

The American Community Survey: America's Premier Data Source

TALKING POINTS

American Community Survey (ACS) data provide information on who we are as a country.

- **The ACS is a nationwide, continuous survey that provides critical demographic, housing, social, and economic data** — including on household income, educational attainment, employment status, health insurance coverage, and more — every year for communities large and small.
- **With an annual sample size of about 3.5 million addresses, the ACS is the largest and most comprehensive survey of American households (short of the decennial census).** It allows the Census Bureau to publish more than 11 billion statistics on a wide range of social, economic, housing, and demographic topics.
- Like the decennial census of which it is a part, response to the **ACS is required by law to help ensure the most accurate data possible**, given the substantial policy and programmatic uses of ACS data.

ACS data are critical to:

- **providing annually updated data for every community in the country — the only source that consistently and reliably does so.** The ACS provides data not only at the national and state levels, but also for smaller geographies such as cities and towns, American Indian reservations, and sparsely populated rural areas.
- furnishing irreplaceable, timely, and high-quality socio-economic data that **guide decision-making in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors.** Without current, reliable data, the nation would be forced to rely on outdated information that may or may not accurately reflect current market conditions.
- **guiding trillions of dollars in annual federal aid to state and local governments** for public education, support for vulnerable children, transportation infrastructure, public health, housing assistance, and other vital services. In 2017, 316 federal spending programs distributed \$1.5 trillion to states and local areas on the basis, in whole or in part, of data derived from the ACS. A recent Census Bureau [report](#) found that in 2021, data derived in whole or in part helped to guide \$2.8 trillion in federal assistance. These data helped allocate limited taxpayer dollars **fairly and responsibly maximizing the efficiency of these programs.**
 - **the efficient management of programs and responsible allocation of federal spending.** Without the up-to-date, reliable, and detailed data provided by the ACS, Congress would be forced to rely on outdated information that may lead to inefficiencies and waste.
- **the implementation, enforcement, and monitoring of federal laws and policies.** The data collected by the ACS are mandated or required for the carrying out of these laws and policies. For example, Congress may have requested the data directly or created a program that relies on ACS data for implementation, enforcement, or monitoring.
 - **making determinations under section 203 of the Voting Rights Act** about which jurisdictions with a high percentage of limited English language proficient people are required to offer bilingual voting materials.
- **helping ensure appropriate employment opportunities for racial and ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and veterans.** Both the government and business sector rely on ACS data for this purpose.
- **businesses of all sizes that rely on ACS data every day to make vital decisions** about where to locate and expand, what goods and services to offer, the scope of employee training needed, and long term investment opportunities.

The American Community Survey: America's Premier Data Source

TALKING POINTS

ACS data are critical to *(continued)*:

- **nonprofit organizations that use ACS results to guide services to those most in need and to measure the success of their programs.**
- the updating of race and ethnicity questions if the Office of Management and Budget moves forward with revising its race and ethnicity data standards. **The ACS will be a cost-effective test bed for updating these questions** prior to the 2030 Census.

Fully funding the ACS is crucial, prudent, and cost-effective.

- **Cuts to the Census Bureau's budget are putting a robust ACS and reliable ACS data for all communities at risk.** In addition to reducing the quality of ACS data, failure to fund innovation for ACS methodology and operations could cost the Census Bureau and federal government more money over time.
 - **Cuts to the ACS budget could force the Census Bureau to reduce the survey's sample size,** making it difficult to produce reliable data for small places (such as neighborhoods), rural areas, and small population groups. This could diminish the quality of ACS data to a point where **the information is not useful or even usable for a myriad of critical public and private sector purposes.**
 - The ACS, like other surveys, is facing low initial response rates. Increased funding is needed to allow the Census Bureau to compensate for these response rates by following up with nonrespondents. **Failure to adequately increase funding would leave the Census Bureau with insufficient response to produce reliable data** for smaller areas (e.g., rural communities, towns, or urban neighborhoods) and population groups (e.g., people with disabilities, veterans, or immigrant groups). *The consequence would be greatly diminished quality of ACS data.*

A voluntary ACS would jeopardize the availability of usable data for rural and remote communities, neighborhoods, and smaller population groups, including people with disabilities and veterans.

- **It is critical that responses to the ACS remain mandatory for those who receive the survey.** Both Census Bureau testing and Canada's experience with a voluntary census long form (the equivalent of our ACS) clearly demonstrate that making ACS response optional would lower response rates dramatically, increase costs significantly, and undermine the quality and accuracy of data as the sample becomes less representative.
 - Census field tests from 2003 showed that the ACS response rate would drop by up to 25 percent, and costs would increase by 30 percent, if the ACS was made voluntary.
 - After Parliament converted Canada's long form to a voluntary survey in 2011, Statistics Canada was unable to produce vital socio-economic and demographic data for a quarter of the nation's places — mostly small jurisdictions and rural areas. The prime minister quickly restored mandatory response for the census long form after the next national election.

The American Community Survey: America's Premier Data Source

TALKING POINTS

- **The quality of estimates produced from a voluntary ACS would be severely jeopardized for all segments of the population and all types of communities.** Response rates for communities already facing undercounts, including communities of color, low-income families, and rural households, would decline even further, requiring more in-person follow-up that is more expensive and of lower quality.
- **Making the ACS voluntary would threaten the availability of data for small places, less populous areas, and small population groups,** including race and ethnic subgroups, people with disabilities, and language minorities.
 - This data loss would hamper the effectiveness of programs and policies serving these communities, such as:
 - Initiatives to expand broadband access in underserved rural areas;
 - Policies to ensure information is available in locally spoken languages in public transit and buildings, voting sites, hospitals, and other public places; and
 - Targeted emergency preparedness programs to respond to events such as extreme weather and heat, chemical exposure or air quality emergencies, and COVID-19 and other health risks.
- **If the survey were voluntary, the Census Bureau would have to spend more money and devote more staff hours to ensure data quality.** The decline in ACS responses would force the bureau to use more costly modes of data collection, such as telephone and door-to-door visits, thereby *increasing the cost of the survey by around 30 percent.*
- **Making the ACS voluntary would create a precarious decision-making vacuum for the nation and hinder future economic growth.**