

Income and Poverty Estimates Guidance on When to Use Each Survey

When should you use income and poverty estimates from the American Community Survey? When should you use ones from the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement instead?

For the United States: Use the Current Population Survey

For national figures, we recommend using data from the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement—the source of the official national estimates of poverty as designated by the Office of Management and Budget. It is also the source for widely used estimates of income.

For states: Use the American Community Survey

To compare states with each other, we recommend using the American Community Survey one-year estimates. To examine the most recent state trends, use the American Community Survey one-year estimates. The Current Population Survey is valuable as a means of examining historical trends (prior to the implementation of the American Community Survey) by state using multiyear averages, as well as comparing state estimates to the official national poverty rate. The two sources of data (Current Population Survey and American Community Survey) vary in the length and detail of questions, sample size, geography and reference period. For more information on differences across surveys, see [Fact Sheet: Differences Between the American Community Survey \(ACS\) and the Annual Social and Economic Supplement to the Current Population Survey \(CPS ASEC\)](#).

For local areas: Use the American Community Survey

There are two different American Community Survey data sets available (one-year and five-year), each covering different time frames and different geographic areas based on population size. The size of the areas being compared will determine which of these data sets you should use. Single-year income and poverty estimates are available for all areas with a population of 65,000 or more, including counties, cities and all congressional districts. There are five-year estimates for all other areas, including 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 five-year data, use the five-year data for all. More guidance on comparisons can be found on the American Community Survey website at <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/guidance/comparing-acs-data.html>.

Examples of when to use the Current Population Survey and American Community Survey

Area comparison	Current Population Survey	American Community Survey
United States	X	
State	X (use multiyear averages for states) Use for historical trend analysis	X (use one-year estimates) Use for recent trends (since 2005)
United States with state	X (use multiyear averages for states)	X (use one-year estimates)
United States with state/metropolitan area/county/place		X
State with metropolitan area/county/place		X
American Indian/Alaska Native areas		X
Congressional districts		X (use one-year estimates)
Metropolitan area with county/place		X
County with place		X
Places (cities)		X
Census tracts		X (five-year estimates only)
Block groups		X (five-year estimates only)

Income and Poverty Data from the American Community Survey and the Current Population Survey: Some Notable Differences

- The American Community Survey is conducted throughout the year, and respondents answer questions that pertain to income received in the 12 months prior to interview. The Annual Social and Economic Supplement to the Current Population Survey is conducted in the spring of each year, and respondents answer questions that pertain to the previous calendar year.
- Households selected to participate in the American Community Survey receive a letter in the mail with instructions about how to log into a secure website and complete the survey online. If households selected to participate in the survey do not use the online response option, the Census Bureau sends them a paper questionnaire or visits in person to obtain answers. The Current Population Survey is conducted entirely by trained interviewers.
- The Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement uses a much more detailed set of questions on income, covering more than 50 income sources.

- Estimates of family income as well as poverty rates are determined based on the size and composition of families. In the American Community Survey, respondents report their relationship to an assigned householder. If members of the household are not related to the householder, they are treated as families of one (unrelated individuals) regardless of whether they are related to anyone else in the household. In the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement, relationship data on marriages and children allow for the creation of subfamilies within a household.

An Additional Source of Local Estimates: Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates Program

The Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates program produces single-year estimates of median household income and poverty for states and all counties, as well as population and poverty estimates for school districts. Since these estimates combine American Community Survey data with administrative and other data, Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates generally have lower variance than those from the American Community Survey. For counties and school districts, particularly those with populations below 65,000, the Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates program provides the most accurate subnational estimates of poverty. For counties, the program generally provides the best single-year estimates of median household income.

Examples of When to Use Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates vs. Current Population Survey and American Community Survey Estimates

Data source recommendation	Cross-sectional estimates		
Geographic level	Number in poverty/poverty rate	Detailed characteristics	Year-to-year change
United States	Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement	Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement/American Community Survey one-year estimates	Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement
State	Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement three-year averages ¹ / American Community Survey	American Community Survey	American Community Survey/Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement two-year averages ¹
Substate (areas with populations of 65,000 or more)	American Community Survey/Small Area Income and Poverty	American Community Survey one-year estimates	American Community Survey/Small Area

	Estimates for counties and school districts		Income and Poverty Estimates for counties and school districts
Substate (areas with populations less than 65,000)	Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates for counties and school districts/American Community Survey five-year estimates for all other geographic entities	American Community Survey five-year estimates	American Community Survey five-year estimates ² / Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates for counties and school districts

Footnotes

¹ Use Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement three-year averages when making cross-state comparisons and two-year averages when comparing state trends.

² The American Community Survey recommends using nonoverlapping periods for trend analysis with multiyear estimates. For example, comparing 2009-2013 American Community Survey estimates with 2014-2018 American Community Survey estimates is preferred for identifying change.