



# THE CENSUS PROJECT

Supporting quality measures of  
America's economy and places

**For Immediate Release**      March 8, 2022

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## **New Report Raises Alarm That Essential Data for the Nation Is At Risk**

### **Census Experts Call for New Investments to Save the American Community Survey**

**Washington, D.C.** – A six-month long study into the uses of the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS) by a large coalition of national, state, and local census experts has raised the alarm about the future of data essential to America’s economy and democracy. The Census Project commissioned [the report](#) upon the news that the Bureau could only release experimental data from its ACS 1-year survey and had to delay the 5-year ACS products at precisely the moment the country was most in need of trusted information to respond to multiple challenges that included a once-in-a-century pandemic; a severe economic downturn; and rapidly rising inflation.

The first extensive assessment of all the uses and value of the ACS, the report found that on top of data quality issues at just the wrong moment in history, the impact of delays in data will be pervasive, especially given the importance of the ACS to businesses, state and local governments, federal funding decisions, and more.

The three major findings of the report are:

- The ACS provides critical social, economic, housing, and demographic data about our nation every year, for communities large and small.
- All census-guided federal spending depends on the ACS in some way, shape, or form. For example, in 2017, 316 federal spending programs distributed more than \$1.5 trillion to states and local areas on the basis, in whole or in part of data derived from the ACS.
- The operational challenges threatening the ACS have been persistent and worsening year by year, and a national initiative is urgently needed to ensure the ACS can deliver high quality, accurate data reflecting the nation's increasingly complex population.

The report found, "...{t}he ACS is the most comprehensive, robust, and current source of information about America's changing population, housing, and workforce. If roads, bridges, railways, and ports form the heart of America's physical infrastructure, then the ACS is the backbone of the country's data infrastructure..."

"The coronavirus pandemic disrupted America's data infrastructure—including the ACS—and reminded us that our access to high-quality data for decision-making is not guaranteed..." as the report called for a national effort to save the ACS from further decline.

"The ACS is so vital to every community in the country for planning of government services and economic development alike. No other data source provides such critical information for every community in our nation, every year," said report author Linda Jacobsen of the Population Reference Bureau.

"ACS data are embedded in every formula and method federal agencies use to fairly apportion more than \$1.5 trillion a year to state and local communities. Without good data, those decisions will become less fair year by year," said report co-author and George Washington University professor Andrew Reamer.

Census Project co-director Howard Fienberg stressed that, "...this is a critical moment for the country if we are to preserve high-quality data to fuel our economy. We will only be able to compete in a global economy with trusted, quality ACS data."

Mark Mather of the Population Reference Bureau and a report co-author said, "...I've worked on ACS issues for 15 years, and even I was impressed with what we learned about how essential ACS data have become, whether from the fair administration of our laws, to responding to weather disasters and other emergencies, to the investments that entrepreneurs make."

Census Project co-director Mary Jo Hoeksema pledged that today's release was only the beginning of raising the alarm for Congress and the nation to address the crisis facing the ACS, "...we are going to make the case throughout this year that a small national investment to save the ACS will pay huge dividends for every community and the nation."

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*The Census Project (<https://thecensusproject.org>) is a broad-based coalition of national, state, and local organizations and companies that support an inclusive and accurate 2020 Census and American Community Survey (ACS) (the modern version of the census "long form"). Its 900+ member organizations and companies, representing the private, public, non-profit, and academic sectors, rely on objective data that the Census Bureau produces to inform evidence-based investment, policy, and planning decisions.*