

## American Community Survey

Every ten years the Census Bureau conducts the decennial census to provide information to Congress and policymakers about the country. This was done with two survey forms – the short form with seven or eight basic questions sent to every American housing unit and considered a 100 percent full count of the population, and the long form with many questions on everything from income to education sent to a sample of American housing units.

Beginning in 2010 the decennial census will ONLY be a full count census using the short form. In place of the long form is a new tool called the American Communities Survey (ACS), implemented in 2005. The ACS collects and produces population and housing information (long form information) every year, instead of every ten years. About three million housing unit addresses are sampled each year throughout the United States and Puerto Rico. This sample is smaller than the decennial census sample, however, so an accumulation of data over several years is needed for smaller geographic areas.

Starting in 2005, when the ACS was implemented, and continuing every year thereafter, ACS data was available for geographic areas with a population of 65,000 or more. These are called the “**1-year estimates**,” and they are based on a single year of sampling. Because these “1-year estimates” were only released for communities with populations of 65,000 or more, ACS 1-year estimates were available for Onondaga County as a whole and the City of Syracuse.

In 2008 the ACS released its first multi-year estimates based on ACS data collected from 2005 through 2007. These are called the “**3-year estimates**,” and are available for geographic areas with a population of 20,000 or more (larger towns in Onondaga County). By 2010, “**5-year estimates**” data will also be available for areas with a population under 20,000, that is, ACS data (long form data) will be available for all geographies, including census tracts.

The 3-year estimates that were recently released require slightly different thinking about the data. These 3-year estimates are called “period estimates,” so when discussing the child poverty data, for example, the best way to characterize this information would be along the following lines: “The child poverty rate for Onondaga County **over the period 2005 to 2007** was X percent.”

Comparing the 3-year estimates to other Census measures is possible, but with some caveats. Generally the following are good guidelines:

1. **If comparing across geographic areas (like between two towns or two counties), make sure you are comparing apples to apples.** Compare 1-year estimates to 1-year estimates, or 3-year estimates to 3-year estimates. DO NOT compare 1-year estimates with 3-year estimates across geographies.
2. **If comparing data for a single area (like just one town or one county to itself) over time, this can be done but it must be done with caution.** Comparing the 2000 Census for Herkimer County to the 2005 - 2007 period estimate for Herkimer County is acceptable, but keep in mind there can be problems with differences in residency rules, reference period differences, and question wording changes.
3. **If you are more interested in current data, 1-year estimates are the better source to use; if precision is more important, than use the 3-year estimates.** The three-year estimates represent a larger sample size over a longer period of time so they are more reliable, especially for smaller areas. When the 5-year estimates become available, they will be an even more reliable source.

A good source for what is and isn't comparable is when using the ACS data sets can be found at the Census Bureau website at: <http://www.census.gov/acs/www/UseData/compACS.htm>. The site url is case sensitive so be sure to use lower and upper case letters as in the address listed for the site.