

Collecting American Community Survey Data From Group Quarters Amid the Pandemic

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The American Community Survey (ACS) provides one of the nation's most comprehensive sources of information about the U.S. population. To give a complete picture of the population, it's essential the survey includes people living in households and in group quarters (GQs) such as nursing/skilled nursing facilities, college/university student housing and correctional facilities.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted our ability to collect quality data from both households and group quarters, so we recently announced [[/newsroom/press-releases/2021/changes-2020-acs-1-year.html](#)] that we will release experimental estimates instead of our standard 2020 ACS 1-year products.

The recent blog [Adapting the American Community Survey Amid COVID-19](#) [[/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2021/05/adapting-the-acs-amid-covid-19.html](#)] described the disruptions to household data collection, and this blog provides more details on how the pandemic affected ACS data collection for group quarters. (Information about how the 2020 Census adapted the group quarters operation is available in the [2020 Census Group Quarters](#) [[/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2021/03/2020-census-group-quarters.html](#)] blog.)

What Are Group Quarters?

GQs are places where people live or stay in a group living arrangement that are owned or managed by an organization providing housing and/or services for the residents. These services may include custodial or medical care as well as other types of assistance. Residency is commonly restricted to those receiving these services, and residents are usually not related to one another.

GQs include such places as:

- College residence halls.
- Residential treatment centers.
- Skilled nursing facilities.
- Group homes.
- Military barracks.
- Correctional facilities.
- Workers' group living quarters and Job Corps centers.
- Facilities for people experiencing homelessness.

How We Usually Collect GQ Data

The ACS is a sample survey – meaning we ask questions of a relatively small number of people and use those responses to estimate the characteristics of the larger population.

Each year, along with a sample of residential addresses, we take a sample of people in GQ facilities to participate in the ACS. It is a two-phase sample – we first sample facilities and then people within the facilities.

The sample must be truly random. It is important to obtain complete information from the survey respondents because they represent many other people living in similar facilities. The Census Bureau uses scientific sampling procedures to select the facilities and individuals in each facility who will be interviewed, so other facilities and individuals cannot be substituted for those selected.

Once we have a sample, we collect data from people living in group quarters in two phases:

- First, our field representatives interview a contact person or administrator from the selected GQ (referred to as the GQ-level interview).
- Second, the field representative interviews a sample of individuals from the facility (referred to as the person- or resident-level interview).

We use the interview with the group quarters contact person to determine or verify the type of facility and population size, and to draw a random sample of residents to interview. In a typical year, we collect data for about 150,000 people from an initial sample of approximately 18,000 individual GQ facilities.

During the person-level phase, the field representative uses a laptop to collect detailed information for each resident in the sample. If the field representative can't complete an interview, they can leave a bilingual (English/Spanish) questionnaire for the resident to complete on their own. The field representative will return to pick up the completed questionnaire.

Pandemic-Related Disruptions

GQ facilities were hit especially hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. The risk of person-to-person transmission meant we couldn't interview people in person, and concern that the virus could be transmitted on surfaces meant we couldn't drop off and pick up questionnaires. So we temporarily suspended ACS GQ operations on March 19, 2020.

We gradually restarted GQ operations in July 2020. However, we still faced COVID-related restrictions at many facilities, especially at the largest types of group quarters: nursing/skilled nursing facilities, correctional facilities and college/university student housing.

For instance, many nursing/skilled nursing facilities whose residents were hit particularly hard by the virus were not allowing any type of in-person interviewing. The same was true for many correctional facilities. Also complicating data collection efforts, college students were no longer on campus.

To address the limited-access issues, we allowed field representatives to collect much of the facility-level information over the telephone. We also relied on administrative records to collect data for our Bureau of Prisons operations.

Summary

Although we experienced many challenges collecting data at GQs, we've seen steady improvements since restarting the effort in July 2020.

Field supervisors have engaged GQ administrators to follow up on field representatives' communications, providing more Census Bureau points of contact to our GQ partners. They are stressing the importance of the survey, how the data are used, how sampling works, and the importance of each GQ facility's participation. In addition, Census Bureau regional partnership staff hosted data summits and made connections with 2020 Census partners to let stakeholders know we are now collecting ACS data.

Field staff have shared options for minimum-contact interviewing such as:

- Completing facility-level interviews over the phone.
- Dropping off paper questionnaires with the GQ contact.
- Using administrative records.

More facilities are allowing field representatives to drop off paper questionnaires, and we've seen a gradual increase in in-person interviewing. We're still not at pre-pandemic GQ response levels yet, but our field staff are adapting to this changing environment and doing what is necessary to collect 2021 data.

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