
FACT SHEET: THE AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY AND CIVIL RIGHTS

What is the American Community Survey?

The once-every-10-years census is required by the U.S. Constitution and plays a central role in the functioning of our government and the well-being of American communities. At the urging of Congress, the American Community Survey (ACS) replaced the old census “long form” in 2005 to help streamline the decennial census and provide more timely information for policymakers.

The ACS collects more comprehensive socio-economic data than the census short form that every household is required to complete. It is an ongoing survey that is sent to a rolling sample of 295,000 addresses per month to produce updated, comprehensive demographic, social, and economic data between decennial censuses.

Because it is part of the constitutionally mandated census, participation is required by law. There is no other source for the reliable, nationwide, community-level data gathered through the ACS.

Why is the American Community Survey a civil rights issue?

A fair and accurate census and comprehensive American Community Survey must be considered among the most significant civil rights issues facing the country today.

Efforts to promote equality of representation and economic opportunity are guided significantly by objective, inclusive data on America’s diverse communities and populations.

Federal agencies rely on census and ACS data to monitor discrimination and implement civil rights laws that protect voting rights, equal employment opportunity, fair housing access, and more. For example, implementation of the Voting Rights Act relies on ACS data to make determinations under Section 203, which requires jurisdictions with a large population of people who are not yet proficient in English to offer language assistance during the electoral process.

Census and ACS data determine federal funding for health care, education, housing, food and income security, rural access to broadband, and other vital services. Community leaders looking to the future use ACS data to determine where to locate new schools, recreational areas, hospitals, transportation, and police and fire departments. Business and industry decide where to locate new plants and services, creating jobs and promoting economic growth. Both the government and business sectors rely on ACS data to help ensure appropriate employment opportunities for racial minorities, people with disabilities, and veterans.

In recent years, however, this essential source of data – which promotes effective deployment of government and private sector resources, and supports enforcement of the nation’s civil rights laws – is threatened by insufficient funding and efforts to make participation optional.

The Leadership Conference Education Fund builds public will for federal policies that promote and protect the civil and human rights of all persons in the United States. The Education Fund’s campaigns empower and mobilize advocates around the country to push for progressive change in the United States. For more information on The Education Fund, visit <http://leadershipconferenceeducationfund.org/>.

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How is the ACS threatened?

Insufficient Funding

At a time when the Census Bureau should be receiving a steady and significant ramp-up in annual funding, Congress instead undermined planning and preparation for the 2020 Census by providing substantially less funding than the bureau requested for 2017. (Congress also approved the funding seven months late.) To make matters worse, the Trump administration's fiscal year 2018 budget would provide only a 2 percent increase over 2017 – an irresponsible and woefully inadequate request. (For comparison, during the ramp-up to the 2010 Census during the administration of George W. Bush, Census Bureau funding rose 61 percent between 2007 and 2008.) Such a severe shortfall, which has already led to the cancellation of crucial tests, not only invites disaster for the 2020 Census but also threatens to undermine the Census Bureau's ability to carry out a high-quality ACS. In fact, the Trump administration proposed a budget reduction for the ACS in FY 2018.

Ill-Advised Legislation

In recent years, Rep. Ted Poe, R. Texas, has introduced legislation that would make responding to the American Community Survey voluntary rather than mandatory. This is an ill-advised proposal that would undermine a unique source of reliable data that guides far-reaching public and private-sector decision-making. It would particularly jeopardize the accuracy of data for hard-to-count communities, including people of color, low-income families, young children, and English-language learners.

This is not a new or untested proposal. After Congress in 2003 directed the Census Bureau to explore making the ACS voluntary, the Bureau concluded that response rates would drop dramatically by both mail and phone. To maintain a big enough sample to produce accurate and usable data, the Census Bureau would have to invest more time and money and involve more American households in the process. Even if it had those resources to spend, which it does not, the Census Bureau would be unlikely to produce usable data for as many as 40 percent of U.S. counties, as well as for small cities, towns, neighborhoods, and American Indian reservations.

There's a real-world example from just to our north. When Canada experimented with a voluntary census long form, it was an expensive disaster. Response rates plummeted, requiring Statistics Canada to spend more money to reach out to more households. Even spending an additional \$22 million did not give them enough quality data to produce reliable socio-economic estimates for one-quarter of all "places" in Canada – mostly small communities and rural areas. After the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, Canadian Federation of Independent Business, and municipal governments all decried the loss of data they used to guide their decision making, the experiment was abandoned.

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The American Community Survey is an integral part of the constitutionally mandated Census, and provides an irreplaceable source of data that is essential to the enforcement of civil rights protections and the well-being of American communities.

The ACS must be adequately funded and protected from irresponsible efforts to undermine its purpose and effectiveness.

Additional resource: “Why We Need the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey,” The Census Project, March 2016 <https://censusproject.files.wordpress.com/2015/12/acs-whyweneedthesurvey-factsheet-march2016.pdf>.

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