

Which Data Set Is Right for Me?

The main function of the U.S. decennial census <www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/2020-census/about.html> is to determine the number of people living in the United States. The Population Estimates Program <www.census.gov/programs-surveys/popest.html> uses administrative records and other data to update the decennial census counts for births, deaths, and migration since the last census. The primary purpose of the American Community Survey (ACS) <www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/about.html> is to measure the changing social and economic characteristics of the U.S. population—our education, housing, jobs, and more.

At a Glance

	Decennial Census Redistricting Data	Population Estimates Program	American Community Survey 1-year estimates	American Community Survey 5-year estimates
Census Block	✓	✗	✗	✗
Census Block Group	✓	✗	✗	△
Census Tract	✓	✗	✗	△
County	✓	✓	△	✓
Place	✓	✓	△	✓
State	✓	✓	✓	✓
Reference Dates	April 1, 2020	July 1, 2020*	January 1– December 31, 2019	January 1, 2015– December 31, 2019
Frequency	Every 10 years	Annually	Annually, normally released in September**	Annually, normally released in December**
Scale	100% count	Estimate	Sample	Sample



Data are available for this geography.



Data are not available for this geography.

* Vintage 2019 population estimates are currently available. Vintage 2020 population estimates release schedule <www.census.gov/programs-surveys/popest/about/schedule.html>. The Population Estimates Program releases a new vintage, or series, of estimates each year that include a time series from the prior census to the current year.

** Information on additional ACS data releases <www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/news/data-releases.html>.



Many counties or county equivalents and places do not meet this threshold.



ACS 5-year estimates are available for all census block groups and tracts, but may have a high margin of error. We recommend aggregating individual census tracts or block groups.

The decennial census is a 100% count of the United States population. This is mandated by Article I, Section II of the U.S. Constitution.

The population estimates are created annually using administrative records and vital statistics data.

The ACS 1-year estimates are a sample of roughly 3.5 million U.S. addresses per year. The ACS 5-year estimates are a cumulative sample of roughly 17.5 million addresses.

Other Key Differences

Who's counted? The decennial census counts everyone living in the country. The population estimates also include the full resident population. The ACS <www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/methodology/design-and-methodology.html> does not include a small subset of the group quarters (GQ) included in the decennial census including domestic violence shelters, soup kitchens, regularly scheduled mobile food vans, targeted nonsheltered outdoor locations, crews on maritime vessels, and living quarters for victims of natural disasters. This results in a small bias in some ACS estimates to the extent that the excluded population is different from the included population. In addition, the residence rules explained below result in some differences between who is counted in the ACS and who is counted in the decennial census.

Residence rules: The ACS uses the concept of "current residence" to determine who should be considered residents of sample housing units. The basic idea behind this concept is that everyone who is currently living or staying at an address for more than 2 months is considered a current resident of that address. In contrast, the decennial census counts everyone who lives or stays at an address most of the time.

Group quarters: The total GQ population in the ACS may not be comparable with the 2000 Census or 2010 Census counts because there are some GQ types that are out of scope in the ACS. These include domestic violence shelters, soup kitchens, regularly scheduled mobile food vans, targeted nonsheltered outdoor locations, crews on maritime vessels, and living quarters for victims of natural disasters. The exclusion of these GQ types from the ACS may result in a small bias in some ACS estimates to the extent that the excluded population is different from the included population. Furthermore, only a sample of GQ facilities throughout the United States and Puerto Rico are selected for the ACS. The ACS controls the GQ sample at the state level only. Therefore, for lower levels of geography, particularly when there are relatively few GQ in a geographic area, the ACS estimate of the GQ population may vary from the count from the decennial census.