

Health Insurance Estimates

Guidance on When to Use Each Survey

When should you use health insurance estimates from the American Community Survey (ACS) and the Current Population Survey (CPS)?

Use the CPS – for the Most Comprehensive and Latest National Data

For 2013 national figures, we recommend using data from the CPS. It is the Census Bureau's most comprehensive and detailed source of health insurance data, as the questions have been re-designed this year to provide a good baseline of coverage before key provisions of the Affordable Care Act went into effect in 2014. Additional questions have been added this year to provide information on health insurance exchanges and marketplaces. Additionally, respondents are now asked about current coverage, as well as whether coverage was continuous during the prior year.

The 2013 CPS data are not comparable to CPS data for prior years; next year, once we have collected the CPS data about 2014, we will be able to provide estimates of year-to-year change in coverage using a consistent methodology.

Use the ACS – for National, Historical Time Series Data and for States

The ACS provides annual, national-level data on health insurance coverage back to 2008. It is not as detailed, however, as the CPS data.

Furthermore, the ACS provides annual data for states back to 2008 as well. To compare states with each other and to examine the most recent state trends, use the ACS one-year estimates.

Use the ACS – for Local Areas

There are three different ACS data sets available, each covering different time frames and different geographic areas based on population size: one-year, three-year, and five-year. The size of the areas being compared will determine which of these data sets you should use. Single-year health insurance estimates back to 2008 are available for all areas with a population of 65,000 or more, including counties, cities and all congressional districts. Three-year estimates back to 2008-2010 are available for all areas with a population of 20,000 or more. There are five-year estimates covering 2008-2012 for the nation's smallest areas, such as census tracts and block groups.

When making comparisons, always use the same data set for all geographies, even if some areas qualify for more than one data set. For example, if only some counties in a state have one-year data but all have three-year data, use the three-year data for all. More guidance on comparisons can be found on the ACS website (<census.gov/acs>).