
American Community Survey Design and Methodology (January 2014)

Foreword



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The American Community Survey—A Revolution in Data Collection

The American Community Survey (ACS) is the cornerstone of the U.S. Census Bureau's effort to keep pace with the nation's ever-increasing demands for timely and relevant data about population and housing characteristics. This survey provides current demographic, social, economic, and housing information about America's communities every year—information that until now was only available once a decade. Implementation of the ACS is viewed by many as the single most important change in the way detailed decennial census information is collected since 1940, when the Census Bureau introduced statistical sampling as a way to collect “long-form” data from a sample of households.

The ACS and the reengineering of the decennial census will affect data users and the public for decades to come. Beginning with the survey's full implementation in 2005, the ACS replaced the census long-form questionnaire that was sent to about one-in-six addresses in Census 2000. As with the long form, information from the ACS is used to administer many kinds of government programs and to distribute more than \$400 billion a year in federal funds. Obtaining more current data throughout the decade from the ACS will have long-lasting value for policy and decision-making across federal, state, local, and tribal governments, the private sector, and virtually every local community in the nation.

The Beginning. In 1994, the Census Bureau started developing what became the ACS with the idea of continuously measuring the characteristics of population and housing, instead of collecting the data only once a decade with each decennial census. Testing started in four counties across the country and with encouraging results; the testing expanded to 31 test sites by 1999. The sample was increased to about 800,000 addresses in 2000 to test the feasibility of conducting the ACS concurrent with conducting a decennial census. The demonstration period continued through 2004, and the Census Bureau collected sufficient information to produce data for the nation, states, and most geographic areas with 250,000 or more population. Evaluations and comparisons with the results from the Census 2000 long form data collection demonstrated the quality of ACS data.

With some changes to the sample design and other methodologies, the ACS was fully implemented in 2005 with a sample of three million addresses each year. The ACS program also was implemented in Puerto Rico, where the survey is known as the Puerto Rico Community Survey (PRCS). In 2006, a sample of group quarters facilities was included so that estimates from the ACS and the PRCS would reflect complete characteristics of all residents.

ACS data are now available for all areas. Currently, the ACS publishes single-year and multi-year estimates for all areas, including those with populations of less than 20,000. All estimates are updated annually, with data published for the largest areas with populations of 65,000 or

more in 1-, 3-, and 5-year formats, and for those meeting the 3-year threshold in both 3- and 5-year formats. Of course, even the smallest communities will be able to obtain ACS data based on 5-year estimates annually.

The 2014 release of the ACS Design and Methodology Report. This ACS Design and Methodology Report is an update of the first unedited version that was released in 2006. Since then, we have issued two revised editions of the Report, and provided revisions to several chapters that describe key design changes in the ACS program. This edition includes information on changes to the ACS program since 2009 and through December 2013. This period covers several key recent developments in the ACS program. These include the initiation of a program review in 2011, and the addition of an internet response mode in 2013.

We hope that data users find this report helpful and that it will aid in improving an understanding of the ACS statistical design and the methods.

Dedicated Staff and A Cooperative Public Are Essential to Success. The ACS is the largest household survey conducted by the federal government. The ACS program has been successful in large part because of the innovation and dedication of many people who have worked hard to achieve the program's goals, and the willingness of the public to participate as survey respondents.

All of the primary survey activities are designed and managed by the staff at Census Bureau headquarters in Suitland, MD. These staff continually strive to improve the accuracy of the ACS estimates, streamline ACS operations, analyze ACS data, and conduct important research and evaluation to achieve greater efficiencies and program effectiveness. They also serve as educational resources and experts for the countless data users who come to the Census Bureau in need of technical assistance and help to use ACS data.

In addition, the Census Bureau's field partners in the six Field Regional Offices, thousands of field representatives across the country who collect ACS data, and survey managers and other staff at the Census Bureau's National Processing Center (NPC) in Jeffersonville, IN, and at the Census Bureau telephone call centers in Jeffersonville, IN; Hagerstown, MD; and Tucson, AZ make it possible to achieve a smooth and efficient running of a very complex and demanding survey operation.

At the most fundamental level, the ACS program's achievements are based on the willingness of the public to provide information that make it possible for the Census Bureau to release summarized data for the nation, states, local and tribal governments, and many other data users. Millions of Americans willingly provide the data that are collected each year by the ACS. The Census Bureau thanks each and every respondent who takes the time and effort to participate in the ACS.