



The Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS)

The American Community Survey (ACS) is a rolling survey of 3.5 million households every year. It is part of the constitutionally-required decennial census (Article I, sec. 2, clause 3), replacing the "long form" in 2005. Response is required by law (13 U.S.C. §214) to encourage participation and garner high response rates (up to 95%).

Threats to the ACS

- The Freedom from Government Surveys Act (S. 265) would make response to the ACS voluntary.
- Legislation and appropriations amendments have repeatedly proposed making response to all but 4 ACS questions (name, contact info, response date, and number of people at the same address) voluntary.
- In FY13, the U.S. House [voted](#) to eliminate the ACS altogether, but the change was dropped in conference.

The unique value of the ACS

- **America's only source:** For comparable (across geography), consistent (across time), timely (updated annually), and high-quality demographic and socio-economic data for all communities, down to the neighborhood and census tract levels (so you can accurately compare downtown New York with rural Kentucky).
- **Provides the statistical baseline:** Without ACS data, private and public sector insights professionals could not develop representative statistical samples for most surveys and studies across the country.
- **Directs spending:** In 2017, 316 federal spending programs distributed more than \$1.5 trillion to states and local areas on the basis, in whole or in part, of data derived from the ACS. *Without ACS data, funding recipients would be determined only by the whims of federal bureaucrats, or the political needs of the White House.*
- **Drives business decisions:** Businesses, especially small ones, rely on ACS data to make sound decisions on where to locate, what products/services to offer, who to hire, how to attract investment, etc.

What would the Founders do?

- Ben Franklin, James Madison and Thomas Jefferson started adding extra questions to the first Census in 1790.

Privacy and confidentiality:

- Federal law prohibits using Census data for non-statistical purposes and prohibits sharing any individual- or household- identifiable data with anyone, including for law enforcement and national security purposes. Unlike most government agencies, the Census Bureau does not have data security breaches.
- [Federal law, directly or indirectly, requires all of the information gathered in the ACS](#) (i.e., Congress requested the data directly, or created a program that needs the data for implementation, enforcement, or monitoring). By law, Congress has the opportunity to review and object to any proposed ACS content by April 1, 2027; no Congressmen objected to the content in 2017-2018, the last review period. Members of Congress can also share ACS concerns with the Census Bureau directly during this process.
- Respondent burden is low: approximately 40 minutes per household every 40 years.

As part of the constitutionally-required decennial census, response to the ACS is mandatory

- Without it, costs would skyrocket,¹ and data wouldn't be available on most rural areas and small towns.²
- The mandatory ACS has received as much as a 95% response rate. Even 10% for voluntary U.S. surveys is rare.
- The Census Bureau would need a lot more time/money for telephone contact and door-to-door interviewing to try to achieve the statistical reliability necessary to continue producing estimates for rural areas and small towns.
- Canada made its census long form voluntary survey in 2011. Response rates plummeted, costs spiked, and it couldn't produce reliable estimates for 25% of the nation. Canada eventually reinstated mandatory response.

¹ A 2003 Census field test of voluntary response saw mail response rates drop by 20+ percent and costs increase by 30+ percent.

² Including more than 40 percent of U.S. counties (as of 2015).