

# **A Demographic Exploration of Frederick County**

## **The American Community Survey**

Welcome to the July, 2005 edition of “A Demographic Exploration of Frederick County.” Instead of focusing on the changing face of Frederick County, this month’s article will focus on the changing face of data acquisition. For further information on the demographics and other statistics of Frederick County, please visit <http://www.co.frederick.md.us/planning/Demographics/Demographics.htm>

As the population and demographic composition of Frederick County has changed throughout the decades, so has the US Census. The US census is a prime data supplier to planners, grant writers, various program managers, and governmental entities. Throughout its’ history, the US Census has supplied valuable data. As the population of the United States has changed, the US Census and the US Census Bureau has been continually changing and adapting to the expansion, both geographically and population wise, of the United States. The questions asked and the format of the reporting has been evolving since the first official census of 1790; and starting in 2010 the census will undergo a major reengineering. The American Community Survey (ACS) will replace the decennial census long form.

### **The History of the US Census**

From the early 1600’s to 1790, Virginia had conducted its own census and the British colonies, in the soon to be United States, had some type of population count. The official US census was not taken until 1790. At this time the 13 colonies, the districts of Kentucky, Maine, Vermont, and the southwest territory (Tennessee) were enumerated. US Marshals, on horseback, conducted the Census under the direction of the Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson. There was no strict reporting methodology; however, questions such as the name of each householder and the number, age, race, gender, and free status for each person in the household was reported.

As the country grew, so did the type of questions and reporting methodology of the US Census. During the 1810 census, information on the quantity and product values of manufacturing was added to the base household data collected. In 1830, because of the increased population, geographic extent, and use of the statistics provided by the census, a standardized form was created. During the 1840 and 1850 census, more data was collected. Questions about fisheries, taxation, churches, pauperism, and crime were added to the census. Due to the vast amount of inquiries and the expanse of the United States, the 1880 census took almost the entire decade to tabulate and publish the results.

Since the 1800’s, the US census has continued to add questions and change the format. Since the population and geographic extent of the United States continued to expand the US Census Bureau decided to create a long form and a short form. The short form is a way to count the actual population. It is to be filled out by every household in the United States. The long form is a way to obtain more specific demographic statistics on housing, social outlooks, and economic situations. The data reported in the long form is a sample of 1 in 6 households; hence not every household needs to fill out the form.

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The information presented in the long form of the decennial census is widely used by planners and governmental agencies. The data collected is used for the distribution of federal programs, billions of federal dollars, grants, and many state and local funding and programs. The information is valuable to many people and programs throughout the United States. One of the downfalls with using the US Census information is that since the survey is only taken every 10 years, the information is vastly out-of-date by the time of the next decennial census. To rectify this problem, the US Census is going to start implementing the American Community Survey (ACS). The ACS will replace the long form of the decennial census, beginning in 2010.

The actual ACS program began its conception in 1996 when the US Census Bureau started collecting data and running tests on 4 defined sites. Between 1996 and 2001, test sites continued to be evaluated for the survey procedures along with cost analysis. Between 2003 and 2005, the US Census Bureau started to release annual estimates on areas with a population over 250,000. The US Census Bureau hopes to release annual estimates of areas with a population greater than 65,000 by 2006 and areas with more than 20,000 people by 2008. In 2010, the full implementation of the ACS is expected to take place. This means that starting in 2010 the ACS is slated to provide annual data and estimates of housing, social, and economic characteristics for all states, counties, cities, census tracts, and block groups. This update once a year will greatly improve the usefulness of the decennial census data, as well as improve the distribution of federal, state, and local programs and funding.

The ACS is conducted under the authority of Title 13, United States Code, Sections 141 and 193. To view more information about Title 13 please visit: [http://uscode.house.gov/download/title\\_13.php](http://uscode.house.gov/download/title_13.php). Since the ACS is a part of the decennial census, response to the survey is mandatory. People over the age of 18 years old who fail to respond can be subject to a fine of no more than \$5,000. As is the case in most US Census Bureau surveys, the information collected is strictly confidential and any Bureau employee who violates this confidentiality will be subject to a fine of no more than \$250,000 and/or a 5-year prison sentence.

The ACS depends on a random selection of households taken from the US Census Bureau's housing unit address database. A particular address has a 1 in 480 chance of being selected in any month, and no address will be chosen more than once in a five-year period. Once an address has been randomly selected, a pre-notice letter will be mailed to the address. This pre-notice letter will be followed by a survey questionnaire. If the household does not respond to the initial questionnaire, a follow-up mailing of the questionnaire will occur. If the second mailing is not returned, a phone call will be placed in order to get the required data. If the phone call is unsuccessful a site visit will be conducted. It is very important and cost effective for people to respond to the first mailing. In other words, please spread the word as to the importance of a timely response to the ACS and our community.

Since the first official US census in 1790, the geography and population of the United States has been expanding. The US Census has been evolving to meet the changes presented in this growth, by adding or redefining questions to the reporting methodology used by the Census Bureau. The 2010 US Census will see an expansive reengineering. The American Community Survey will be replacing the long form of the decennial

census. This new approach to the decennial census will allow for planners, grant writers, interested public, governmental entities, and many others the benefit of annual updates down to the block group level. The ACS is a mandatory part of the decennial census and Frederick County residents should be prepared to answer the questionnaires. The data collected by this survey will be a valuable part of how the federal, state, and local governments issue programs and spend money. The more accurate the information that is presented to the Census Bureau, the better off our County will be. It is extremely important to help spread the word of this new survey and let people know how valuable the information obtained by the survey will be to their community. If there are further questions please visit the Census web site at: <http://www.census.gov/acs/www/> or contact the Frederick County Division of Planning.