

# “I’m calling about the American Community Survey.”

## Resources for Congress



### What is the American Community Survey (ACS)?

The ACS is an important sample survey conducted in the United States. It is designed to provide more current demographic, social, economic, and housing estimates throughout the decade. Each address in the United States has a small chance of being selected in a month, and no address should be selected more than once every 5 years.



### Is it mandatory?

Yes. Just as people are required to respond to jury duty, get a driver’s license in order to drive, pay their taxes and report their income, they also have the obligation to respond to the ACS. The ACS is conducted under the authority of Title 13, U.S. Code (U.S.C.), Sections 141 and 193, and response is required by law. The purpose of these provisions is to protect the accuracy of the statistics used to measure the socioeconomic well-being of the American public, determine how to allocate tax dollars, and make other decisions that affect everyone.



### Is it confidential?

Yes. Title 13 of the U.S. Code requires the U.S. Census Bureau to keep all information about all respondents strictly confidential and protected from unauthorized use. Any Census Bureau employee who violates these provisions is subject to a fine of up to \$250,000 or a prison sentence up to 5 years, or both.



### How do respondents complete the ACS?

The Census Bureau samples addresses not individuals, and sends a series of mailings to the resident of each address.



- Most households receive a letter including an explanation of the ACS and instructions to access and complete the survey online.



- A paper questionnaire is mailed if the online survey is not completed within a reasonable amount of time.



- If no survey is completed online or returned by mail, an attempt is made to contact the address by phone. Telephone interviewers will give a 1-800 phone number that can be called to confirm the inquiry.



- Some households may also be contacted by personal visit. Interviewers will carry an identification badge and explain the reason for each visit.



Once contacted, respondents may call our Telephone Questionnaire Assistance Line at **1-800-354-7271** to find out more or to complete the survey over the phone.



## Need help?

### Additional information

If you or your staff have additional concerns, please contact our **Office of Congressional and Intergovernmental Affairs** at [cao@census.gov](mailto:cao@census.gov) or by phone at **301-763-6100**.

### Additional questions

Constituents can find additional FAQs and submit their own questions at [askacs.census.gov](http://askacs.census.gov).

They may also ask questions, receive assistance in other languages, and complete the survey over the phone at **1-800-354-7271**.

### Locating data

Estimates for ACS and other Census Bureau surveys are located on American FactFinder at [factfinder2.census.gov](http://factfinder2.census.gov).





### **Why is participation in the ACS important?**

The questions on the ACS supply the statistics needed to assess a variety of programs. When people complete the ACS, they are helping to ensure that the best, most accurate, and complete statistics are available to inform decisions about the future of their communities.



### **Is my information safe?**

Yes. The Census Bureau is committed to safeguarding privacy and protecting the confidentiality of all individuals who share their information. Only authorized persons with a work-related need to know may view a respondent's personal information. Additionally, advanced statistical methodologies protect confidential information. The final published aggregate statistics do not reveal names, addresses, or any other information that would identify an individual respondent or business—the identifiers are deleted from these files.



### **The survey took longer than 40 minutes to complete.**

On average, the ACS will take about 40 minutes to complete, including the time for reviewing the instructions and answers. Many households will spend more time on this form, ensuring that each question is given thorough consideration and each answer is as accurate as possible.



### **Can the elderly, sick, or disabled be removed from this survey?**

While responding to the ACS may be more challenging for people who are older or disabled, everyone's information is very important. For example, statistics about the size, distribution, and needs of the disabled and older population are used by a number of federal agencies to ensure that everyone has access to adequate housing, transportation, and services. When someone is unable to complete the form, they can designate a trusted individual as their proxy to answer the questions on the questionnaire or over the phone.



### **Why does the Census Bureau need to know the time I leave for work?**

Basic knowledge about commuting patterns and the characteristics of commuter travel come from responses to these questions. The commuting statistics are essential for planning highway improvements and developing public transportation services, as well as for designing programs to ease traffic problems during peak periods, conserve energy, reduce pollution, and estimate and project the demand for alternative fueled vehicles.



### **Why does the Census Bureau need to know my income, the amount of my mortgage payment, or how much I pay for electricity?**

Selected monthly owner costs, such as mortgage payments and utilities, are a measure of the cost of homeownership. When combined with income, selected monthly owner costs offer an excellent measure of affordability and excessive shelter costs. These statistics are used in many housing assistance programs, and research into housing affordability.



### **Can respondents be fined for not completing the ACS?**

The ACS is conducted under the authority of Title 13, U.S. Code (U.S.C.), Sections 141 and 193, and response is required by law. According to Section 221, persons who do not respond shall be fined not more than \$100. Title 18 U.S.C. Section 3571 and Section 3559, in effect amend Title 13 U.S.C. Section 221 by changing the fine for anyone over 18 years old who refuses or willfully neglects to complete the questionnaire or answer questions posed by census takers from a fine of not more than \$100 to not more than \$5,000.

## **Why does the ACS ask about...?**

The federal government has been collecting statistics in addition to a population count for more than 100 years.

The ACS questions were chosen because federal and state governments require the statistics that we collect to manage or evaluate programs.

For example, information on income is required for use by the Social Security Act, the National School Lunch Program, the Low Income Energy Assistance Program, and the U.S. Department of Education for grant allocation.

You can find Fact Sheets that explain why we ask each question, as well as the common uses of each question, on the ACS Web site at [www.census.gov/acs/www/about-the-survey/questions-and-why-we-ask/](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/about-the-survey/questions-and-why-we-ask/).