

American Community Survey

Resources for Congress

What is the American Community Survey (ACS)?

The ACS produces current social, economic, housing, and demographic statistics throughout the decade. It is part of the decennial census program. Every address in the United States has a small chance of being selected to participate in the ACS in any month, in any year. No address will be selected more than once every 5 years.

Is it required by law?

Yes. Just as you are required to report to jury duty, get a license to drive, and pay taxes, you also have the obligation to respond to decennial census surveys. The ACS is authorized by Title 13, U.S. Code, Sections 141 and 193, and response is required by law.

These statistics drive important decisions about how to allocate tax dollars, evaluate whether programs are working, and help local communities make decisions.

Is it confidential?

Yes. The law requires the U.S. Census Bureau to keep all information about all respondents strictly confidential. Any Census Bureau employee who violates these provisions is subject to a fine up to \$250,000, a prison sentence up to 5 years, or both.

How do you complete the ACS?

There are multiple ways to respond to the survey:

- **Respond online.** You will receive a letter with a unique user ID for your address and instructions for responding. Responding online is secure and saves taxpayer dollars.
- **Respond by mail.** We will mail you a paper form to complete and mail back if we don't receive an online response from you.
- **Respond via an in-person interview.** We may contact you by personal visit or phone if we receive an incomplete survey or do not receive a response.
- **Receive help.** You can call the ACS helpline at 1-800-354-7271 with questions about the survey or to complete it by phone.



Need help?

Contact our Office of Congressional and Intergovernmental Affairs at <cao@census.gov> or 301-763-6100.

Help for Your Constituents

Find answers and submit questions at <ask.census.gov>.

Ask questions or respond to the survey by phone at 1-800-354-7271.

Speak to our respondent advocate at <respondent-advocate@census.gov> or 1-888-609-0563.

Where to Find ACS Estimates

Find ACS and other statistics at <https://data.census.gov>.



Why is participation in the ACS important?

Your answers to questions on the ACS produce the statistics needed to assess a variety of programs. When people complete the ACS, they are helping to ensure that the best statistics are available to inform decisions about the future of their communities.

Is my information safe?

Yes. The Census Bureau is committed to safeguarding privacy and protecting the confidentiality of all individuals who share their information. By law, the Census Bureau can only use your responses to create statistics. The Census Bureau is not permitted to publicly release your responses in a way that could identify you or your household.

Can the elderly, sick, or disabled be removed from this survey?

While responding to the ACS may be more challenging for people who are older or disabled, everyone's information is very important. For example, statistics about the size, distribution, and needs of the disabled and older population are used by a number of federal agencies to ensure that everyone has access to adequate housing, transportation, and services.

When someone is unable to complete the form, they can designate a trusted individual as their proxy to answer the questions on the questionnaire or over the phone. The Census Bureau does not remove an address from the survey because doing so would reduce the quality of results.

Why does the Census Bureau need to know the time I leave for work?

These questions produce basic knowledge about commuting patterns and the characteristics of commuter travel. The commuting statistics are essential for planning highway improvements and developing public transportation services. They're also used to design programs to ease traffic problems during peak periods, conserve energy, reduce pollution, and project the demand for alternative fueled vehicles.

Why does the Census Bureau need to know my income, the amount of my mortgage payment, or how much I pay for electricity?

Selected monthly owner costs, such as mortgage payments and utilities, are a measure of the cost of homeownership. When combined with income, selected monthly owner costs offer an excellent measure of affordability and excessive shelter costs. These statistics are used in many housing assistance programs and research into housing affordability.

What topics are on the ACS and why?

The topics included on the ACS were chosen because the federal government requires the data to manage or evaluate programs. For example, information on income is required by the Social Security Administration, the National School Lunch Program, the Low Income Energy Assistance Program, and the U.S. Department of Education for grant allocation. The following federal laws and programs affecting American Indian and Alaska Natives also use ACS estimates:

- Civil Rights Act (1964)
- Native American Programs Act (1974)
- State Children's Health Insurance Program (1997)
- Veterans Benefits Improvement Act (1994)

You can find fact sheets that explain why we ask each question and provide common uses of each question on the Census Bureau's website at www.census.gov/ACSWhyWeAsk.