

The American Community Survey New Municipal Census Data—Every Year

You may not realize it when looking at new population and housing data, but in 2010, a major shift in how the United States collects and releases demographic data was made. Previously, much of our demographic data had come at ten year intervals through a national survey known as the Census. In 2010, the Census was still conducted and sent out to every known address, but this time it only collected data on basic “counts,” such as total population, age, race, sex, housing units, and households. More extensive population and housing characteristics under four broad categories (demographic, economic, housing, and social) were collected by a new ongoing survey called the American Community Survey (ACS). The ACS collects much of the same detailed data that used to be collected by the Census, but it is continually administered and offers new up-to-date results every year instead of having to wait ten years as in the past. However, there are a few differences to keep in mind.

ACS Data are Estimates— Unlike the 2010 Census, the ACS is based on a sample of the population, which means there is a greater margin of error in the results. Therefore, the actual value may not be exactly what is reported. Margins of error can be obtained from the Census Bureau on its data delivery site, American Factfinder (factfinder2.census.gov). In statistical terms, the smaller the sample size, the greater the margin of error.

ACS Data are Time Period Estimates— ACS datasets are available as 1-year, 3-year, and 5-year estimates depending on the size of the geography. Most municipalities in Montgomery County are only available as 5-year estimates, so all ACS data in the Montco Planning Data Portal is reported as a 5-year estimate even when shorter terms are available. 5-year estimates are the most accurate and have a smaller margin of error, but they cover a longer range of time. A 5-year estimate for 2010 is actually the average of responses taken from 2006 through 2010, whereas a 1-year estimate would only include answers taken in 2010. Past data collected from the decennial Census were from a single point in time so those results were always correlated to a specific year.

Comparisons with the Decennial Census— Most ACS data can be directly compared with historical data collected from a prior Census, but not all. Many of our tables contain 2000 data to provide a historical context, but we have included footnotes to explain when special care should be taken before comparing ACS data to 2000 Census data. See this link for a detailed guide over what can and cannot be compared: www.census.gov/acs/www/guidance_for_data_users/comparing_data/

Future Year Releases— New ACS data will be released every year, usually around December for the preceding year. With 5-year estimates, this means that there will be overlapping years in consecutive data releases. Generally, it is not recommended to compare overlapping time periods, so we will continue to compare the latest release with 2000 data until five years have passed and the 2005-2009 values can be compared to 2010-2014 with no overlap.