1. HOW CONGRESS USES ACS DATA

While the main function of the decennial census is to provide counts of people for the purpose of apportionment and redistricting, the primary purpose of the American Community Survey (ACS) is to measure the changing social and economic characteristics of the U.S. population—our education, housing, jobs, and more.

ACS content is designed to meet the needs of federal government agencies, and every question on the ACS is asked for a statutory or programmatic purpose. For example, questions about how people get to work, what time their trip to work usually begins, and the length of their commutes are used for planning improvements to roads, highways, rail lines, and bus routes, and for planning emergency response routes. More information about the subjects included in the ACS is available in the section on "Understanding the ACS: The Basics" in the U.S. Census Bureau's handbook *Understanding and Using American Community Survey Data: What All Data Users Need to Know*.[2]

Using ACS Data to Allocate Funds and Monitor Compliance With Federal Laws

Many laws require the use of ACS or decennial census data as the basis for establishing program or grant eligibility and for allocating federal program funds. For example, ACS data on veteran status and period of military service are used to allocate funds to states and local areas for employment and job training programs for veterans. Income data from the ACS are used to determine poverty status, measure economic well-being, and assess the need for assistance. Many federal programs, including Low-Income Home Energy Assistance, Community Development Block Grant, National School Lunch Program, Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), Head Start, and Americorps use ACS income data to allocate formula grants (see Box 1.1). The Census Bureau estimates that 132 programs used census data, including data from the ACS, to distribute more than $675 billion in funds during fiscal year 2015.[3]

ACS data are also used to monitor compliance with federal laws. For example:

- ACS data on age, housing, employment, and education are used to help the government and communities enforce laws, regulations, and policies against discrimination based on age such as the Age Discrimination in Employment Act.

- Data on age, sex, race/ethnicity, labor force status, and work status are used to monitor compliance with the Civil Rights Act.

- ACS data on housing characteristics, such as units in a structure, kitchen and plumbing facilities, rent, tenure, and selected monthly owner costs, are used to implement and assess compliance with the National Affordable Housing Act.

Many of the questions on the ACS were previously included on the 2000 Census and prior census long-form questionnaires. However, in the years since the ACS achieved full implementation in 2005, questions have been added, revised, or removed from the survey. For example, questions about household computer ownership and Internet access were added to the ACS in 2013 as a requirement of the Broadband Data Improvement Act of 2008.

In 2014, the Census Bureau conducted a comprehensive assessment of the ACS program, including a review of each ACS question. This ACS content review sought to determine which federal programs use the information collected in response to each question and assess how the Census Bureau might reduce respondent burden.[4] A summary of federal agencies' uses of

Box 1.1. Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP)

Enacted as part of the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981, the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) is a mandatory block grant program to the states. The mission of LIHEAP is to help low-income households pay their home energy bills.

Congress established the law's block grant distribution formula based on each state's climate and low-income population. The income question on the ACS is essential to determining the low-income population in each state. Implementation of the LIHEAP program also relies on data from other ACS questions, including age, sex, Hispanic origin, relationship, disability status, units in structure, and occupants per room. LIHEAP program administrators also use data from the ACS question on selected monthly owner costs to analyze current residential energy supply and consumption and to forecast future energy needs.

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[2] U.S. Census Bureau, *Understanding and Using American Community Survey Data: What All Data Users Need to Know*, <www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/guidance/handbooks/general.html>

[3] U.S. Census Bureau Library, *Uses of Census Bureau Data in Federal Funds Distribution*, 2017, <www.census.gov/library/working-papers/2017/decennial/census-data-federal-funds.html>.

[4] U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS), *Content Review*, 2014, <www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/operations-and-administration/2014-content-review.html>.

ACS data from each question is included in the Census Bureau's ACS Handbook of Questions and Current Federal Uses.[5] The Census Bureau has also developed a series of interactive Web pages that explain why each question is asked on the ACS. Each page shows the question as it appears on the form and allows users to explore some of the most popular statistics that come from the question at the local level. The pages also explain the origin of each question, privacy concerns, and how the statistics are used to help communities.[6]

How Members of Congress and Staff Use ACS Data

The ACS provides a wealth of timely social, economic, housing, and demographic data for all congressional districts and states that can be used in drafting legislation, press releases, statements, and constituent correspondence; conducting legislative research; and developing grant formulas for proposed programs.

The Census Bureau releases annual ACS data for each of the 435 congressional districts. Members and staff can use these data to produce current snapshots of the characteristics of their districts.

> TIP: Members of Congress can also compare ACS estimates with those of previous years to look at trends over time. However, congressional district data from the 2012 ACS and later years reflect the new boundaries that were drawn after the 2010 Census, while ACS data for earlier years reflect the 2000 Census boundaries. Given the major changes to district boundaries after each census, a comparison of congressional district data between 2011 and 2012 and later years is not advisable.[7] Data users should also use caution when working with ACS estimates for districts that have been subject to intercensal redistricting.

Following are some examples of how congressional staff can use ACS data to carry out their responsibilities.

Cosponsoring Legislation

The breadth of ACS data can support research for a wide variety of potential bills. For example, if a senator wants to draft a housing assistance bill that targets people who are spending 30 percent or more of their income on housing expenses, the ACS provides estimates of the number and characteristics of homeowners and renters who spend 30 percent or more of their income on housing and utilities. Congress can use these data to allocate funds to state and local governments through a formula grant.

Drafting a Floor Statement

Members of Congress sometimes need to make floor statements on very short notice. For example, a member who wants to make a speech about the economy might ask his or her staff to quickly determine the proportion of families in the district living below the poverty level and how that figure compares with the national poverty rate. These data are readily available in published ACS tables.

Responding to a Constituent Inquiry

Constituents occasionally send letters or call their member's office to ask why they were selected to participate in the ACS. Members and their staffs need to understand how addresses are selected, how personal information is protected, what questions are asked in the questionnaire, and how Congress uses the responses to write legislation and assist constituents. The Census Bureau provides answers to these and other common constituent questions in a two-page flyer available for download from the ACS Web site.[8] Specific answers as to why each question is asked are also provided in a series of interactive Web pages.[9]

Some respondents are reluctant to answer the ACS because of concerns about the confidentiality of the data. However, the final published statistics do not reveal names, addresses, or any other information that would identify any individual respondent, and strict confidentiality laws protect all ACS information that could be used to identify individuals or households, under the authority of Title 13 of the U.S. Code.[10] This is true even for interagency communication: other government agencies do not have the legal right to access individuals' confidential information.

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[5] U.S. Census Bureau, *American Community Survey Handbook of Questions and Current Federal Uses*, 2014, <www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/operations-and-administration/2014-content-review/federal-uses.html>.

[6] U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, *Questions on the Form and Why We Ask*, <www.census.gov/acs/www/about/why-we-ask-each-question/>.

[7] Note: 2011 Data Profiles for congressional districts are available through the Census Bureau's file transfer protocol server, <https://www2.census.gov/acs2011_1yr/CD113/>.

[8] U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS), ACS Resources for Congress Flyer, <www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/library/outreach-materials/flyers/acs-constituent-answers.html>.

[9] U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, *Questions on the Form and Why We Ask*, <www.census.gov/acs/www/about/why-we-ask-each-question/>.

[10] U.S. Census Bureau, Data Protection and Privacy Program, Title 13 - Protection of Confidential Information, <www.census.gov/about/policies/privacy/data_stewardship/title_13_-_protection_of_confidential_information.html>.

Analyzing Legislative Proposals

Members receive a wide variety of legislative proposals that require detailed evaluation. The ACS provides a broad range of social, economic, housing, and demographic data that can help staff conduct these assessments. For example, if an advocacy group sends a proposal to reform the Social Security system, ACS data on labor force participation and disability could be used to evaluate how many people would be affected by this proposal.