

What You Need to Know Now About U.S. Census Data –

Much of the data used on the Global Atlanta Works website, in Global Atlanta Snapshots, and cited in many other Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) publications and reports are based on U. S. Census Bureau datasets, including the annual American Community Survey (ACS) and Decennial Censuses. Understanding Census data is fundamental for data users with varying levels of expertise trying to effectively sort through the rich array of information, products and programs accessed from the Census website at www.census.gov.

For starters, users must have a basic understanding of the difference between decennial census data and the annual ACS data. The decennial 2010 Census shows the ‘number’ of people who live in the U.S. and the ACS shows ‘how’ people live. In other words, use 2010 Census data to obtain official ‘counts’ of the population and their basic characteristics (sex, age, race, Hispanic origin and homeowner status). Use the ACS to obtain demographic, social, economic and housing characteristics.

With the implementation of the annual ACS program, some users may find the data more difficult to understand and to compare. Did you know that you could have four or more population totals from the Census Bureau - Census 2010, 1-Year 2010 ACS, 3-Year 2008-2010 ACS, 5-Year 2006-2010 ACS? To understand which ACS dataset to use, follow the link to “[Understanding and Using ACS Single-Year and Multiyear Estimates](#)”. The Bureau also releases annually between decennial censuses official estimates of population and housing units. Yet, ‘official’ does not necessarily translate into reliable (see Margins of Error below).

The bottom line is that the Census Bureau is still the best resource for data about the general population. We are highlighting several occurrences in Census data to make those of you who are interested in researching, analyzing, and reporting Census data more fully aware of these special cases.

Margins of Error

Included in ACS data tables are always Margin of Errors computations – the results of sampling problems associated with the smaller survey sample size. Go to the Census Bureau website to learn more about ACS Margins of Error. Statistical analysts can [link to a tool developed by the State Data Center \(SDC\) and Business Industry Data Center \(BIDC\) for calculating ACS Margins of Error and Statistical Significance](#).

Comparing ACS Data

When comparing 3-year ACS to 3-year estimates (e.g. 2008-2010 with 2005-2007), there are three main issues to consider:

1. Change in Geographic Boundaries
2. Change in Population Controls
3. Change in the Questionnaire or Coding

For illustrative purposes, a selection of topics with major questionnaire or coding changes is shown in the table below.

Complexity of Comparing American Community Survey (ACS) Data

Topic	2010 ACS with Census 2000	2010 ACS 1-Year with 2009 ACS 1-Year	2010 ACS with Census 2010
Hispanic or Latino Origin	Compare with Caution	Compare with Caution	Compare
Race	Compare with Caution	Compare with Caution	Compare
Foreign Born; Citizenship; Year of Entry; Nativity	Compare	Compare with Caution	The question was not asked in the 2010 Census
Place of Birth	Compare	Compare with Caution	The question was not asked in the 2010 Census
Language Spoken at Home and Ability to Speak English	Compare	Compare with Caution	The question was not asked in the 2010 Census
Poverty Status of Families, People in Families, and of All People in the Poverty Universe	Compare with Caution	Compare with Caution	The question was not asked in the 2010 Census
Disability (hearing/vision, cognitive/ambulatory/self-care, independent living difficulty)	Do Not Compare	Compare with Caution	The question was not asked in the 2010 Census

- [Read more details about comparing ACS data with other data, access comparison chart, or use the table comparison tool](#)
- [Download the Census Bureau's Handbooks for Data Users](#)
- [Access the Census Bureau How-To Webinar on the New American FactFinder data delivery tool](#) . Be sure to listen to Q&A that follows.