

**Speaker Notes:
An Overview of the American Community Survey
Updated February 2013**

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Have you ever thought about how, or why, new roads, schools, after-school programs, or hospitals are placed in communities? What makes communities attractive to new businesses or tourists? Why there is no ATM or bike share on a street corner?

The answers often lie in the numbers: numbers that reflect what our communities look like, how our communities have changed, and how those changes impact our daily lives. Most importantly, the numbers reflect how our communities are meeting the needs created by these changes. Traditionally, these numbers have been collected during the census every 10 years. Those numbers play a critical role for states and local communities in determining their share of federal money for schools, roads, senior citizen centers, and other services.

In today's world, our communities can change very quickly. Between decennial censuses, local governments, organizations and businesses need timely data to assess and plan for local needs. Costly mistakes can result when planners do not have current data on which to base their decisions. That is one of the reasons why the U.S. Census Bureau moved to a whole new way of gathering data to help answer those questions. Rather than taking a snapshot of a community once every ten years, the American Community Survey provides a dynamic and much timelier moving picture of the nation, every year.

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This presentation will give you an overview of the American Community Survey. We will answer the question "What is the American Community Survey?" and then move on to discuss content, sample design and data collection, data availability and data products, as well as resources for learning more.

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The American Community Survey, sometimes referred to as the ACS, is a nationwide survey that produces characteristics of the population and housing, similar to the long-form questionnaire used in Census 2000. The American Community Survey produces these estimates for small areas and small population groups. The American Community Survey is a continuous survey, in which each month a sample of housing unit addresses receives a questionnaire. About 3.5 million addresses are surveyed each year.

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The Puerto Rico Community Survey, or PRCS, is the equivalent of the American Community Survey for Puerto Rico.

The form is produced in both English and Spanish.

In addition, the tables published on American FactFinder are available in both English and Spanish.

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Two forms were used during Census 2000. The “short form” asked several questions on the most basic demographic and housing topics. These questions asked about age, sex, race, Hispanic origin, the number of people living in the housing unit, and if the housing unit was owned or rented by the resident.

The “long form” collected the same information as the “short form,” but it also asked questions on additional topics. Thirty-two questions were asked of each resident of the housing unit on such topics as marital status, education, language spoken at home, employment, occupation, and others. Twenty-one questions were asked about the housing unit itself, so only one resident of that housing unit was asked to provide information on such topics as plumbing and kitchen facilities, type and cost of utilities, value of the property, and others.

Only a sample of the total U.S. population received the long form. The data from the long form are called “sample data.” The basic data collected on both the short and the long forms are called “100 percent data” since these questions were asked for 100 percent of the U.S. population.

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The 2010 Census included only one form sent to the entire U.S. population. That form asked only questions similar to those contained in previous census short forms. The 2010 Census provides a basic count of the U.S. population, collecting only the most basic demographic and housing information. Detailed demographic, social, economic, and housing data are no longer collected as part of the decennial census.

The data that were collected from the long form sample are now produced from the American Community Survey.

The American Community Survey collects data from the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico, where it is called the Puerto Rico Community Survey. The American Community Survey does not collect data from the other U.S. territories, such as Guam and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The 2010 decennial census collected long form type data for these areas. The questions that were asked on the 2010 Census are also asked on the American Community Survey questionnaire.

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In the wake of the 2010 Census, we want to emphasize that estimates produced by the American Community Survey are not the same as the 2010 Census population counts.

Again, the purpose of the decennial census is counting the population to support apportionment and redistricting. Use numbers from the 2010 Census to obtain counts of the population and their basic characteristics, such as sex, age, race, Hispanic origin, and homeowner status.

The American Community Survey shows how people live by providing a portrait of the community’s characteristics. Use estimates from the ACS to obtain detailed demographic,

social, economic, and housing characteristics. You will learn more about these characteristics in upcoming slides.

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Next, let's take a look at the content of the American Community Survey.

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The content collected by the American Community Survey can be grouped into four main types of characteristics – social, economic, demographic, and housing. Let's take a closer look at the type of information each of these categories contain.

Social characteristics include topics such as education, marital status and history, fertility, grandparent caregivers, veterans, disability status, place of birth, citizenship status, year of entry, language spoken at home, ancestry and tribal affiliation.

Economic characteristics include such topics as health insurance coverage, income, benefits, employment status, occupation, industry, commuting to work, and place of work. Data on the economic characteristics of the population are collected to assess the material well-being of individuals and households.

The American Community Survey also collects the basic demographic characteristics such as sex, age, race and Hispanic origin. This is the same information that was collected by the 2010 Census.

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Housing characteristics include topics such as tenure, occupancy and structure, housing value, taxes and insurance, utilities, and mortgage or monthly rent. This housing data gives us a measure of the housing stock of the country.

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Several changes were made to the American Community Survey questionnaire at the beginning of 2008. Three new questions were added on marital history, health insurance coverage, and veteran's service-connected disability. The disability question was also modified in such a way that it represents a break in series from previous years. These new data were first available during the data release in 2009.

In 2009, a new question was added on bachelor's field of degree. These new data were first available during the data release in 2010.

In 2013, 3 new questions on computer ownership/internet access were added. The questions are type of computer (e.g., desktop, laptop, smart mobile phone, etc.), type of computer subscription/access to internet, and internet service type (e.g., dial-up, DSL, cable modem, etc.). These new data will be available during the data release in 2014.

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Now, let's take a look at sample design and data collection for the American Community Survey.

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Interview and residence rules define the target population for a survey. These rules therefore identify the units and the people eligible for inclusion in the survey. The sampling frame reflects this choice of universe, as do the instructions on the forms and in the procedures used by survey interviewers during follow-up. The American Community Survey collects data from all persons without regard to their legal status or citizenship. In 2005 the target population was limited to the housing unit population of the US and Puerto Rico. For the first time in 2006, and for every year thereafter, the American Community Survey has included the resident population living in BOTH housing units and group quarters.

Housing units include a house, apartment, mobile home or trailer, a group of rooms, or a single room occupied as separate living quarters, or if vacant, intended for occupancy as separate living quarters.

Group quarters are places where people live or stay that are normally owned or managed by an entity or organization providing housing and/or services for the residents. These services may include custodial or medical care as well as other types of assistance, and residency is commonly restricted to those receiving these services.

The group quarters population is divided into two categories, the Institutional group quarters population and the Non-institutional group quarters population.

The Institutional group quarters population includes residents under formally authorized supervised care. Examples of these facilities include skilled nursing facilities, adult correctional facilities, and psychiatric hospitals.

The Non-institutional group quarters population includes residents of college/university housing, military barracks, and group homes.

The American Community Survey residence rules were established to collect data from people who are currently living at the selected address. For inclusion in the survey, these rules require that, at the time the questionnaire is completed, the respondent is living or staying at the housing unit address for more than two months.

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The American Community Survey data collection operation uses four modes that take place over a three-month period: Internet, mail, telephone, and personal visit.

For most housing units, the first phase of data collection includes an invitation for the household to respond via Internet which is mailed to the sample address. If the household does not respond via Internet, a paper questionnaire is sent to the sample address for the household to complete and return by mail.

If no response is received by mail or Internet, the Census Bureau follows up with computer assisted telephone interviewing, or CATI, if a telephone number is available for the address.

If the Census Bureau is unable to reach an occupant of the unit using CATI, or if the household refuses to participate, the address may be selected for computer assisted personal interviewing, or CAPI. At any point in this process, receipt of an Internet response or a completed paper questionnaire from the sampled address results in the address being removed from the data collection workload.

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American Community Survey period estimates describe the average characteristics of the population or housing over a specified period of time. In the case of American Community Survey one-year estimates, the period is the calendar year. For example, the 2010 American Community Survey data describe the population and characteristics of an area from January 1, 2010 through December 31, 2010, not for any specific day within the year.

In contrast, the 2010 Census was a point-in-time estimate measuring the population on April 1, 2010.

The American Community Survey collects survey information continuously nearly every day of the year and then aggregates the results over a specific period of time – one year, three years, or five years. The data collection is spread evenly across the entire period represented so as not to over-represent any particular month or year within the period.

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Now, let's discuss data availability and data products in the American Community Survey.

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American Community Survey estimates are tabulated for a variety of different geography areas ranging in size from broad geographies, such as the nation and states, to cities, towns, neighborhoods, and census block groups. These geographic concepts are divided into two groups: legal/administrative areas and statistical areas.

The term "legal areas" describes geographic areas that are defined by a legal process, such as a charter, treaty, law, resolution, or court decision. These areas often, but don't always, have a functioning government that provides public services or may be used to administer programs. Legal areas also include "administrative areas," which perform specific functions though do not have a functioning government. Examples of legal areas include states, counties, and incorporated places.

The term "statistical areas" describes geographic areas that are not legally defined, do not have elected/appointed officials, and do not provide services. They are defined for the primary purpose of data tabulation and presentation. Many statistical areas are defined by the Census Bureau in conjunction with state, tribal, and local government officials. The ACS produces estimates for many different statistical areas. Examples of statistical areas include regions, divisions, Census designated places, and Census tracts.

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All American Community Survey data are published based on population thresholds. One-year estimates from the American Community Survey are published for geographic areas with a population of 65,000 or more, including counties or county equivalents, all Congressional Districts, metropolitan and micropolitan statistical areas, all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. The 2010 American Community Survey 1-year estimates were released in September 2011.

Three-year estimates from the American Community Survey are published for geographic areas with a population of 20,000 or more. The 2008-2010 American Community Survey 3-year estimates were released in October 2011. These 3-year estimates were produced with data collected from the 2008, 2009 and 2010 American Community Surveys.

The Census Bureau released data for all areas, including those with estimated populations of less than 20,000, for the first time in December 2010 with the 2005-2009 American Community Survey 5-year estimates. For small areas with populations less than 20,000, it takes 5 years to accumulate a large enough sample to provide estimates with accuracy similar to the decennial census long form. The 2006-2010 5-year estimates were released in December 2010. These 5-year estimates were produced from the data collected from the 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2010 American Community Surveys.

All American Community Survey data products are refreshed annually.

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The American Community Survey data products are similar to those produced from the decennial census long form. Like the decennial sample data products, the American Community Survey products show the characteristics of the country's population and housing. These products include 3 broad types of products – profiles, tables, and Public Use Microdata Sample, or PUMS, files. There are multiple types of profiles and tables – data profiles, narrative profiles, comparison profiles, selected population profiles, ranking tables, subject tables, detailed tables, and geographic comparison tables. Not all products are available for each data release. For example, ranking tables are only available in the 1-year estimates, not the 3-year or 5-year estimates.

All of the data products are available on the Census Bureau's American FactFinder. The data products are explored in depth in the presentation titled "Data Products from the American Community Survey."

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Local governments, emergency planners, and businesses all rely on data products produced from the American Community Survey.

State and local leaders use ACS data to determine the needs of their communities, such as where to build new roads, schools, hospitals, offices, and community centers, or what schools need to plan for bilingual education.

Emergency planners use ACS data for natural disaster planning and response. The number of households and relative economic vulnerability located in small areas inform the plans for moving large numbers of people and for providing efficient and appropriate responses.

Companies use ACS data to make investment decisions in assessing such factors as the local labor force, new markets, and the needs of prospective customers.

You can watch videos to see how statistics from the ACS are used to make decisions and future plans across the United States at http://www.census.gov/acs/www/about_the_survey/acs_helps_communities/.

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Finally, let's talk about resources for learning more about the American Community Survey. This section of the presentation will discuss resources available on our website, census.gov/acs.

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The American Community Survey webpage has a lot of information about the survey. The next several slides will present some valuable resources for learning more about the American Community Survey. We will look at the ACS Main page, Guidance on Comparing ACS Data to Other Sources, the ACS Compass Products, the Data and Documentation page, and the ACS Design and Methodology Report.

The upcoming slides show static images of the American Community Survey Web site taken in early 2012. As the Web site is continually updated, these images may differ slightly from what is currently on the active Web site. At the bottom of each of the upcoming slides are the Internet addresses for the Web page that the slide is referencing.

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The American Community Survey main page, at [census dot gov forward slash acs](http://census.gov/acs), includes a wealth of information about the survey. From here, you can navigate to different sections on the web page- "About the Survey," "Guidance for Data Users," "Data and Documentation," "Methodology," and "Library." Let's examine some of the content available from these pages.

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Guidance on comparing the American Community Survey to other sources is available under the tab "Guidance for Data Users" at the top of the ACS homepage. Select "Comparing ACS Data" from the left navigation bar and select your year of interest. Guidance is available on comparing each subject area from the American Community Survey, such as school enrollment, poverty, or health insurance, to Census 2000, the previous year of the ACS, and 2010 Census.

Instead of selecting your year of interest, you can also select "ACS/Census Table Comparison" under "Comparing ACS Data." From here, you can enter a table number to search for a comparable table between the American Community Survey 5-year estimates and Census 2000 Summary File 3 detailed tables.

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The American Community Survey Handbooks for Data Users, or Compass Handbooks, are also available by selecting the “Guidance for Data Users” tab at the top of the ACS homepage. Select “Handbooks for Data Users” from the left navigation bar. Each one of our 12 downloadable PDF Compass handbooks helps a particular group with specific how-to instructions and/or case studies. For an introduction to ACS data, we recommend the Compass handbook for General Data Users.

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Information on each yearly data release is available under the tab “Data & Documentation” at the top of the ACS homepage. Select “Data” from the left navigation bar and select your data release of interest. For example, by selecting the “2010 Data Release,” you can see new and notable items specific to the 1-year, 3-year, and 5-year data releases. There are also links to “Product Changes,” the “Release Schedule,” and “ACS Briefs” specific to that year.

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Documentation supporting each yearly data release is available under the tab “Data & Documentation” at the top of the ACS homepage. Select “Documentation” from the left navigation bar. This page includes links to the

- Code Lists
- Subject Definitions
- Group Quarters Definitions
- Instructions for Applying Statistical Testing
- Comparison Guidance
- Accuracy of the Data

The page defaults to the most recent release. If you want documentation for another year, select the appropriate tab.

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The ACS Design and Methodology paper describes the basic design of the American Community Survey and details the full set of methods and procedures that are currently in place. It is available by selecting the “Methodology” tab at the top of the ACS homepage.

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In addition to the ACS website at census.gov/acs, here are some other American Community Survey resources.

American Community Survey data products are available through American FactFinder at factfinder2.census.gov.

Quick, easy access to facts about people, business, and geography are available through QuickFacts at quickfacts.census.gov.

DataFerrett, the Census Bureau's free online tool that can analyze and extract data from the American Community Survey, is available at dataferrett.census.gov.

Finally, frequently asked questions specific to the American Community Survey are available at ask.census.gov by selecting "American Community Survey" in the left navigation bar.

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This presentation gave you an overview of the American Community Survey program and products.

Stay updated on ACS-related news by subscribing to our email updates. Select "Get Email Updates" from the ACS homepage at census.gov/acs. While you are at our website, check it out for the latest updates on the survey.

Please feel free to contact the Census Bureau if you have questions or need further information. If you have questions that are not answered by the Web site, please call 1-800-923-8282 or submit a question at <https://ask.census.gov>.