

**THE APPALACHIAN REGION:
A DATA OVERVIEW FROM THE
2009-2013 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY
Chartbook**

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FOREWORD

The data contained in this chartbook come from the 2009-2013 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The decennial long form has been replaced by the American Community Survey (ACS), a nationwide study collected continuously every year in every county in the United States.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 2009-2013 ACS data to have comparable statistics for all 420 counties in the Region.

The five-year ACS estimates for 2009-2013 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 2009 through December 2013. 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 2009-2013 ACS data illustrate this problem. The 2009-2013 time period covers two distinct periods of economic activity: the last six months of the “Great Recession” of December 2007 through June 2009; and the four years of economic recovery that immediately followed the downturn. Since the 2009-2013 ACS pools data from both periods, it smooths out the extreme variations in economic measures that would be evident in annual data from this recent period.

In this year’s chartbook, Chapter 5, which covers education, contains a new table (Table 5.4) and figure (Figure 5.7). These items focus on the major degree field for adults ages 25 and over who have attained a bachelor’s degree or more. The ACS introduced a “field of degree” question in 2009, which means that the 2009-2013 time period is the first for which five-year data on this particular topic are available.