American Community Survey
Producing Accurate Estimates

HOW DOES THE AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY (ACS) PRODUCE ACCURATE ESTIMATES?

The U.S. Census Bureau's ACS each year asks a random sample of about 3.5 million addresses a series of questions about the home and the people that live there. We use those responses to provide estimates for the whole population and local communities to decision-makers, businesses, and the public. We ask a sample of people, instead of asking everyone, to reduce the burden on the public.

WE ENSURE ACCURATE ESTIMATES AND REDUCE UNCERTAINTY IN OUR ESTIMATES BY TAKING THE FOLLOWING STEPS:

Prepare for accurate estimates.
We prepare for years before any surveys are sent.

- Conduct research and lab testing to design questions that produce accurate answers.
- Conduct the decennial census, the Population Estimates Program, and other operations that help us accurately weight our sample responses—this is how we know how many people the survey responses must represent.

Draw an accurate sample.
Sampled households represent many others in their community.

- Work with the U.S. Postal Service and census operations to create an accurate list of every address in the United States (also called our sampling frame), and with communities to ensure our geographic boundaries are accurate.
- Randomly sample addresses in every county, every month, every year. Small geographic areas (including some rural areas) are sampled at a higher rate to ensure they are well-represented.

Encourage accurate response.
Questions are understandable and help is easy to find.

- Online response (with help screens for each question): Any selected household with access to an Internet connection can complete the survey when it is convenient for them.
- Mailed questionnaire: If an online response is not received, addresses automatically receive a paper form to complete and return.
- Telephone and personal interviewing: If a response is not received, a knowledgeable professional interviewer may conduct the survey and provide help, in several languages if requested.

Review responses for accuracy.

We may follow up with respondents when handwriting is unreadable and responses are inconsistent and incomplete. All responses are confidential.

- Though the survey responses are primarily "read" by computers, professional staff who are sworn to protect respondent confidentiality will review, edit, and classify responses.

- Sophisticated editing programs ensure that responses are complete, consistent, and that important fields are not left blank.

- Experts review data looking for geographic areas that have significantly changed from the previous year.

- If any problems are detected, we work to modify questions and develop guidance that will help future respondents.

Produce reliable data with margins of error.

Many surveys do not report indicators of data quality. We do.

- We publish data quality indicators because we want users to be able to judge the reliability of each estimate.

- Our margins of error (MOE) are at the 90 percent confidence level, which implies the difference between the population value and the sample estimate is less than or equal to the MOE 90 percent of the time.

- We publish MOE to be transparent, but also so that you can make informed decisions about which data (and which type of geography) meet your needs.

What can you do?

Help potential respondents understand how their responses ensure communities have accurate data.

- Complete the survey to the best of your ability (if your address is selected).

- Communicate with other potential respondents about how important it is for them to respond to ensure accurate estimates for your community.

- Learn more about the ACS, data accuracy, and statistical methodology at **census.gov/acs**.

For more information about the American Community Survey, please visit **census.gov/acs**.