2. HOW FEDERAL AGENCIES USE ACS DATA

As the successor to the decennial census long form, response to the American Community Survey (ACS) is required by law. The U.S. Census Bureau considers the ACS to be a component of the decennial census program; all the statutory language in Census Bureau legislation that applies to the decennial census also applies to the ACS. The Census Bureau is also bound to protect responses to the ACS in the same way that it protects responses to the decennial census.

While the Census Bureau considers the ACS to be part of the decennial census program, it is up to each federal agency to interpret the agency's legislation and to decide how ACS data should be used. The Census Bureau's *ACS Handbook of Questions and Current Federal Uses* provides an overview of why specific questions on the ACS are asked, which estimates are created from the answers to these questions, and how federal agencies and other organizations use these estimates.[8] The Census Bureau has also developed a series of interactive Web pages that explain why each question is asked on the ACS. Each page shows the question as it appears on the form and allows users to explore some of the most popular statistics that come from the question at the local level. The pages also explain the origin of each question, privacy concerns, and how the statistics are used to help communities.[9]

Many laws require the use of ACS or decennial census data as the basis for establishing program or grant eligibility and for allocating federal program funds. For example, ACS data on veteran status and period of military service are used to allocate funds to states and local areas for employment and job training programs for veterans. Income data from the ACS are used to determine poverty status, measure economic well-being, and assess the need for assistance.

Many federal programs (including Low-Income Home Energy Assistance, Community Development Block Grant, Older Americans Act, Every Student Succeeds Act, Head Start, and Women, Infants, and Children) use ACS income data to allocate formula grants (see Box 2.1).

Box 2.1. **Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) 42 U.S. Code, 8629(a) & (b)(2), and 8622(11)**

Enacted as part of the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981, the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) is a mandatory block grant program for the states.

The mission of LIHEAP is to help low-income households pay their home energy bills.

Congress established the law's block grant distribution formula based on each state's weather and low-income population. The income question on the ACS is essential to determining the low-income population in each state. Implementation of the LIHEAP program also relies on data from other ACS questions, including age, sex, Hispanic origin, relationship, disability status, units in structure, and occupants per room. LIHEAP program administrators also use data from the ACS question on selected monthly owner costs to analyze current residential energy supply and consumption and to forecast future energy needs.

ACS data are also used to monitor compliance with federal laws. For example:

- ACS data on age, housing, employment, and education are used to help the government and communities enforce laws, regulations, and policies against discrimination based on age such as the Age Discrimination in Employment Act.

- Data on age, sex, race/ethnicity, labor force status, and work status last year are used to monitor compliance with the Civil Rights Act.

- ACS data on housing characteristics, such as units in structure, kitchen and plumbing facilities, rent, tenure, and selected monthly owner costs, are used to implement and assess compliance with the National Affordable Housing Act.

The following four figures show a few examples of ACS questions, and how federal agencies use the results from these questions in program eligibility determinations, allocation of funds, and planning.

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[8] U.S. Census Bureau, *American Community Survey (ACS) Handbook of Questions and Current Federal Uses*,<www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/operations-and-administration/2014-content-review/federal-uses.html>.

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

Figure 2.1. **Question on Race and Federal Uses of the Data**

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, *ACS Handbook of Questions and Current Federal Uses*, <www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/operations-and-administration/2014-content-review/federal-uses.html>.

Figure 2.2. **Question on Health Insurance and Federal Uses of the Data**

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, *ACS Handbook of Questions and Current Federal Uses*, <www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/operations-and-administration/2014-content-review/federal-uses.html>.

Examples of Federal Uses

- Required to identify vulnerable populations that may be at disproportionate risk of experiencing limitations in health care access, poor health quality, and suboptimal health outcomes.

- Required to enforce against discrimination in education, employment, voting, financial assistance, and housing.

- Used in many reporting and research tasks to investigate whether there are race differences in education, employment, home ownership, health, income and many other areas of interest to policymakers.

Examples of Federal Uses

- Required to identify vulnerable populations that may be at disproportionate risk of experiencing limitations in health care access, poor health quality, and suboptimal health outcomes.

- Used to project the demand for VA extended health care services.

- Used to review and analyze the unmet needs of people with disabilities and to identify the characteristics of the target service population.

Figure 2.3. **Question on Vehicles Available and Federal Uses of the Data**

12 How many automobiles, vans, and trucks of one-ton capacity or less are kept at home for use by members of this household?

☐ None
☐ 1
☐ 2
☐ 3
☐ 4
☐ 5
☐ 6 or more

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, *ACS Handbook of Questions and Current Federal Uses*, <www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/operations-and-administration/2014-content-review/federal-uses.html>.

Examples of Federal Uses

- Required in the enforcement responsibilities under the Voting Rights Act to determine disparities in voter participation rates for analysis and for presentation in federal litigation.
- Required in mass transportation and metropolitan planning to ensure compliance with the Clean Air Act and implementing regulations, particularly with respect to coordination and conformity.
- Used to summarize the conditions and performance of the nation's highways, bridges, and transit.

Figure 2.4. **Question on School Enrollment and Federal Uses of the Data**

10 a. **At any time IN THE LAST 3 MONTHS, has this person attended school or college?** *Include only nursery or preschool, kindergarten, elementary school, home school, and schooling which leads to a high school diploma or a college degree.*

☐ No, has not attended in the last 3 months → *SKIP to question 11*
☐ Yes, public school, public college
☐ Yes, private school, private college, home school

b. **What grade or level was this person attending?** *Mark (X) ONE box.*

☐ Nursery school, preschool
☐ Kindergarten
☐ Grade 1 through 12 – *Specify grade 1 – 12*
☐ College undergraduate years (freshman to senior)
☐ Graduate or professional school beyond a bachelor's degree *(for example: MA or PhD program, or medical or law school)*

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, *ACS Handbook of Questions and Current Federal Uses*, <www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/operations-and-administration/2014-content-review/federal-uses.html>.

Examples of Federal Uses

- Used in the enforcement of nondiscrimination in education by state and local governments, including ensuring appropriate action to assist English language learners in overcoming language barriers and monitoring desegregation.
- Used to allocate funds to states based on the number of adults beyond the age of compulsory school attendance without a secondary school diploma.