

American Community Survey

Organization: Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce. “The U.S. Census Bureau provides data for the federal, tribal, state and local governments as well as voting, redistricting, apportionment and congressional affairs.”¹

Purpose and Uses: The American Community Survey (ACS) is a continuous survey of households that provides detailed annual data describing demographic and socioeconomic characteristics at all levels of geography, from the neighborhood to the nation. Federal, tribal, state, and local entities, businesses, research organizations, media and other groups use ACS information for research, government service provision, emergency response, journalism, and more.²

Data Elements Relevant to Postsecondary Education and Workforce Development:

- Labor force status
- Income and earnings
- Occupation
- Industry
- Place of work
- Education attainment
- School enrollment
- Food stamps benefit
- Residence a year ago
- Demographic – race, Hispanic origin, gender, age

ACS data are tabulated for a variety of geographic areas, including the nation, regions (Northeast, Midwest, South, and West), states, metropolitan areas, micropolitan areas, counties, cities, places, census tracts, and block groups.

History and Status: The ACS is the most recent iteration of a long-standing federal tradition of using the decennial census to collect demographic and socioeconomic data beyond that needed for congressional apportionment and redistricting (that is, data other than a count of individuals) to inform public policy. From 1790 to 1930, such data were collected from every household; in 1940 and 1950, all households answered most questions and a small sample were given extra ones; between 1960 and 2000, such data were primarily collected from a sample of households (one in six in 2000) through the decennial census “long form.” Estimates based on long-form data collection were produced at every level of geography, down to small neighborhoods.

Such data proved enormously helpful for a variety of public, private sector, and household decision-makers. However, as they were provided only once a decade, they were usually out of date.

¹ Bureau of the Census website, www.census.gov/

² ACS Information Guide, https://www.census.gov/acs/www/Downloads/ACS_Information_Guide.pdf

Consequently, with guidance from Congress, the Census Bureau replaced the long form with the “American Community Survey” and in 2005, after a decade-long test period, began collecting the data monthly and publishing it annually.³ No household receives the survey more often than once every five years. Households are required by law to fill out the survey. The 2010 Census was the first decennial census in memory that all households received only a short-form census.

The Census Bureau is authorized to conduct the ACS under Title 13 of the United States Code (USC) 141 and 193, sections specifying the details of the Constitutional requirement to enumerate the population (Article 1, Section 2). The ACS has Office of Management and Budget clearance through June 2016.

Methodology: The ACS is a monthly survey. One in 38 households per year is invited to participate in the ACS, a sample size of 3.54 million addresses (295,000 households per month). In addition, a sample of group quarters, such as nursing homes, college dormitories, and correctional facilities is contacted as well.

The ACS selects sample housing units from each of the 3,143 counties and county equivalents in the US, including the District of Columbia and the 78 municipalities in Puerto Rico.⁴ Responses can be submitted online or with a paper questionnaire.⁵ In some instances, sampled addresses may be contacted by telephone or personal visit.

ACS data are released annually, in the fall after the end of the calendar reference year. Five-year estimates are available for all geographies; three-year estimates for areas of 20,000 or more; and one-year estimates for geographies of 65,000 or more.

Data Products and Tools: ACS data are available online through a variety of Census Bureau data tools, described [here](#).

Annual Cost: For FY2014, the cost of the ACS is \$231 million.⁶ For FY2015, the President has requested \$246 million.

For more information about the American Community Survey, please visit:
<http://www.census.gov/acs/www/>

³ Complaints about out-of-date data from the decennial census were voiced as early as 1873 by President Grant, who proposed a mid-decade census to address the problem. Under President Ford, Congress finally approved a mid-decade census, but never funded it.

⁴ [US Census Bureau. American Community Survey Design and Methodology \(January 2014\): Chapter 4: Sample Design and Selection. \(pg. 5\)](#)

⁵ Reference: [Survey Methodology Main](#), ACS website.

⁶ http://www.reginfo.gov/public/do/PRAViewICR?ref_nbr=201309-0607-001.