

September 2014

On two days this week, the Census Bureau will release new 2013 data on poverty and income:

- On **Sept. 16th**, the Bureau will release poverty and income data from the Current Population Survey (CPS).
- On **Sept. 18th**, the Bureau will release more robust poverty and income data from the American Community Survey (ACS).

Ahead of the release, it is worth noting that poverty has been slow to decline during the current economic recovery and austerity policies likely hampered progress against poverty in 2013. A return to pre-recession poverty level anytime soon is unlikely.

CPS vs. ACS: Apples and Oranges

Although the data from these two surveys are similar, they differ in important ways and will likely yield somewhat different numbers. The surveys pose different questions at different times of the year to different populations. Therefore, CPS data should not be compared to ACS data. The key differences between CPS and ACS data are as follows:

- **Annual U.S. sample sizes:** CPS = 100,000 addresses *versus* ACS = 3 million addresses.
- **Geographic level of data:** CPS = available for U.S. and states vs. ACS = U.S., states, and nearly everywhere.

Examining the State-Level Poverty Data: ACS Data is Superior for One-Year Estimates and Short-Term Trend Analysis

The main purpose of the CPS data released on September 16th is to provide national estimates and long-term trends in state-level data on poverty, income, and health insurance coverage. CPS' smaller sample size leads to less-reliable state-level estimates compared to the ACS estimates. For most states, the Bureau advises averaging two years of survey data to get reliable state comparisons over time. The averaging, however, will mask some of the state-level change that occurred in 2013. CPS data is available back to 1989 for most data, although some data is available back to the 1940s.

The main purpose of the ACS data released on September 18th is to provide state and local estimates, detailed state characteristics, and comparisons among states. The ACS' much larger sample size (30 times larger) makes it a better source for recent state-level trends and state rankings. ACS estimates will also be available on other socioeconomic data, including health insurance data, housing costs as a percentage of income, commuting times, average family size, and other population data. ACS data is only available back to 2001.

The ACS releases data for most geography sizes, from the national level all the way down to the block group level. The data is released from September to December, depending on geography size. Also, multi-year estimates are used for smaller geographies due to the larger sample size required for accurate estimates.

- 1-Year estimates will be available on September 18th for geographies with populations of 65,000 or more
- 3-Year estimates will be available on October 23rd for geographies with populations of 20,000 or more
- 5-Year estimates will be available on December 4th for geographies as small as the block group level

Use the Budget and Tax Center as a Resource to Help Make Sense of the Numbers

The Budget and Tax Center, a non-profit, non-partisan project of the North Carolina Justice Center, will be available to provide context and interpretation of the numbers. If you want a quote or have questions regarding the methodology, please contact Tazra Mitchell, Policy Analyst at the Budget and Tax Center, at (919) 861-1451 or at tazra@ncjustice.org.

