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Research Policy Update
The American Community Survey

The American Community Survey (ACS) provides important demographic, social, and economic data on American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/ANs) and Tribal Lands (geographies). However, ACS is often confused with the Decennial Census and is not well understood. This Research Policy Update provides a broad overview of the ACS and its importance to Tribal Nations.

***Differences Between the American Community Survey
and the Decennial Census***

The American Community Survey (ACS) is an important survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau each year to collection information on a variety of social and economic indicators about people and communities in the United States, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. ACS data is used for a variety of purposes, including federal, state, and local funding and resources, and planning by communities, businesses, and governments (1).

The ACS is often mistaken for the Decennial Census that occurs every 10 years. This confusion in part arises from the history of the U.S. Census. Prior to 2010, the Decennial Census included administration of a “short form” with questions mainly about demographic and housing information that was intended to be answered by everyone living in the United States and a “long form” that contained questions on other demographic, social, and economic data that was only sent to some households. In 2005, the ACS was launched and developed from the “long form” questions to be administered every year to a sample of households (2). The Decennial Census, with the basic demographic questions such as age, sex, race, Hispanic/Latino origin, and housing information, continues to be administered every 10 years to all households in the United States, the District of Columbia, and U.S. territories. The most recent Decennial Census was administered in 2020 (3).

The ACS is also different from the Decennial Census because it is administered to just a sample, or portion, of households in the United States, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico on a monthly basis each year (2). The Decennial Census is administered every 10 years over a few months in that year to all households and is intended to be a “complete count” as

required by the Constitution (3). The ACS is completed by households in four ways: online; phone; mail; or in-person interview (4). **Table 1** illustrates additional differences between the ACS and the Decennial Census (5).

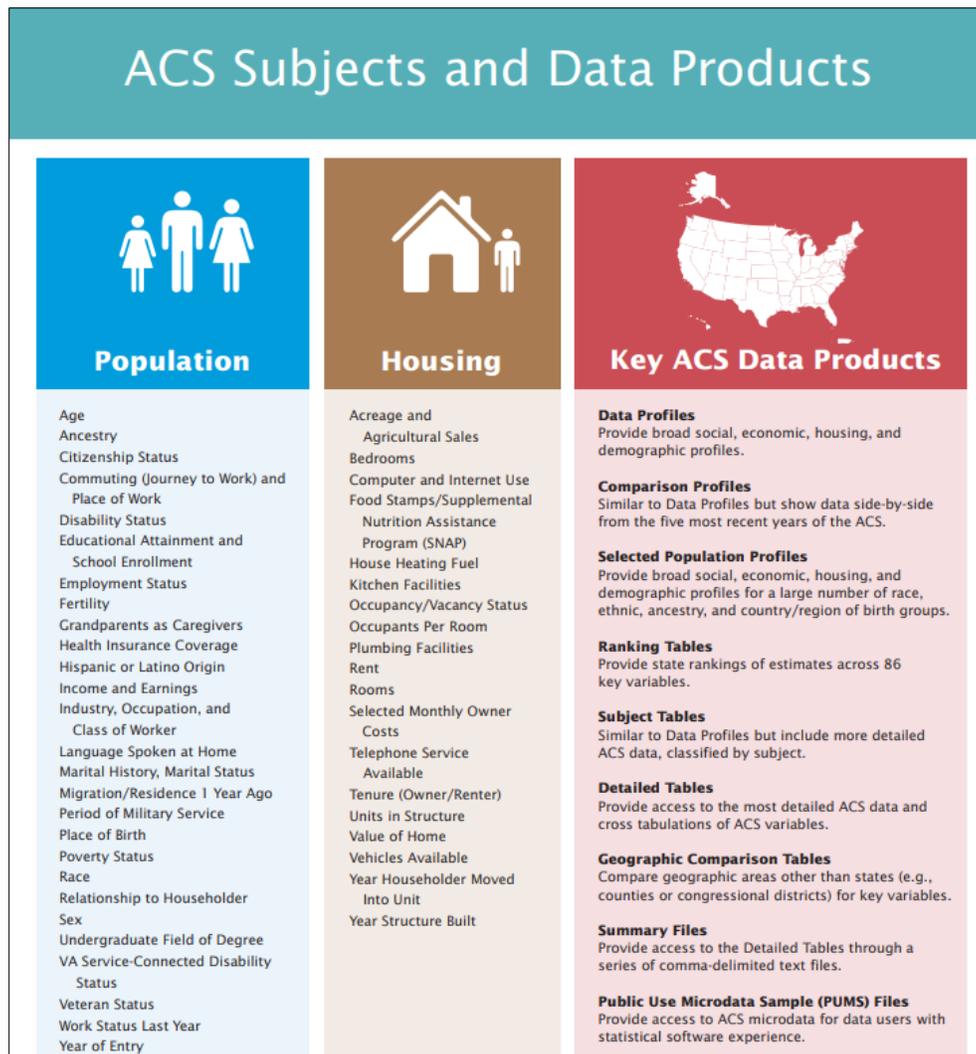
Table 1. Comparison between the Decennial Census and the American Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau

	Decennial Census	American Community Survey
What is the purpose?	Population count, basic demographic and housing data	Demographic, social, economic, and housing data
How often is it conducted?	Once every 10 years	Every year
When does recruitment occur?	Every 10 years	Every month, every year
How is ACS data collected?	Online, mail, phone, in-person	Online, mail, telephone, in-person
How many households are recruited?	All households living in US states, DC, and five US territories on April 1 in the 10th year	A random sample of addresses in US states, DC, and Puerto Rico
What information does it ask about?	Age, sex, race/ethnicity, housing status	Demographic, Social and economic data (education, housing, jobs, transportation, internet access)
How is it used?	Congressional apportionment and state/local representation (redistricting), population counts, policies, planning, and programs, government funding and resources, research	Programs, planning, policies, funding, resource allocation, public health, business, government decision-making and funding, research
Is answering the questions required by law?	Yes	Yes
Will responses be kept confidential?	Census Bureau is required by law to keep responses confidential	Census Bureau is required by law to keep responses confidential

What Types of Data are Included in the ACS?

The ACS includes questions in three categories: 1) **demographic data**, such as age, sex, race, Hispanic/Latino origin, marital status, disability status, veteran status, and languages spoken at home; 2) **social and economic data**, such as income, poverty status, employment, work status, education, health insurance coverage, occupation, military service, and migration; and 3) **housing data**, such as own vs. rent status, description of home, telephone service, computer/internet use, kitchen/plumbing facilities, home value, and available vehicles. **Figure 1** from the U.S. Census Bureau provides a clear overview of topics included in the ACS and a summary of data products that are produced from the data (2).

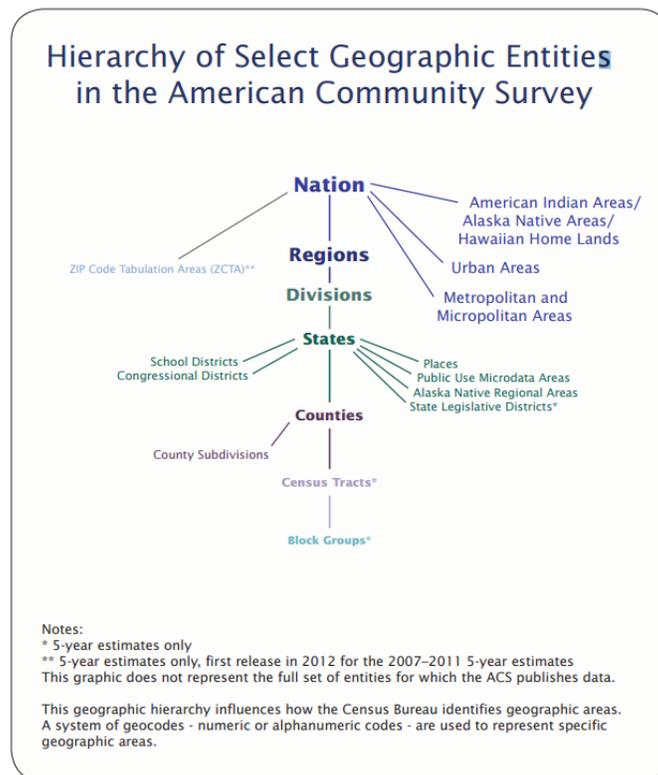
Figure 1. ACS Data Topics and Data Products



Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2)

ACS data are very useful because the data are published at several geographic levels, including at the national level, state level, and other types of geographies, such as places, counties, census tracts, block groups, urban and metropolitan/micropolitan areas, zip codes, school districts, and congressional districts. ACS data are also published for the American Indian/Alaska Native population and for American Indian/Alaska Native Areas (geographies). **Figure 2** is a U.S. Census Bureau graphic that shows the official census geographies for which ACS data are available (2).

Figure 2. Select Geographic Entities in the American Community Survey



ACS Data Releases

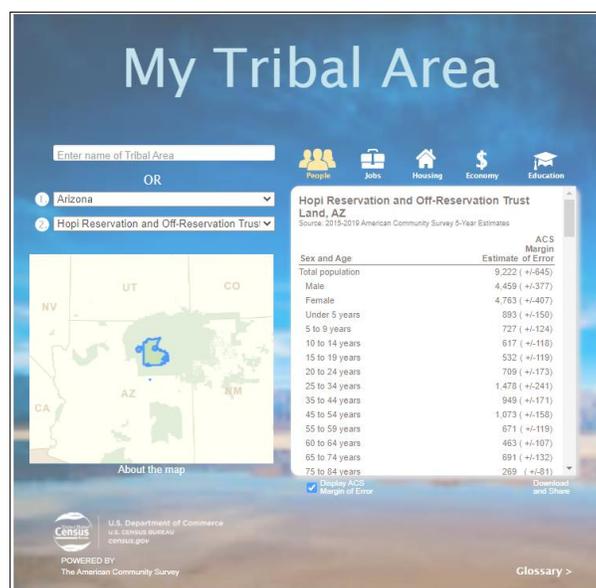
The ACS data are released in various products and formats in one-year and five-year releases. The one-year releases are for data collected over the 12 months during the year of the release, and the five-year releases combine data from the five years indicated. The former provides quick and timely estimates for planning and other purposes, but data at lower levels of geography may not be accurate or even available. **The five-year estimates provide much more accurate data at all levels of geographies by combining five years of data, and these five-year estimates are considered more accurate than the one-year estimates.** The results are “estimates” since the ACS collects data from just a sample of households each year rather

than every person. The U.S. Census Bureau also publishes ACS in a variety of formats as listed in **Figure 1**. ACS data are accessible on the U.S. Census Bureau website at <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/> (6). While ACS does include population counts, the U.S. Census Bureau recommends using their Populations Estimates instead of ACS population counts. The U.S. Census Bureau also recommends not comparing results from the ACS with Decennial Census results primarily due to the differences in data collection – yearly vs. once every 10 years (7).

My Tribal Area

The U.S. Census Bureau created a portal called “My Tribal Area” that allows access to data for census tribal geographies from the latest ACS five-year estimates. My Tribal Area includes a simple drop-down menu to select a single Tribal Area or select a state and then select the Tribal Area within that state. Data categories available include information about people, jobs, housing, the economy, and education. Data are presented as an estimate with margins of error to help users understand the relative accuracy of the estimate provided in the data. Comments from Tribal Leaders often include questions about the accuracy of the data in My Tribal Area, especially since federal and state agencies and other funders often request or require them to use census data in their grant or funding applications. The U.S. Census Bureau recently mentioned that they may add the 2020 Census data to My Tribal Area, but there are concerns about the quality and accuracy of that data due to several factors including closures due to COVID-19 during the count and issues with privacy protections to the data. **Figure 2** is an image of My Tribal Area with a Tribal Nation selected, and the link to this webpage is here: <https://www.census.gov/tribal/>.

Figure 2. My Tribal Area, U.S. Census Bureau – Example of Data Displayed for the Hopi Reservation and Off-Reservation Trust Land, Arizona under the “People” tab



ACS Data and Funding Formulas

ACS data are used in some federal funding formulas to determine distributions of funding to a variety of entities including Tribal Nations. The U.S. Census Bureau published a summary of the use of census data in federal funding formulas a few years ago, and ACS data were used in several funding formulas (8). Over the years, some Tribal Nations have expressed concerns about the inaccuracy of data used for federal funding formulas and feel they are not getting their fair share of funding. ACS data are an estimate based on a sample of respondents in a community, and if households that receive a request to fill out the ACS do not complete it, their community's data will likely be less accurate.

Tribal Nations also may use ACS in My Tribal Area to gather data about their community to use in planning and funding applications. The U.S. Census Bureau also publishes tribal geography data every 10 years from the Decennial Census that may be different than the ACS, which has led to some confusion and questions about which data to use in funding applications, funding formulas, and local planning. Some Tribal Nations have decided to conduct their own censuses and surveys about their community population to access more accurate data about their population, but these efforts are time consuming and can be costly (9). The U.S. Census Bureau has publicly stated its plans to hold a tribal consultation on the use of tribal administrative records in the 2030 Decennial Census, such as enrollment data, to help make census data more accurate. It is not clear if this strategy will be considered for the ACS.

Given that the ACS data are used in some federal funding formulas and are easily accessible through My Tribal Area, encouraging all AI/ANs to respond to the ACS is critically important to ensure the most accurate estimates, especially for tribal lands. For more detailed information on how the ACS and other census data are used in federal funding formulas, the U.S. Census Bureau published a report in 2017 – Uses of Census Bureau Data in Federal Funds Distribution – that is posted here: <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/program-management/working-papers/Uses-of-Census-Bureau-Data-in-Federal-Funds-Distribution.pdf>.

ACS – Resources and Action Steps for Tribal Nations

The ACS provides important information every year on demographic, social, and economic data for AI/ANs and Tribal Nations, but the data are an estimate from samples collected throughout the year, which means completion of the ACS by every invited household is critical. The NCAI Policy Research Center recommends all Tribal Nations and AI/AN communities encourage their citizens and community members to complete the ACS if they happen to be

among the random sample of households that receive the ACS each month. Messages that focus on how important completing the ACS is to the local community receiving the resources and funding it deserves are likely to be most effective. A useful guide to the ACS was published by the U.S. Census Bureau and is available here for more information:

https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/programs-surveys/acs/about/ACS_Information_Guide.pdf.

The U.S. Census Bureau Regional Offices can be a resource to Tribal Nations on ACS and their staff work with tribal leadership when they are planning to conduct ACS interviews while on tribal lands. Tribal Nations can find their Regional Office contacts here:

<https://www.census.gov/about/regions.html>.

Tribal Nations are encouraged to regularly update the U.S. Census Bureau on any changes in tribal legal boundaries or the list of household addresses in their community. These updates help the U.S. Census Bureau ensure that the correct population and housing counts are assigned to the right tribal geography, which is a critical step to ensure that the Tribal Nation receives the resources and funding they deserve.

For more information, email research@ncai.org.

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Endnotes

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