

American Community Survey – The “New” Census

ACS is now the source of Census Bureau socio-economic data.

The ACS replaces what was commonly referred to as the long form or the sample portion of the decennial census. With this release detailed social, economic, demographic, and housing data will be available for the entire country, from state-level down to the census block group-level. The current year 5-year-estimates release is based on data collected from the previous 5 years. ACS Estimates are not Census data which are used primarily for apportionment and redistricting.

Survey data provided and used the same as before.

The name and collection method of the sample data have changed, the American Community Survey and five years of samples, but what data will be provided and how the data will be used has essentially stayed the same. The survey will help determine how more than \$400 billion in federal and state funds are distributed each year nationally. Tables for poverty, income, education, and dozens of other characteristics will still be available. The ACS 5-year estimates will be made available in multiple data products. They will include detailed tables, data profiles, narrative profiles, subject tables, and geographic comparison tables. The ACS 5-year estimates will be released annually.¹

Care should be taken when comparing surveys.

As mentioned, the data collection methodology has changed between the 2000 Census and the ACS. Estimates from the two surveys are not always comparable. Even within the ACS, care should be taken when comparing data. One should avoid comparing data from the 1-year or 3-year survey with the 5-year survey. When comparing within the same survey, the Census Bureau discourages comparison of overlapping time periods. For example, if data from the 2005-2009 ACS is used the next survey that should be used for a time comparison would be the 2010-2014 ACS.

The precision of the data has changed.

Another consideration that comes with the change in data collection methodology is the precision of the data. The 5-year survey has the largest sample size and hence the most reliable of the ACS estimates. Even so, the estimates are not as precise as the 2000 Census. The precision is expressed as a margin of error in ACS publications and will be provided with the data. While not shown with the earlier long form data, margin of error existed since it was sample data. The margin of error for the ACS 5-Year Estimates is generally 1.75 times larger than the 2000 Census sample data. A couple of examples are provided to graphically represent the change. Depending on the use of the data, this increased margin of error may be important. If possible it may be beneficial to use multiple variables of a similar nature to refine or cross check any analysis.

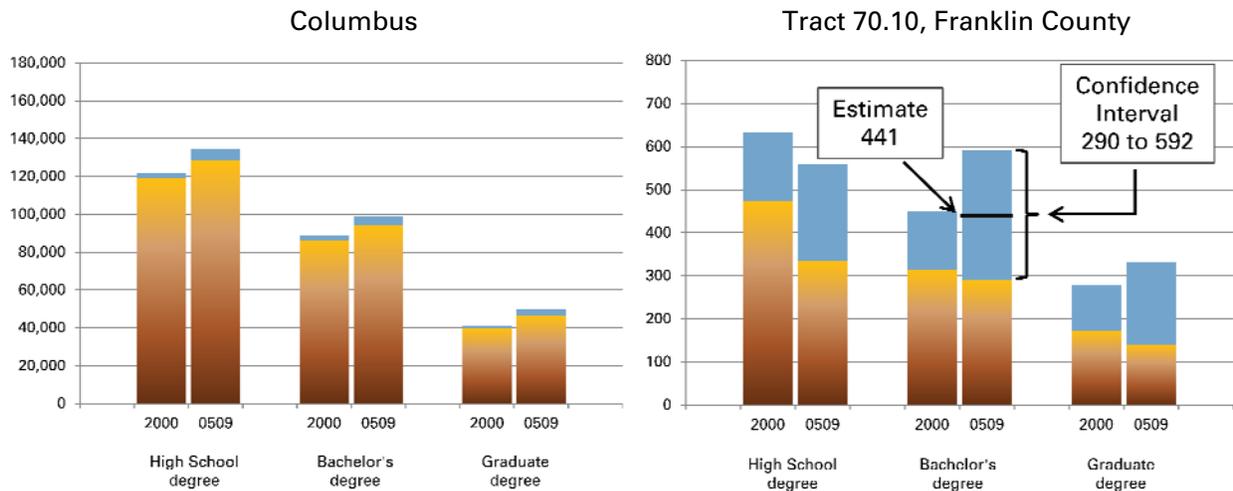
¹ A 1-Year Estimate and 3-Year Estimate is also available annually. The 1-Year Estimate is available for geographic entities with a population of 65,000 or more. The 3-Year Estimate is available for geographic entities with a population of 20,000 or more.

Median Household Income

	Estimate	Margin of Error	Lower to Upper Bound
Columbus			
2000 Estimate	\$37,897	+/- \$183	\$37,714 to \$38,080
2005-2009 5-year Estimate	\$43,569	+/- \$444	\$43,125 to \$44,013
Tract 70.10, Franklin County			
2000 Estimate	\$38,393	+/- \$2,987	\$35,406 to \$41,380
2005-2009 5-year Estimate	\$46,979	+/- \$17,429	\$29,550 to \$64,408

The Lower to Upper Bound refers to the 90 percent confidence interval.

Educational Attainment



The blue portion of the columns represents the 90 percent confidence interval.

U.S. Census Bureau resources help to explain the changes.

There are other issues that may need consideration depending on the users undertaking; geographic boundary changes, dollar valued data, and residency. The U.S. Census Bureau has produced several online handbooks geared to specific users of ACS data. The publications discuss margin of error, data comparability, and proper usage of the data as well as provide case studies. There are publications designed for government, business, researchers, media and others users. These publications can be found at http://www.census.gov/acs/www/guidance_for_data_users/handbooks.