

**NWX-US DEPT OF COMMERCE**  
**U.S. Census Bureau**

**July 29, 2021**  
**2:00 pm ET**

Coordinator: ...for standing by. All lines have been placed in a listen-only mode for today's presentation. The call is being recorded. If you have any objections, you may disconnect at this time. I will now introduce your conference host, Mr. Michael Cook. Sir, you may begin.

Michael Cook: Good afternoon. I'm Michael Cook, Chief of the Public Information Office of the US Census Bureau. I'd like to thank everyone for joining us today to conduct this Webinar about the pandemic's impact on the 2020 American Community Survey. As you may know, the American Community Survey is an important source of information providing key demographic, social, economic and housing data about the US population.

Our presenter today, Donna Daily - she is the Chief of the American Community Survey Office. She will walk us through how COVID-19 impacted data collection for the ACS and what that means for the upcoming 2020 ACS data products.

At the end of today's presentation we'll go to the phone lines to take questions from the media. And to help us answer those questions we'll be joined by a number of our colleagues who are subject matter experts on a range of ACS topics.

If you're a member of the media and you'd like to ask a question, you need to dial in to our phone line at 1-888-566-5775 and use the passcode that you see on your screen.

If you don't plan to ask a question, you can just listen in - today's presentation through the WebEx plan - platform. One more note before we get started. The resources for today's Webinar will be posted to a press kit on census.gov.

You can find the press kit by simply clicking on the Information For option at the top of our homepage. Then click on Media Newsroom. The press kits are listed on the left side of the page.

We'll also be dropping a direct link to the press kit in the WebEx chat feature - to be sure to look out for that. Without further delay I'd like to turn it over to Donna Daily. Donna?

Donna Daily: Thanks Michael. We're here today to announce changes to the 2020 American Community Survey data release plan. The Census Bureau is committed to providing high-quality data, and because of the impact from the COVID-19 pandemic on ACS data collection and data quality, we are not releasing our standard one-year ACS data products as planned.

Instead, we will be releasing a set of experimental estimates from the one-year data. In this Webinar we're going to walk through the basics of the ACS, look

at the data collection challenges caused by the pandemic and the impact on data quality.

Then we'll explain our plan for the 2020 ACS data products and then open up the lines for questions. The ACS samples approximately 3.5 million addresses each year.

These data are collected continuously throughout the year to produce annual social, economic, housing and demographic estimates. The data collected through ACS are used to inform the distribution of more than \$675 billion dollars of federal government spending each year.

Our estimates, covering more than 40 topics, support more than 300 known federal uses and countless non-federal uses. The Census Bureau typically releases three different sets of ACS data estimates each year in the form of one-year and five-year period estimates as data sets as well as one-year supplemental estimates.

We know people rely on ACS estimates to make decisions and plans for their communities, so it's critical the estimates truly represent their communities. Due to circumstances beyond our control, the pandemic significantly limited our ability to reach people and limited their ability to participate in the ACS in 2020.

Based on our analysis of the data the 2020 ACS data we collected did not meet our quality standards for producing our standard one-year estimates. I will discuss the challenges we faced and the operational considerations we had to address in more detail in upcoming slides.

Before I discuss the ACS data collection operations and how the pandemic impacted them, it's important to understand how the ACS fits into the decennial census program and how it is different from the census.

ACS estimates are based on a sample of the population, whereas the census is based on the official count of the population. The ACS collects detailed social, economic, housing and demographic characteristics, whereas the census collects basic demographics such as age, sex, race, Hispanic origin, household relationships and housing tenure.

The ACS produces population and housing characteristics, whereas the census produces population and housing totals. The ACS occurs annually, collecting data every month and reflecting a period of time over which the data are collected, averaging data for 12 months or 60 months, whereas the census occurs every ten years and reflects a point in time.

Census Day is April 1. The typical ACS data collection strategy includes multiple modes including Internet, mail, telephone and personal visits. For most housing units the first phase includes a mail request to respond online followed later by an option to complete a paper questionnaire and return it by mail, and if no response is received by either mail or Internet or if the household refuses to participate, the address may be selected for personal visit during our non-response follow-up phase of the data collection.

The ACS includes 12 monthly independent samples. Data collection for each sample spans three months with mail and Internet returns accepted during this entire period.

The process operates in continuously overlapping cycles so that during any given month we have data collection activities occurring for three separate monthly panels.

Respondents are always able to call the telephone questionnaire assistance line at any point during the three-month data collection cycle if they have questions about the survey or if they prefer to complete the survey over the phone.

Now I'd like to shift to how we had to modify our mail and in-person operations due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While households could still self-respond online or by mail amid stay-at-home orders, such restrictions limited our ability to mail questionnaires and invitations to participate.

The need to protect our staff and the people who respond and to comply with national, state and health - local health guidelines meant we had to temporarily stop many of our operations.

We rely on our national processing center in Indiana to print, assemble and mail out survey invitations, capture data from completed forms and provide telephone support for people who respond.

Much of this work cannot be done virtually so local stay-at-home orders and the need for social distancing created substantial disruptions in the operations at NPC.

We suspended mail operations in mid-March and ultimately canceled the mail outs for the April, May and June panels of 2020. We were able to resume mailing survey materials using a revised strategy in July of 2020.

We began sending two out of the five mailing packages. We prioritized sending the questionnaire packages to areas with low response or low Internet connectivity.

We ensured that paper questionnaires were sent to some addresses in all areas. In October 2020 we were able to increase that to three mailing packages so we were sending out an invitation or an introduction.

We were sending out a questionnaire and a reminder. At this time, all non-responding house - housing units received a questionnaire - a paper questionnaire. We continued with this methodology until returning to our standard five mailing strategy in April of 2021.

For the Internet, the Internet option was always available. However, due to the lack of mailings most of our sample addresses didn't know they were in the ACS until the computer-assisted personal interviewing operation which, of course, is a subsample of the full monthly panel - of monthly samples. Sorry.

We suspended in-person interviewing for housing units and group quarters from mid-March through June of 2020, and I'll discuss this more on the next slide. For housing units, we attempt to - we attempt in-person interviews for a sample of the addresses that don't respond.

And as I mentioned, we suspended in-person interviewing in mid-March through June of 2020 due to the stay-at-home orders and to ensure the safety of our staff and the respondents.

We temporarily increased the non-response follow-up workload due to the suspension of mailout, but we were only able to conduct telephone interviews from April through June of 2020.

Our field representatives called these addresses when they had a phone number available to collect the information. The regional offices mailed a new letter called a “Please Call Me” letter to the entire CAPI (Computer-Assisted Personal Interviews) workload.

To encourage respondents to contact the center's field representative, these letters included critical information for the respondent to log in to our Internet data collection instrument to complete the survey.

Personal visits resumed for some areas in July and for all areas without stay-at-home orders in September of 2020. The pandemic - for group quarters the pandemic significantly impacted how we collect information from people living in group quarters such as nursing homes, college dorms and prisons.

We suspended interviewing from mid-March to June due to the restrictions accessing these GQ facilities, and given the access issues that we did encounter we are using administrative records from the Bureau of Prisons for that part of the GQ sample.

It is important to address the operational considerations with the challenges to data collection. The ACS is a sample survey and relies on data from a relatively small number of people to represent the larger population.

As an ongoing survey the ACS is designed to collect data from a new sample each month, and the ACS could not postpone the non-response follow-up until after the pandemic months had passed.

When an in - when in-person interviewing could be conducted they - due to the lack of invitations and reminders to respond and the reduced number of

paper questionnaires, this led to a lower overall response rate and a less representative sample.

For the ACS, a survey that collects and combines 12 months of data, there is no extending data collection particularly for non-response follow-up once that month has passed.

Ultimately, the pandemic severely impacted data for half the month of the - for the one-year estimates. Unlike the ACS the 2020 Census was able to postpone their non-response follow-up to a time when they could carry out the full operation.

This proved effective for the census and the 2020 Census was able to limit the effects of the pandemic on data quality in ways the ACS could not. This meant the 2020 Census was able to maintain higher quality throughout their data collection operations.

The 2020 Census was able to account for over 99.9% of addresses nationwide, and review of the 2020 Census data reveal reasonable, usable data. Ultimately, the data collection challenges we faced during the pandemic impacted the ACS data quality.

The ACS uses a multi-mode data collection strategy with multiple mailings to get responses from all segments of the population. Due to the limitations in our data collection and our inability to fully utilize all three data collection modes during the pandemic, we were unable to collect information from certain segments of the population.



The people who did respond to the survey had significantly different social, economic and housing characteristics from those who didn't, resulting in significant non-response bias in the data.

For example, people who did not respond to the ACS had lower income, lower education and were likely to - were less likely to own their home. All surveys have some non-response bias because those that do not respond tend to be different than those who do respond.

Non-response bias is a natural part of sample surveys and often statisticians can adjust for non-response bias by more - by giving more weights to responses from underrepresented groups.

However, our standard non-response adjustment methods for the ACS one-year estimate do not fully address the differences in a way that meets Census Bureau quality standards.

Response rates for March through September of 2020 -- this is half the month that would make up the 2021 year estimates -- were severely impacted by the pandemic.

For the 2020 ACS data collection, we had the lowest response rate in the history of the survey at 71%. This is down from 86% in 2019 and 92% in 2018.

This rate is an average across the entire year. Response rates during the peak pandemic months were significantly lower and response rates varied across different areas of the country.

The Census Bureau is committed to releasing quality data. The Census Bureau has long-established statistical data quality standards designed to ensure the utility, objectivity and integrity of the statistical information that we provide to Congress, to federal policymakers, to sponsors and to the public.

We follow and adhere to these published statistical data quality standards, and for the first time our 2020 ACS one-year data products do not meet these standards.

In reviewing the preliminary data, they were often inconsistent with benchmarks or administrative data or changed in unexpected magnitude. This is a reflection of those who responded and how they were different in meaningful ways from those who did not respond.

Once we finish our analysis, we will share more specific information about how we're seeing - what we're seeing in the data and related quality metrics in an analytical report that we plan to release in October.

Instead of providing the standard one-year data products, we will release a series of experimental estimates from the one-year data. To create these estimates, we will apply an alternative set of weight to the 2020 ACS one-year data in an attempt to further adjust for non-response bias.

We plan to release the experimental estimates as a limited number of data tables for limited geographies in November of 2021. These data tables may be similar to the one-year supplemental estimates table - tables.

In December 2021 we plan to release a 2020 ACS one-year public use microdata file, a PUM file, containing experimental weights. Because of the

underlying quality concerns, we urge caution in using the experimental estimates.

The experimental weights are only able to adjust for some of the non-response bias. A research paper detailing the methodology for the experimental weights will also be released.

Because of this change, the 2020 ACS one-year health insurance data will not be included in the 2020 current population survey health insurance reports. As I mentioned before, we know people rely on ACS estimates to make decisions and plan for their communities.

It's critical the estimates truly represent their community and standard 2020 ACS one-year data products would not be able to do that. As the nation's premier statistical agency it is imperative that we set and meet high-quality standards.

While this was a difficult decision for us, it demonstrates our strong commitment to produce high-quality data. So about the five-year estimate, we're still evaluating the quality of the 2016 to 2020 ACS five-year estimates against our statistical quality standards and tentatively plan to release them in December.

We will appropriately address quality issues if needed. The five-year estimates cover a longer period of time than the one-year estimates, so they may not be as impacted by the issues with non-response bias.

The six months in 2020 that were most affected by non-response bias make up 1/10 or 6 out of 60 months of the five-year estimates. So these are the experimental data products in the targeted release months.

In addition to today's Webinar, we are also releasing a news release to announce changes to the 2020 one-year data release, the analytical report with more specific information about what we're seeing in the data and related quality metrics is planned to be released in October, the working paper detailing the methodology for the experimental weights as well as the one-year experimental estimates are planned to be released in November.

And finally, the ACS one-year - well, the one-year public - the PUM file with experimental weights is planned to be released in December, and here are the five-year data products and the targeted release months.

The 2016, 20 - through 2020 five-year estimates are tentatively planned to be released in December. The five-year variance replicate estimates are planned to be released in January of 2022.

This product is for advanced users who want to calculate margins of error when collapsing data within a table or across geographies. And finally, the five-year PUM file is planned to be released in February of 2022.

This product allows users to create custom estimates or tables for a limited set of geographies. So we created a number of resources to prepare you for this change, and they will be posted on the ACS Web site this afternoon.

The first one is a revised release schedule and it will include the complete schedule with our new planned release dates. The ACS resource hub flyer provides information about the ACS and resources available.

It's going to be attached to the news release and is also available on the ACS Web site at the URL at the bottom of the screen. And the 2020 ACS one-year

estimates What You Need to Know flyer provides information to help you navigate various options, answer questions and direct you to more information.

So I just want to be clear that we're here to, you know, navigate this with you and to consult with anyone who needs our help so I just wanted to share that. And before we begin Q&A, I want to acknowledge that people may be curious to see some of the estimates from our preliminary review of the 2020 ACS one-year estimates.

Unfortunately, we cannot release any of those estimates at this time, but as I mentioned earlier we are working on an analytical report scheduled for release in October that will contain ACS quality metrics and examples of estimates that are not consistent with external benchmarks.

I would like to now turn it over to PIO who will be leading the question and answer. Michael?

Michael Cook: Thanks Donna. We'd like to start taking questions now from the media. As a reminder, you must call the phone number displayed at the - on the slide on your screen.

You cannot ask a question if you don't dial in to your phone line. Before asking your question please state your name and news organization. We want to fit in as many questions as possible, so please only one question with a follow-up allowed. Operator, I'll now hand it over for additional instructions.

Coordinator: We will now begin our formal question and answer session. If you would like to ask your question by phone, please press star 1 on your telephone keypad, record your first and last name and your media affiliation. To withdraw your

question you may press star 2. The first question is coming from Tami Luhby of CNN. Your line is open.

Tami Luhby: Thank you...

Michael Cook: Hi Tami.

Tami Luhby: ...very much for - hi. Thank you very much for holding this call. So I cover income, poverty and health insurance. I saw that you mentioned that you will not be able to include the one-year ACS in the health insurance study, which is what most experts rely on now.

So I'm wondering what does this mean for the annual CPS poverty and income and health insurance numbers that you will release in - typically in September?

And then also because we do use the ACS numbers for state and local level poverty and income, which is usually released in late September, what - I guess my question is, is will we be - will we ever get this data or like what does this mean?

Michael Cook: Thanks for that question Tami. And as we try to be as transparent as possible and illustrate how to access, use and understand this change or this data set this year, we have with us in addition to Donna Daily a number of SMEs from around the building that are related that work closely with this data set.

So as they start to roll in and answer questions and virtually step to the mic, I'm going to ask them to introduce themselves, not just their name but also their titles so that those that are listening - those reporters can capture that information.

So with that, I'm going to turn this question over to David - Dave Waddington, who is the Chief of our Social, Economic and Housing Statistics division.

And for those of you who are looking at your screen, you can see the full list there of our subject matter experts that we have available for us today with their titles for your coverage. Dave?

David Waddington: Yes, great. So this is Dave Waddington again with the Social, Economic and Housing Statistics division. And so I'll speak - I guess there was two parts to your question.

And one was what will people use for other - what other sources of data will be available? As Donna said, we're going to be releasing the experimental estimates later this year.

But what we're doing is we're referring people to OMB who is working in contact with some of the other federal agencies and others about what other alternative datas (sic) are available for people to use for the - for their needs.

And we're certainly happy to talk with you about what data we have too and what might - and share what that is and the quality of those data. So the - regarding the current population survey and the release that's scheduled for September 14, we're proceeding with that release that we had.

Our current population survey collected the data in February through April of this year, and we're processing those data and preparing those reports so that release is still on.

It just won't contain any of the ACS data in the health insurance report as it has in the past.

Michael Cook: Thanks for that Dave. And also I'd like to - did you have a follow-up Tami?

Tami Luhby: No. I mean, I - well, just after what you were going to say I'll follow-up with my question.

Michael Cook: We've got just a reminder to contact us at [pio@census.gov](mailto:pio@census.gov). for any additional questions and assistance, but also take a look at the electronic press kit that we have up for today's Webinar.

It and has a lot of information in it that'll give you that background that you need. It may answer some of the questions that you might have about this announcement today.

Tami Luhby: Okay, so just a follow-up. And so the national figures will still be released on September 14 - the CPS figures for poverty, income and health insurance.

But there will be no release on state-level data and that we should - we're - you're talking to OMB about alternative data for state-level poverty, income and health insurance for 2020?

David Waddington: Yes. So we're encouraging, you know, other federal agencies to work within their guidelines and what restrictions they have. And they're - we don't know all the other requirements that people have and won't specify their specific data.



So we're encouraging people to work - and OMB is actually reaching out to many of the other federal agencies that use the ACS data to talk with them about alternative data.

Tami Luhby: Okay, thank you.

David Waddington: We don't have any, I mean, we've got the ACS data that we're putting out so thank you.

Michael Cook: Thanks for that. Operator, do we have our next caller and a question?

Coordinator: Yes. The next question is coming from Michael Macagnone of CQ Roll Call. Your line is open.

Michael Cook: Hey Mike.

Michael Macagnone: Hi. Hi Michael. Thank you for holding this Webinar. I wanted to ask now that you've drilled down on the ACS, I also wanted to ask about some of the other data sets that the Census Bureau produces that are based off of ACS data, particularly ones like the small area income and poverty estimates that are, you know, are updated annually and based on ACS data how are they going to be impacted by this?

Michael Cook: Thanks for that question. I'll turn that over to Dave looks like. Dave?

David Waddington: Yes, sure. So this is Dave Waddington again. I think, you know, so we're still evaluating exactly what we're going to do. One of the nice things about the model-based estimates that we do, the small area estimates program, is that they actually account for the uncertainty in the estimate.

So they weight the administrative records data as well as the survey data based on the variances and certainty that we have with the quality of those data. So I think we're still evaluating that.

I know we're still evaluating that and we're going to come to some conclusions on how - the best way is to go forward and what we use for those.

Michael Cook: Thank you. Operator, do we have our next caller?

Coordinator: At this time we have no further questions in queue. If you do have a question at this time please press star 1 on your telephone keypad. One moment for the next question.

Michael Cook: And again while we wait for our next question to queue up, another reminder, another advertisement if you will for our electronic press kit online. There you'll find a number of resources including information explaining what experimental data products are and information about the Census Bureau statistical quality standards. Operator, do we have our next question?

Coordinator: At this time we have no further questions in queue.

Michael Cook: And I'll give one last advertisement for the EPK and then double-check the lines before we close out today's Webinar. Just a reminder that we will be posting the slides from today's news release about today's announcement.

If the deck and the news release go live before the end of today's Webinar we'll drop those links in the chat. Since we're recording today's Webinar we'll be posting that to the press kit too and we hope to have that up early next week.

Also I'd like for you to - remind you that you can check out our recent blog about how we adapted the American Community Survey during the pandemic.

That's also linked in our online press kit. And operator, I'll give one last check, see if there's any more questions.

Coordinator: Once again if you do have a question please press star 1 on your telephone keypad. One moment for the next question.

Michael Cook: Thank you.

Coordinator: At this time we have no further questions in queue.

Michael Cook: Thank you then for your questions today and for joining today's Webinar. As a reminder, go to [census.gov](https://www.census.gov) to access our press kit for more information and research regarding changes for the 2020 ACS one-year estimates release.

If you have additional questions, please call our Public Information Office at 301-763-3030 or email us at [pio@census.gov](mailto:pio@census.gov). And I encourage you to sign up to our email updates so you can get timely updates on all that we do.

Again on behalf of our subject matter experts I'd like to thank you for joining us today and hope that you enjoy the rest of your day. This concludes today's Webinar. Thank you. Thanks everyone.

Coordinator: This will conclude today's conference. All parties may disconnect at this time.

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