



# The Census Project

## THE AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY (ACS): Addressing Congress' Key Concerns

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- The U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) is the nation's *only* source of comparable (across geography), consistent (across time), timely (updated annually), high-quality demographic and socio-economic for all communities in the country, down to the neighborhood and census tract levels.
- The ACS is part of the constitutionally required decennial census (Article I, sec. 2, clause 3), replacing the census "long form" in 2005. Response to the census is required by law (13 U.S.C. §214) to encourage participation and maintain high response rates. The accuracy and availability of the data for *all* communities in the U.S. depends on it.
- Congress allocates more than \$415 billion annually in federal assistance to states and localities (representing more than 2/3 of all federal grant funding) based on ACS data. *There is no other source for these data!* A majority of states also use ACS data to set tax and spending limits.
- Revelations about NSA collection of phone and email data, and recent credit card breaches at major U.S. retailers, understandably have given Americans pause about the security of their personal information. Fortunately, the Census Bureau operates under the strongest confidentiality provisions on the books. The bureau cannot share any personal information about you, your family, or your home with *anyone* — not other government agencies or officials (federal, state, or local), including for law enforcement and national security purposes; not under court order; not with businesses. The Census Bureau has never violated the provisions of its governing law. And the census and ACS do not even ask for social security numbers.
- Canada converted its census long form to a voluntary survey in 2011. The results were disastrous. Response rates dropped from 94 percent to 68 percent. Statistics Canada could not produce reliable socio-economic estimates for 25 percent of the nation's territories (small communities and rural areas). Experts believe the data on income is not reliable at all. Essentially, Canada spent more money to achieve a worse outcome.
- A congressionally ordered 2003 test of voluntary ACS response showed that mail response rates would plummet (by at least 20 percent) and survey costs would increase dramatically (\$80 million a year, or 30 percent more). Data reliability, especially for small communities and less populous areas, also dropped. *The Census Bureau 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 American Indian reservations, if response to the ACS were voluntary.*
- A mandatory ACS actually *reduces* the burden of essential data collection on the public. That's because the Census Bureau would have to send the survey to *more* Americans to maintain a representative sample in the face of falling mail-back rates and to produce valid data.
- The Census Bureau takes seriously congressional concerns about the response burden on the public. The bureau is conducting a top-to-bottom review of ACS content and field procedures, to ensure that only questions required to implement federal laws and regulations are asked in the survey and that survey takers contact reluctant households by telephone or in person a few times. Members of Congress can share any concerns about ACS questions with the Census Bureau during this process. And the bureau will submit the proposed ACS content to Congress by April 1, 2017, as required by law.

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