

The American Community Survey & Alaska Natives

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Why is the Alaska Community Survey important for Alaska Native People?

To achieve our goal of “progress for the next 10,000 years,” Alaska Natives need to know where we have been, where we are now, and where we hope to go. Demographic, housing, social, and economic data all help us understand and tell the story by answering questions such as:

Are our kids graduating from high school? At what percentages are they dropping out?

How much money are we making? How many of us are above the poverty level?

What kinds of houses do we live in? Are our houses safe and adequate (plumbing, etc.)?

The answers to these questions and more can be found in the data collected through the American Community Survey (ACS). Consistent data that is both accurate and *appropriately reported* – such as by ANCSA region – can help Alaska Natives to:

- **Assess** where we are, and how much progress we have made.
- **Observe** current trends in our population.
- **Use** it for our benefit. For example, comparing data from one ANCSA region to another in order to identify what may be working in one region that might serve as a model for other regions.

Having this data also provides us with information that helps us with:

- **Grant application processes** by providing information about income and poverty levels.
- Creating and maintaining **beneficial programs** that may be based on data-identified needs. For example, preschool programs in areas that show poor academic achievement.
- Providing an adequate, data-derived basis for **decision-making and policy** that affects our people.

What is the ACS?

The 2000 Census marked the final year that the decennial census would use two surveys: the “short form” survey used to count the US population, and the “long form” survey, used to gather demographic information about the US population. The “short form” survey will continue to be conducted every ten years; the “long form” will be replaced by the ACS which will be conducted on a continuous basis (See Figure 1).

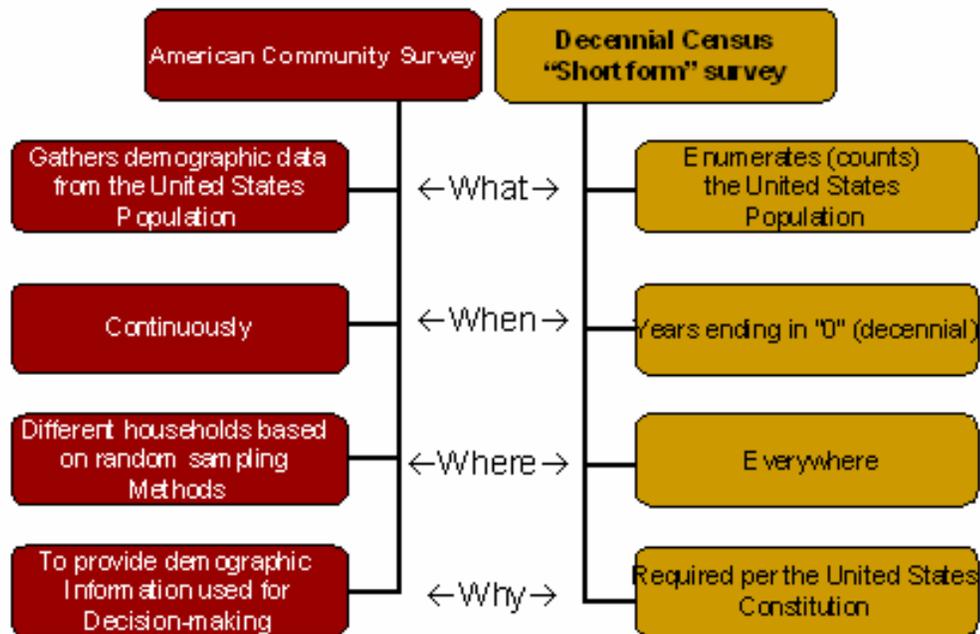


Figure 1: Differences Between ACS and Decennial Survey

The ACS was implemented for two reasons: timeliness and cost of gathering the data. The ACS was created to fill a need for data that was updated more frequently than every ten years. The ACS will allow locations with a population of over 65,000 people to have demographic data updated yearly. For smaller locations with populations fewer than 20,000 which account for most of the Alaska census areas the timeliness will be increased, but not as significantly. This is because, in these smaller communities, the sample size is very small, so the Census must average five years of collected data to ensure reliability of the data.

While the ACS is expected to have a minimum impact on most US communities, the potential impact in Alaska is a matter of concern. Because Alaska has a large number of remote communities, largely populated by Alaska Natives, it is in our best interest to ensure that the ACS is conducted properly and effectively. This may depend upon many of the small changes proposed by ACS:

- **Timing:** the ACS in rural Alaska is conducted in two periods: between September and December and between January and April. Alaska’s seasonal population, temporary increases in income due to the Permanent Fund Dividend, and shareholder dividends may influence the results of the survey.
- **Procedure:** the ACS in rural Alaska will be conducted in person. However, the possibility of cultural differences and values can play a larger role during the interview process within Alaska Native populations.

- **Technical issues:** The definitions used by the Census Bureau can impact the answers given. For example, definition of residency (where are you right now vs. where are you usually) and vacancy may result in inaccurate results in remote Alaska

When we think about how the changes brought about by ACS may affect our Alaska Native population, we need to also be aware of areas that will **not** be affected including: *per capita funding from the state and federal governments, state districting, congressional districting, and all other areas of funding or representation that may be linked to population numbers.* These areas of interest are instead linked to the decennial “short form” census and will not be affected by the demographic data gathered through the ACS.

Using ACS information can be tedious and challenging. It is important to remember that depending on the source and time of publication there will be inconsistencies within the ACS information. When using the ACS data it is important to keep in mind that it was only fully implemented in 2005. Therefore ACS is too new to gauge *actual* impacts; however, we need to remain cognizant of the *possible* impacts.

What do Alaska Natives need to know about the ACS?

The ACS is so newly implemented that it would be impossible to say with certainty what the implications of the ACS will be for the future. This is why it is necessary to become educated about the ACS methodology and data collection.

One aspect of the ACS that needs to be carefully monitored is proper funding. ***Funding and sample size are very closely connected*** in the sense that a decrease in funding will likely result in a decrease in sample size. This is particularly important in rural Alaska because a decrease in a small sample population, such as that of a remote village, will have a significant effect more so than a decrease in a larger sample population, such as that of Anchorage.

The ***method of data collection*** – interview-only surveys – ***in rural Alaska is unique.*** Interview-only surveys were developed to accurately count people in remote areas and identified concerns with the standard mail-out/mail-back procedure. Having an interview-only survey increases the response rate significantly and thus is a great benefit for remote Alaskan areas. Possible implications may arise for remote areas that are “unidentified” and located *within* year round collection areas (See Figure 2). These “unidentified” remote areas will be subject to the standard mail-out/mail-back procedure and thus will not have the benefit of interview-only survey processes. In addition, these “unidentified” remote areas will have data collected year round, while identified remote areas (See Figure 2) will only have data collected in the designated periods (September-December; January-April). The inconsistency in data collection times presents a challenge when comparing data across similar communities.

American Community Survey

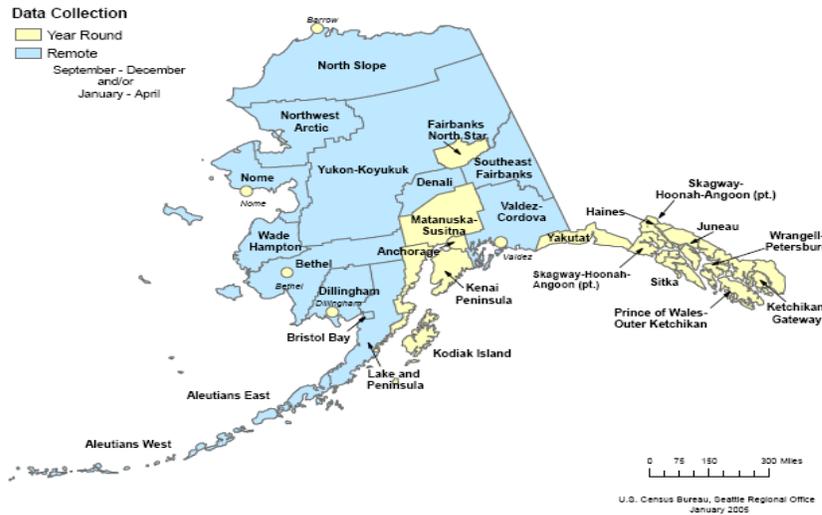


Figure 2: American Community Survey map of data collection in Alaska

Another consideration is the limitations present when we attempt to use the data. After the ACS matures, some of these limitations may disappear. However, we will need to remain aware of the limitations when we interpret and use the ACS data.

Limitations

- The margin of error is higher than the decennial “long form”. The margin of error is disclosed and should be considered when judging the accuracy of the information.
- The higher margin of error is in part corrected by averaging over a period of five years. This serves to increase the total sample size over time, thus increasing reliability. This change brings a difference in reporting. Where we previously were looking at data at a single point in time, we are now seeing an average over a period of time. In villages with great variances this change is likely to pose problems as it averages out the erratic realities into a number that does not represent reality. Having the data in such a different form will affect how we are able to compare future data with past data, how we can observe trends, and how we will compare communities with one another. It will be necessary to learn how to properly use data reported in this form and what limitations will be present.
- Additionally, the ACS is currently reporting the data in regions (i.e. Cook Inlet, Doyon, Sealaska). We see that this data is reported because there are communities greater than 65,000 within the regions. Further, data representative of these communities will overwhelm the data from the smaller communities within the region. Again, then, these results must be used cautiously to understand the realities of our communities and how these are represented.

What should we, as Alaska Natives, be doing in regard to the ACS?

We need to be aware. It is important for Alaska Native people to be educated about the results that the ACS produces and the role we play in creating those results.

- Results that the ACS produces:

Keep in mind all the prior outlined limitations when you are working with the ACS data: the margin of error, period estimates vs. point-in-time estimates, and comparing across communities. If necessary, email the staff at the *First Alaskans Institute; Alaska Native Policy Center* to answer any questions you have about the way in which you are utilizing the data, or to connect you with other researchers, Alaskan demographers, or the ACS staff.

- Role we play in creating ACS results:

The multi-race option is a recent development, as of 2000, in the census “long form” survey and is a continued option in the ACS. Not all agencies have adapted to this change — i.e. some agencies split multi-race responses, such as combinations of White and Alaska Native people, equally (half into White and half into Alaska Native). This action results in a reduced total number of Alaska Native people reported. Until the issue is resolved, keep in mind the population you wish to affiliate with and be sure to answer accordingly.

Alaska Native leaders need to know that the ACS and the resulting data it provides is a concern to the Alaska Native people. The leaders need to be informed about timelines involving Tribal Liaison programs and the Local Update of Census Addresses (LUCA). Tribal leaders, in recognition of the government – government relationship between tribes and the US - will be sent a courtesy letter informing them of the ACS arrival in their community and have the responsibility of sharing the information with the rest of their community. Likewise, community members may find that informing Tribal governments of their participation in the ACS may alleviate concerns about timing by providing a record of when the ACS was conducted, and in which communities.

We need to participate. Alaska Native participation in a large-scale, demographic survey such as the ACS is vital to obtaining accurate data that can be effectively used by our people and those who work to better the lives of Alaska Native people. Participation can come at the community and individual level.

- **Community level:**

The quality of any survey is based on the number of people it reaches—the sample of the ACS relies heavily on the Census Bureau’s Master Address File (MAF). The LUCA program is involved in making sure that the MAF is as accurate and up-to-date as possible. The Census Bureau is taking special measures for Tribes by creating Tribal Liaison positions to assist with LUCA at a tribal level. We, as a community, need to take advantage of this opportunity to participate, as well as other opportunities for community involvement that exist or may arise.

- **Individual level:**

If and when you receive the ACS in the mail or are interviewed in person, keep in mind which community you affiliate with, particularly when answering the question about which race you identify with. Attempt to keep records such as pay stubs, tax documents, etc. on hand for your self and all family members to make sure the information you contribute is as accurate as possible. If necessary, designate a particular family member to take on the responsibility of filling out/answering the ACS properly and accurately if and when it comes to your household.

In addition to participating in filling out the ACS properly, we need to be adequately represented in Census field representative positions that are available—particularly those that are available within Alaska Native villages. Conducting interviews is one of the key components in survey quality. To ensure that due care is given to cultural, Alaskan, and community values, it makes sense for these field representative positions to be filled by our people.