

Using American Community Survey Data Products to Meet Your Needs

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Short Abstract

The American Community Survey (ACS) provides the nation with a timely, accurate, and detailed look at how America is changing. To help the data user arrive at this information, the Census Bureau produces various data products that show characteristics of the country's population and housing. The 2005 ACS data release includes ten different data products. While some products are similar to those produced for the 2000 decennial census, others are new to the ACS. The data products available are user friendly, but also sophisticated – often times comparing and showing statistical significance between geographical areas. With so many tabular and graphical displays, how is a data user to determine which data product will meet their needs? This paper describes and gives examples of the various 2005 ACS data products. The detailed descriptions highlight information on each product so that the data user can determine which product best fits their individual needs.

Long Abstract

The American Community Survey (ACS) provides the nation with a timely, accurate, and detailed look at how America is changing. To help the data user arrive at this information, the Census Bureau produces various data products that show characteristics of the country's population and housing. The 2005 ACS data release includes ten different data products. While some products are similar to those produced for the 2000 decennial census, others are new to the ACS. The data products available are user friendly, but also sophisticated – often times comparing and showing statistical significance between geographical areas. With so many tabular and graphical displays, how is a data user to determine which data product will meet their needs? This paper describes and gives examples of the various 2005 ACS data products. The detailed descriptions highlight information on each product so that the data user can determine which product best fits their individual needs.

A high-level description of each product is provided below. Examples of each product will be illustrated in the full paper.

Base Tables: Base Tables show basic distributions of population and housing characteristics. These tables provide the most detailed data and are the basis for other ACS products. Base Tables include tables iterated for race and Hispanic origin universes and tables that show imputation (allocation) rates for selected variables. The Census Bureau will release approximately 1,200 Base Tables for the 2005 ACS.

Base table topics are varied, encompassing demographic, social, economic, and housing characteristics. For example, you can retrieve tables for such characteristics as sex by age by race and Hispanic origin; means of transportation to work by travel time to work; median number of rooms in housing units; school enrollment by level of school; and poverty status in the past 12 months by sex and age.

Data Profiles: Data Profiles are tables that provide estimates of selected summary characteristics for each geographic area. They rely on the data tabulated in the Base Tables. The Census Bureau produces Data Profiles for four distinct sets of characteristics: demographic, social, economic, and housing.

Narrative Profiles: Narrative Profiles include Data Profile information displayed in a narrative format that summarizes data on a wide array of subjects. Narrative Profiles are plain-language descriptions with simple graphs to complement the standard Data Profiles.

Subject Tables: Subject Tables show more detail than is available in the Data Profiles. Generally, they present percent distributions for a few key universes, estimates of each universe total, and the associated margins of error. There are approximately 50 summarized topic-specific Subject Tables, which include such topics as housing financial characteristics, relationships by households and families, and means of transportation to work by selected characteristics.

Selected Population Profiles: Selected Population Profiles provide the user with ready-made data tabulations on a specific population or housing group of interest. There are two types of Selected Population Profiles. The first type provides characteristics of race, ethnic, and ancestry groups such as Native Hawaiians and Other Pacific Islanders. The second type provides characteristics for groupings that are based on age or other characteristics such as children under 18, and the population age 60 years and older. A Selected Population Profile can be created when the population group of interest is 65,000 or more and the geographic area of interest has a population of 1 million or greater. In 2005, we expect to produce most Selected Population Profiles at the national and state levels.

Geographic Ranking Tables and Charts: Geographic Ranking Tables compare population characteristics across the Nation and all states, including the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. The Geographic Ranking Tables are currently available for over 80 characteristics at the state level. The table describes a single characteristic, and the geographic areas are “ranked” from highest to lowest. Additionally, data users can view the statistical significance of comparisons among areas. The Geographic Ranking Tables can also be viewed as charts, where characteristics are displayed from highest to lowest.

Thematic Maps: Thematic Maps are based on the state-level Geographic Ranking Tables, but have the added advantage of visually displaying on a map the geographic variation and patterns of a key summary or derived measure. The shading intensity on a Thematic Map is directly related to the value associated with the derived measure listed in the map’s legend. Lighter shading is used for the lower derived measure values. As the shading becomes darker and more intense, the derived measure’s values increase. Similar to the Geographic Ranking Tables, data users can view the statistical significance of comparisons among areas.

Geographic Comparison Tables: Geographic Comparison Tables complement Geographic Ranking Tables by showing characteristics for various geographic areas. Data users can utilize Geographic Comparison Tables to compare geographic levels beyond the state level. For example, users can compare Congressional Districts, Places, PUMAs, Urban/Rural areas, and areas inside versus outside metropolitan and micropolitan statistical areas.

Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS): Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) files are data files that contain records of a sample of all housing units that the survey interviewed. PUMS files are available as comma-delimited files and as SAS datasets and are available for downloading from the main AFF website. Simply select a data type, data format, and state, and you will have access to public-use 2005 ACS data.

Analytic Reports: Analytic Reports contain detailed analyses of ACS data. The Census Bureau issued the most recent Analytic Report, “Income, Earnings, and Poverty From the 2004 American Community Survey,” in August 2005. This report is available through the following Census Bureau site: <http://www.census.gov/prod/2005pubs/acs-01.pdf>.