

# American Community Survey (ACS) vs. Decennial Census

Every 10 years since 1790, the decennial census has been conducted every 10 years as required by the U.S. Constitution. Recent censuses have consisted of a “short form” which included basic demographic questions such as age, sex and race, and a “long form” used for only a sample of households that included not only the basic “short form” questions but also detailed questions about the socioeconomic and housing characteristics. The American Community Survey (ACS) - begun in 2005 - has ushered in the most substantial change in the decennial census in more than 60 years. It is a nationwide, continuous survey designed to provide communities with reliable and timely demographic, social, economic and housing data every year rather than every 10 years. The ACS data provides (for the first time) a continuous stream of updated information for the Nation, states, counties communities and local areas down to the block group level and revolutionizes the way we use data to understand our communities

American Community Survey (ACS)	Decennial Census
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Data released every year</li><li>• Provides Estimates Based on a Sample of Households (appx. 300,000 households per month; 3 million households per year)</li><li>• Primary purpose is to measure the changing social, economic and housing characteristics of the U.S. Population</li><li>• Releases Detailed Social, Economic and Housing data: including Education, Language, Income, Poverty, Labor Force, Health Insurance, Disability, Foreign Born/Origin/Nativity, Value of Home, Year Structure Built, Housing Costs (Rent/Mortgage)</li><li>• Data available down to the Block Group level of Geography</li><li>• Data provided as 1, 3 and 5-yr estimates for geographies of different population sizes.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Data released every 10 years</li><li>• Provides Complete Counts of the Population (every household in the U.S. is enumerated)</li><li>• Primary purpose is to provide counts of people for the purpose of congressional apportionment and legislative redistricting</li><li>• Releases Population Counts and Basic Demographic data: including Age, Gender, Race, Ethnicity, Household Relationship, Total Housing Units, Vacancy Characteristics and Tenure (Rent vs. Own)</li><li>• Data available down to the Block level of Geography</li><li>• All data provided for same time period</li></ul>

Comparisons can be made between some, but not all, of the data items from the American Community Survey and the Decennial Census long forms from prior censuses. Visit the following link to see which data is comparable, which needs to be compared with caution and which data should not be compared: [http://www.census.gov/acs/www/guidance\\_for\\_data\\_users/comparing\\_2010/](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/guidance_for_data_users/comparing_2010/)

## ACS and Decennial Census Data Items

### Demographic Characteristics

Age  
Sex  
Hispanic Origin  
Race  
Relationship to Householder  
(e.g., spouse)

### Economic Characteristics

Income  
Food Stamps Benefit  
Labor Force Status  
Industry, Occupation, and Class  
of Worker  
Place of Work and Journey to  
Work  
Work Status Last Year  
Vehicles Available  
Health Insurance Coverage\*

### Social Characteristics

Marital Status and Marital History\*  
Fertility  
Grandparents as Caregivers  
Ancestry  
Place of Birth, Citizenship, and  
Year of Entry  
Language Spoken at Home  
Educational Attainment and  
School Enrollment  
Residence One Year Ago  
Veteran Status, Period of Military  
Service, and VA Service-  
Connected Disability Rating\*  
Disability

### Housing Characteristics

Year Structure Built  
Units in Structure  
Year Moved Into Unit  
Rooms  
Bedrooms  
Kitchen Facilities  
Plumbing Facilities  
House Heating Fuel  
Telephone Service Available  
Farm Residence

### Financial Characteristics

Tenure (Owner/Renter)  
Housing Value  
Rent  
Selected Monthly Owner Costs

**Demographic Characteristics** available in both Decennial Census and American Community Survey

## ACS Data Release Schedule

Table 2. Release Schedule for ACS Data

Data product	Population threshold	Year of Data Release							
		2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Year(s) of Data Collection									
1-year estimates	65,000+	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
3-year estimates	20,000+			2005– 2007	2006– 2008	2007– 2009	2008– 2010	2009– 2011	2010– 2012
5-year estimates	All areas*					2005– 2009	2006– 2010	2007– 2011	2008– 2012

\*Five-year estimates will be available for areas as small as census tracts and block groups.  
Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

## Where can I find data for my community?

ACS data is available for FREE through the American Factfinder—the U.S. Census Bureau’s online data access tool. The URL is [www.factfinder2.census.gov](http://www.factfinder2.census.gov)

If you have any questions or need any assistance accessing data for your community please contact our Information Services Department at 617-424-4510 or via e-mail at [boston.pdsp@census.gov](mailto:boston.pdsp@census.gov)