

American Community Survey

Key Facts

WHAT?

- **WHAT IT IS.** The American Community Survey is the premier source of statistics about the socioeconomic and housing characteristics of our nation. Together with population data from the once-a-decade census, ACS data help determine how more than \$400 billion in federal funds are distributed to state and local areas each year.

- **WHAT IT IS NOT.** The American Community Survey is not the official source of population counts. The official population count — including population by age, sex, race and Hispanic origin — comes from the once-a-decade census, supplemented by annual population estimates (the Population Estimates Program). American Community Survey data are designed to show the *characteristics* of the nation's population and should not be used as actual population counts or housing totals for the nation, states or counties.

- **SHORT FORM-ONLY CENSUS.** Prior to the American Community Survey, about one-in-six households and people living in group quarters were randomly selected to fill out a more detailed census long form rather than the standard census short form during the 10-year census. The American Community Survey collects information similar to the former long form. It eliminated the need for a separate long form for the 2010 Census and streamlined the entire census process.

- **QUESTIONS.** Questions on the American Community Survey cover a wide range of social, economic, housing and demographic topics.

- **WHERE THE QUESTIONS COME FROM.** The questions on the American Community Survey are included to produce statistics needed to manage federal programs or comply with federal laws, regulations or court decisions. The data help determine how more than \$400 billion of federal tax dollars are allocated annually to local communities. State and local leaders, planners and businesses use the data to help make important decisions.

For information on each question, go to the “background” section of the ACS Media Tool Kit, accessible from the ACS Web page (<http://www.census.gov/acs>).

- **CONFIDENTIALITY.** Protecting the confidentiality of survey respondents is the Census Bureau's highest priority. All individual answers are anonymous and confidential. Any Census Bureau employee who

violates their oath of confidentiality is subject to a prison term, a fine, or both.

WHO?

- **RECIPIENTS.** In the United States and Puerto Rico, about 250,000 addresses per month receive the American Community Survey. This is equal to about one-in-480 addresses a month, or one-in-40 a year. During Census 2000, about one-in-six addresses received the long form. Addresses are randomly selected and geographically dispersed.
- **SMALLER AREAS.** A larger proportion of addresses in small governmental units (American Indian reservations, small counties and towns) receive the survey. The monthly sample size is designed to approximate the ratio used in Census 2000, requiring more intensive distribution in these areas.
- **MINIMIZING BURDEN.** The odds of receiving the American Community Survey in any 10-year period are less than 1-in-4. No address will receive the survey more than once in any five-year period.

WHERE?

- **LOCATIONS.** The American Community Survey is taken in all counties, American Indian reservations, Alaska Native villages, and Hawaiian homelands in the United States. The Puerto Rico Community Survey is conducted throughout the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.

WHEN?

- **START.** Full implementation of the ACS in the U.S. and Puerto Rico began with data collection in January 2005. Group quarters (nursing facilities, military barracks, college dorms, etc.) were added beginning in January 2006.
- **RESULTS.** ACS data are released annually in the form of single- and multi-year estimates. Annual one-year estimates are available for areas with populations of 65,000 or more. Three-year estimates for areas with populations of 20,000 or more were first released in 2008, and five-year estimates are planned for release for all areas beginning in 2010. This schedule is based on the time it will take to collect data from a sample size large enough to produce accurate results for geographic units of different sizes.

WHY?

- **TEN YEARS IS TOO LONG FOR COMMUNITIES TO WAIT FOR CURRENT DATA.** With the American Community Survey, communities will have current information to assess local needs, such as where to build new roads, schools or senior centers. The survey also will help ensure that communities get their fair share of government funding.
- **CURRENT DATA ARE CRITICAL.** Every year, more than \$400 billion in federal funds are distributed to localities based on a combination of the

census population and housing numbers and American Community Survey data.

- **DECISION-MAKING TOOL.** The American Community Survey can help communities avoid making costly mistakes — such as building an elementary school, road or seniors' facility in the wrong place.
- **IMPROVING THE 2010 CENSUS.** The American Community Survey has improved census operations by streamlining address updates and allowing the 2010 Census to focus on counting the population.
- **AUTHORITY.** The American Community Survey is part of the decennial census, even though it is conducted throughout the decade. As such, its legal authority derives from the same statutes that authorize the census: Title 13 of the U.S. Code, Sections 141 and 193. As with the basic decennial census, responding to the American Community Survey is mandatory.

HOW?

- **RESPONSES AND FOLLOW-UP.** The Census Bureau mails surveys every month to a random sample of addresses in each county. If a household does not respond within six weeks, Census Bureau staff may attempt to contact the household by telephone to complete the survey. If that, too, fails, Census Bureau representatives visit a sample of the remaining addresses for an in-person interview. There is a separate process for people living in group quarters (college dorms, nursing homes, military barracks, etc.).
- **FOLLOW-UP COSTS.** The cost to taxpayers of a follow-up interview for households that do not mail back their completed questionnaires is up to 10 times greater than the cost of processing questionnaires received by mail.

For more information, visit the American Community Survey Web page at [<http://www.census.gov/acs>](http://www.census.gov/acs).

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