

THE AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY

A New Approach to the National Census

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THE ANSWER IS IN THE NUMBERS

Census numbers describe who we are, what our communities look like, and how changes occur over time. These same numbers play important roles in our daily lives. For instance, figures for local population and income affect the location choices of large industries, the marketing strategies of small businesses, the distribution of federal funding to our communities, and countless other decisions made by individuals, governments, and companies.

Until now, these numbers were collected by the U.S. Census Bureau every 10 years through a house-to-house survey. Two types of questionnaires were used:

1. **The short form** was administered to the majority of American households and counted only the population and housing units.
2. **The long form** covered the remainder of the nation's households, specifically, a 1-in-6 sample. It collected the same population and housing unit information included on the short form, plus it gathered very detailed data, such as education attainment, nationality, marital status, income, employment, housing value, and dozens of other measures.

Because the census was decennial, the data were often considered out-of-date just a couple of years after publication. To provide this type of information in a timelier manner and allow users to see changes as they take place each year, the Census Bureau has developed a new way to collect their numbers.

A NEW SURVEY

The American Community Survey (ACS) is a nationwide survey conducted each year as part of the decennial census program. The ACS has three main goals:

1. Replace the long form in future censuses, returning the 10-year survey to its original purpose of counting only the population.
2. Provide federal, state, and local government agencies with current information to better evaluate programs.
3. Provide all users with up-to-date demographic, housing, social, and economic data each year.

The development of the ACS began in 1996 with four test sites. In 1999, coverage expanded to 31 places, one of which was Sevier County, Tennessee. ACS data obtained from 1999 to 2001 was compared to the 2000 Census long form to correct differences between the two surveys and fine-tune the ACS methodology.

In 2005, full implementation of the ACS went into effect: the Census Bureau now mails questionnaires to 250,000 different households every month for a total sample of three million recipients per year. Random households in every county nationwide are selected from the Census Bureau's records of housing unit addresses. A household has about one chance in 40 of being selected in any month, and no address can be selected more than once every five years.

The ACS currently provides annual estimates for all states, metropolitan areas, counties, cities, and population groups of 250,000 or more (Table 1). This year, annual data reporting extends to areas with population between 65,000 and 250,000. Places with population between 20,000 and 65,000 will have annual reports by 2008, with numbers based on previous three-year averages (2005 to 2007). Census tracts (small, relatively permanent statistical subdivisions of a county, averaging about 4,000 inhabitants) and block groups (the smallest geographic level for which ACS data will be produced, containing between 600 and 3,000 people) are scheduled for annual release in 2010 and will be derived from five-year averages (2005 to 2009). All ACS data collected for the current year will be released in August of the following year.

The information release timeline is summarized for local places:

- ACS reports for Knox County have been available since 2003 (release of 2002 data) because the countywide population is greater than 250,000.
- The City of Knoxville's total population is in the neighborhood of 175,000: smaller than the 250,000 threshold, but larger than 65,000. As a result, citywide ACS data were first collected in 2005 and will be released August, 2006.
- Demographics for local census tracts and block groups will be released in 2010. Town of Farragut numbers will also appear in 2010, since its current population is about 18,000, too small to qualify for the 2008 release.

Table 1. AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY DATA RELEASE SCHEDULE

Type of Data	Population Size of Area	Data for the Previous Year Released in the Summer of:							
		2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010+
Annual Estimates	≥ 250,000								
Annual Estimates	≥ 65,000								
3-year Averages	≥ 20,000								
5-year Averages	Census Tract & Block Group*								

 Data reflects American Community Survey testing through 2004

Census tracts are small, relatively permanent statistical subdivisions of a county averaging about 4,000 inhabitants. Census block groups generally contain between 600 and 3,000 people. The smallest geographic level for which data will be produced is the block group; the Census Bureau will not publish estimates for small numbers of people or areas if there is a probability that an individual can be identified.


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey *A Handbook for State and Local Officials*, December 2004.

YEARLY PROFILES

The information obtained by the American Community Survey comprises a yearly profile, divided into four categories:

1) Demographic, 2) Social, 3) Economic, and 4) Housing.

To illustrate, information for Knox County is presented:



DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

- Knox County's population grew 4% from 2001 to 2004.
- Population 65 years and older increased 2% since 2001 and comprised 12% of the overall population in 2004.
- Black or African Americans represented 9% of the countywide population.
- In 2004, 48% of county households were married-couple families.

**Table 2:
KNOX COUNTY DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS
2001-2004**

Year	2001	2002	2003	2004
Total Population	372,708	376,584	380,498	387,471
Male	180,019	182,312	187,580	190,705
Female	192,689	194,272	192,918	196,766
65 Years & Over	46,741	46,526	46,978	47,575
White	329,631	330,575	335,628	342,137
Black or African American	29,801	32,258	35,767	34,298
Some Other Race	1,130	2,181	1,830	702
Total Households	164,274	161,124	163,638	161,853
Married-couple Families	72,845	82,505	71,462	78,312

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2001-2004.



SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS

- About 31% of persons 25 years and over held a bachelor's degree or higher in 2004.
- The number of persons with a bachelor's degree or higher increased 6.7% between 2001 & 2004.
- The veteran population decreased 13% since 2001.
- Native-born residents increased 3%, while foreign-born numbers grew 55% over the past four years.

**Table 3:
KNOX COUNTY SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS
2001-2004**

Year	2001	2002	2003	2004
25 Years & Over	250,583	254,975	259,609	270,065
Bachelor's Degree or Greater	78,970	78,183	82,032	84,240
18 Years & Over	286,032	289,442	294,602	302,100
Civilian Veterans	37,040	31,113	29,127	32,213
Total Population	372,708	376,584	380,498	387,471
Native Born	362,453	359,190	369,617	371,555
Foreign Born	10,255	17,394	10,881	15,916

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2001-2004.



ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS

- Knox County's total labor force expanded 5% from 2001 to 2004.
- 84% of employed Knox County residents drove alone to work in 2001; 87% in 2004.
- Median household income grew 22% from 2001 to \$41,922 in 2004.
- Per capita income increased 19% to \$25,369 in 2004.

**Table 4:
KNOX COUNTY ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS
2001-2004**

Year	2001	2002	2003	2004
Total Labor Force (16 Years & Over)	296,352	298,279	304,151	311,397
In Labor Force	195,716	191,419	199,460	208,670
Employed	186,381	181,290	190,253	196,216
Commute to Work (16 Years & Over)	182,038	176,907	186,065	189,948
Car, Truck, or Van - Drove Alone	152,515	148,803	165,309	166,014
Median Household Income	\$34,424	\$39,775	\$37,334	\$41,922
Per Capita Income	\$21,348	\$21,091	\$24,557	\$25,369

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2001-2004.



HOUSING CHARACTERISTICS

- Total housing unit supply was up 5% over the past four years.
- In 2001, 94% of housing units were occupied; by 2004, the share dropped to 88%.
- Median housing value rose 23% from 2001 to 2004.
- The number of households with two or more vehicles grew 8% since 2001.

**Table 5:
KNOX COUNTY HOUSING CHARACTERISTICS
2001-2004**

Year	2001	2001	2003	2004
Total Housing Units	174,898	177,358	179,945	183,033
Occupied Housing Units	164,274	161,124	163,638	161,853
Renter-occupied	59,275	48,724	60,209	50,305
Median Housing Value	96,436	119,393	115,045	119,013
Occupied Housing Units	164,274	161,124	163,638	161,853
Two or More Vehicles Available	91,858	104,075	93,526	99,364

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2001-2004.

WHAT IF I RECEIVE A QUESTIONNAIRE IN THE MAIL?

Although the odds are nearly 40-to-1 that your household will receive a monthly American Community Survey, the following FAQs (and answers) will be helpful:

1. What kinds of questions are asked?

The ACS collects information regarding income, housing, military service, age, race, language, employment, automobile ownership, and many other details about people and their families.

2. Do I have to answer all the questions?

Yes. Your answers are required by law (Title 13, U.S. Code), and they are held completely confidential.

3. What happens if I do not complete the questionnaire and mail it back?

If the Census Bureau does not receive a completed questionnaire within two or three weeks, a reminder card is mailed, followed by another questionnaire. Addresses that do not respond within six weeks of the original mailing will be contacted by telephone or personal visit.

4. How do I know that the information I give will not be misused?

The Census Bureau protects the confidentiality of your information. Federal law imposes substantial fines and possible imprisonment for any Bureau employee who divulges your personal data.

5. How do I benefit by answering this survey?

The ACS can identify changes in an area's population and give an up-to-date statistical picture when users need it, every year, not just once in ten years. Some examples:

Local government service agencies use population counts to determine funding allocations, evaluate programs, and assess community development needs.

Community organizations, such as those serving seniors, libraries, churches, hospitals, and other groups, rely on figures for population by age, race, homeownership, and income, among other indicators, to measure service needs.

Transportation planners use Census data to identify travel patterns and traffic flows in order to reduce congestion, plan for parking, develop carpooling programs, evaluate needs for new roads, and expand transit systems.

Utility companies look at changes in population counts to identify shifting settlement patterns and new growth areas so they can predict future service demands.

The American Community Survey provides current information about families, the homes in which they live, the work they go to each day, and numerous other measures that characterize the nation's cities and towns. By offering this type of information every year, rather than once a decade, as in the past, an important data source has become that much more valuable to public and private organizations alike.

Complete ACS profiles for Knox County and the Knoxville Metropolitan Statistical Area are available for downloading or printing from MPC's website at www.knoxmpc.org.