An Overview of the American Community Survey

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Overview

• What is the American Community Survey (ACS)?
  – Origins
  – Methodology
  – Content
  – Period Estimates
  – Comparing ACS with Census 2000
  – Data Products

• Learning More
ACS Origins: Census 2000

• Census 2000 employed two forms
  – “short” form – 7 questions; collected basic demographic and housing data
  – “long” form – 53 questions; collected detailed social, economic, and housing data; received by about 1 in 6 households

• Hundreds of billions of dollars of federal aid were allocated based on census data

Problem: Data become outdated over time
ACS and the 2010 Census

• ACS
  – Continuously measures demographic change
  – Largest demographic survey in U.S.
  – Replaces the 2010 census long form in U.S. and Puerto Rico (PRCS)
  – Provides updated data every year (vs. every 10 years)

• 2010 Census
  – Short form only – 10 questions; focused on counting U.S. population
  – U.S. territories will still have a long form
ACS Methodology

• Data collected continuously throughout year
• Estimates published *annually*
• Sample size - about 3 million addresses per year or 250,000 addresses per month
• Questions and content very similar to Census 2000
• Three collection modes: mail, phone, personal visit
• Data published for most Census 2000 geographic areas (including tracts and block groups)
ACS - Official Data Source

• Supported by Office of Management and Budget (OMB)
• Officially part of decennial census program
• All data collected in the ACS is either required by federal law or necessary for Census Bureau programs
• Federal agencies rely on ACS:
  – DOJ: Voting Rights Act; Civil Rights Act; Fair Housing Act
  – HUD: Community Development Block Grant Act
  – ED: No Child Left Behind Act (Title I, Title III)
  – HHS: Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program
  – Etc.
Demographic Characteristics

- Sex
- Age
- Race
- Hispanic Origin
Social Characteristics

- Education attainment
- Marital Status
- Place of birth
- Citizenship
- Residential mobility
- Language spoken at home
- Veteran status
- Disability status
- Grandparents as caregivers
- Etc.
Economic Characteristics

- Household Income
- Poverty
- Employment Status
- Occupation
- Industry
- Commuting to Work
- Place of Work
- Etc.
Housing Characteristics

- Type of unit
- Tenure (own or rent)
- Age of structure
- Number of rooms
- Housing Value
- Taxes & Insurance
- Utilities
- Mortgage/Monthly Rent
- Etc.
Content Changes

- The ACS has a formal process for testing and implementing content changes
- The process involves the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), many Federal agencies, and other stakeholders
- Significant changes to the mail questionnaire are considered roughly every 5 years
- There were content changes in both 2008 and 2009
- The ACS is currently testing possible changes to the 2013 instrument
Notable 2008 Content Changes

• New questions on marital history, health insurance coverage, and veterans service-connected disability status

• Complete revision of the disability questions

• Modifications to the school enrollment and educational attainment questions to collect more detailed information on grade enrolled and level of attainment.

• Modifications to the relationship, year of naturalization, employment, and Food Stamps questions
Notable 2009 Content Change

• The only notable change to the 2009 ACS questionnaire was the addition of a question on bachelor’s degree field

• For a summary of all changes to the ACS questionnaire since 2005 see the ACS Survey Questionnaire page
Notable Changes Being Tested for 2013

• The addition of questions on parental place of birth and household computer and Internet use

• Revisions to the questions on veterans status and period of service, Food Stamps, wage and salary income, interest and dividend income, and cash public assistance
Period Estimates

• ACS estimates are period estimates, describing the average characteristics over a specified period

• Contrast with point-in-time estimates that describe the characteristics of an area on a specific date

• 1-year, 3-year, and 5-year estimates will be released for geographic areas that meet specific population thresholds

• ACS survey responses are pooled over time to create multi-year estimates
Multiyear Estimates

- A multiyear estimate is a period estimate that encompasses more than one calendar year.
- Period for ACS multiyear estimates is either 3 or 5 calendar years.
- Dollar-valued data items are inflation adjusted to the most recent year for the period.
- Geographic boundaries are as of January 1 of the last year in the multiyear period.
- Multiyear estimates are controlled to the average of the individual year’s population estimates for the period.
Use Multiyear Estimates When …

• One-year estimates are not available
• Margins of error for one-year estimates are larger than required
• Analyzing data for small population groups
Comparing ACS vs. ACS Estimates

• **Across geographies:**
  Only compare the same type of estimate
  – 1-year to 1-year
  – 3-year to 3-year
  – 5-year to 5-year

• **Across time** (same geographic area):
  – Use caution if geographic boundaries have changed over time
  – Easier to compare non-overlapping periods
Comparing ACS with Census 2000

- Global differences exist between ACS and Census 2000
  - Residence rules
  - Universes
  - Reference periods

- Comparisons can be made for most population and housing subjects

Educational Attainment: Census 2000 v. 2009 ACS

9. What is the highest degree or level of school this person has COMPLETED? Mark ONE box. If currently enrolled, mark the previous grade or highest degree received:

- No schooling completed
- Nursery school to 4th grade
- 5th grade or 6th grade
- 7th grade or 8th grade
- 9th grade
- 10th grade
- 11th grade
- 12th grade, NO DIPLOMA
- HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATE — high school DIPLOMA or the equivalent (for example: GED)
- Some college credit, but less than 1 year
- 1 or more years of college, no degree
- Associate degree (for example: AA, AS)
- Bachelor’s degree (for example: BA, AB, BS)
- Master’s degree (for example: MA, MS, MEng, MEd, MSW, MBA)
- Professional degree (for example: MD, DDS, DVM, LLB, JD)
- Doctorate degree (for example: PhD, EdD)

11. What is the highest degree or level of school this person has COMPLETED? Mark ONE box. If currently enrolled, mark the previous grade or highest degree received:

- NO SCHOOLING COMPLETED
- Nursery school
- Kindergarten
- Grade 1 through 11 – Specify grade 1 – 11
- 12th grade – NO DIPLOMA

- HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATE
  - Regular high school diploma
  - GED or alternative credential

- COLLEGE OR SOME COLLEGE
  - Some college credit, but less than 1 year of college credit
  - 1 or more years of college credit, no degree
  - Associate’s degree (for example: AA, AS)
  - Bachelor’s degree (for example: BA, BS)

- AFTER BACHELOR’S DEGREE
  - Master’s degree (for example: MA, MS, MEng, MEd, MSW, MBA)
  - Professional degree beyond a bachelor’s degree (for example: MD, DDS, DVM, LLB, JD)
  - Doctorate degree (for example: PhD, EdD)
ACS Data Products

• Detailed Tables
• Profiles
  – Data Profiles
  – Narrative Profiles
  – Comparison Profiles
  – Selected Population Profiles
• Other Derived Products
  – Subject Tables
  – Ranking Tables/Geographic Comparison Tables
  – Thematic Maps
• Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) Files
# ACS Data Products Release Schedule

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* Five-year estimates will be available for areas as small as census tracts and block groups.

Source: US Census Bureau
1-Year v. 3-Year v. 5-Year Data Products

• 1-Year v. 3-Year Data Products
  – Different population threshold necessary for publication (65,000 v. 20,000)
  – Ranking Tables and Comparison Profiles are not published with the 3-Year products, although we plan to release 3-Year Comparison Profiles beginning in CY2011

• 3-Year v. 5-Year Data Products
  – No population threshold for 5-Year products
  – More geographic types available for 5-Year products including tracts, block groups, and state legislative districts
  – No filtering of 5-Year products
  – 5-Year products will be a subset of the 3-Year products
5-Year Data Products

- Not all details are resolved
- Detailed tables comparable to Census 2000 Summary File 1 and 3 tables will be released on American FactFinder (AFF) down to the tract level
- Data Profiles will also be released on AFF down to the tract level
- Block group data will only be available in Summary File format, not on AFF, and only for select tables
- Will include one version of each detailed table, either base or collapsed
- 5-Year PUMS file will not be available until 2011
ACS Data Release Page

Data Release Schedule

GET DATA

American FactFinder (AFF)
File Transfer Protocol (FTP) Site
Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) Files
Request a Custom Tabulation

DATA USER TOOLS & TIPS

What's New & Notable
Highlights of changes to the 2008 ACS, including new content and products

2008 Data Product Details
Table shells/IDs, maps, geographic areas, and more

The ACS Compass Products
Universe handbook, PowerPoint presentations, and other educational materials

Comparing ACS Data
Guidance on making data comparisons

Using Multiyear Estimates
Guidance on how to use the new ACS multiyear estimates

Geographic Overview
Details on geographic areas in ACS data products

DOCUMENTATION

Media Tool Kit
News releases and general information about the ACS

Questionnaires
Sample ACS questionnaires and instruction guides, and why we ask each question

Subject Definitions
Glossary of all ACS variables

Accuracy of the Data
Information on the sample design, weighting methodology, reliability of the data and more

Errata
Updates made to the data due to detected errors

User Notes
Explanatory information about the data

ACS Design and Methodology
Descriptions of the basic design of the ACS and details of the full set of methods and procedures

Quality Measures
Documentation of specific measures of quality associated with ACS published data
Learning More

- ACS Main Page
- 2008 Data Product Details
- Subject Definitions
- Guidance on Comparing 2008 Data to Other Sources
- Design and Methodology Report
- The ACS Compass Products (handbooks and PowerPoint presentations)
For more information

Subscribe to “ACS Alert”
http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Special/Alerts.htm

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