

**THE APPALACHIAN REGION:
A DATA OVERVIEW FROM THE
2008-2012 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY
Chartbook**

**Kelvin Pollard
Linda A. Jacobsen
Population Reference Bureau**

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**THE APPALACHIAN REGION: A DATA OVERVIEW FROM THE 2008-2012 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY
TABLE OF CONTENTS**

	<u>PAGE</u>
FOREWORD	3
CHAPTER 1. POPULATION BASICS	
Table 1.1: Population, Land Area, and Population Density in the Appalachian Region, 2008-2012	4
Figure 1.1: Population Distribution in the Appalachian Region, 2008-2012	5
Figure 1.2: Population per Square Mile of Land Area in the Appalachian Region, 2008-2012	6
CHAPTER 2. AGE	
Table 2.1: Population in the Appalachian Region by Age Group, 2008-2012	7
Figure 2.1: Percent of Population in the Appalachian Region Under Age 18, 2008-2012	8
Figure 2.2: Percent of Population in the Appalachian Region Ages 18 to 24, 2008-2012	9
Figure 2.3: Percent of Population in the Appalachian Region Ages 25 to 64, 2008-2012	10
Figure 2.4: Percent of Population in the Appalachian Region Ages 65 and Over, 2008-2012	11
Figure 2.5: Median Age of Persons in the Appalachian Region, 2008-2012	12
CHAPTER 3. RACE AND HISPANIC ORIGIN	
Table 3.1: Population in the Appalachian Region by Race and Hispanic Origin, 2008-2012	13
Figure 3.1: Percent of Population in the Appalachian Region That Is Minority, 2008-2012	14
Figure 3.2: Percent of Population in the Appalachian Region That Is Black Alone, not Hispanic, 2008-2012	15
Figure 3.3: Percent of Population in the Appalachian Region That Is Hispanic or Latino, 2008-2012	16
CHAPTER 4. HOUSING OCCUPANCY AND TENURE	
Table 4.1: Occupancy and Tenure of Housing Units in the Appalachian Region, 2008-2012	17
Figure 4.1: Percent of Housing Units in the Appalachian Region That Are Occupied, 2008-2012	18
Figure 4.2: Percent of Housing Units in the Appalachian Region That Are Vacant, 2008-2012	19
Figure 4.3: Percent Owner-Occupied Housing Units in the Appalachian Region, 2008-2012	20
Figure 4.4: Percent Renter-Occupied Housing Units in the Appalachian Region, 2008-2012	21
CHAPTER 5. EDUCATION	
Table 5.1: Educational Attainment of Persons Ages 25 and Over in the Appalachian Region, 2008-2012	22
Table 5.2: Educational Attainment of Persons Ages 25 to 64 in the Appalachian Region, 2008-2012	23
Table 5.3: Educational Attainment of Persons Ages 65 and Over in the Appalachian Region, 2008-2012	24
Figure 5.1: Percent of Persons Ages 25 and Over in the Appalachian Region With a High School Diploma or More, 2008-2012	25
Figure 5.2: Percent of Persons Ages 25 and Over in the Appalachian Region With a High School Diploma but With No Postsecondary Degree, 2008-2012	26
Figure 5.3: Percent of Persons Ages 25 and Over in the Appalachian Region With a Bachelor's Degree or More, 2008-2012	27
Figure 5.4: Percent of Persons Ages 25 to 64 in the Appalachian Region With a High School Diploma or More, 2008-2012	28
Figure 5.5: Percent of Persons Ages 25 to 64 in the Appalachian Region With a Bachelor's Degree or More, 2008-2012	29
Figure 5.6: Percent of Persons Ages 65 and Over in the Appalachian Region With a Bachelor's Degree or More, 2008-2012	30
CHAPTER 6. LABOR FORCE, EMPLOYMENT, AND UNEMPLOYMENT	
Table 6.1: Labor Force, Employment, and Unemployment Status of Persons Ages 25 to 64 in the Appalachian Region, 2008-2012	31
Figure 6.1: Percent of Persons Ages 25 to 64 in the Appalachian Region Who Are In the Labor Force, 2008-2012	32
Figure 6.2: Employment Rate for Civilian Labor Force Participants Ages 25 to 64 in the Appalachian Region, 2008-2012	33
Figure 6.3: Unemployment Rate for Civilian Labor Force Participants Ages 25 to 64 in the Appalachian Region, 2008-2012	34
CHAPTER 7. INCOME AND POVERTY	
Table 7.1: Household, Family, and Per Capita Income in the Appalachian Region (In Adjusted 2012 Dollars), 2008-2012	35
Table 7.2: Number of Persons in the Appalachian Region in Poverty, by Age Group, 2008-2012	36

Table 7.3: Percent of Persons in the Appalachian Region in Poverty, by Age Group, 2008-2012 37
Figure 7.1: Mean Household Income in the Appalachian Region (In Adjusted 2012 Dollars), 2008-2012 38
Figure 7.2: Median Household Income in the Appalachian Region (In Adjusted 2012 Dollars), 2008-2012 39
Figure 7.3: Mean Family Income in the Appalachian Region (In Adjusted 2012 Dollars), 2008-2012 40
Figure 7.4: Median Family Income in the Appalachian Region (In Adjusted 2012 Dollars), 2008-2012 41
Figure 7.5: Per Capita Income in the Appalachian Region (In Adjusted 2012 Dollars), 2008-2012 42
Figure 7.6: Percent of Persons in the Appalachian Region in Poverty, 2008-2012 43
Figure 7.7: Percent of Persons Under Age 18 in the Appalachian Region in Poverty, 2008-2012 44
Figure 7.8: Percent of Persons Ages 18 to 64 in the Appalachian Region in Poverty, 2008-2012 45
Figure 7.9: Percent of Persons Ages 65 and Over in the Appalachian Region in Poverty, 2008-2012 46

CHAPTER 8. HEALTH INSURANCE COVERAGE

Table 8.1: Number of Persons in the Appalachian Region Not Covered by Health Insurance, by Age Group, 2008-2012 47
Table 8.2: Percent of Persons in the Appalachian Region Not Covered by Health Insurance, by Age Group, 2008-2012 48
Figure 8.1: Percent of Persons in the Appalachian Region Not Covered by Health Insurance, 2008-2012 49
Figure 8.2: Percent of Persons Under Age 18 in the Appalachian Region Not Covered by Health Insurance, 2008-2012 50
Figure 8.3: Percent of Persons Ages 18 to 24 in the Appalachian Region Not Covered by Health Insurance, 2008-2012 51
Figure 8.4: Percent of Persons Ages 25 to 64 in the Appalachian Region Not Covered by Health Insurance, 2008-2012 52

CHAPTER 9. DISABILITY STATUS

Table 9.1: Number of Persons in the Appalachian Region With a Disability, by Age Group, 2008-2012 53
Table 9.2: Percent of Persons in the Appalachian Region With a Disability, by Age Group, 2008-2012 54
Figure 9.1: Percent of Persons in the Appalachian Region With a Disability, 2008-2012 55
Figure 9.2: Percent of Persons Under Age 18 in the Appalachian Region With a Disability, 2008-2012 56
Figure 9.3: Percent of Persons Ages 18 to 64 in the Appalachian Region With a Disability, 2008-2012 57
Figure 9.4: Percent of Persons Ages 65 and Over in the Appalachian Region With a Disability, 2008-2012 58

CHAPTER 10. MIGRATION

Table 10.1: Mobility Status of Persons Ages 1 and Over in the Appalachian Region, 2008-2012 59
Figure 10.1: Percent of Persons Ages 1 and Over in the Appalachian Region Who Had Moved in the Past Year, 2008-2012 60
Figure 10.2: Percent of Persons Ages 1 and Over in the Appalachian Region Who Had Migrated From Outside Their County of Residence in the Past Year, 2008-2012 61
Figure 10.3: Percent of Persons Ages 1 and Over in the Appalachian Region Who Had Migrated From Outside Their State of Residence in the Past Year, 2008-2012 62

CHAPTER 11. VETERAN STATUS

Table 11.1: Veteran Status of Adult Civilians in the Appalachian Region by Age Group, 2008-2012 63
Table 11.2: Veteran Status of Adult Civilians in the Appalachian Region by Gender, 2008-2012 64
Figure 11.1: Percent of Adult Civilians in the Appalachian Region Who Are Veterans, 2008-2012 65
Figure 11.2: Percent of Civilians Ages 18 to 34 in the Appalachian Region Who Are Veterans, 2008-2012 66
Figure 11.3: Percent of Civilians Ages 35 to 64 in the Appalachian Region Who Are Veterans, 2008-2012 67
Figure 11.4: Percent of Civilians Ages 65 and Over in the Appalachian Region Who Are Veterans, 2008-2012 68

FOREWORD

The data contained in this chartbook come from the 2008-2012 American Community Survey. While the types of demographic and housing data included in Chapters 1 through 4 were also collected in the 2010 decennial census, the types of social and economic data included in Chapters 5 through 11 were not. This is because unlike previous censuses—which consisted of a “short form” of basic demographic and housing questions and a “long form” (used for a sample of households) that also asked detailed questions about social, economic, and housing characteristics—the 2010 census only had a short form.

The decennial long form has been replaced by the American Community Survey (ACS), a nationwide study collected continuously every year in every county in the United States. The ACS is designed to provide communities with reliable and timely demographic, social, economic, and housing data each year. However, the annual sample size of the ACS is much smaller than the sample size of the decennial census long form; therefore, data from five years must be combined to provide reliable estimates for geographic areas with fewer than 20,000 people. Since a number of counties in the Appalachian Region have fewer than 20,000 residents, we must use the 2008-2012 ACS data to have comparable statistics for all 420 counties in the Region.

The five-year ACS estimates for 2008-2012 represent concepts that are fundamentally different from those associated with data from the decennial census. While the main function of the census is to provide *counts* of people for congressional apportionment and legislative redistricting, the primary purpose of the ACS is to measure the changing *characteristics* of the U.S. population. Moreover, while the decennial census provides a “snapshot” of the U.S. population once every 10 years, the ACS has been described as a “moving video image” that is continually updated. Finally, while the census provides “point in time” estimates designed to approximate an area’s characteristics on a specific date, the ACS provides “period” estimates that represent data collected over a period of time. The five-year estimates in this chartbook, therefore, are data collected over the five-year (or 60-month) period from January 2008 through December 2012. These ACS estimates are *not* averages of monthly or annual values, but rather an *aggregation* of data collected over the five-year period.

For areas with consistent population characteristics throughout the calendar year, ACS period estimates might not differ much from those that would result from a point-in-time survey like the decennial census. However, ACS period estimates might be noticeably different from point-in-time estimates for areas with seasonal populations or those that experience a natural disaster such as a hurricane. For example, a resort community in the upper Midwest might be dominated by locals in the winter months and by temporary workers and tourists in the summer months, with a corresponding decrease in employment rates during the winter and increase in these rates during the summer. In such a community, the ACS period estimate of the percent of persons in the labor force, which is based on data across the entire calendar year, would likely be higher than the decennial census point-in-time estimate from April 1.

While five-year ACS data are needed to provide reliable estimates for areas with small populations, they can make it difficult to track trends in these areas. The 2008-2012 ACS data illustrate this problem. The 2008-2012 time period covers two distinct periods of economic activity: the recession from December 2007 through June 2009; and the first three years of economic recovery that followed the downturn. Since the 2008-2012 ACS pools data from both periods, it smooths out the extreme variations in economic measures that would be evident in annual data from the recent severe recession.

This year’s chartbook contains three new chapters: Chapter 8 focuses on health insurance coverage in the Appalachian Region; Chapter 9 is on disability status; and Chapter 11 covers the veteran status of the adult civilian population. The ACS introduced a question on health insurance coverage in 2008, which was the same year that significant changes were made to the ACS questions on disability status. As a result, the 2008-2012 time period is the first for which five-year data on these topics are available.