

The American Community Survey

January 16, 2024

Overview

The U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS) is intended to measure the changing social, economic, demographic, and housing characteristics of the U.S. population. The ACS is sent to a sample of addresses across the 50 states and the District of Columbia on a rolling basis, with approximately 3.5 million addresses sampled annually. The Census Bureau also operates the [Puerto Rico Community Survey](#), which covers the same topics as the ACS, with relevant [adjustments](#).

ACS data are used to produce one-year and five-year population estimates. Five-year estimates increase the reliability of statistics for less-populated areas and small population subgroups. One-year estimates are intended to provide more frequent data but are [not available for smaller populations](#) because the sample sizes are too small to produce reliable statistics. Similar to the decennial census, respondents are [required by law](#) to complete the ACS.

Prior to the [2005 inauguration of the ACS](#), a subset of households responding to the decennial census would be provided a “long-form” survey, which asked additional demographic characteristics questions outside of the standard “short-form” survey. The Census Bureau [found](#) that a decennial collection of detailed population characteristics did not reflect the rapid demographic changes in the United States. As a result, the agency removed the long-form survey to implement a more frequent ACS intended to reduce operational risks, improve accuracy, and provide more relevant data.

ACS data are used by [multiple stakeholders](#)—including businesses, local governments, the federal government, and private users—for economic development, government decisionmaking, and research purposes.

Survey Content Development

[Content development](#) for the ACS relies on coordination between the U.S. Census Bureau and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) through an [interagency committee](#) that comprises over 30 federal agencies. Before a new question can be added to the ACS, the Census Bureau conducts content testing.

[Content tests](#) for the ACS begin with a proposed new or changed survey question, and the overall process lasts five years (see [Table 1](#)).

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Table I. Process for ACS Content Changes

Year	Step
1	Merit of proposed question determined by Census Bureau and OMB. Wording options are tested. Different versions of the question are tested through cognitive interviews.
2	Question testing continues. Question performance is evaluated during field testing.
3	Field testing continues.
4	Field testing continues. Census Bureau solicits public comments.
5	Public comment period continues. OMB determines final approval.

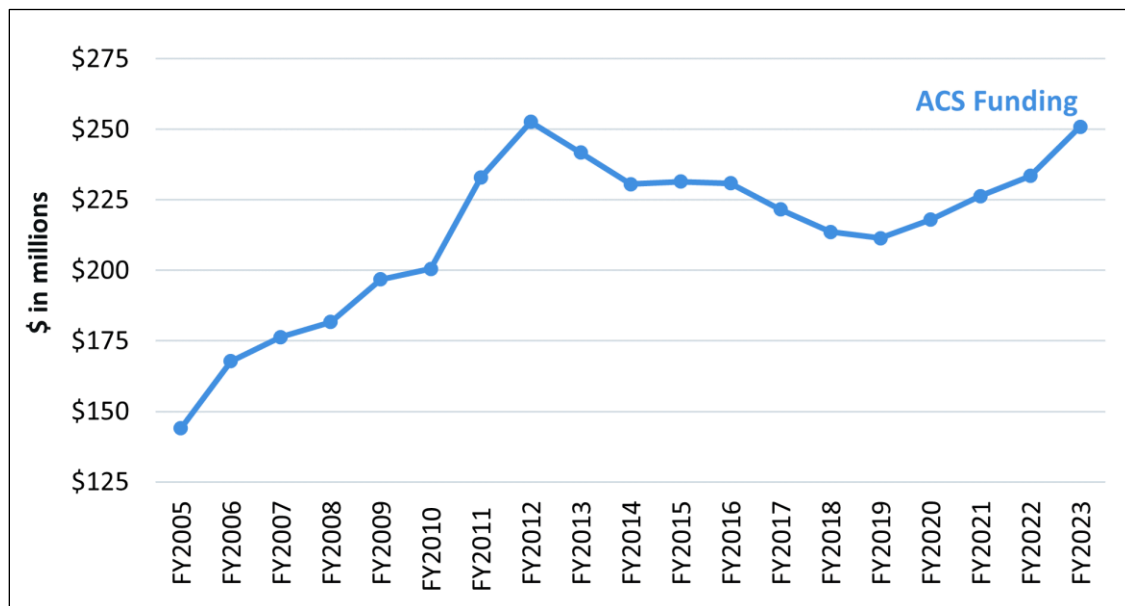
Source: “How a Question Becomes Part of the American Community Survey,” U.S. Census Bureau.

Funding

Funding for the ACS is provided under the Census Bureau’s “Periodic Censuses and Programs” account and is considered a [part of the decennial census program](#). **Figure 1** shows funding for the ACS from FY2005 through FY2023.

Figure 1. Funding for the American Community Survey for FY2005 through FY2023

Figure is interactive in the HTML version of this Insight.

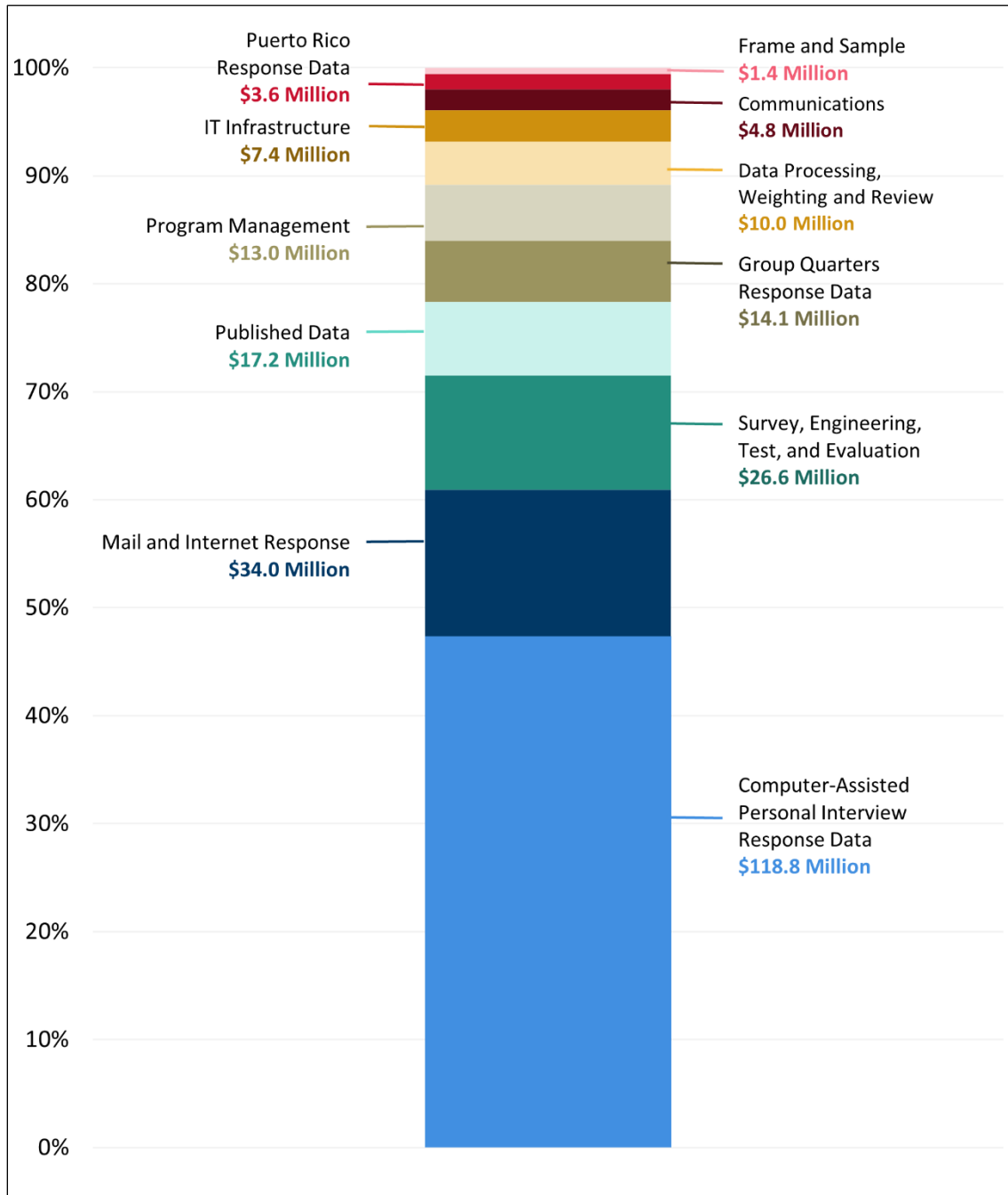


Source: U.S. Census Bureau budget documents.

Figure 2 shows a breakdown of the ACS funding for FY2023. The largest line item, “[computer-assisted personal interview response data](#),” reflects the cost of field representatives contacting households that have not responded to the ACS by mail, internet, or telephone.

Figure 2. FY2023 American Community Survey Detailed Budget (\$250.9 Million Total)

Figure is interactive in the HTML version of this Insight.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, *U.S. Census Bureau's Budget Fiscal Year 2024*.

Note: Figures are rounded.

Data Use

Various stakeholders use ACS data for a variety of purposes.

Many [federal agencies utilize ACS data](#) to administer programs, establish program or grant eligibility, allocate funds, and monitor compliance with federal laws. For example, veteran status and military service data collected from the ACS are used to allocate funds intended to support veteran job training and employment programs. Other federal programs rely on ACS income data to allocate formula grants. ACS [special tabulations](#) of the [Citizen Voting Age Population](#) by race and ethnicity have been published since 2011 at the request of the Department of Justice for use in [Voting Rights Act](#) compliance.

[Local governments use ACS data](#) as a guide for planning projects or programs to prioritize by evaluating community needs and identifying subgroups that may most benefit from project or program implementation. In turn, ACS data also help local governments evaluate existing projects or programs by allowing them to see any changes experienced by subgroups following implementation of a given project or program.

[Businesses can use ACS data](#) as a resource when selecting locations to operate and evaluating existing locations. ACS data can help businesses understand the locations of working-age populations, labor force status, means of transportation, income, occupation, and education attainment levels. Additionally, the Census Bureau maintains [State Data Centers](#) that can provide support for businesses in accessing ACS and other data. The Census Bureau also offers the [Census Business Builder](#), a product designed to provide data for users looking to start or grow a business.

The Census Bureau additionally releases annual ACS data on the 435 congressional districts through the “[My Congressional District](#)” tool. Members of Congress and their staff can use these data to understand their districts’ current and historical population characteristics. [Members can use ACS data](#) for other congressional matters as well. Congressional clients can access a short webinar on how to obtain a wide range of statistics on states and congressional districts from the Census Bureau’s online data platform.

Potential Considerations for Congress

A number of issues related to the ACS may be of interest to Congress, including

- the use of ACS data to inform federal funding and program administration decisions;
 - funding levels and priorities for the ACS;
 - the role of congressional oversight related to ACS content development and other ACS issues;
 - the advantages and disadvantages of the mandatory nature of ACS responses;
 - the effectiveness of current [disclosure avoidance](#) methods in protecting respondent confidentiality; and
 - the use of administrative records to reduce respondent burden.
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Author Information

Taylor R. Knoedl
Analyst in American National Government

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