

# The American Community Survey

ACS data benefit the American people through economic and social development and smarter, more effective government

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## ACS Basics

- The ACS, part of the decennial census, was established in 2005 to replace the traditional census long form in order to keep long form data more current and to streamline the decennial population count. It is the culmination of a 40-year bipartisan effort to collect data more frequently than once a decade.<sup>1</sup>
- The ACS is the fourth iteration of a 160-year bipartisan tradition of collecting data on demographic, housing, social and economic characteristics through the decennial census program.
- Each ACS question must have a federal use and Congress must be given the opportunity to review the ACS questions proposed in the decennial year.<sup>2</sup>
- The ACS is a statistically representative sample conducted on a rolling basis to 2.9 million U.S. households annually (about 250,000 monthly). Households are selected at random.
- Congress appropriated \$204 million for the ACS in Fiscal Year (FY) 2010. The FY11 budget request includes funding to increase the sample size to 3.5 million addresses, to improve data accuracy in light of population and housing unit growth.

## Who uses ACS data?

- Congress and federal agencies<sup>3</sup>
  - 184 federal domestic assistance programs used ACS-related data to guide the distribution of \$416 billion to every community in the country in FY2008, 29% of all federal assistance.
  - ACS-guided grants accounted for \$389.2 billion, 69% of all federal grant funding.
  - ACS data provide key benchmarks for implementation of civil rights and anti-discrimination laws, including the Voting Rights Act, and court decisions.
  - Lawmakers and federal agencies use ACS data to design and plan programs addressing key national needs: education, health, economic, housing, workforce, business development, criminal justice, and more.
- State and local governments
  - ACS data make possible accurate *annual* state and local population counts.
  - Local and state transportation planners use data from the questions on departure time for work, commute time, and number of vehicle passengers.<sup>4</sup>
  - Housing officials assess substandard housing (e.g., number of flush toilets) or affordable housing for larger families with ACS data.
  - Law enforcement officials use census data for crime mapping when exploring the relationship between various types of criminal incidents (e.g., homicides, drug dealing)

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<sup>1</sup> See President Gerald Ford, "Statement on Signing the Bill Providing for a Mid-Decade Census of Population," October 18, 1976; <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=6480>.

<sup>2</sup> United States Code, Title 13, Section 141(f).

<sup>3</sup> Andrew D Reamer, "Surveying for Dollars: The Role of the American Community Survey in the Geographic Distribution of Federal Funds," Brookings Institution, 2010: [http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2010/0726\\_acs\\_reamer.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2010/0726_acs_reamer.aspx).

<sup>4</sup> "Census Transportation Planning Products (CTPP) from the American Community Survey," <http://www.pooledfund.org/projectdetails.asp?id=392&status=4>.

and neighborhood characteristics (risk factors such as poverty, population density, and vacant housing) to pinpoint where crimes are most likely to occur and to focus police resources accordingly.<sup>5</sup>

- Local and state service officials assess their services for the disabled based on questions relating to capabilities and disabilities.
- Emergency planners use ACS data for natural disaster planning and response. The number of households and relative economic vulnerability located in small areas inform the plans for moving large numbers of people and for providing efficient and appropriate responses. Data from the ACS and its predecessor have proven especially useful in understanding who was affected by Hurricane Katrina, where they live now, and how they are doing.
- Local and state governments use ACS data to determine where to site schools and health clinics.
- **Business and Nonprofit Sectors: Facilitating job creation and economic development**
  - Businesses in the retail, service, homebuilding, manufacturing, and other sectors use ACS data to help evaluate plans to invest, expand, or relocate. ACS data enable employers to assess such factors as local labor force, new markets, and needs of prospective customers.
  - The ACS provides information on regional competitiveness, including educational attainment, occupations, and entrepreneurship.
  - The ACS provides the data foundation for neighborhood redevelopment efforts, before and after.
  - Regional economic and workforce development organizations use ACS to help plan investments in training, education, and the local workforce. The data set provides highly localized information about how the labor force is changing, key job centers, relative earnings, and commuting patterns.

### **Confidentiality is Paramount; Privacy is Preserved**

- All answers are confidential. To ensure confidentiality, information is only released in aggregate form. Your responses cannot be shared with any other government agency or private entity, period. Any Census Bureau employee who violates that confidentiality is subject to a jail term, a fine, or both.
- The Census Bureau collects information about you and your household *only* to produce useful information about the characteristics of your broader community that help policymakers target government programs to areas most in need of services and investments in our future.

### **Resources**

- ACS and Census data for Congressional District or city, county, state: <http://factfinder.census.gov/home/cws/main.html>.
- Census Bureau's Congressional Tool Kit: [http://www.census.gov/acs/www/SBasics/congress\\_toolkit/toolkit.htm](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/SBasics/congress_toolkit/toolkit.htm)
- How to address questions from constituents: [http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Downloads/CT\\_%20answers.pdf](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Downloads/CT_%20answers.pdf)
- ACS website: <http://www.census.gov/acs/www/SBasics/>
- *Questions Planned for the 2010 Census and ACS*, Report to Congress, [http://www.census.gov/acs/www/SBasics/Questions\\_Planned\\_for\\_the\\_2010\\_Census\\_and\\_American\\_Community\\_Survey.html](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/SBasics/Questions_Planned_for_the_2010_Census_and_American_Community_Survey.html).

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<sup>5</sup> Andrew R. Reamer, "To Take a Bite Out of Crime: Safeguard the Census," June 26, 2006, [http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2006/0626communitydevelopment\\_reamer.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2006/0626communitydevelopment_reamer.aspx).