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# UNDERSTANDING AND USING AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY DATA: WHAT DATA USERS FOR AMERICAN INDIANS AND ALASKA NATIVES NEED TO KNOW

Suppose a tribal planner needs current information about the local population to plan for future economic development, a Commission on Indian Affairs in a southeastern state wants to improve access to health services for tribal members, or a policy analyst at a federal agency wants to measure the effectiveness of programs that fund critical health care services to American Indian and Alaska Native populations nationwide. Where could they turn for this information?

The U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) provides a detailed portrait of the social, economic, housing, and demographic characteristics of America's communities, including information about the characteristics of American Indians and Alaska Natives and the areas where they live. ACS data are important to tribal government officials, federal funding agencies, state government agencies, and

nongovernmental organizations that provide services to improve the well-being of tribal populations. When American Indian and Alaska Native respondents complete the ACS, they are helping to ensure that the best statistics are available to their communities to inform future decisions.

This handbook provides an overview of the ACS to help tribal data users and others understand the basics of the survey, how the data can be used, how to judge the accuracy of ACS estimates, and how to access ACS data on the Census Bureau's Web site. It also includes some recent case studies that show how ACS data are being used to help address important policy and program issues facing American Indian and Alaska Native populations. Links to additional ACS resources, including technical documentation for more advanced users, are included throughout this handbook.

## 1. UNDERSTANDING THE ACS: THE BASICS

### What Is the ACS?

The American Community Survey (ACS) is a nationwide survey designed to provide communities with reliable and timely social, economic, housing, and demographic data every year. A separate annual survey, called the Puerto Rico Community Survey (PRCS), collects similar data about the population and housing units in Puerto Rico. The Census Bureau uses data collected in the ACS and the PRCS to provide estimates on a broad range of population, housing unit, and household characteristics for states, counties, cities, school districts, congressional districts, census tracts, block groups, and many other geographic areas.

The ACS has an annual sample size of about 3.5 million addresses, with survey information collected nearly every day of the year. Data are pooled across a calendar year to produce estimates for that year. As a result, ACS estimates reflect data that have been collected over a period of time rather than for a single point in time as in the decennial census, which is conducted every 10 years and provides population counts as of April 1 of the census year.

ACS 1-year estimates are data that have been collected over a 12-month period and are available for geographic areas with at least 65,000 people. Starting with the 2014 ACS, the Census Bureau is also producing "1-year supplemental estimates"—simplified versions of popular ACS tables—for geographic areas with at least 20,000 people. The Census Bureau combines 5 consecutive years of ACS data to produce multiyear estimates for geographic areas with fewer than 65,000 residents. These 5-year estimates represent data collected over a period of 60 months.<sup>1</sup>

Because the ACS is based on a sample, rather than all housing units and people, ACS estimates 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, combined with the ACS estimate, gives users a range of values within which the actual "real-world" value is likely to fall.

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<sup>1</sup> The Census Bureau previously released 3-year estimates based on 36 months of data collection. In 2015, the 3-year products were discontinued. The 2011–2013 ACS 3-year estimates, released in 2014, are the last release of this product.



ACS content is designed to meet the needs of federal government agencies, and every question in the ACS is asked for a reason. For example, questions about how people get to work, when they leave, and the length of their commutes are used for planning improvements to roads, highways, rail lines, and bus routes, and for planning emergency response routes. Because participation in the ACS is mandatory, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) will only approve necessary questions for inclusion in the ACS. The OMB's responsibility under the Paperwork Reduction Act requires that new questions demonstrate the practical utility of the data and minimize "respondent burden."

Respondent burden can be defined in different ways, but is often related to the length of the interview or questionnaire, or the extent to which questions are viewed as being intrusive or too personal.

Some people are reluctant to respond to the ACS because of concerns about the confidentiality of the data. However, strict confidentiality laws protect all ACS information that could be used to identify individuals or households under Title 13 of the U.S. Code.<sup>3</sup> This is true even for interagency communication: other

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Title 13, U.S. Code, <[www.census.gov/history/www/reference/privacy\\_confidentiality/title\\_13\\_us\\_code.html](http://www.census.gov/history/www/reference/privacy_confidentiality/title_13_us_code.html)>.

### **Box 1.1. How Different Data User Communities Use ACS Data on American Indians and Alaska Natives**

**Federal agencies:** ACS data help determine how more than \$675 billion in federal funds are distributed to state and local areas each year. Federal agencies use ACS data to fund programs providing services such as education, health care, tribal courts, and housing to American Indians and Alaska Natives. For example, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) uses ACS data in their report, *Housing Needs of American Indians and Alaska Natives in Tribal Areas*, which addresses issues of overcrowding and other housing problems among American Indians and Alaska Native populations.<sup>1</sup>

**Nongovernmental organizations:** The National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) helps locate the best data for tribal planners, data users, researchers, NCAI staff, and other leaders. NCAI's Census Information Center often fulfills requests for data and provides information on data accessibility and quality. Part of their goal is to explain the difference between reports based on the decennial census enumeration and data from the ACS and other federal surveys that are derived from sample data. Data users are often interested in basic population counts at the tribal, congressional district, and state levels; as well as the voting-age population; unemployment statistics; poverty and income statistics; housing conditions; and educational attainment in American Indian and Alaska Native areas.

**Grant seekers:** In 2015, the California Indian Manpower Consortium (CIMC) received a grant from the U.S. Department of Labor to support a "Career Pathways for Native Youth" Project. This project provides career training and resources for American Indian youth with limited or no work experience. In their grant proposal, CIMC cited unemployment data from the ACS to demonstrate the need for career services among American Indian youth.

**Tribal Governments:** The Navajo Nation's Division of Economic Development uses ACS data to brief chapter leaders on geographic differences in poverty, unemployment, household income, and language spoken at home. Although they acknowledge the limitations of ACS data—such as the large margins of error associated with some estimates for small geographic areas—they also value the ACS because it provides a "stable, consistently applied- and coded-" source of information for the Navajo Nation and other tribal leaders.<sup>2</sup>

**Researchers:** Researchers use ACS data to delve deeper into social, economic, housing, and demographic issues facing American Indian and Alaska Native populations. For example, researchers have used ACS data, linked with local labor market information, to investigate contemporary Native poverty and its potential links to urbanization of the American Indian population and the growth of tribally owned casinos.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *Housing Needs of American Indians and Alaska Natives in Tribal Areas*, <[www.huduser.gov/portal/publications/HousingNeedsAmerIndians-ExecSumm.html](http://www.huduser.gov/portal/publications/HousingNeedsAmerIndians-ExecSumm.html)>.

<sup>2</sup> National Research Council, *Benefits, Burdens, and Prospects of the American Community Survey: Summary of a Workshop*, Daniel L. Cork, rapporteur, Committee on National Statistics, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press: 2013).

<sup>3</sup> James J. Davis, Vincent J. Roscigno, and George Wilson, "American Indian Poverty in the Contemporary United States," *Sociological Forum*, Vol. 31, No. 1, March 2016.

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government agencies do not have the legal right to access individuals' confidential information.

## Who Uses ACS Data and Why?

The ACS puts up-to-date information about important social issues at the fingertips of people who need it, including tribal leaders, planners, and program directors/managers; businesses; federal policymakers; researchers; nongovernmental organizations; journalists; teachers and students; and the public (see Box 1.1). Tribal governments are using ACS information to keep track of year-to-year population changes in their jurisdictions so they can better address the needs of their constituents. Businesses use the data to better understand their current or potential customers. The federal government uses ACS information to evaluate the need for federal programs and to run those programs effectively.

The topics included in the ACS were chosen because federal and state governments require the data to manage or evaluate programs. For example, information on income is used for grant allocation by the U.S. Social Security Administration, the National School Lunch Program, the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, and the U.S. Department of Education. For more information about how federal agencies and other data users use the ACS in their work, visit the Census Bureau's Web page showing Questions on the Form and Why We Ask.<sup>4</sup>

## History of the ACS

Every 10 years since 1790, Congress has authorized funds to conduct a national census of the U.S. population, as required by the U.S. Constitution. Censuses conducted between 1940 and 2000 consisted of a "short form," which included basic questions about age, sex, race, Hispanic origin, household relationship, and owner/renter status, and a "long form" used for only a sample of households. The long form included not only the basic short-form questions but also detailed questions about social, economic, and housing characteristics.

Data from the census long form provided a detailed snapshot, every 10 years, of America's population and households. However, in today's world, our communities can change very quickly. Between decennial censuses, local governments, organizations, and businesses need timely data to assess and plan for local needs. Costly mistakes can result when planners and policymakers do not have current data on which

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, *Questions on the Form and Why We Ask*, <[www.census.gov/acs/www/about/why-we-ask-each-question/](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/about/why-we-ask-each-question/)>.

to base their decisions. That is one of the key reasons the Census Bureau moved to a new way of gathering data. Rather than taking a snapshot of communities once every 10 years, the ACS was designed to provide a dynamic and timely picture of the nation every year.

The ACS underwent years of extensive testing, including demonstration surveys conducted in parallel with the 2000 Census to evaluate the reliability of survey results. The ACS achieved full, nationwide implementation in 2005 for the household population and was expanded to cover the full population (including group quarters—such as college dormitories) in 2006. In 2010, the ACS replaced the census long form as the nation's source of social and economic data for population and housing characteristics.

Over time, questions have been added, revised, or removed from the survey, as shown in Table 1.1. For example, in 2008, three new questions on marital history, health insurance coverage, and veteran's service-connected disability were added, while the questions on disability were significantly revised to cause a break in series. The data from these new and revised questions collected in 2008 were first available in the ACS products released in 2009. A new question on bachelor's field of degree was added in 2009—with data available in 2010—while in 2013, three new questions on computer ownership and Internet access were added, with data available in 2014.

When a new question is added to the survey, 1-year estimates are available the following year, but it takes 5 years to accumulate data for small geographic areas. While ACS 1-year estimates of health insurance coverage were first available in 2009, ACS 5-year estimates of coverage (for 2008–2012) were first available in 2013.

In 2014, the Census Bureau conducted a comprehensive assessment of the ACS program, including a review of each ACS question. This ACS Content Review sought to understand which federal programs use the information collected by each question and assess how the Census Bureau might reduce respondent burden.<sup>5</sup> Based on this assessment, the questions on the presence of a flush toilet and whether there is a business or medical office on the property were removed from the ACS, beginning with the 2016 survey.

The sample size of the ACS and the ways data are collected have also changed over time, as described in more detail in the next section.

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<sup>5</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, *American Community Survey, 2014 Content Review*, <[www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/operations-and-administration/2014-content-review.html](http://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/operations-and-administration/2014-content-review.html)>.

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## How Are ACS Data Collected?

From 2005 through 2012, the ACS collected data using three sequential methods or “modes:” paper questionnaires through the mail, phone interviews, and personal visits with a Census Bureau interviewer. Starting in 2013, the Census Bureau added a fourth mode—an Internet response option—that simplified data collection and reduced survey costs. Starting in late 2017, based on declining response rates and increasing costs, the Census Bureau discontinued using phone interviews to follow up with nonrespondents. The annual sample size of the ACS has also increased over time, from 2.9 million addresses in 2005 to more than 3.5 million addresses in 2015. This increased sample size has improved the precision of the ACS estimates. Over a 5-year period, the Census Bureau samples approximately 1 in 9 households nationwide, but the sampling rate is higher in areas with small populations and low predicted response rates.

Of the 3.5 million addresses selected for ACS interviews in 2018, about 2.1 million resulted in final interviews. The number of final interviews is smaller than the number of initial addresses selected because the Census Bureau conducts in-person interviews with only a subset of those who do not respond by Internet, mail, or phone. Addresses are also excluded if they are determined to be invalid or commercial.

The Census Bureau calculates survey response rates to help determine the quality of the ACS data.<sup>6</sup> An analysis of survey response from the 2008–2012 ACS 5-year data showed that the response rate for American Indian and Alaska Native areas—at 97.9 percent—was comparable to the national response rate (97.6 percent).<sup>7</sup> For more information about ACS sample size and response rates, visit the Census Bureau’s Web page on Sample Size and Data Quality.<sup>8</sup>

The annual ACS sample is smaller than that of the 2000 Census long-form sample, which included about 18 million housing units. As a result, the ACS needs to combine population or housing data from multiple years to produce reliable numbers for small counties, neighborhoods, and other local areas. To provide information for communities each year—including American

Indian areas, Alaska Native areas, and Hawaiian Home Lands—the ACS currently provides 1-year estimates for geographic areas with at least 65,000 people, and 5-year estimates for smaller geographic areas down to the census tract and block group level. Starting with the 2014 ACS, the Census Bureau is also producing 1-year supplemental estimates—simplified versions of popular ACS tables for geographic areas with populations of 20,000 or more.

One important fact to remember about the ACS is that the request to complete the survey is not mailed to specific people, but rather to specific addresses. The Census Bureau selects a random sample of addresses to be included in the ACS. Each address has about a 1-in-40 chance of being selected in a given year, and no address should be selected more than once every 5 years. Each month, the ACS sample includes approximately 295,000 addresses across the United States. This is a small number of housing units considering there are more than 140 million eligible addresses in the United States.

Until 2015, the Census Bureau sent all selected addresses an advance notification letter informing people living at that address that they had been selected to participate in the ACS. Shortly thereafter (for most U.S. addresses), instructions for completing the survey by Internet were mailed. Beginning in August 2015, the Census Bureau eliminated the advance notification letter and instead included instructions in the initial mail package for completing the survey by Internet or over the phone through a toll-free Telephone Questionnaire Assistance (TQA) line. If households do not respond by Internet or TQA, then a paper questionnaire is mailed to the address. In Puerto Rico and some hard-to-reach areas, only a paper questionnaire is mailed.

Until 2017, if no response was received by Internet, TQA, or mail within a month following the initial mailing, the Census Bureau followed up with a telephone interview when a telephone number was available. However, beginning in October 2017, the Census Bureau discontinued the telephone Nonresponse Followup operation because of declining response rates and increasing costs. Respondent data are still collected via telephone through the TQA operation.

If the Census Bureau is unable to get a response by Internet, mail, or TQA, then the address may be selected for an in-person interview. Because of the high cost per completed interview, the Census Bureau samples about one in three nonrespondent housing units for personal visit interviews. The proportion of nonresponding households selected for in-person

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<sup>6</sup> The survey response rate is the ratio of the estimate of housing units interviewed after data collection is complete to the estimate of all units that should have been interviewed. Interviews include complete and partial interviews with enough information to be processed.

<sup>7</sup> Michael D. Starsinic, “American Community Survey Response and Nonresponse Rates for American Indian and Alaska Native Geographic Areas,” (November 2, 2016), accessed online at <[www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/working-papers/2014/acs/2014\\_Starsinic\\_01.pdf](http://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/working-papers/2014/acs/2014_Starsinic_01.pdf)>.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, Sample Size and Data Quality, <[www.census.gov/acs/www/methodology/sample-size-and-data-quality/](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/methodology/sample-size-and-data-quality/)>.

interviews is higher in areas with lower predicted response rates. A sample of people living in group quarters facilities—such as college dorms, skilled nursing facilities, or correctional facilities—is also interviewed in person to ensure coverage of people who are not living in housing units.

While the basic method for selecting the ACS sample is the same across the country, the Census Bureau applies different sampling rates in some cases to improve the reliability of estimates. For example, the ACS samples up to 15 percent of housing units in less populated areas, while sampling rates in more populated areas are often much lower. For more information about ACS methods, visit the Census Bureau’s Design and Methodology Report Web page.<sup>9</sup>

### Racial/Ethnic Classification in the ACS

Figure 1.1 shows the race question that appears on the 2020 ACS questionnaire.<sup>10</sup> Beginning in the 2020 ACS, six examples are provided for the “American Indian or Alaska Native” category. These examples represent some of the largest population groups within the geographically diverse population of the category. A combined “American Indian or Alaska Native” category is designed to collect data on both American Indians and Alaska Natives. The responses to this question provide the information from which the estimates for American Indians and Alaska Natives are derived. The responses are based on self-identification. Respondents are asked to report one or more races for themselves and other members of their households. Respondents who identify themselves as American Indian or Alaska Native are asked to report their enrolled or principal tribe. People can report more than one tribe. The racial and ethnic classifications included on the ACS questionnaire follow OMB guidelines for the classification of federal data on race and ethnicity (see Box 1.2).

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, *American Community Survey Design and Methodology Report*, (January 2014), <[www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/methodology/design-and-methodology.html](http://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/methodology/design-and-methodology.html)>.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2020 ACS Questionnaire, <[www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/methodology/questionnaire-archive.2020.html](http://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/methodology/questionnaire-archive.2020.html)>.

**Figure 1.1. Race Question on 2020 American Community Survey Form**

**6 What is Person 1’s race?**  
 Mark (X) one or more boxes **AND** print origins.

White – Print, for example, German, Irish, English, Italian, Lebanese, Egyptian, etc. 

Black or African Am. – Print, for example, African American, Jamaican, Haitian, Nigerian, Ethiopian, Somali, etc. 

American Indian or Alaska Native – Print name of enrolled or principal tribe(s), for example, Navajo Nation, Blackfeet Tribe, Mayan, Aztec, Native Village of Barrow Inupiat Traditional Government, Nome Eskimo Community, etc. 

Chinese  Vietnamese  Native Hawaiian

Filipino  Korean  Samoan

Asian Indian  Japanese  Chamorro

Other Asian – Print, for example, Pakistani, Cambodian, Hmong, etc. 

Other Pacific Islander – Print, for example, Tongan, Fijian, Marshallese, etc. 

Some other race – Print race or origin. 

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey.

## Box 1.2. Federal Guidelines for Reporting Data on the American Indian and Alaska Native Population

The racial and ethnic classifications used by the Census Bureau follow the latest standards issued by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in their Federal Register Notice, Revisions to the Standards for the Classification of Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity (October 30, 1997).<sup>1</sup> These standards govern the categories federal agencies must use to collect and present federal data on race and ethnicity. The OMB standards require two minimum ethnicity categories (Hispanic and not Hispanic) and five minimum race categories (White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander). A sixth category, “Some Other Race,” was added to the ACS with OMB approval. In

<sup>1</sup> Office of Management and Budget, *Revisions to the Standards for the Classification of Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity*, <[www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-1997-10-30/pdf/97-28653.pdf](http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-1997-10-30/pdf/97-28653.pdf)>.

addition to the five race groups, the OMB standards also state that respondents should be offered the option of selecting one or more races.

The OMB standards define American Indian or Alaska Native as a person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America) and who maintains tribal affiliation or community attachment. Tabulated data for this category include people who:

- Indicate their race as “American Indian” or “Alaska Native.”
- Report the name of an American Indian tribe (for example, Navajo or Blackfeet) or Alaska Native tribe (for example, Inupiat or Yup’ik).
- Report entries such as Canadian Indian, French American Indian, or Spanish American Indian.

People who answer the question on race by marking only the “American Indian or Alaska Native” response box, and/or writing in one or more tribes, are referred to as the “American Indian and Alaska Native alone” population. People who answer the race question by marking the “American Indian or Alaska Native” response box and one or more other races, for example “American Indian and Alaska Native” and “White” or “American Indian and Alaska Native” and “Black or African American,” are included in the “American Indian and Alaska Native alone or in combination” population.

Based on responses to the race question, data on American Indians and Alaska Natives can be tabulated or shown in data tables in two broad minimum and maximum categories, namely, the American Indian and Alaska Native alone population and the American Indian and Alaska Native alone or in any combination population.

The Census Bureau also codes responses from the write-in box of the race question to provide statistics for specific:

- American Indian tribes.
- Alaska Native tribes, villages, associations, communities, and corporations.
- Tribal groupings.

When minimum population requirements are met, data are available for two minimum and maximum categories, for example the Hoopa Valley Tribe alone or the Hoopa Valley Tribe alone or in any combination.

Tribal groupings are a Census Bureau convention, which consists of combinations of individual American Indian tribes and Alaska Native tribes, villages, associations, communities, and corporations. For example, the Hoopa tribal grouping consists of three tribes: Trinity, Whilkut, and Hoopa Valley Tribe. To explore the complete list of detailed American Indian and Alaska Native categories and their relationship to tribal groupings, see the ACS Code Lists.<sup>11</sup>

Some American Indians live in federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native areas, such as the Navajo Nation Reservation and Off-Reservation Trust Land, but the majority of American Indians live outside of these areas (off reservation). For more information about American Indian geographic areas, see the section on the “Geography of American Indian and Alaska Native Areas.”

### When Are ACS Data Released?

ACS data are very timely because they are released in the year immediately following the year in which they are collected (see Table 1.2). Beginning with data collected in 2005, 1-year estimates have been published for areas with populations of 65,000 or more, including all states, the District of Columbia, and many large counties and cities. In 2010, the Census Bureau released the first ACS 5-year estimates for the nation, states, cities, counties, American Indian and Alaska Native areas, and other geographic areas.

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS), Code Lists, Definitions, and Accuracy, <[www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/technical-documentation/code-lists.html](http://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/technical-documentation/code-lists.html)>.

Table 1.2. Release Schedule for ACS Data

Year of data release	Data product, population threshold, and year(s) of data collection			
	1-year estimates (65,000+)	1-year supplemental estimates (20,000+)	3-year estimates <sup>1</sup> (20,000+)	5-year estimates <sup>2</sup> (all areas)
2006	2005	NA	NA	NA
2007	2006	NA	NA	NA
2008	2007	NA	2005–2007	NA
2009	2008	NA	2006–2008	NA
2010	2009	NA	2007–2009	2005–2009
2011	2010	NA	2008–2010	2006–2010
2012	2011	NA	2009–2011	2007–2011
2013	2012	NA	2010–2012	2008–2012
2014	2013	NA	2011–2013	2009–2013
2015	2014	NA	NA	2010–2014
2016	2015	2014/2015	NA	2011–2015
2017	2016	2016	NA	2012–2016
2018	2017	2017	NA	2013–2017
2019	2018	2018	NA	2014–2018

NA Not available.

<sup>1</sup> The Census Bureau produced ACS 3-year estimates starting in 2008, but that series was discontinued in 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Five-year estimates are available for areas as small as census tracts and block groups.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

These 5-year estimates have been updated annually by removing the earliest year and replacing it with the latest one, thus providing an unprecedented ability to annually monitor social and economic trends in local communities.

The Census Bureau also produced ACS 3-year estimates, starting in 2008, but that series was discontinued in 2015. However, every community in the nation will continue to receive a detailed statistical portrait of its social, economic, housing, and demographic characteristics through ACS 1-year and 5-year data products.

In July 2016, the Census Bureau released a series of supplemental estimates, consisting of new 1-year estimates for geographic areas with populations of 20,000 or more. These tables provide 1-year estimates for many geographic areas that were previously only available through the 3-year or 5-year data products.

While data for the total American Indian and Alaska Native population are available through each of the standard ACS releases, characteristics for detailed tribal population groups are primarily available every 5 years through the release of a special set of tables. These tables, known as the Selected Population Tables and American Indian and Alaska Native Tables, are

based on 5 years of ACS data collection. The tables are repeated for over 1,000 tribal groups to provide a detailed statistical portrait for each group.

Data from the ACS 5-year American Indian and Alaska Native Tables are available for tribal groups with populations of 100 or more at the national level. This is a much lower population requirement compared to the 65,000 national-level population minimum for the Selected Population Profiles in the standard ACS 1-year data release.

ACS data collected for earlier years, from 2000 through 2004, are also available for areas with 250,000 people or more, including all states, the District of Columbia, and many large counties and cities. However, few federally recognized tribal governments meet this 250,000 population threshold.

### **ACS Data Collection for American Indian and Alaska Native Areas**

Beginning with the 2011 ACS sample, the Census Bureau made several improvements to their sampling procedures to increase the reliability of the ACS estimates for populations in certain well-defined geographic areas, including American Indian and Alaska Native areas. Since 2011, the Census Bureau has

conducted in-person interviews for all housing units with unmailable addresses, as well as addresses that did not respond via Internet, mail, or phone in the following areas:<sup>12</sup>

- Hawaiian Home Lands.
- Alaska Native Village Statistical Areas.
- All American Indian areas with at least 10 percent of the population responding to the 2010 Census as American Indian or Alaska Native (alone or in any combination).

From 2011–2020, unmailable addresses were excluded from mail, Internet, and phone interviews. Beginning in 2021, the Census Bureau allows unmailable addresses the option to respond online.

The Census Bureau also conducts interviews in remote Alaska—a set of rural areas in Alaska that are difficult to access and for which all housing unit addresses are treated as unmailable.<sup>13</sup> Interviews were only conducted in-person until 2021 when Internet completion became an option for remote Alaska. Because of the difficulties in field operations during specific months of the year and the extremely seasonal population in these areas, data collection operations in remote Alaska differ from the rest of the country. Previously, all sample addresses were contacted by personal visit to attempt interviews in one of two interview periods of the year—January through April or September through December. Starting in 2021, the Census Bureau extends these two interview periods from 4 to 6 months. By extending these interview periods from January through June and July through December, it allows field staff to travel to these remote locations during a window of time that is safer and less

expensive, as well as a time when they know residents will be present.<sup>14</sup>

Between 2010 and 2012, these new sampling procedures—combined with the increase in the overall ACS sample size, starting in 2011—resulted in a 26 percent increase in the number of housing units in American Indian and Alaska Native areas initially selected for the ACS sample, and an 80 percent increase in the number of final housing unit interviews conducted in these areas (see Table 1.3).

More information about ACS methods, including a description of sampling procedures in remote Alaska, is available in the Census Bureau’s chapter on “Sample Design and Selection” in their Design and Methodology Report.<sup>15</sup>

### **Meeting the Needs of American Indian and Alaska Native Communities**

The Census Bureau pledges to consult with tribal leaders and cooperate with them on any activities regarding the decennial census and ACS that might affect their tribes. This policy applies to all activities of the Census Bureau. Since each tribal nation forms its own government, the Census Bureau works with them one-by-one to coordinate data collection. It is imperative that all Census Bureau operations, including the ACS, be conducted with the acknowledgment and cooperation of the tribal authority over those reservation areas. For more information, see the Census Bureau’s *Handbook for Consultation With Federally-Recognized Indian Tribes*.<sup>16</sup>

The Census Bureau trains field representatives to conduct interviews on American Indian and Alaska Native Reservations. The Census Bureau strives to respect each individual tribe’s own customs, beliefs, and cultural norms, and field interviewers are instructed to follow set procedures to ensure that interviews

<sup>12</sup> Examples of unmailable addresses include those with only physical descriptions of a housing unit and its location, or with post office (P.O.) box addresses, as well as addresses missing place names and zip codes. P.O. box addresses are considered unmailable because of the unknown location of the housing unit using the P.O. box. Addresses missing zip codes are considered unmailable when the place name is also missing.

<sup>13</sup> The county equivalents identified as totally or partially remote in Alaska include: Aleutians East, Aleutians West, Bristol Bay, Denali, Lake and Peninsula, Northwest Arctic, Southeast Fairbanks, Kuskokwim, Yukon-Koyukuk, Bethel, Dillingham, Nome, North Slope, and Valdez-Cordova.

<sup>14</sup> Prior to the 2011 sample year, all remote Alaska sample cases were subsampled for personal interviews at a rate of 2 in 3.

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, *American Community Survey Design and Methodology Report*, Chapter 4: Sample Design and Selection, (January 2014), <[https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/methodology/design\\_and\\_methodology/acs\\_design\\_methodology\\_ch04\\_2014.pdf](https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/methodology/design_and_methodology/acs_design_methodology_ch04_2014.pdf)>.

<sup>16</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, *Handbook for Consultation With Federally-Recognized Indian Tribes*, <[www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2011/dec/2011-handbook-indian-tribes.pdf](http://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2011/dec/2011-handbook-indian-tribes.pdf)>.

**Table 1.3 Effect of Sample Design Changes for American Indian and Alaska Native Areas**

Housing unit	2010	2012	Percent increase
Initially Selected Housing Unit Addresses	80,000	101,000	26%
Final Housing Unit Interviews	47,000	84,000	80%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

are conducted in a culturally sensitive manner. For their first visit to a reservation, the Census Bureau's Regional Office staff contacts the tribal government leadership and establishes a contact person identified as the Tribal Government Liaison, for the initial visit and subsequent visits. The contact person is usually the Tribal Leader.

The Census Bureau also works closely with Native Americans and Alaska Natives to ensure that survey results accurately reflect and meet the needs of these communities. A Native American Data Improvement Working Group was formed to identify and address the common data needs of tribes and federal agencies. The group includes representatives from the Census Bureau, Department of the Interior, and Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), and collaborates with tribes and other federal agencies. This working group includes three subgroups:

- A Geospatial Subgroup established to develop a process for integrating BIA's authoritative Indian land boundary data into the Census Bureau's geographic database and products.
- A Federal Data sets and Products Subgroup established to identify and address common data needs and gaps for tribes and federal agencies.
- A Communications Subgroup established to develop an overall systematic communication plan for implementing this agreement through internal and external subgroups, agencies, tribes, and the Federal Geographic Data Committee (FGDC), and act as the point of contact for reporting between groups.

## Additional Background Information

### ***What Is the ACS?***

<[www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/about.html](http://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/about.html)>  
This Web page includes basic information about the ACS and provides links to additional background materials.

### ***ACS Questionnaire Archive***

<[www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/methodology/questionnaire-archive.html](http://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/methodology/questionnaire-archive.html)>  
Browse archived sample ACS questionnaires for the household and group quarters populations in English and Spanish with instruction guides from 1996 through the present.

### ***Methodology***

<[www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/methodology.html](http://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/methodology.html)>  
This Web page contains links to information on ACS data collection and processing, evaluation reports, and related topics.

### ***Questions on the Form and Why We Ask***

<[www.census.gov/acs/www/about/why-we-ask-each-question/](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/about/why-we-ask-each-question/)>  
This Web page provides more information about how federal agencies and other data users use the ACS in their work.

### ***ACS Data Releases***

<[www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/news/data-releases.html](http://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/news/data-releases.html)>  
This Web page includes information about the ACS data release schedule, guidance on using the latest ACS data, and technical information about geography and product changes. Users can also browse the notes from previous years.

### ***Table and Geography Changes***

<[www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/technical-documentation/table-and-geography-changes.html](http://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/technical-documentation/table-and-geography-changes.html)>  
This Web page provides information about changes to tables and geography for each ACS data release.