



The Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS)

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

Threats to the ACS

Congressmen like former Rep. Ted Poe (H.R. 1305 - 115th Congress) proposed making response to all but 4 ACS questions (name, contact info, response date, and number of people at the same address) voluntary. Similar amendments to FY13, FY15 and FY16 CJS Appropriations bills passed the House by voice vote. (The House also [voted](#) to eliminate the ACS altogether in FY13, but the change was dropped in conference with the Senate.)

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 baseline:** Without ACS data, private and public sector survey, opinion and marketing researchers could not develop representative statistical samples for studies across the country.
- **Directs spending:** Congress allocates more than \$600 billion a year in federal assistance to states and localities (more than 2/3 of all federal grant funding) based on ACS data. *Without ACS data, funding recipients would be determined 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, etc.

What would the Founders do?

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

Privacy and confidentiality:

- Federal law prohibits using Census data for non-statistical purpose 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, 2017; no Congressmen objected to the content in 2007-2008, 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.

Absent mandatory response, costs will skyrocket, and data won't be available on rural areas and small towns

- The Census Bureau would need more time/money for telephone contact and door-to-door interviewing and try to achieve the statistical reliability necessary to continue producing estimates for rural areas and small towns.
- A 2003 Census field test of voluntary response saw mail response rates drop by more than 20 percent and the survey's cost increase by more than 30 percent.
- *The mandatory ACS gets a 95% response rate. Current (voluntary) surveys in the U.S. rarely break 10%.*
- Canada converted its census long form to a voluntary survey in 2011. Response rates plummeted, costs spiked, and Canada cannot produce reliable estimates for 25% of the nation's territories.
- We likely would be unable to produce usable data for [more than 40 percent of all U.S. counties](#), or for small cities, towns, neighborhoods, and native reservations, if response to the ACS were voluntary.