http://dataferrett.census.gov/index.html>.

New developments in the Census Bureau’s data dissemination processes have expanded opportunities for using ACS and other census data by improving access. In the sections that follow, the current ACS data dissemination system is described, and the new developments are highlighted to provide an updated account of ACS data dissemination as of February 2013.

14.2 Schedule

Data Release Timetable

Starting in 2010, the information on social, demographic, economic, and housing characteristics previously available only once a decade is now available annually through the ACS for all areas, as shown by Table 14-1.

The Census Bureau has released 1-year ACS estimates in September; 3-year ACS estimates in October; and 5-year ACS estimates in December. PUMS files have been released on a slightly delayed schedule. Table 14-2 shows the general ACS data release schedule.

Table 14-1: ACS Data Availability by Type of Estimate, 2006-2013 Release Schedule

Data product	Population threshold	Year of data release								
		2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	
1-year estimates...	65,000+									
3-year estimates...	20,000+	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	
5-year estimates...	All areas*			2005– 2007	2006– 2008	2007– 2009	2005– 2009	2006– 2010	2007– 2011	2008– 2012

* All legal, administrative, and statistical geographic areas down to the tract and block group level.

Table 14-2: ACS Data Release Schedule

Planned Release	Data Products	Lowest Level Geography
September	1-Year Data Release on American FactFinder (AFF): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data Profiles • Comparison Profiles • Narrative Profiles • Selected Population Profiles • Ranking Tables • Subject Tables • Detailed Tables • Geographic Comparison Tables 1-Year Summary File Release on FTP and DataFerrett.	Places, County Subdivisions (where available) Geographies of 65,000+ population Exception: Ranking Tables the lowest level is States
October	3-Year Data Release on AFF: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data Profiles • Comparison Profiles • Narrative Profiles • Selected Population Profiles • Subject Tables • Detailed Tables • Geographic Comparison Tables 3-Year Summary File Release on FTP and DataFerrett.	Places, County Subdivisions (where available) Geographies of 20,000+ population
	1-Year Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) File Release on FTP and DataFerrett.	Public Use Microdata Area (PUMA)
December	5-Year Data Release on AFF: No products below were released via DataFerrett	Census Tracts Exceptions: Geographic Comparison Tables the lowest level is Places/County Subdivisions
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data Profiles • Subject Tables • Narrative Profiles • Detailed Tables • Geographic Comparison Tables 	
	5-Year Summary File Release on FTP and DataFerrett.	Census Block Groups
	3-Year PUMS File Release on FTP and DataFerrett.	PUMA
January (of the following year)	1-Year, 3-Year, & 5-Year Spanish Version of Puerto Rico Community Survey Data Release on AFF. Narrative Profiles will be discontinued on AFF starting 2013.	Census Tracts Exceptions: Geographic Comparison Tables the lowest level is Places/County Subdivisions
	5-Year PUMS File Release on FTP and DataFerrett.	PUMA
Once every five years	Selected Population Tables and American Indian and Alaska Native Tables	Census Tracts
Notes:		
1. The release schedule for the 2013 ACS PUMS products was revised to reflect their planned release in 2014.		
2. The 2008-2012 Five-Year Narrative Profiles were released on DataWeb as a HotReport.		

14.3 Accessing ACS Data and Supporting Documents

American FactFinder (AFF)

The AFF website contains data maps, tables, and reports from a variety of censuses and surveys including the Decennial Census, the ACS, the Population Estimates Program, the Economic Census, and the Annual Economic Surveys.

The AFF is currently the primary Web access tool for ACS data products, which include detailed tables, data profiles, comparison profiles (1- and 3-year data), ranking tables (1-year data only), and geographic comparison tables, selected population profiles, summary files, and downloadable Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) files. As the Census Bureau continues its efforts to make ACS data available through new dissemination vehicles, other forms of ACS data products have emerged. Some of these are discussed later in this chapter.

ACS Website

The ACS website contains a wealth of information, documentation, and research papers about the ACS program. The site also hosts many supporting documents related to data products such as subject definitions, code lists, geographic information, comparison guidance, and notes on new and notables for each data release. Documentation on the accuracy of the data also is included, providing information about the sample design, confidentiality, sampling error, nonsampling error, and estimation methodology. The User Notes and Errata section lists updates made to the data. The geography section gives a brief explanation of the Census Bureau's geographic hierarchy, common terms, and specific geographic areas presented.

The ACS website can be found at: <http://www.census.gov/acs/www>.

File Transfer Protocol (FTP) Site

The FTP site is intended for advanced users of census and ACS data. This site provides quick access to users who need to begin their analysis immediately upon data release. The data can be downloaded into Excel, PDF, or text files. Users of the FTP site can import the files into the spreadsheet/database software of their choice for data analysis and table presentation.

The ACS Summary Files and PUMS files are located on the FTP site at <http://www2.census.gov/> or they are assembled via AFF link and the ACS website at: <http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml> or <http://www.census.gov/acs/www>.

Documentation describing the layout of the site in the README file is available in the main directory on the FTP server.

Data Ferrett and the Research Data Centers

In addition to AFF, the Census Bureau supports Data Ferret, a unique data analysis and extraction tool with recoding capabilities to use ACS and other census data sets with federal, state, and local data. Data Ferrett represents a second source of ACS PUMS files as well as of ACS Summary Files. Access to PUMS files on Data Ferrett does not require knowledge of a programming language, making the files popular with many data users who do not have training in the use of computer program languages such as SPSS and SAS.

Qualified researchers can access ACS microdata through the Census Bureau-sponsored Research Data Centers (RDCs). More information about the RDCs is available at:

<http://www.census.gov/ces/rdcresearch/index.html#>.

New Developments in ACS Data Access and Dissemination

A series of new developments in the access, dissemination, and presentation of ACS and other census data sets has been underway at the Census Bureau over the last few years. For example, the Census Bureau has developed its first mobile app to provide updated statistics to its smartphone and tablet data users for the purpose of highlighting major data releases. The first mobile app highlighted the Economic Census; future mobile apps will highlight ACS and other data sets. The Census Bureau updated its popular Quick Facts site in December 2013 to reflect the latest ACS data; regular updates are planned for the future. The launch of a new tool, “Easy Stats,” allows users to build their own tables by selecting a desired topic and geography providing users easy access to facts about people, business, and geography based on 5-year ACS estimates.

New developments in data dissemination also include interactive, online mapping applications designed for faster utilization, display, and extraction of data. Two examples of such applications are the Language Mapper and the Census Flows Mapper. The Language Mapper allows a data user to pinpoint the wide array of languages spoken in homes for communities across the nation, along with a detailed report on rates of English proficiency and the growing number of speakers of other languages. Similarly, the Census Flows Mapper allows for a quick and visual extraction of county-to-county migration flow data. The Census Flows Mapper allows the user to select a county and view its inbound, outbound, and net migration flows. Flows can also be filtered by the number of movers and by characteristics such as sex, age, race and Hispanic origin using the 2006-2010 and 2007-2011 5-year data. In the future, the mapper will include data from additional 5-year files and flows will be filtered by additional characteristics.

The Language Mapper can be accessed at:

http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/language/data/language_map.html

To access the Census Flows Mapper go to:

<http://flowsmapper.geo.census.gov/flowsmapper/flowsmapper.html>

Other developments that could affect ACS data users in the years to come are a federal digital strategy and new initiatives in data dissemination. The federal digital government strategy addresses the challenges and opportunities associated with the proliferation of mobile devices, new technologies such as cloud computing, and expectations that the Federal Government should be able to deliver and receive digital information and services any time, anywhere, and on any

device.¹ This initiative has led the Census Bureau to reexamine IT architecture and services, data products, and data dissemination systems, in an effort to align them with the digital government strategy guidelines for accessibility, usability, and efficiency.

An example of a new data dissemination initiative that the Census Bureau is pursuing is the Microdata Analysis System (MAS). The MAS is an automated system for public access to microdata that meet disclosure restrictions. The MAS permits advanced query and analysis via direct access to tabulations of data that would normally require substantial time to develop, review, and clear. While its adoption would not eliminate the need for custom tabulations, it has the potential to help relieve staff of a significant part of the burden of producing such tabulations, and provide data users with more rapid access to custom tabulations that would normally require weeks of staff time to develop.

Finally, the Census Bureau has developed an Application Programming Interface (API) to improve access to and the usability of census data, including ACS estimates. The API empowers web users and developers to come up with new ways to access and display subsets of statistics they choose to meet their customer's needs. The API is the base upon which diverse methods of disseminating Census data to the public can be developed without issues of data storage and data access. Apps developed from the API include the Census Bureau's Easy Stats web app and the Sunlight Foundation's Sitegeist mobile app. Easy Stats provides theme-based navigation to ACS tables. Sitegeist highlights selected ACS data at the tract level and links the app user back to the census.gov webpage. Additional apps that will allow users to explore ACS data in engaging ways are under development.

¹ Digital Government, pp. 1-12

14.4 References

White House. “Digital Government: Building a 21st Century Platform to Better Serve the American People. May 23, 2012.” Available at:

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/egov/digital-government/digital-government-strategy.pdf>.