

Frequently asked Questions

- **How is ACS data different than the Decennial Census data?**
The ACS is a survey that provides period estimates, not a 100% enumeration. The ACS offers detailed data on things such as commuting, educational attainment and income, while the 2010 Census (when released in early 2011) will contain a few key variables such as population, age, race and housing. The trade off for more detail is that sample data sacrifices some accuracy. It will be important to consider the margins of error when using the ACS.
- **Should we use the 5-year ACS population numbers?**
No. The ACS is based on sample data and is therefore not as good as other sources, primarily the Decennial data and the Population Estimates data, both also available from the Census. For this reason it is best to view the data in terms of percentages to view this data rather than the actual numbers.
- **If I can't use the numbers, what value is the 5-year ACS data?**
The 5-year data provides the only comprehensive "wall to wall" datasets that cover the whole region other than the decennial census. Starting with the 2005-2009 release the ACS will provide detailed characteristics for small areas on an ongoing, annual basis. The ACS is a valuable resource for making detailed comparisons between geographies, and as more releases are available, over time.
- **How can I access the 5-year ACS data?**
Much of the data will be posted to the MRCOG website as profiles by county or municipality, or specific subject tables. However, the finer data including block group geography will not be on our website. Most of the ACS 5-year data will be available through the Census Bureau's American Factfinder tool, and the remainder will be available through their Summary File tables or on their FTP site.
- **Can we use 5-year data to evaluate recent economic and market changes?**
No. ACS 5-year data smoothes out any highs and lows that are due to short-term events, whether they are economic or otherwise. This data is not suited to detail recession and recovery type events. There are better data sources available such as the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Department of Workforce Solutions.
- **Can I compare the 5-year ACS data to the Decennial Census or other ACS products?**
Sometimes. Some variables remain unchanged from 2000 and therefore can be safely compared. However other variables have changed, including disability status and mobility status. Click on the following link to get to the Census Bureau's guidance on comparing variables over time. ACS 5-year estimates should never be compared to 3-year or 1-year ACS estimates.