

2. HOW JOURNALISTS USE ACS DATA

Journalists use the American Community Survey (ACS) for a wide range of applications—from accessing a single statistic in data.census.gov to complex analyses of data for thousands of geographic areas. Many of the best news articles based on ACS data are written without the restriction of a deadline, by searching through tables on the U.S. Census Bureau’s Web site to find the hidden stories in the data. This section provides some examples of how journalists use ACS data in their work.

Using the ACS to Create Rankings or Identify Outliers

Journalists, bloggers, and others often use rankings to draw attention to geographic areas or population subgroups at the top or bottom of a distribution. For example, Chris Wilson at *Time* was interested in writing a story about occupations with high proportions of people working past retirement age. Using ACS data, he determined that tax preparers and members of the clergy had among the highest concentrations of workers over age 65—at around 14 percent each.⁸

Journalists interested in ranking population and housing characteristics across states can start with the Census Bureau’s Ranking Tables, which provide state-level rankings for more than 80 key ACS variables.⁹

The ACS can also be used to identify outliers—data points that stand out because they are very different from other data points in a ranked series of numbers. Emily Alpert Reyes at the *Los Angeles Times* explains why outliers are so appealing:

“Outliers are easy to find—and they can be truly fascinating stories. What places in your area have the lowest levels of Internet use? The most single parents? The most multiracial people? If the answers end up surprising you, your readers will probably also be interested—and want to know the reasons behind those surprising facts. It’s a great hook for traditional reporting—getting out and knocking on doors and finding the real people who are living those statistics.”¹⁰

⁸ Chris Wilson, *Time*, “The 50 Jobs Where People Work the Longest,” April 5, 2017, <<http://time.com/4726657/retirement-age-jobs/>>.

⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, Ranking Tables, <www.census.gov/acs/www/data/data-tables-and-tools/ranking-tables/index.php>.

¹⁰ Emily Alpert Reyes, “Finding Stories in Census Data,” October 2014, <<https://source.opennews.org/articles/finding-stories-census-data/>>.

Examples of How Journalists Can Use ACS Data

- *Using the ACS to create rankings or identify outliers:* ACS data are frequently used to rank states, metropolitan areas, counties, and other geographic areas on key social and economic statistics.
- *Using the ACS to provide a broader context:* ACS data are available for the nation, states, counties, and local communities, enabling journalists to put data for local areas into a broader context.
- *Using the ACS to report on trends and reversals:* Data on a wide range of topics are updated every year, sharpening journalists’ understanding of key social, economic, housing, and demographic trends.

TIP: Although using ACS data to create rankings and identify outliers can be very appealing, journalists need to use caution when comparing ACS estimates—especially those for small geographic areas or population subgroups. ACS estimates are based on only a sample, rather than all housing units and people, so they have a degree of uncertainty associated with them, called sampling error. In general, the larger the sample, the smaller the level of sampling error.

To help users understand the impact of sampling error on data reliability, the Census Bureau provides a “margin of error” for each published ACS estimate. The margin of error gives users a range of values within which the actual, “real-world” value is likely to fall.

In general, data users should be careful in drawing conclusions about two ACS estimates because they may not be statistically different.

TIP: In the case of state-level estimates and comparisons between large population subgroups, sizable differences between estimates are likely to be statistically significant. But for estimates based on smaller segments of the ACS sample, even large differences between estimates may not be statistically significant.