

CPS Data and ACS Data Frequently Asked Questions

What are the primary differences between the CPS ASEC and ACS?

Both surveys are conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau and collect data on a variety of topics, including income, health insurance coverage, and demographic and social characteristics. The CPS ASEC is the official source of national poverty estimates and is the preferred data source for national income and poverty statistics. The CPS ASEC is collected annually.

The ACS is the preferred data source for states and other subnational areas. The ACS provides data not only at the national and state levels, but also for smaller geographies such as counties, cities, small towns, and rural areas. The ACS collects data continuously throughout the year. The ACS is the largest household survey in the U.S. and offers a comprehensive look at how people live in communities across the country.

What types of data are collected by these surveys?

The ASEC collects data on more than 50 sources of income during the previous calendar year. The ACS collects limited labor data, detailed demographics, housing (homeownership, rent, structure), detailed income and poverty data, and granular education data. It also tracks where people move.

What geographic levels does the ACS cover?

The ACS provides data for all communities down to the neighborhood (census tract) level. Available geographies include the nation, states, counties, cities, metropolitan areas, American Indian and Alaska Native areas, congressional districts, state legislative districts, and school districts.

How is ACS data used?

ACS data is relied upon for a wide range of uses by governments, nonprofits, researchers, journalists, and businesses. The survey's detailed information on demographics, housing, education, income, and other key indicators helps inform policy decisions, allocate resources, and understand community needs. ACS data guides trillions of dollars in federal funding for education, health care, housing, transportation, and other vital services. ACS data helps state and local governments direct services and resources effectively and in emergency response planning.

How can media use ACS data?

Reporters can use ACS data to drill down to state, county, city, or neighborhood levels to show how a national trend (like rising rents, income inequality, or insurance coverage) is

impacting your coverage area. The detailed demographic data can be used to expose inequities in income, education, housing, or internet access. Data can support investigations with hard numbers or provide additional evidence to support anecdotes and quotes.

For assistance interpreting ACS data, please contact soleary@wvpolicy.org for support.

For assistance interpreting CPS data, please contact our partner, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities at communications@cbpp.org.