The American Community Survey: What It Means for You in 2010 and Beyond

In winter 2010, the U.S. Census Bureau will release new data about the economic, demographic, housing, and social characteristics of America's people and households. The data will cover the past 5 years (2005–2009) and come from a sample of roughly one in eight U.S. households.

Every year after 2010 these data will be updated, granting decision makers unprecedented access to timely information about key issues. This new data collection and distribution effort is called the American Community Survey (ACS), and it represents a remarkable shift in the way the U.S. Census Bureau collects and disseminates data.

The ACS will replace the long form of the decennial census in order to reduce costs and provide access to annual data. If you have relied on the long form census data from 1990 or 2000 to write grant proposals (e.g., Community Development Block Grants) or to determine the need for projects in your community, you will now need to use ACS data instead.

Advantages of the ACS:

- Annually updated data
- Subcounty data (census tract, school district, ZIP code)
- Information about the accuracy of the data
- One-year, 3-year, and 5-year average data for urban areas, annually

Challenges of the ACS:

- Data represent averages across 1-, 3-, and 5-year periods; there are no "point-in-time" estimates like those generated by the long form of the 2000 census
- Only 5-year average data for rural and small areas, annually
- Data with varying levels of precision (and less precision than the long form of the 2000 census)

What is on the ACS?

Table 1 outlines the topics covered in the ACS.

How many people fill out the ACS, and how accurate are the data?

At various times throughout a given year, the ACS is distributed to approximately 1 in 40 housing units and group quarters in the U.S. The ACS data are combined across the year and across successive years so that the published data eventually represent approximately:

- 1 in 40 housing units with 1 year of data
- 3 in 40 housing units with 3 successive years of data
- 5 in 40 (1 in 8) housing units with 5 successive years of data

Because the ACS is a sample survey, its estimates are subject to statistical error. The magnitude of error for ACS estimates is greater than that for previous census long-form estimates because the ACS is based on a smaller sample size. The Census Bureau publishes the margin of error associated with each ACS estimate. These margins of error correspond to the range around the estimates within which we can be 90 percent confident the true population statistics exist.

Table 1. Topics included in the American Community Survey.

Demographic characteristics	Social characteristics	Housing characteristics
Age	Marital status and marital history*	Year structure built
Sex	Fertility*	Units in structure
Hispanic origin	Grandparents as caregivers	Year moved into unit
Race	Ancestry	Rooms
Relationship to householder (e.g., spouse)	Place of birth, citizenship, and year of entry	Bedrooms
Economic characteristics	Language spoken at home	Kitchen facilities
Income	Educational attainment and school enrollment	Plumbing facilities
Food stamps benefit*	Residence 1 year ago*	House heating fuel
Labor force status	Veteran status, period of military service, and VA service-connected disability rating*	Telephone service available
Industry, occupation, and class of worker	Disability	Farm residence
Place of work and journey to work		**Financial characteristics**
Work status last year		Tenure (owner/renter)
Vehicles available		Housing value
Health insurance coverage*		Rent
		Selected monthly owner costs

*Fertility, residence 1 year ago, marital history, VA service-connected disability rating, food stamps benefit, and health insurance coverage are new for the ACS, compared to the 2000 long form of the census.

Source: *Questions Planned for the 2010 Census and American Community Survey*, U.S. Census Bureau.

When you report data from the ACS, you should include the margin of error. For example, the estimated percentage of Oregonians with a high school education or greater (from the 2006–2008 ACS) was 88 percent, with a margin of error of 0.2 percent. The best way to report this estimate would be, "On average, between 2006 and 2008, approximately 88 percent of adult Oregonians had a high school or greater education level, plus or minus 0.2 percent."

It is very important that sampled individuals fill out the ACS because the data are used in conjunction with decennial census data to qualify areas for federal, state, and other grants. If too few people fill out the survey, the size of the sample decreases and accuracy is reduced.

What averages will be released?

Data will be released annually for all areas of the U.S. For some areas, annually released data will include data collected during 1 year, while for other areas, the Bureau will release only averages for 3 or 5 years of data. The difference is due to unequal levels of statistical sampling error. The assignment of geographic areas to an average year estimate group is based on the size of the population at the last full population count (decennial census). Table 2 lists the parts of Oregon that are assigned to each group.

Starting in 2010, 1-year, 3-year, and 5-year average estimates will be available. Each year after 2010, in the late fall, data collected from the previous year(s) will be available. This means that the averages will be released in a "rolling" fashion; 5-year average data published in 2010 correspond to data collected 2005–2009, 5-year average data published in 2011 correspond to data collected 2006–2010, and so on.

Clearly, the ACS has the potential to provide vast amounts of important information on an unprecedented, annual basis to community leaders and decision makers. It is important to understand what is available, when it is available, the quality of the data, and how to interpret ACS statistics. For more information, please contact Lena Etuk at Oregon State University Extension Service (lena.etuk@oregonstate.edu), Charles Rynerson at the Portland State University Population Research Center (PRC) (Rynerson@pdx.edu), or visit the U.S. Census Bureau website: http://www.census.gov/acs.

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U.S. Census Bureau, Public Information Office. February 2001. Preliminary Estimates Show Improvement in Census 2000 Coverage. Table 1: Preliminary estimated coverage of Census 2000 based on the Accuracy and Coverage Evaluation (A.C.E.) Survey. http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/2001/cb01cn03.html

Table 2. Average year estimate groups.

1-year average estimates	#	3-year average estimates	#	5-year average estimates	#
Counties larger than 65,000	15	Counties larger than 20,000	27	All counties	36
Cities larger than 65,000	8	Cities larger than 20,000	30	All places	309
Metropolitan areas larger than 65,000	12	Metropolitan and micropolitan areas larger than 20,000	19	All metropolitan and micropolitan areas	32
Urban areas larger than 65,000	5	Urban areas larger than 20,000	19	All urban areas	72
School districts larger than 65,000	12	School districts larger than 20,000	46	All school districts	
				All ZIP codes, census tracts, census block groups, and other geographic areas	

For a list of the areas in Oregon that are assigned to the 1- and 3-year average estimate groups, contact Lena Etuk at Oregon State University (lena.etuk@oregonstate.edu).

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