

What is the American Community Survey?



The ACS is a large survey that provides regularly updated estimates of a wide variety of demographic and socioeconomic variables. Five years of ACS sample addresses includes approximately 15 million households.

Traditionally the Census has consisted of a “short form” that was sent to most households asking a few basic questions and a “long form” that was sent to a sample of households asking for data on many detailed characteristics. Beginning with the 2010 Census, the census collected information using only the short-form and did away with the long-form. Instead of collecting the long-form data as part of the 2010 Census, the Census Bureau is now collecting and disseminating this information throughout the decade by adding the American Community Survey (ACS). The ACS is a very large mailout/mailback survey that provides regularly updated estimates (rather than the point-in-time estimates provided by the decennial census data) of a wide variety of demographic and socioeconomic variables that are valuable for many business applications. Five years of ACS sample addresses will include approximately 15 million households.

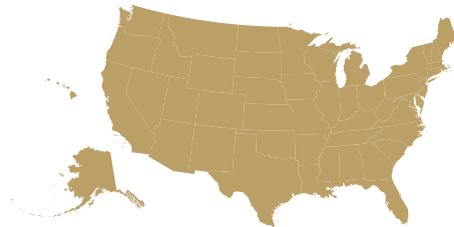
ACS data reflect population and housing characteristics over a period of time—1 year, 3 years, or 5 years. The population size of a geographic area determines the type of ACS estimates that are provided. Estimates based on 1 year of data collection are provided for geographic

areas with populations of 65,000 or more, 3-year estimates are provided for areas of 20,000 or more and 5-year estimates will be provided for areas of the smallest population size (including small towns, census tracts, and block groups). Table 1 gives a sense of which types of areas are large enough to receive 1-year and 3-year estimates. As the number of areas in column 1 makes clear, the vast majority of geographic areas will receive only 5-year estimates. The Census Bureau also plans to release ACS data for ZIP Code Tabulation Areas (ZCTAs). Because most ZCTA’s are small they will only be released in the form of 5-year estimates.

Since 2005 was the first year of ACS data collection at full sample, the first set of 1-year estimates was released in 2006. The first set of 3-year estimates was released in 2008, and the first set of 5-year estimates will be released in December 2010. Following 2010, the Census Bureau will release new 1-year, 3-year, and 5-year estimates every year.

The U.S. Census Bureau is a bureau of the U.S. Department of Commerce. This article was adapted from the ACS handbook *A Compass for Understanding and Using American Community Survey Data*. ●

Geographic Areas Published in the 1-year, 3-year, and 5-year American Community Survey Estimates



Geographic Areas	1-year estimates		3-year estimates		5-year estimates
	Areas with a *Population of 65,000 +		Areas with a *Population of 20,000 +		**All areas
	number	percentage	number	percentage	number
United States	1	100%	1	100%	1
States, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico	52	100%	52	100%	52
Counties	805	25%	1,888	59%	3,221
Census Tract	0	0%	0	0%	66,322
Block Group	0	0%	0	0%	211,274
Cities (incorporated cities and census designated places)	540	2%	2,115	8%	25,302
Metropolitan Statistical/Micropolitan Statistical Area	517	54%	926	97%	953
Combined Statistical Area	126	99%	127	100%	127
Urban Area	396	11%	865	24%	3,625
Congressional Districts - 111th	435	100%	435	100%	435
State Legislative District (Upper)	0	0%	0	0%	1,983
State Legislative District (Lower)	0	0%	0	0%	4,791
Public Use Microdata Area ¹	2,101	100%	0	0%	0
School Districts	972	28%	3,371	80%	13,892

¹ Public Use Microdata Areas (PUMAs) are published for ACS 1-year estimates only. * Counts based on geographic area boundaries as of January 1, 2009 and population estimates from the July 1, 2009 Census Bureau Population Estimates. ** The Census Bureau does not publish ACS data for blocks.