American Community Survey:
New Survey Questions Enable Measurement of Marital Transitions

Beginning in 2008, the American Community Survey (ACS) will ask about marital events that have occurred in the last 12 months, the number of times a person has been married, and the year the most recent marriage occurred. The new data content can be combined with the demographic, economic and community data in the survey to analyze marriage and divorce rates, events, and transitions.

The ACS and Information on Marriage and Divorce

Since its inception, the ACS has included a question on marital status (never married, divorced, separated, widowed, or married). With the addition of the new questions, the ACS will fill a large data gap and allow for the calculation of marriage and divorce rates and a more complete study of family formation trends. Because of the size of the sample and the kinds of information collected on the ACS, these rates and trends can be analyzed at the person, family, household and community level. This new data will provide program managers, government analysts, policymakers, researchers, demographers and others with the information needed to analyze marriage and divorce rates and marital transitions nationally, by state and by locality.

The ACS, the Census Bureau's replacement for the decennial census long form, provides estimates of demographic, housing, social, and economic characteristics. It is a continuous measurement survey with an annual sample of three million households plus a large sample of group quarters (e.g., college dormitories, prisons, military barracks). The data are collected monthly and reported annually. Because of its large sample size, the ACS allows for sub-national analyses. Statistics can be computed annually for all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and population areas with 65,000 or more people; reliable county-level and Census tract-level statistics can be computed using three years and five years of data, respectively.

New Marriage- and Divorce-Related Questions

Prior to 2008, the ACS asked respondents whether they were now married, widowed, divorced, separated or never married and about his or her relationship to each household member. Thus, ACS data could be used to calculate the number and proportion of people who were never married, divorced, separated, widowed, or married. The ACS could also provide information by relationship status, such as the percent who are cohabiting, are biological parents who live with their children, and are step-parents living with their step-children. For the 2008 ACS, the Census Bureau added questions that can be used to calculate marriage and divorce rates and the duration of the most recent marriage. The questions also measure respondents' marital history.

New ACS Marital History Questions

- In the PAST 12 MONTHS did this person get—

	Yes	No
Married	☐	☐
Widowed	☐	☐
Divorced	☐	☐

- How many times has this person been married?

Once	☐
Two times	☐
Three or more times	☐

- In what year did this person last get married?

Year ⬭

The New Data Will Benefit Many Program Areas

Information about marriage and divorce—including rates, duration of events, and transitions into and out of each status—is used by analysts, program managers, policymakers, researchers, and other interested parties for a variety of purposes, such as to analyze potential eligibility for program services and benefits and to assess behavioral changes resulting from policies and programs.[1]

For example, data can be used to:

- Calculate marriage and divorce rates and document the characteristics of individuals transitioning into and out of marriage (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, income, presence of children) at national and sub-national levels over time.

- Track and forecast changes in family structure at the national, state and local levels, thus identifying needs for child care, child support, housing, and other services.

- Formulate, assess, and evaluate policies at the national and state levels for the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood grant programs, and other initiatives.

- Analyze tax policies that can create or mitigate "marriage penalties" (that is, higher taxes for married couples compared to what they would pay if filing as unmarried individuals).

- Improve cost and eligibility projections and analysis for Social Security disability and retirement benefits.

- Identify needs and evaluate policies and state- and local-level programs operated by governmental or non-governmental programs.

Other Questions of Interest on the ACS

The ACS collects a wealth of demographic, economic, and community data that will be helpful in analyzing marital transitions and trends. In addition to the standard demographic categories of age, sex, race, ethnicity, education, and employment, marriage and divorce data can be analyzed using information about home ownership, military service, participation in social safety net programs, nationality, size of household, presence of children, and hours worked and geographic location. All of these factors could provide important new information about the context in which marital transitions are likely to occur.

Data Availability

Data from the American Community Survey is available but only the information regarding current marital status is included in the data files. Publication of the new marital data is anticipated in late 2009. Because this is a new data collection effort, the marital history items will be evaluated with other survey data and existing tabulations from the vital statistics system at both the national and state levels. It is anticipated that published tables from the ACS in the American Factfinder will initially be limited to data at the National level and for individual states. More geographic detail will be available over time. ACS data can be accessed by visiting the Census Bureau website:

http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Products/index.html

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[1] Census Bureau, *Subjects Planned for the 2010 Census and the American Community Survey: Federal Legislative and Program Use*, page 92.

American Community Survey Overview

The ACS is cross-sectional, as opposed to longitudinal, meaning that it collects data from a national sample of people only once, rather than collecting data from the same people multiple times. The survey is sent to about 250,000 people monthly resulting in an annual sample of over three million. The survey is sent and returned through the mail. The Census Bureau follows up with non-respondents through phone calls, and, for a subset, in-person visits, to complete the survey.

ACS Goals

The stated goals of the ACS are three-fold:

- Provide federal, state and local governments an information base for the administration and evaluation of governmental programs;
- Improve the Decennial Census by allowing its data collection to focus on population numbers; and
- Provide data users with annually updated demographic, housing, social and economic statistics that can be compared across states, communities and population groups. The ACS provides more information than the Census does and allows for quicker access to survey results—usually six to eight months after a survey year has been completed.

Survey Structure

Questions on the ACS include information about household composition, income and program participation. One respondent per household fills out the survey but the survey collects information on each person living in the household as well as information about the entire household unit. The ACS collects data on a wide variety of topics. Sections of the survey ask about:

- The household roster (name of all people in the household; their relationship to the respondent; their sex, age, date of birth, race and ethnicity).
- Housing (the type and characteristics of the respondent's home; number of automobiles owned by members of the household; rent, mortgage and utility costs; home value).
- Information about each person in the household (place of birth, nationality, schooling, ancestry or ethnic origin, languages spoken at home, health insurance, disabilities, marital status and marital transitions, child birth, participation in social safety net programs, military service, employment, income and if the household member is a grandparent raising a grandchild).

Unique Attributes

The ACS has several unique attributes that set it apart from other surveys and data collection tools. First, its size. The ACS is the largest annual survey in the United States and is designed to be representative down to the Census tract level. State-level statistics can be computed for all 50 states and the District of Columbia on an annual basis; annual statistics are also available for all population areas with 65,000 people or more. Reliable county-level statistics also can be computed using three years of data and Census tract-level statistics can be computed using five years of data. Second, the ACS is the only survey for which completion by the surveyed household is mandatory. The ACS response rate of 97.5 percent (2006) is the highest of any Census Bureau demographic survey. Finally, changes to the ACS are not easily made or implemented. Most of the ACS content is mandated or required by law and modifications to the survey require Office of Management and Budget approval.