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The American Community Survey

by Mark Mather, Kerri L. Rivers, and Linda A. Jacobsen

- The 21st century marks a new era in census taking and a break with tradition.
- The American Community Survey is a nationwide monthly survey that will provide communities with reliable and timely demographic, housing, social, and economic data every year.
- The ACS will provide new information about U.S. migration levels and trends.

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The American Community Survey

by Mark Mather, Kerri L. Rivers, and Linda A. Jacobsen

The U.S. government has a long history of gathering information about the American people. Congress has authorized funds to conduct a national census of the U.S. population every 10 years since 1790, as required by the U.S. Constitution. When the first American leaders chose to allocate congressional seats to states according to population size, a decennial census was mandated to obtain a complete and official enumeration of the population. The first census recorded a minimum of information: the gender, race, and age group of household members. Census questionnaires have changed every decade since then, reflecting the current interests and needs for information about the U.S. population and housing units. Some censuses collected detailed demographic, social, and economic information for all Americans, including parents' birthplaces, dates of immigration and naturalization, literacy, and the value of any assets. More recent censuses consist of a "short form" delivered to all U.S. housing units and a "long form," delivered to a sample of housing units. The short form includes questions about age, gender, race, Hispanic origin, household relationship, and owner/renter status; the long form seeks detailed socioeconomic information about U.S. population and housing.

The 21st century marks a new era in census taking and a break with tradition. The American Community Survey (ACS), a relatively new survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, is ushering in the most substantial change in the decennial census in more than 60 years.[1] The ACS is a nationwide monthly survey designed to provide communities with reliable and timely demographic, housing, social, and economic data every year. The ACS will replace the 2010 Census long form by collecting detailed information throughout the decade. While the primary aim of the census is coverage—obtaining a complete population enumeration—the ACS program is focused on content—obtaining accurate information about population and housing characteristics. The ACS data will provide, for the first time, a continual stream of updated information for states and local areas, and may revolutionize the way federal, state, local, and tribal governments plan, administer, and evaluate their programs.

Lloyd Wolf for the U.S. Census Bureau

The American Community Survey will replace the long form questionnaire sent to a sample of U.S. households in every decennial census since 1960. The ACS will provide more frequent updates of U.S. population and housing characteristics.

Beginning in 2006, the ACS will provide population and housing data for areas with populations of 65,000 or more. Assuming sufficient congressional funding, the ACS will have sampled 15 million addresses by 2009; by 2010, the ACS will provide five-year averages of demographic, housing, social, and economic data for the nation, states, cities, counties, and even smaller geographic areas. These five-year moving averages will then be updated annually and will provide, for the first time, the ability to monitor social and economic trends in local communities in years between decennial censuses.

This *Population Bulletin* presents an overview of the ACS and the new opportunities and challenges it offers.

It explores ways the survey can help monitor socioeconomic trends in the United States.

The ACS provides several advantages over the decennial census and other surveys:

- The ACS will deliver relevant data, comparable to the census long form, updated every year rather than once a decade.
- The ACS is the first nationwide survey that can be used to monitor annual trends in local communities, and make valid comparisons among communities in the years between censuses.
- The ACS will provide new information about U.S. migration levels and trends.
- The ACS estimates will be more accurate than those from the census long form through the use of professional, highly trained interviewers to collect information from households that do not return complete forms.

The continuous measurement approach of the ACS also presents several challenges for people who want to use and interpret the data. For example:

- The ACS sample will be smaller than that of the 2000 Census long form because of the high cost of conducting a monthly survey.
- Researchers, journalists, and others working with ACS results will need to learn how to interpret 90 percent confidence intervals, which show the margin of sampling error around the estimates.
- The ACS includes several questions that are similar to those collected in other federal surveys for other purposes—especially the Current Population Survey (CPS), the American Housing Survey (AHS), and the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP). Hence, users must choose when to use the ACS and when to use one of the other sources of population and housing characteristics.
- Data users will need to learn how to interpret the five-year moving averages that form the core of the ACS estimates. Interpreting a moving average can be especially tricky in areas with rapidly changing populations.
- Funding for the ACS must be renewed every year, making it vulnerable to budget cuts and fluctuations that could jeopardize the program or the usefulness of the data.

Breaking With Tradition

The United States has conducted a census every 10 years since 1790, but the 1960 Census was the first to include separate "short form" and "long form" questionnaires.[2] In 2000, there were just six questions on the basic short form sent to each housing unit—asking each occupant's age, gender, race, Hispanic origin, and relationship to household head, and whether the householders owned or rented their residence. The long form included 46 additional items and was mailed to a sample of about 16 percent of occupied housing units nationwide.

In 2010, the census short form will still be administered and will count the number of people in each state for the primary purpose of apportioning the 435 seats in the U.S. House of Representatives among the states. The ACS is designed to eliminate the need for a census long form in 2010 by collecting information comparable to long-form data throughout the decade.

The Census Bureau began testing the ACS in 1996 in four test sites. By 2000, the test expanded to more than 1,200 counties, collecting data that could be compared with the 2000 Census. Results from the 2000 ACS test survey, referred to as the Census 2000 Supplementary Survey or C2SS, are available for the nation, states, and most cities and counties with 250,000 or more people. With some exceptions, the ACS results can be compared with the 2000 Census results.[3]

The testing phase ended in 2004 and the ACS was implemented nationwide in 2005. The basic design of the ACS is self-enumeration through mail-out and mail-back questionnaires, with follow-up telephone calls and visits to housing units that do not return a form. Questionnaires are mailed every month to a random sample of approximately 250,000 addresses—about 3 million households per year—making it one of the largest surveys in the world. Responding to the ACS questionnaire is required by law, as is responding to the decennial census.

The questions used in the ACS are essentially the same as those in the census long form, but there are some critical differences between the two data sources. The priority for the decennial census is *coverage* of the U.S. population, while the priority for the ACS is *content*, which calls for different methods for collecting data.

The ACS and Census

While the census provides a snapshot of the U.S. population once every 10 years, the ACS has been described as a "moving video image, continually updated to provide much needed data about our nation in today's fast-moving world."[4] To provide information for communities each year, the ACS will provide one-, three-, and five-year averages of data, depending on the area's population size (see Box 1). The five-year estimates from the ACS are intended to replace estimates from the decennial census long form.[5]

Box 1
Release Schedule for ACS Data

The American Community Survey (ACS) will provide single-year estimates for areas with 65,000 or more people by late summer 2006. The 2004 ACS, released in August 2005, includes single-year estimates for states and other geographic areas with 250,000 or more people (see table). Beginning in 2008, three-year averages will be available for areas with populations greater than 20,000.

Starting in 2010, five-year averages will be produced for all geographic areas, regardless of population size. New York City, for example, will have three different ACS estimates in 2010: single-year (2009), three-year (2007–2009), and five-year (2005–2009).

Release Schedule for ACS Data

Estimate Interval	Resident population	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010+
Annual estimate	250,000 or more	X	X	X	X	X	X
Annual estimate	65,000 or more		X	X	X	X	X
3-year average	20,000 or more				X	X	X
5-year average	Less than 20,000*						X

*Includes geographic areas down to the census-tract and block-group level. The Census Bureau will not publish population characteristics for areas with small numbers of people if the characteristics (such as race, age, or occupation) could be used to identify a particular individual.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (www.census.gov/acs).

Methodological Differences

The ACS uses different methods than the census long form, and requires new approaches for interpreting results. While the census long form questionnaire is mailed once every decade to a random sample of addresses, the ACS is mailed every month of every year to a random sample of addresses. No address will receive the ACS more than once in a five-year period, although the same person could receive it again within five years if he or she moved to another address included in the sample.

Another methodological difference stems from the continuous nature of the ACS: The ACS requires a constant supply of interviewers to follow-up on non-returned forms. The nonresponse follow-up for the census is conducted by thousands of temporary interviewers who are trained by the Census Bureau and sent out into the field for a few months of data collection. The ACS maintains a much smaller staff of professional interviewers who receive extensive training. ACS staff achieve a higher response rate than census staff by using effective follow-up procedures for households that do not return forms. ACS field workers are also more effective than census enumerators at reducing "item nonresponse" by getting people to provide usable information for more items on the questionnaire. Consequently, the ACS obtains more accurate and complete population and housing information than the census long form.[6]

The census has used two phases of data collection: mail-out and mail-back, and in-person follow-up of nonresponses by a field representative.[7] The ACS uses three phases: mail-out and mail-back; computer-assisted telephone interviewing of people at addresses that did not return a form; and computer-assisted personal interviewing of a sample of the remaining unanswered questionnaires. This sampling rate varies depending on the overall response rate at the census-tract level. In census tracts with an overall response rate below 36 percent, for example, the sampling rate is one in two, while it drops to one in three for tracts with a response rate between 51 percent and 60 percent. Unlike the census, the ACS does not accept proxy responses from a neighbor or anyone else who is not a resident of the sampled housing unit. Information about absent occupants is usually more accurate and complete when it comes from a household member rather than a neighbor.

Reference Periods

Another important difference between the census and ACS is the reference period used to determine residency, employment, income, and school enrollment of respondents. The reference period for most of these items in the census is April 1 of the census year. The reference period for the ACS varies according to which month the respondent receives the questionnaire.

Questions regarding employment, income, and school enrollment each have different reference periods, as explained below. In both the census long form and the ACS, respondents are asked whether they worked for pay "last week." However, the census collects data

between March and August, while the ACS collects data year-round, and produces an average of the monthly data. The responses to questions about employment status in turn affect data on commuting, occupation, industry, and class of worker.[8]

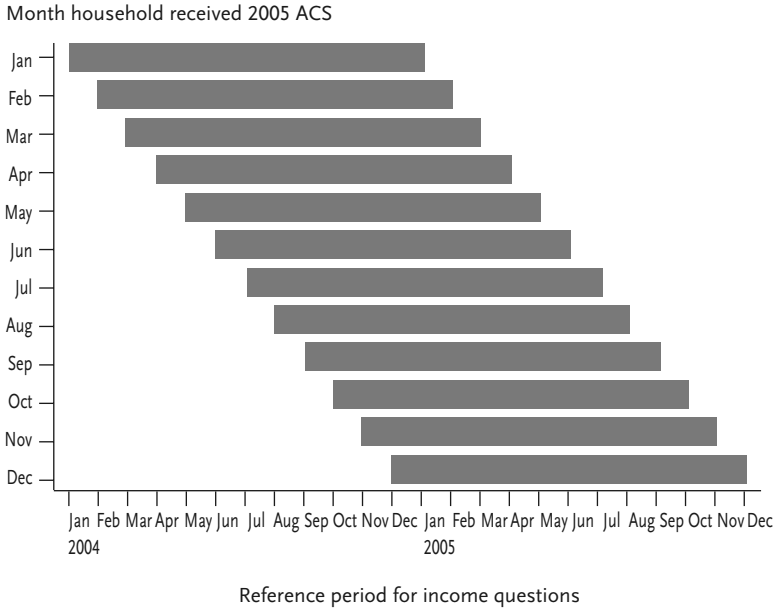
Income data collected in the census refer to the previous calendar year, while the ACS asks respondents to state their income for the previous 12 months. A household that receives the 2005 ACS in January will report income received between January 2004 and December 2004; a household that receives the 2005 ACS in December will report income received between December 2004 and November 2005 (see Figure 1). The 2005 estimate would reflect an average of values from this 23-month period. All income values are adjusted for inflation using the Consumer Price Index (CPI). (A more detailed description of income data from the ACS is given in the section on income and poverty.)

The reference period for school enrollment also is different in the ACS than in the census. The census long form asks if a person has attended school "any time since February 1." The ACS asks if a person has attended school during the "last three months." Census staff point out that these "differences in the reference period for the school enrollment question and differences in the time of year in which the question was asked" may result in different enrollment estimates between the two surveys.[9]

The ACS and census also differ in how residency is defined for the population living in housing units. The ACS uses a "two-month" rule to define residency, while residency in the decennial census is based on the concept of "usual residence." This fundamental difference in how residency is defined is especially important in areas with seasonal populations (see Box 2).

In addition to residency and reference period differences, minor differences in the wording and order of questions may also cause the ACS and census long-form estimates to differ. Census Bureau staff and other professionals continue to study the correspondence between the census and ACS estimates, and to offer guidance for interpreting the results from each data source.[10]

Figure 1
Reference Period for Income and Poverty Estimates From the American Community Survey



Source: Population Reference Bureau.

New Opportunities

The ACS is the first nationwide survey that can be used to monitor socioeconomic trends in local areas, and make valid, mid-decade comparisons among different communities. It combines the geographic detail of the decennial census with the trend data that are typically available from national surveys.[11] This combination provides a valuable new tool for policymakers and planners in federal, state, and local governments who rely on demographic, housing, social, and economic data to allocate funds. Access to more frequent local area data will improve planning for food stamp programs; locations for new schools, highways, or day care centers; or compliance with the Voting Rights Act. Corporations, small businesses, and individuals can use ACS data to develop plans to start or expand a business and to track changing needs for public services.

Small towns and rural communities have the most to gain from the ACS. Because they lack the staff and resources to conduct their own research, many local communities must rely on decennial census information that soon becomes outdated,[12] or administrative records that are not comparable with those in neighboring areas.

The Census Bureau will release a Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) file of ACS data each year that will enable researchers to create custom tabulations from individual ACS records. The Census Bureau expects the 2005 ACS PUMS file to include about 1.1 million households, or about 40 percent of the households included in the full ACS sample.[13] The PUMS files for the 2000 to 2004 ACS are already available on the Census Bureau website.[14]

The ACS also provides valuable new information about U.S. migration levels and trends. Among the three components of population change—births, deaths, and migration—migration is by far the most difficult to define and to measure reliably. The ACS measure of residence one year ago provides researchers with a new source of information about moves within

Box 2

Residency Rules in the ACS and the Decennial Census

Information collected in censuses and surveys pertains to the people residing in the housing units that received the questionnaire. Place of residence may seem like a straightforward concept, but it can be difficult to measure for individuals or families with complex living arrangements—including people with second homes, college students, and migrant workers. The decennial census uses a "usual residence" rule. Usual residence is the place where a person lives most of the time. The American Community Survey (ACS) uses the concept of "current residence," based on a two-month rule. Under the two-month rule, a person is considered a current resident if any of the following are true:

- The person has been at the residence for more than two months at the time of survey contact.
- The person has no other place where he or she usually stays, regardless of length of time at the residence at the time of survey contact (for example, a person moved into a sampled housing unit one month before the time of survey contact and has no other place where he or she usually stays).
- The person is away at the time of survey contact and has been away for two months or less, for example, traveling on business or vacation. (Information on the absent household member would be obtained from another household member.)

There are a few exceptions to the two-month rule. Children who are away at school (below college level) are considered residents of their parents' home.[1] Children in joint custody are considered to be current residents of the sample unit if they are staying there at the time of survey contact. Individuals who stay at a residence close to their work and return regularly to another residence are considered to be current residents of the family residence, not the work-related residence.

The current residence rule is more appropriate for the ACS because the survey is conducted every month on independent samples and produces annual average estimates. The Census Bureau states that "the 'current residence' concept recognizes that people can have more than one place where they live or stay over the course of a year, and that estimates of the characteristics of the population for some areas are affected by these people. This provides better representation of seasonal residents and migratory groups."[2]

ACS data for areas with large seasonal populations—such as retirement destinations; beach, lake, or mountain vacation areas; or university towns—may show different characteristics than data based on the census.

References

1. College students' residency is determined using the two-month rule.
2. U.S. Census Bureau, "Report 4: Comparing General Demographic and Housing Characteristics With Census 2000," *Meeting 21st Century Demographic Data Needs—Implementing the American Community Survey* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2004), accessed online at www.census.gov, on July 19, 2005.

the United States as well as levels of immigration from other countries.[15] Census Bureau staff are using ACS data on international migration to develop better estimates of U.S. immigration and population change.

The ACS promises to produce even more reliable and useful data than the census. The decennial census has often been viewed as the "gold standard" for demographic, housing, and socioeconomic data. But the use of professional, highly trained interviewers and the reliance on information from household members rather than proxies should reduce the rate of nonsampling error in the ACS compared with the census. A comparison of data for the Bronx, N.Y., from the 2000 ACS test (the C2SS) and the 2000 Census, for example, showed that while the census had a higher initial mail response rate than the ACS, the census interviewers were less efficient than the ACS interviewers during follow-up phases, when information was collected from nonrespondents.[16]

Full implementation of the ACS should simplify and streamline the 2010 Census process by eliminating the need for the long form questionnaire and by allowing greater focus on coverage of the population. Although the ACS does not offer significant cost savings over a traditional long form, it should help spread the costs of data collection over the decade, reducing the bulge in the Census Bureau's budget around the time of the decennial census.

ACS operations have also led to improvements in the Census Bureau's Master Address File (MAF), which identifies housing units that should receive a census questionnaire. The MAF is now updated each year, rather than once a decade, which may reduce the undercount of minorities, immigrants, children, and other hard-to-enumerate groups in 2010.

ACS Challenges

To hold down the costs of conducting a monthly survey, the ACS sample size will be smaller than that of the 2000 Census long form (see Table 1, page 8), which will result in larger standard errors. The 2000 Census long form went to about one in six U.S. households. The 2005 to 2009 ACS five-year estimates, in comparison, will be based on a sample of about one in eight U.S. households. Census Bureau researchers expect to offset some of the higher sampling error in the ACS with lower nonsampling error through more effective follow-up of nonresponses.[17]

The two-month rule used in the ACS poses additional challenges for researchers because the ACS sample population totals are currently controlled to population estimates based on a "usual residence" rule. The Census

Table 1
Household Sampling Rates for the Census and the American Community Survey

Data source	U.S. households in sample	
	Number (millions)	Percent
2000 Census short form	115.9	100.0
2000 Census long form	18.3	15.8
2003 ACS	0.8	0.7
2005 ACS (projected)	3.0	2.5
Multiyear ACS (2005-2009)	15.0	12.5

Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

Bureau may eventually produce population estimates based on the current residence concept, which would simplify interpretation of ACS results (see Box 3).

Consistent and adequate funding is another serious challenge for the ACS program. The ACS is an expensive initiative in a time of tight budgets. Perhaps the biggest challenge will be to gain sufficient support for the survey in communities that stand to benefit the most—America's small towns and rural areas.[18] ACS data have been available for most large cities and metropolitan areas every year since 2001, but people living in

Box 3
Control Totals for the ACS

Like the census long form, the American Community Survey (ACS) provides estimates of the characteristics of population and housing units rather than a complete count or enumeration. Both census long-form and ACS data are collected from only a sample of all people and housing units. As a result, both long-form and ACS data must be "controlled" to complete counts of population and housing units in order to produce reliable estimates of the number of people or households with certain characteristics. In this case, controlling means using a process of ratio-adjusting to make sample-based estimates sum to an established total count.[1]

While Census 2000 short-form data provided the population and housing control totals for the 2000 Census long-form data, there are no such short-form data in the years in between censuses. Fortunately, however, there is another source of control totals for the ACS—the Census Bureau's annual intercensal population estimates. The Census Bureau is required by federal law to produce population estimates for states, counties, and local governments (for example, cities, villages, towns, and townships) in the years between decennial censuses. These intercensal population estimates appear to be an obvious choice, and have indeed already been used as control totals for ACS sample-based estimates. However, there is one important drawback to this approach: The intercensal estimates are based on a "usual" residence concept, while the ACS is based on a "current" residence concept.

The intercensal population estimates are based on usual residence, benchmarked to the previous census, and adjusted to refer to July 1 of each year. In using the concept of usual residence, the population estimates represent the average annual population of year-round residents in a particular area. However, in areas with a significant seasonal population, control totals based on counts of "usual residents" may be misleading. For example, the 2000 Census, and the intercensal population estimates, treat residents from other states who are temporarily living in Arizona and Florida as residents of the states where they "usually reside." The ACS, on the other hand, counts these "snowbirds" where they are living at the time the ACS data are collected, as long as they have lived there for two months or longer. So, the ACS data collected in Florida during 2004 will reflect the characteristics of the population living there at various points throughout the entire year, rather than just those who reside there year-round. Controlling ACS data to counts of "usual" residents is problematic because it could result in skewed or incorrect estimates of the average annual number of people and households with certain characteristics. This is especially likely if the seasonal population has different characteristics than the year-round population.

To control ACS data to the intercensal population estimates, either the population estimates have to be adjusted to a current residence concept or the ACS estimates adjusted to a usual residence concept. Data from the 2001, 2002, 2003, and 2004 ACS used the intercensal population estimates based on usual residence as controls. However, as described in their 2003 ACS Operational Plan,[2] the Census Bureau is researching and testing methods for adjusting the intercensal estimates to a current residence concept. They have not yet announced a final decision for controlling ACS data for 2005 and beyond to the intercensal estimates.

Although there are significant challenges in controlling the ACS to the intercensal population estimates, there are also important opportunities offered by the ACS to improve the intercensal population estimates. The Census Bureau has established the Program of Integrated Estimates (PIE) to research ways to integrate information from the decennial census, administrative records, and the ACS to improve the quality of intercensal population and housing unit estimates. When the ACS is fully implemented, it will provide annual distributions of population characteristics for all counties and many subcounty areas. Such data are not currently available, but could be used in the future to improve estimates of the components of annual change (births, deaths, and net migration) that are essential to the development of intercensal population estimates. For example, 2000-2002 ACS data on the foreign-born population were used to estimate national levels of international migration that were used in the intercensal estimates for 2003. Additional research is underway to explore the utility of ACS data on housing characteristics, fertility, seasonal residence, and racial characteristics for improving intercensal housing unit and population estimates.

References

1. For a technical description of this complex process of sequential "iterative proportional fitting", see Chapter 8 of Census 2000 Summary File 3 Technical Documentation, accessed online at www.census.gov/prod/cen2000/doc/sf3.pdf, on July 19, 2005.
2. U.S. Census Bureau ACS Operations Plan, accessed online at www.census.gov/acs/www/Sbasics/op_plan.htm, on Aug. 22, 2005.

rural areas will not see data for their communities until 2010. For the ACS to gain widespread support in Congress, decisionmakers representing America's small towns need to perceive potential benefits of ACS data.[19] The value of the ACS for rural areas may be enhanced in 2006, when the Census Bureau plans to release estimates for Public Use Microdata Areas (PUMAs). Each state is divided into PUMAs of about 100,000 population size, including groups of contiguous counties in rural areas.

Even if ACS basic operations are funded each year, cuts in proposed expansions could jeopardize the survey's usefulness and its ability to truly replace the census long form. For example, the 2005 ACS did not collect information on the group quarters population because of insufficient funds. ACS estimates on the group quarters population would fill an important gap previously filled only by the census long form.[20] And, the ACS funding levels will need to increase as the number of U.S. households increases and the ACS requires a larger sample size.[21]

The ACS includes several questions that are very similar to those collected regularly in other federal surveys—especially the Current Population Survey (CPS), the American Housing Survey (AHS), and the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP). In some cases, there are clear guidelines about which estimates to use. For example, the CPS is the official source of national income and poverty estimates. However, the Census Bureau recommendation that ACS information on income and poverty be used for areas below the state level poses a quandary: Which source should be used for state-level data? Users are likely to choose the data source that best matches their specific needs.[22]

The biennial AHS presents a special challenge, because there is substantial overlap in the questions about housing characteristics in the AHS and ACS surveys. A 2002 review by the General Accountability Office (GAO) found that ACS and AHS questions overlapped on 25 questionnaire topics including place of birth and citizenship, education, labor force activity, transportation to work, income, and housing. Data users will need guidance on when to use AHS data and when to use ACS data.[23] A recent report for the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) concluded that "having more than one official number for the same variable can create problems for HUD."[24] At the same time, however, the ACS offers new opportunities to monitor housing characteristics in local areas.

ACS data users also need to be cautious when comparing geographic areas with varying population sizes. To make valid comparisons between Boston and the much smaller Massachusetts community of Nantucket, for example, data users need to employ five-year estimates centered on the same year. Boston data for 2005 to 2009 (centered on 2007) should be compared with Nantucket data for the same period, even though more recent estimates are available for Boston. The availability of five-year and three-year averages for places like Boston will allow users to compare most geographic areas, but annual data will be available only for the more populous areas (see Box 4, page 10).

Another challenge to ACS data users: Multiyear averages are likely to be confusing because of their more complex statistical properties and because many people are not familiar with them. A recent GAO report concluded "it is critical for the Census Bureau to provide users with guidance on topics such as the reliability of multiyear averages for areas with rapidly changing populations."[25] In such cases, a multiyear average is "like a blurry video for fast-moving objects," whose image can be sharpened a little each year with new data.[26]

ACS on Income and Poverty

The ACS collects detailed information about household, family, and personal income, and will be a valuable source of information on economic trends in local communities and for population subgroups. Federal, state, and local governments and other private and public organizations rely on such data to allocate billions of dollars, to provide services, and to plan and budget. The Department of Education uses income and poverty data to allocate grants in high poverty areas, for example, and HUD uses such data to allocate low-income housing assistance.[27] Administration of the National School Lunch Program, Social Security benefits, the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program, and the Agricultural Risk Protection Act of 2000 all require income and poverty estimates. Many national surveys and programs provide estimates of income and poverty to comply with legal requirements and to support the nation's infrastructure. The challenge for policymakers, researchers, and others is deciding whether the ACS or some other source of income and poverty estimates best suits their needs.

The ACS collects information on eight different types of income:

- Wages, salary, commissions, bonuses, and tips;
- Self-employment income;
- Interest, dividends, net rental income, royalty income, and income from estates and trusts;
- Social Security or Railroad Retirement income;
- Supplemental Security Income;

Box 4

Using the ACS to Measure Trends

The ACS will provide all states and communities with at least 65,000 residents with annual estimates of demographic, housing, social, and economic characteristics—a boon to government agencies that need to plan and budget for public services such as transportation, medical care, and schools. These large areas will be able to track annual change in their communities starting with the 2005 ACS data. ACS data for 2000 to 2004 can be used to monitor change in geographic areas with populations of 250,000 or greater.

ACS data for Prince George's County, Md., for example, tracked an increase in housing costs between 2000 and 2003. Although it was well known that home prices were rising in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area, the ACS confirmed and quantified the increase for a specific county within the metro area: Median rental costs in Prince George's County increased from just under $800 in 2000 to about $900 in 2003, and about one-third of renters in the county spent 35 percent or more of their incomes for rent in 2003, up from one-fourth in 2000.

Areas with smaller populations have a longer wait to accumulate enough data from the ACS to track such trends. The ACS samples too few households in smaller areas to provide single-year estimates—but several years of data can be pooled to obtain good estimates even for these smaller areas. ACS data from 2005 to 2007 can be averaged for areas with 20,000 to 65,000 people. When the 2008 data are processed, the 2006 to 2008 data can be pooled, moving the average ahead a year. For areas with less than 20,000 people, it will take five years of data to obtain a large enough sample for reliable estimates. Eventually, even small areas will have new estimates every year, but the reference period will be the last three or five years, rather than the last year.

How can users decide whether an increase or decrease shown in the ACS signals a real trend or temporary fluctuations? Cynthia Taeuber, an expert on the ACS, cautions that users should "not make a big deal of small differences." The averages portrayed in the ACS—whether they are based on 12 months or 60 months of data, include a range of uncertainty. For any given area, the larger the sample and the more months included in the estimate, the greater the confidence in the estimate. The Census Bureau reports the 90 percent confidence interval for every ACS estimate that it produces. If an estimate is significant at the 90 percent level, then there is a 90 percent chance that the true value of the characteristic falls within the confidence interval for that estimate.

Trends are harder to detect for areas with smaller populations because they rely on pooled data for three or five years. Comparisons of three-year averages from 2000 to 2002 and 2001 to 2003 are unlikely to show much difference because two of the years overlap. For independent estimates, Taeuber suggests comparing periods that do not overlap—comparing 2000 to 2002 estimates with 2003 to 2005 estimates, for example, which means waiting longer to track a trend. But data users also must rely on their own judgment. In areas undergoing fundamental shifts in the size or composition of the population—change may be so substantial that it will be obvious after only a few years.

The ACS provides unprecedented ability to track changes in smaller areas, as long as users adhere to a few guidelines. In particular, users must consider the range of uncertainty of the estimates, and be careful about interpreting short-term fluctuations as long-term trends.

Reference

1. Cynthia M. Taeuber, "Tracking Who We Are and Where We Are Going: An Example of Using the American Community Survey in Calvert and Prince George's Counties, MD" (May 2005), accessed online at www.prb.org/pdf05/TrackingWhoWeAre.pdf, on July 19, 2005.

- Public assistance income, including general assistance and Temporary Aid to Needy Families;
- Retirement or disability income; and
- All other regular income, including unemployment compensation, veterans' benefits, alimony and child support, and military family allotments.

The CPS, in contrast, collects information on more than 50 sources of income, including noncash benefits such as food stamps, the school lunch program, and housing assistance. The Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC) to the CPS, conducted every February through April, provides the official national estimates of income and poverty used by most government programs.[28] The CPS sample is not large enough to produce reliable single-year estimates for most states or metro areas. Users often construct three-year averages to track changes or compare areas—employing methods similar to those required for using ACS data for smaller areas.

There are other sources of income data for small areas: The decennial census, which provides measures for the year preceding the census, and the Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE) program. SAIPE produces estimates of income and poverty for states, counties, and school districts for the administration of federal programs and the allocation of federal funds. The SAIPE program combines survey data and administrative records to create statistically modeled annual estimates. "For the geographic areas it covers, the SAIPE program provides the most accurate subnational estimates of median household income and poverty for different age groups …"[29] One primary drawback of SAIPE data is the two-year time lag for producing estimates. Another drawback concerns geographic limitations: The SAIPE program does not produce estimates for metropolitan areas, cities, towns, and congressional districts. And, SAIPE estimates are available for age groups, but not for race, ethnic, or other population groups.

Of all of these sources, the ACS is the only one that can provide detailed—and timely—information about economic trends in local areas and for population subgroups. However, in making the transition to the ACS, it is important to understand how income is measured in this new survey.

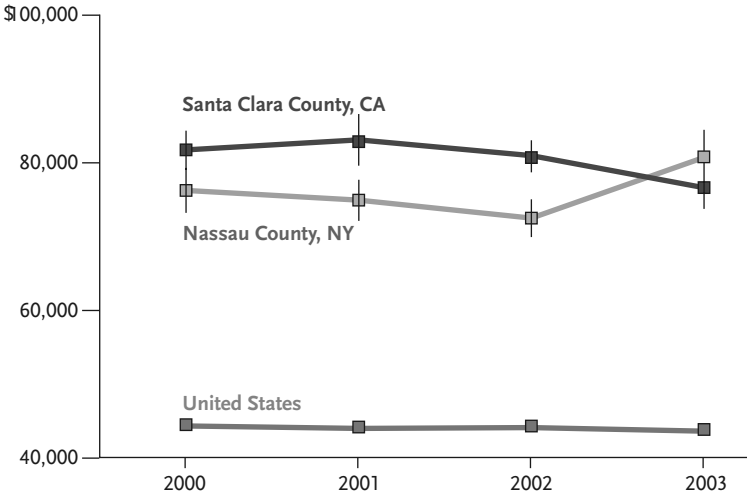
While the decennial census, CPS, and SAIPE collect income data for the calendar year, the ACS collects income data for the 12 months prior to the time the respondent fills out the survey. Because the ACS is administered every month of every year, the reference period for income in a given survey year covers a 23-month period (see Figure 1, page 6). ACS income estimates are adjusted for inflation using averages of the CPI for the survey year and the income reference period, creating an annual estimate of income using 23 months of data.[30]

Poverty status is based on family income, family composition, and age of family members.[31] To determine a person's poverty status using the ACS, family income for the prior 12 months is compared with a poverty threshold that corresponds to those 12 months.[32] Put simply, income estimates are derived by adjusting 12 months of income, while poverty estimates are derived by adjusting 12 months of poverty thresholds.

ACS estimates of median household income in the United States show the median for 2003, $43,564, just below the median ($44,270) for 2000, after adjusting for inflation.[33] But ACS data reveal that economic patterns in many counties ran counter to the national trend in the early 2000s (see Figure 2). For example, median income declined significantly in Santa Clara County, Calif., between 2000 and 2003, while it increased significantly in Nassau County, N.Y.

In 2003, 17.7 percent of children under age 18 were in poverty in the United States. The ACS provides poverty data for groups within the child population. As Figure 3 shows, the poverty rates for children are widely divergent for children of different races. White children and Asian children are the least likely to live in poverty (13 percent each), while black children had the highest proportion in poverty (34 percent).

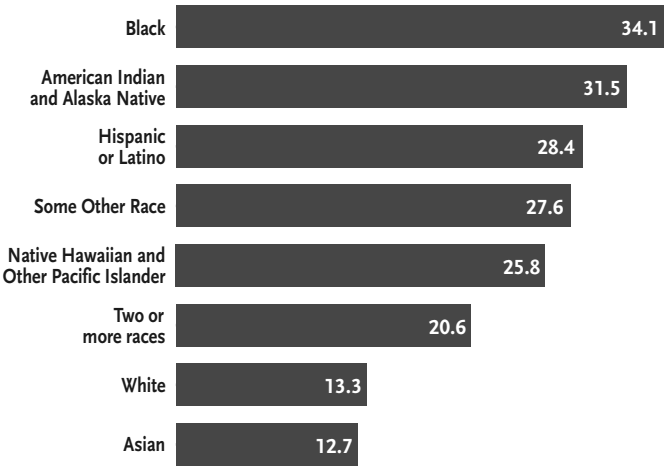
Figure 2
Tracking Median Annual Household Income in the United States and Selected Counties, 2000–2003



Note: The vertical bars illustrate the margin of sampling error around each estimate, based on a 90 percent confidence interval.

Source: Population Reference Bureau analysis of the 2000 to 2003 American Community Surveys.

Figure 3
Percent of U.S. Children Under Age 18 Living In Poverty by Race and Ethnicity, 2003



Note: Hispanics or Latinos may be of any race. Racial categories here include Hispanics/Latinos.

Source: Population Reference Bureau analysis of the 2003 American Community Survey.

Immigration and Language

By providing updated information about the U.S. population each year, the ACS will greatly improve our understanding of trends in international migration and the characteristics of new immigrants to the United States.[34] The rapid growth of the U.S. Hispanic population during the 1990s was one of the big stories to come out of the 2000 Census. Between 1990 and 2000, the number of Hispanics increased from 22.4 million to 35.3 million, a 58 percent increase. Many states and local areas that had very small Hispanic communities saw those populations increase dramatically during the 1990s. The Hispanic population increased nearly fivefold in North Carolina and at least doubled in 21 other states.[35]

In many states and local areas, policymakers did not know much about the size or characteristics of the

Hispanic population living in their jurisdictions prior to the release of the 2000 Census results. The Census Bureau and other government agencies had underestimated levels of international migration to the United States—primarily from Mexico—during the 1990s,[36] and there were no surveys tracking the size or characteristics of the Hispanic population in local areas.

The ACS questionnaire includes seven questions that are specific to international migration:

- State or country of birth;
- U.S. citizenship status;
- Year of U.S. entry;
- Place of residence one year ago;
- Ancestry or ethnic origin;
- Language spoken at home; and
- Hispanic origin.

ACS questions about immigration and language ability serve two broad purposes. First, policymakers, researchers, and others use these data to determine the size and characteristics of the foreign-born population in states. For example, these data can help monitor changes in the age, gender, education level, or country of origin of the U.S. foreign-born population, or to develop educational programs for people with limited English skills (see Box 5). Second, the ACS questions measure the number and destinations of foreign-born individuals entering the United States in a given year. These data help the federal government set and evaluate immigration laws and policies and develop the migration component of annual population estimates.

Characteristics of the U.S. Foreign-Born Population

The ACS will enhance data on the U.S. foreign-born population from the CPS and other sources,[37] with reliable, annual estimates of the foreign-born population in states and local areas. The 2003 ACS shows that California has the highest proportion of residents born outside of the United States, at 27 percent, followed by New York (21 percent) and New Jersey (19 percent). The states with the lowest shares of foreign-born residents are located in the South (Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, and West Virginia) and in several states in the Great Plains (Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming) (see Figure 4).[38]

ACS data revealed that the states with the fastest-growing foreign-born populations between 2000 and 2003 included several Southern states that had relatively small foreign-born populations in 2000 (Arkansas, Kansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and West Virginia), and two Southwestern states that have historically attracted large numbers of immigrants (Nevada and New Mexico).

The ACS also asks respondents to report the U.S. state or foreign country in which they were born, and reports much more detail than the CPS about country and region of birth.[39] In 2003, about 52 percent of the U.S. foreign-born population was born in Latin America, 27 percent was born in Asia, 14 percent in Europe (similar to the 2003 CPS findings), 3 percent in Africa, and 3 percent in Canada or Oceania. About 30 percent of all foreign-born residents reported Mexico as their country of origin.

Nearly one-half of the U.S. foreign-born population (49 percent) came to the United States after 1990, and 15 percent arrived between 2000 and 2003. The majority of these individuals (83 percent) are not U.S. citizens. The 2003 ACS revealed that, of the 15 percent of the foreign-born population who arrived after 2000, nearly all (96 percent) lack U.S. citizenship. In Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee, nearly a third of the foreign-born population arrived in this country since 2000, while in New York, only 10 percent did.

The ACS estimates on year of entry measure how long a person has permanently resided in the United States. Respondents are asked what year they entered the country "to live," but this question can be interpreted in different ways. Respondents who have entered the United States multiple times can choose to report their first year of entry, their most recent year, or any

Box 5
The Foreign-Born vs. Immigrants

There is an important distinction between the "foreign-born" population and "immigrants." Immigrants are more narrowly defined as "aliens who are admitted to the United States for lawful permanent residence." The American Community Survey (ACS) captures information about the foreign-born population, which includes anyone who is not a U.S. citizen at birth, including immigrants, legal nonimmigrants (temporary migrants), humanitarian migrants, and people illegally present in the United States (undocumented aliens). The ACS questionnaire does not ask about the legal status of persons born outside of the United States. In 2003, the foreign-born population in the United States numbered about 34 million, according to the ACS. However, there were only 700,000 immigrants admitted into the United States that year, according to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.[1]

Reference

1. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics: 2003* (2005): table 5, accessed online at http://uscis.gov/graphics/shared/statistics/index.htm, on June 27, 2005.

time in between. Census staff are exploring the possibility of modifying questions in the ACS questionnaire to collect migration histories from immigrants who entered the United States multiple times.

Questions about language ability provide important information to government agencies that serve the needs of people with limited ability in English. For example, the Department of Education uses this information to assess the special needs of immigrant children, many of whom live in "linguistically isolated" households.[40] Estimates of language spoken at home in the 2000 ACS test (the C2SS) differed from those in the 2000 Census: ACS respondents were slightly less likely to report languages spoken other than English. Census staff offer a possible explanation for the difference: The 2000 Census had questionnaires available in five languages other than English (Chinese, Korean, Spanish, Tagalog, and Vietnamese), and language guides in more than 40 languages, while the ACS questionnaire was available only in English, and follow-up instruments available only in English and Spanish.[41]

The ACS, like the 2000 Census, does not include a question about parents' place of birth.[42] Starting with the 1980 Census, a question about ancestry replaced the question on birthplace of parents on the census long form,[43] providing additional information about racial and ethnic background and nationality. The Census Bureau is considering including the ancestry question on the 2010 Census short form to collect information about racial and ethnic origin from all residents. The ACS will provide similar ancestry data for intercensal years—for example between 2015 and 2019, when the 2010 Census information is likely to be outdated.

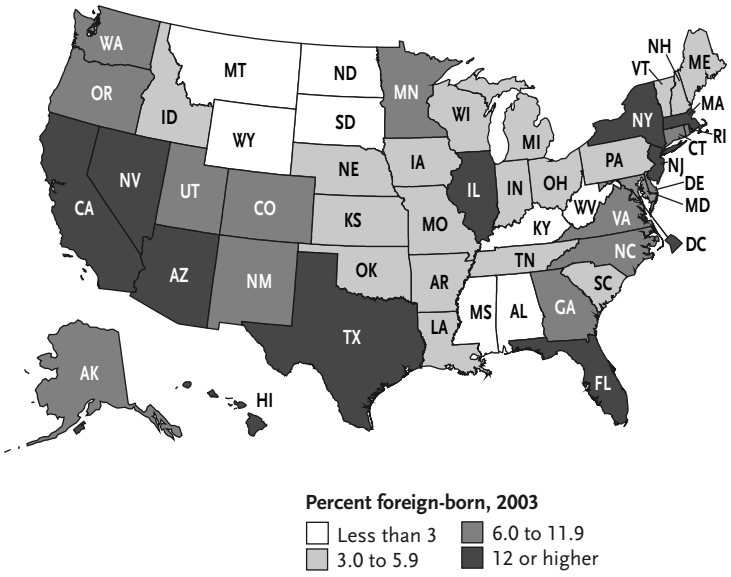
Immigration to the United States

In addition to collecting information about the foreign-born population, the ACS can help measure annual immigration levels to the United States. Unlike the 2000 Census, which asked about place of residence five years ago (in 1995), the ACS requests information about residence in the previous year. Census Bureau staff can therefore use the ACS estimates of new immigrants to help determine the international migration component of official population estimates and projections.[44] ACS data for 2000 to 2004 provide reasonable estimates of total immigration levels, and data from the expanded ACS sample will provide detailed information about the characteristics of these new immigrants.

In 2003, 1.5 million people reported in the ACS that they lived in a foreign country in the previous year—implying they had entered the United States within the last year. This figure is higher than the estimate of new arrivals from abroad measured by the CPS (1.3 million).[45] The difference between the two estimates may be due to the different time reference of the surveys: The CPS estimate is based on the population living in the United States in March 2003, while the ACS estimate is an average based on data collected over 12 months. Both surveys collect information about people entering the United States regardless of their legal status. However, it is likely that they both underestimate the number of unauthorized workers entering the United States. Jeffrey Passel at the Pew Hispanic Center estimates that there are about 10 million undocumented residents in the United States.[46] Some foreign-born residents are also excluded from the ACS estimates because they are residing in group quarters, which are not currently included in the ACS sampling frame (see Box 6, page 14). The Census Bureau plans to expand the ACS sample to include group quarters when funding is available.

ACS data on residence in the previous year are also potentially useful to other countries, such as Canada and Mexico, because they can be used to measure the number and characteristics of emigrants from their countries to the United States in a given year.[47]

Figure 4
Percent Foreign-Born by State, 2003



Source: Population Reference Bureau analysis of the 2003 American Community Survey.

Housing and Commuting

The ACS includes a wealth of information about housing and commuting patterns in the United States, but

Box 6

The Group Quarters and Homeless Populations

The 2000 Census surveyed the population living in housing units as well as people residing in group quarters, such as correctional facilities, hospitals, college dormitories, group homes, and overnight shelters. The census identified 7.8 million people living in group quarters in 2000. Because of budget constraints, the 2005 ACS did not collect information from the group quarters population, but the Census Bureau hopes to include this population in future surveys.

The ACS will not be used to enumerate the homeless population. The 2000 Census enumerated people in emergency and transitional shelters and at designated street locations, soup kitchens, and mobile food vans. The Census Bureau released a special report on the 171,000 people in emergency and transitional shelters on the night of March 27, 2000, but did not produce a count of the total population experiencing homelessness in 2000.[1]

Reference

1. See U.S. Census Bureau, "Emergency and Transitional Shelter Population: 2000," *Census 2000 Special Reports Series CENSR/01-2* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2001), accessed online at www.census.gov, on July 19, 2005.

there are some important methodological differences between the ACS and the housing information collected in the census long form.[48]

The difference between "usual residence" in the census and "current residence" in the ACS (see Box 2, page 7) has important implications for areas with large seasonal fluctuations in population. These areas include, for example, college towns, retirement destinations, vacation getaways, and areas that attract seasonal migrant workers. ACS estimates for these areas, which are based on annual averages of population and housing data, are expected to differ from census figures based on the population on April 1. In Sevier County, Tenn., in the Great Smoky Mountains, about 24 percent of housing units were identified as vacant in the 2000 Census, compared with 19 percent in a three-year average of ACS test data for 1999 to 2001.[49] Oneida County, Wisc., showed a similar pattern (42 percent vacancy in the census versus 37 percent in the ACS). Both areas have large seasonal fluctuations in their populations.

Homeownership

Buying a home has long been a key part of the American dream—an important step for families to improve their quality of life and to become financially secure. For most Americans, especially those living in low-income families, a home is the most valuable asset they will ever own. The homeownership rate—or the proportion of occupied housing units that are owner-occupied—is used to measure this economic indicator. In 2003, homeownership rates were lowest in more densely populated states in the Northeast and West—California, Hawaii, and New York—which have some of the nation's highest home values. Homeownership rates were highest in the Midwest—Idaho, Michigan, and Minnesota—where homes values run below the national average.

At the national level, the homeownership rate in the 2000 ACS was slightly lower (65 percent) than the figure based on the census (66 percent).[50] Census Bureau staff attribute this discrepancy to the differences in residency rules and the lower allocation rates achieved by using highly trained interviewers. But for counties with large seasonal populations, ACS homeownership estimates are expected to be considerably higher than those from the 2000 Census, because the ACS measures housing occupancy each month—not just on April 1. For example, the homeownership rate for Oneida County, Wisc., based on ACS data from 1999 to 2001 was 63 percent, compared with 58 percent in the 2000 Census.[51]

ACS estimates show an increase in national homeownership, from 65 percent in 2000 to 67 percent in 2003.[52] For some racial and ethnic groups, however, homeownership rates are considerably below the national average. About 73 percent of non-Hispanic whites[53] owned their homes in 2003, compared with 46 percent of African Americans and 47 percent of Hispanics.[54]

The ACS also measured substantial increases in home values over the past several years. Census Bureau analysis of ACS data found that the national median home value in 2003 was about $140,000, up nearly 16 percent in three years, after adjusting for inflation; the percentage of million-dollar homes roughly doubled, from 0.5 percent to 1.0 percent.[55] In some large cities, home value increases have been especially dramatic, such as the 71 percent jump in Sacramento, and more than 50 percent increases in Miami and in the California cities of Santa Ana, Oakland, and San Diego.[56] The 30 percent increase in San Francisco brought median home values in that city to approximately $600,000 in 2003, among the highest in the country.

Downsides of the Housing Boom

The ACS can also help document some of the potential downsides to the housing boom, particularly for low-income families. These include the rising cost burden of homeownership, a lack of affordable housing near areas of job growth, and more crowded housing.

While increases in homeownership and home values in the early 2000s have improved economic security for

millions of Americans, high housing costs strain the finances of many. The high housing costs are more of a burden for renters, who tend to have lower incomes than homeowners. HUD considers housing "affordable" if total expenses (rent or mortgage payments, taxes, insurance, utilities, and other related payments) account for less than 30 percent of total household income.[57] Paying 30 percent or more of income on housing may leave insufficient resources to cover other basic expenses, including food and health care. In 2003, one-fourth of all homeowners—and more than two-fifths of renters—lacked affordable housing, according to ACS data.[58]

Another obstacle for low-income families is the lack of affordable housing in cities and metropolitan areas where most high-paying jobs are located. This imbalance has contributed to urban sprawl and longer commutes for many families. The time spent commuting to work has become a major concern of both policymakers and the public, especially with the increased attention to traffic gridlock. In *The Cost of Sprawl—2000*, researchers at Rutgers University investigated the various costs of commuting to work.[59] In addition to the monetary costs of fuel, vehicle maintenance, and auto insurance, the time people spend sitting in traffic each day reduces the time that people could be spending at work or at home with their families.

Between 2000 and 2003, the average one-way travel time to work held steady at about 24 minutes. New York and Maryland had the longest commutes, with an average of 30 minutes each. Workers in the Dakotas had the shortest commutes nationwide—about 15 minutes each.[60] Among counties, Staten Island, N.Y., had the highest proportion of workers commuting 60 minutes or more to work each day—35 percent. In addition to several counties in New York, a high proportion of residents in Calvert County, Md., Prince William County, Va., and McHenry County, Ill., had long commutes to work (see Figure 5). All of the counties with the longest travel times were located on the outskirts of large cities—Chicago, New York, and Washington, D.C.

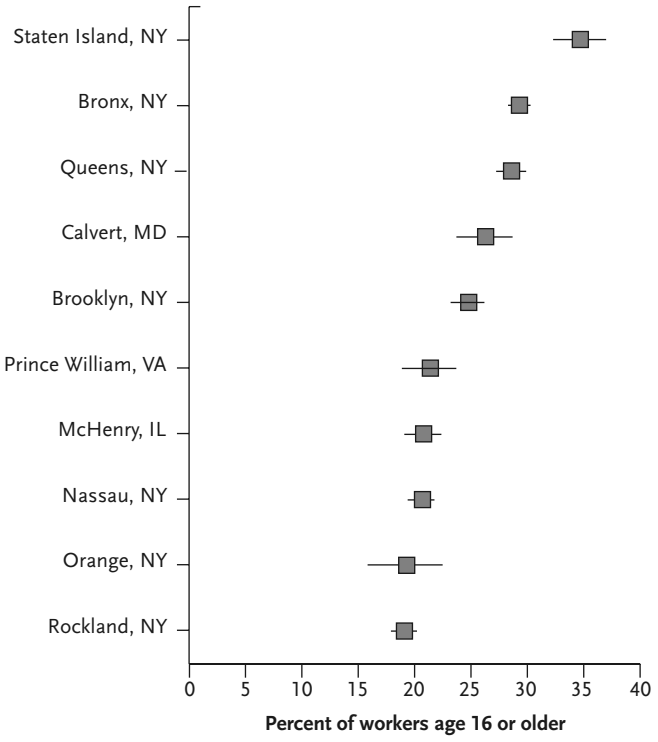
Another dimension of housing quality is the level of crowding in the housing unit. Low-income families, especially new immigrants, are more likely to live in crowded conditions to share the cost of housing.[61] Severe overcrowding can lead to health and safety risks, particularly if crowded conditions are combined with physical housing deficiencies. Crowded conditions are typically defined as having more than one person per room in a housing unit.[62] In 2003, about 4 percent of all households—and 17 percent of households headed by Hispanics—were crowded using this definition.[63]

Marriage and Family

Trends in family households in the United States have received a great deal of media attention because of the long-term and dramatic decline in the share of married-couple families, and the corresponding increase in the share of single-parent families, since 1960. The CPS has chronicled the decline in family households between 1960 and 2003: Family households (a household with two or more people related by birth, marriage, or adoption) decreased from 85 percent to 68 percent of all U.S. households,[64] while the proportion of families with children that were headed by a single parent increased from 9 percent to 28 percent.[65] These changes resulted from a combination of factors, including population aging, rising age at first marriage, high divorce rates, improvements in the health and financial status of the older population, and changing residential preferences.

While the CPS is the primary source of information about national trends in marriage and family structure, the ACS can provide information about the wide variation in family structure in different parts of the United States.[66] In some large cities (defined here as cities with

Figure 5
Daily Commutes to Work of One Hour or Longer, Selected Counties, 2003

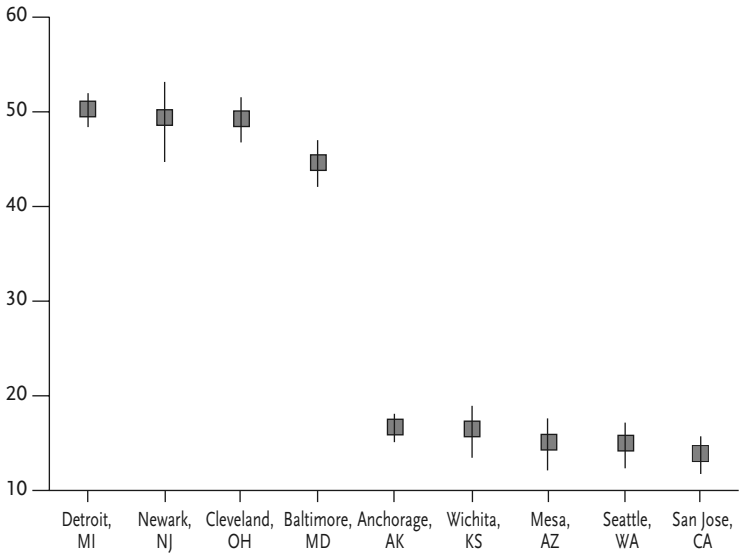


Note: The horizontal bars illustrate the margin of sampling error around each estimate, based on a 90 percent confidence interval.

Source: Population Reference Bureau analysis of the 2003 American Community Survey.

250,000 or more population), the share of female-headed families approaches 50 percent (for example, in Cleveland, Detroit, and Newark, N.J.), while the share is much lower in other cities, including Mesa, Ariz.; San Jose, Calif.; and Wichita, Kan. (see Figure 6). There is a strong racial and ethnic overlay to these geographic differences, with high rates of female headship among African Americans, and considerably lower rates among other racial and ethnic groups.[67] The detail available from ACS data for these specific groups and metro areas will enhance the analysis of these differences.

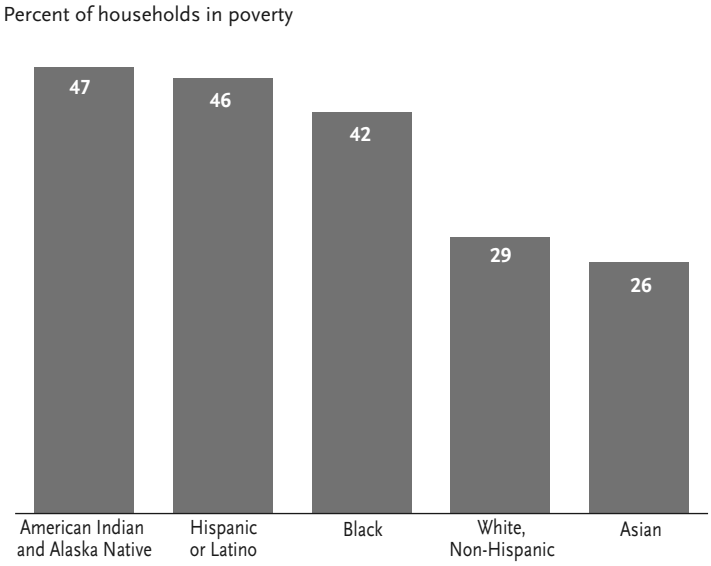
Figure 6
Female-Headed Families as a Percent of All Families in Selected Cities, 2003



Note: The vertical bars illustrate the margin of sampling error around each estimate, based on a 90 percent confidence interval.

Source: Population Reference Bureau analysis of the 2003 American Community Survey.

Figure 7
Poverty Rate of Female-Headed Households With Children by Race/Ethnicity, 2003



Source: Population Reference Bureau analysis of the 2003 American Community Survey.

The increase in female-headed families is of concern because people living in female-headed families typically have access to fewer economic or human resources than people in married-couple families.[68] There are fewer potential earners in female-headed families, which partially explains the lower household income. Delinquent child support payments from absent fathers also erode economic resources available to many female-headed families. In 2000, only about 35 percent of female-headed families with children reported receiving child support or alimony payments.[69]

ACS data indicate that children living in female-headed families are particularly vulnerable to poverty. The high rate of female-headship among African American families is one of the major contributing factors to the high poverty rates for African American children. In 2003, about 37 percent of families maintained by women with children were poor, nearly six times the rate for married couples with children. Poverty rates were highest for female-headed families headed by American Indian and Alaska Native women, Latino women, and African American women, and lowest for Asian American and white non-Hispanic women (see Figure 7). In the case of American Indians, the high poverty rates reflect the geographic isolation of many American Indian tribes in rural communities and reservations that are cut off from employment opportunities.

The ACS can also provide data for research on gay and lesbian households. Like the decennial census, the ACS does not ask about sexual orientation, but does include information about households headed by same-sex, unmarried partners. These results can be used to derive indirect estimates of the number and characteristics of gay and lesbian couples in the United States. The ACS offers a distinct advantage over other national surveys, such as the CPS, because its large sample size will allow data users to produce reliable estimates for relatively small population groups.

Marital Status

The ACS, like the CPS and the decennial census, collects information on five categories of marital status: married, separated, widowed, divorced, and never married. The ACS adds rich detail to the information from these other sources.

One of the biggest demographic stories of the past several decades has been the increase in the proportion of adults who are not currently married—either because they have never been married or because they are separated or divorced. Between 1960 and 2003, the share of Americans age 15 or older who have never been married increased from 22 percent to 29 percent, and the share of adults who are divorced increased from 2 percent to 10 percent. Although the proportion of the population that is divorced has leveled off since the late 1990s, there is wide variation in different parts of the United States. In 2003, many of the cities with the highest proportion of people who are divorced were located in Florida, while Boston, along with California cities Santa Ana and San Jose, had among the lowest proportion of adults who are divorced (see Figure 8). Variations in age structure, education levels, and religion probably contribute to these geographic differences.[70]

The ACS does not collect information about marital history—for example, age at first marriage or previous marriages and divorces—that would allow researchers to study causal relationships between marriage and other life course events.[71]

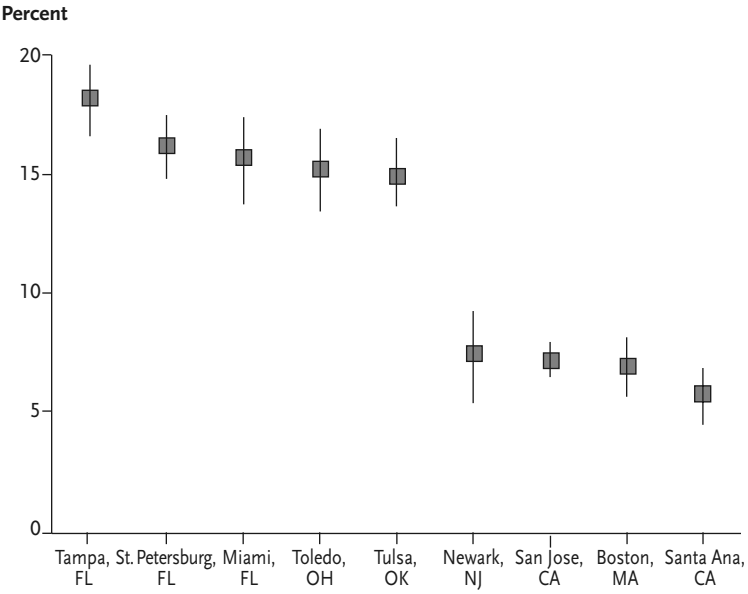
Fertility

The ACS includes a single question about fertility: "Has this person given birth to any children in the last 12 months?" A similar question appeared on the 1990 Census long form, but was dropped from the 2000 Census long form because the data were not required by federal law. This question is included in the ACS to improve population estimates and controls. The question is also used by the Department of Health and Human Services, state and local governments, and other agencies and organizations to assess current fertility patterns and to determine the need for programs and services targeting families with children.

Although the National Center For Health Statistics collects much more detailed information than the ACS about U.S. fertility, the ACS data are useful because they provide information about the characteristics of mothers with young children, including age, marital status, nativity status, education level, poverty status, and labor force status.[72] The 2003 ACS estimated that 4 million women ages 15 to 50 had one or more births during the 12 months prior to the survey.

Figure 8

Percent Divorced Among People Ages 15 and Older in Selected Cities, 2003



Note: The vertical bars illustrate the margin of error around each estimate, based on a 90 percent confidence interval.

Source: Population Reference Bureau analysis of the 2003 American Community Survey.

The 2005 ACS and Beyond

About 3 million households will receive the 2005 ACS questionnaire this year, making it the largest U.S. population survey ever conducted, outside of the decennial census. Next year—2006—is critical for the ACS, because that year marks the first opportunity to demonstrate the usefulness of the ACS estimates for smaller counties and cities across the United States. In 2006, annual data should be available for at least 750 counties, representing more than 80 percent of the U.S. population.[73] Counties for which three-year averages will be produced include 13 percent of the U.S. population, and smaller counties—with fewer than 20,000 people—

Table 2

Number of Counties and Percent of Population Represented by One-, Three-, and Five-Year Estimates From the American Community Survey

County population	ACS estimate interval (years)	Number of counties	% of U.S. population
65,000 or more	1	761	82.5
20,000 or more	3	1,805	95.5
All counties	5	3,141	100.0

Source: Adapted from N. Gordon, "The American Community Survey: Full Implementation" (presentation to the IAOS Satellite Meeting, Wellington, New Zealand, April 15, 2005; accessed at www.stats.govt.nz, July 19, 2005.)

account for less than 5 percent of the population (see Table 2). By 2010, assuming congressional funding, ACS data should be available for geographic areas down to the census-tract and block-group level.

What is the potential impact of the ACS on the decennial census? The use of the ACS should simplify and streamline the census process by eliminating the need for a long form and allowing a greater focus on population coverage. It will not cost less to administer than a traditional long form, but it should help spread the costs of data collection over the decade.

The first information from the 2005 ACS will be available in August 2006, providing us with detailed social, economic, and demographic estimates for the U.S. population at mid-decade. PRB staff have already used ACS estimates for a variety of purposes—to monitor the well-being of children; investigate the characteristics of the U.S. scientific and technical workforce; determine the economic well-being of working-poor families; and track social, economic, and demographic changes in Maryland. PRB plans to use the ACS throughout the decade to monitor the characteristics of rapidly changing subgroups of the U.S. population, including immigrants, the elderly, and racial and ethnic minorities.

However, funding for the 2006 ACS was uncertain as this report was being prepared. ACS operations need to be approved by Congress each year, at an annual cost of about $170 million. In 2005, the group quarters population was excluded from the sample because of insufficient funds, and this is a possibility again in 2006. In a worst-case scenario, the Census Bureau could decide to suspend the ACS for the rest of the decade, and start planning for a traditional short-form and long-form census in 2010.

Many researchers are being cautious in their approach to the ACS, and rightly so. This is a relatively new survey with an uncertain future. But the ACS offers great promise, particularly as a source of annual socioeconomic data for local areas. By producing estimates each year, the ACS will provide critical information for communities when they need it most.

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Suggested Resources

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www.census.gov/acs

U.S. Census Bureau American FactFinder
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American Community Survey

This *Population Bulletin* presents an overview of the American Community Survey and the new opportunities and challenges the ACS offers. It explores ways the survey can help monitor socioeconomic trends in the United States.

The ACS provides several advantages over the decennial census and other annual surveys:

- The ACS will deliver relevant data, comparable to the census long form, updated every year, rather than once a decade.
- The ACS is the first nationwide survey that can be used to monitor annual trends in local areas and to make valid comparisons among communities in the years between censuses.
- The ACS will provide new information about U.S. migration levels and trends.
- The ACS estimates will be more accurate than those from the census long form through the use of highly trained interviewers to collect information from households that do not mail back their questionnaires.

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