

# More than the Top Ten

## A Resource for Questions about the American Community Survey

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Resources for accessing data in real time  
<http://www.ca.uky.edu/snarl>

For some time now we have been hearing about the American Community Survey.

Because it is an important source of data for our counties and local communities, it is important to understand some of the basics.

This publication provides answers to basic questions about the American Community Survey and the questionnaire.

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The American Community Survey is only source for many of the detailed data on our counties and local communities. It is an ongoing survey conducted each month by the U.S. Census Bureau to collect data on social, economic, and housing characteristics of residents in the United States. It is the largest household survey conducted in the nation.

### Why do I need to know about the American Community Survey?

1. Residents in your county are receiving questionnaires from the ACS. So, it is important to know how to help them should they have questions about it.
2. Since the questions in the American Community Survey are no longer part of the Decennial Census questionnaire, this is the **only way** we will have these detailed data for our communities.

### Where did the American Community Survey come from?

The American Community Survey gives us estimates on the **characteristics** of the people who live in our counties and local communities.

The Census (e.g. 2010 Census) gives us the **official count** of how many people live in our counties and local communities.

Since 1940, every 10 years the Decennial Census was used to collect both the official population counts as well as detailed data on social, economic, housing and other characteristics for people living in the United States.

Because of issues like cost and the timeliness of data, in the 1990s the Census Bureau began developing the American Community Survey as an alternative. Since 2010, the switch-over was complete and today the American Community Survey is now the place to find detailed data for counties and local communities.

### Should I fill out the questionnaire?

Yes. The more people who fill out the questionnaire, the better the data will be for our counties and communities.

Also, responding to the ACS questionnaire is required by law (Section 221 of Title 13).

### Will anyone know my answers?

No. The information is collected for statistical purposes only and any information you provide is protected under federal law.

All Census Bureau employees take an ***oath for life*** to protect any identifiable information. This means that they are held to the oath even if they are no longer employed by the U.S. Census Bureau.

The penalty for disclosure is a fine of up to \$250,000, imprisonment for up to 5 years, or both.

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### Will my address be sold or given to a commercial mailing list?

No. By law, the Census Bureau is **prohibited** from selling or giving your address to anyone.

### What does the questionnaire look like?

If you would like to see what the questionnaire looks like, samples are available on the Census Bureau's American Community Survey website:

[http://www.census.gov/acs/www/about\\_the\\_survey/forms\\_and\\_instructions/](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/about_the_survey/forms_and_instructions/)

### Can I fill out the questionnaire online?

Yes. For most people, the questionnaire can be completed online. If your household was selected to participate, you will receive information in the mail about completing the ACS.

To fill out the ACS online, you will need information from the mailing label. The online system will generate a PIN number. Be sure and keep track of the PIN number because it cannot be changed or reset.

To learn more about responding online, go to:

[http://www.census.gov/acs/www/about\\_the\\_survey/respond\\_or\\_get\\_help/](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/about_the_survey/respond_or_get_help/)

If you forgot your PIN number, need to reset the questionnaire, or need other help, you can call:

**1-800-354-7271**

### Is it safe to fill out the questionnaire online?

Yes. According to the Census Bureau, they use a secure server and encrypt the data at all times. To know that you are using a secure server, the web address begins with "HTTPS."

### What kinds of questions are asked in the American Community Survey?

Many of the topics covered in the ACS are the same as those that were covered when the Decennial Census was used to collect these data.

Each question is asked for a specific reaction. To see the rationale for the questions, go to:

[http://www.census.gov/acs/www/about\\_the\\_survey/questions\\_and\\_why\\_we\\_ask/](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/about_the_survey/questions_and_why_we_ask/)

### What if I don't know the exact answer to a question?

Your best estimate is okay, but it is important to remember that the more accurate our answers are, the better the data for our counties and local communities will be.

### Will I have to fill out the ACS questionnaire every year?

No. Each year, questionnaires are sent to a sample of about 3.5 million households. These households are selected at random. This means that it could be some time before you receive another questionnaire.

### Why did I receive a second mailing?

When the Census Bureau does not receive a completed questionnaire, they will do a follow-up. This is because the quality and reliability of the data depends on having a high response rate.

If you have already completed your questionnaire, it could be that the two crossed in the mail.

### I completed the questionnaire but lost the envelope, what do I do?

If you lose the envelope for your questionnaire, you can still send it in. Just mail it to:

Director  
U.S. Census Bureau  
P.O. Box 5240  
Jeffersonville, IN 47199-5240

### Why would I receive a phone call or visit from someone about ACS?

There are two reasons why someone from the Census Bureau could contact you. One reason has to do with ensuring the highest response rate possible. In some cases when there is no response

to the ACS questionnaire, a field representative from the Census Bureau may call you on the phone or visit in person.

Another reason could be that they need some clarification on one of your responses.

### How do I know if this person is really from the Census Bureau?

To confirm that the someone is really from the U.S. Census Bureau, you can call our Regional Census Office. Kentucky is included in the "Philadelphia Region."

**1-800-262-4236, press 1**

Monday through Friday,  
7:30 am- 5:00 pm  
Eastern Daylight Time

More information can be found on the Philadelphia Regional Office website at:

<http://www.census.gov//regions/philadelphia/>

Here are some other tips on how to confirm that someone is from the Census Bureau:

- ID Badge which contains: photograph of field representative, Department of Commerce watermark, and expiration date
- Will provide you with:
  - Supervisor contact information and/or the regional office phone number for verification, if asked
  - A letter from the director of the Census Bureau on U.S. Census Bureau letterhead
- May be carrying a laptop and/or bag with a Census Bureau logo

### Where do I find data from the American Community Survey?

If you have used the web to find data from the Census Bureau, just as before, you can find ACS data at the American FactFinder website at:

<http://factfinder2.census.gov>

There are *important differences* that affect how the data look and how we use the data.

The Census Bureau's American Community Survey website has lots of resources. *Just click on the tab called "Guidance for Data Users."*

<http://www.census.gov/acs/www/>

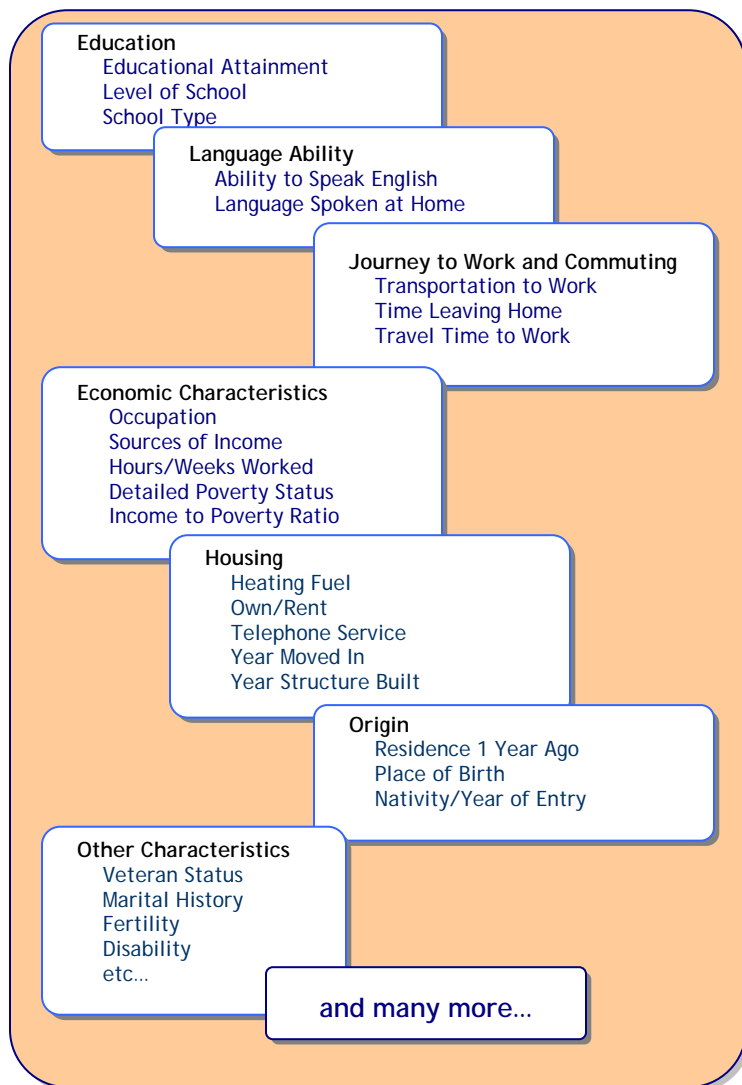
If this is your first time learning about data from the ACS, see *New Kid in Town: Understanding Data from the American Community Survey*.

You can find it on the Kentucky: By The Numbers website at: <http://www.ca.uky.edu/snar1/>

### What types of data are available?

If you have ever used detailed data from the 2000 Census, you will recognize many of the topics that are covered in the American Community Survey.

Here are some examples of the kinds of estimates that are available.



## Is the American Community Survey different from the Decennial Census?

Yes. The important thing to remember is that our **official counts** (as required by the U.S. Constitution) still come from the Decennial Census (ie. 2010 Census)

The American Community Survey, on the other hand, has detailed estimates on the social, economic, and housing **characteristics** of our population.

### Decennial Census (ie. 2000, 2010)

The Decennial Census is the **official count** of the number of people who live in the United States.

It is required by the U.S. Constitution and a census has been conducted every decade since 1790.

The Decennial Census is conducted once every **10 years**.

Data from the Decennial Census provided a snapshot only **once every 10 years**.

### American Community Survey

The American Community Survey provides a portrait of our population's **characteristics**.

Since 1940, detailed data were collected during the Decennial Census.

Now, they are collected through the American Community Survey.

The American Community Survey is an **ongoing** survey with data collected continuously and questionnaires are sent out **every month**.

Data are released in **1-, 3-, and 5-year estimates**.

Which estimates are available for your county depends on its population size

New estimates are released **each year**.

While the topics are similar, estimates from the American Community Survey are different from data that come from the 2000 or 2010 Census.

To learn about which ACS data that **can** and **cannot** be compared go to:

[http://www.census.gov/acs/www/guidance\\_for\\_data\\_users/comparing\\_data/](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/guidance_for_data_users/comparing_data/)

For an overview on comparing the two data sources, see: **Cautionary Tales: Comparing the American Community Survey with Data from the Decennial Census**.

You can find it on the Kentucky: By The Numbers website at: <http://www.ca.uky.edu/snarl/>

## I have more questions about the American Community Survey. Where do I go?

The Census Bureau has a website devoted to answering questions about the American Community Survey.

Click on "**About the Survey**" at:

<http://www.census.gov/acs/www>

If you, or someone you know needs help completing the American Community Survey questionnaire, you can call

**1-800-354-7271**

For help in Spanish:

**1-877-833-5625**

To see a list of Frequently Asked Questions go to:

[http://www.census.gov/acs/www/about\\_the\\_survey/faqs\\_how\\_to\\_respond/](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/about_the_survey/faqs_how_to_respond/)

You can also watch a tutorial online that will give you some basics about the American Community Survey:

[http://www.census.gov/acs/www/guidance\\_for\\_data\\_users/e\\_tutorial/](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/guidance_for_data_users/e_tutorial/)

Information on the American Community Survey used in this publication was obtained from the Census Bureau website: <http://www.census.gov/acs/www/>

This publication is an updated and revised version of "Top 10 Questions..." by Julie N. Zimmerman and Sarah Frank Bowker (March 2011)

**Kentucky: By the Numbers** is a program of the Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service in the Department of Community and Leadership Development at the University of Kentucky. Primarily known for the data series by the same name, the program also provides publications and other resources for those interested in finding data on their county. Data and resources are available on the Kentucky: By the Numbers section of the SNARL (<http://www.ca.uky.edu/snarl>) website. For more information contact your local Cooperative Extension office or Julie N. Zimmerman, Department of Community and Leadership Development, 500 Garrigus Building, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY 40546-0215. Email: [jjimm@email.uky.edu](mailto:jjimm@email.uky.edu).