

Choosing Census data for local research

Choose the population measure first, then the geography and time period. For an up-to-date population total, start with the Population Estimates Program. For neighborhood income or housing characteristics, start with ACS 5-year tables. A familiar year label does not make the products interchangeable.

Independent research by Cleargrain Docs, based on official U.S. Census Bureau pages checked 9 October 2026. This brief compares five product families. It contains no invented customer brief, market-size estimate, supplier price or performance result.

Five options and the deciding condition

Product	Use it when	Check before using
ACS 1-year standard	Recent social, economic and housing characteristics	No standard 2020 ACS 1-year product; experimental 2020 data are not comparable
ACS 1-year supplemental	Recent simplified characteristics for smaller areas	Confirm the exact requested measure exists before selecting
ACS 5-year	Small-area social, economic and housing characteristics	A five-year period estimate is not a last-year snapshot
Decennial census	Official population count and basic demographic baseline	2020 census did not ask detailed income or employment questions
Population Estimates Program	Population totals and change between decennial censuses	Do not mix vintages or substitute these totals for ACS characteristics

What the comparison resolves

The source material is spread across product-selection guidance, table descriptions and program documentation. This brief aligns those differences into a selection matrix, five research task decisions and a repeatable check process. The companion workbook exposes ten comparison dimensions and a source register without hiding uncertainty behind a score.

This is a comparison of data products, not a statistical analysis of a particular market. Product availability and release timing should be rechecked before a new project begins.

Coverage and time period change the choice

ACS standard and supplemental are different products

Standard ACS 1-year estimates cover most eligible areas with at least 65,000 people. Supplemental 1-year estimates lower that population threshold to 20,000, but provide simplified K20 tables. They do not supply the entire standard catalog. Both describe 12 months of data collection. Verify the actual table and geography rather than applying the population threshold alone. [C1, C6]

A five year release describes five years

ACS 5-year estimates combine 60 months of collection and cover all areas. Detailed tables are available down to block groups; other ACS products have their own geography rules. The larger sample generally improves precision relative to 1-year data, at the cost of a broader reference period. A release labeled 2020-2024 is a period estimate, not a measurement of 2024 alone. [C1, C6]

Counts and characteristics answer different questions

The 2020 decennial census provides official population counts and basic characteristics. It did not collect the detailed income, education and employment information available through ACS. Census guidance recommends the decennial census or Population Estimates Program for population totals and ACS for characteristic distributions such as percentages, medians and rates. [C2, C5]

The vintage is part of the population estimate

The Population Estimates Program updates a time series using births, deaths and migration data. A new vintage can revise earlier years. The Census Bureau says the latest available vintage supersedes earlier estimates for those dates and that separate vintages should not be combined. Its current download page also states that current estimates cannot presently be supported by the API. Use the official files and preserve the vintage in the citation. [C3, C4]

Retired product deliberately excluded

ACS 3-year estimates ended with the 2011-2013 release. Historical files remain available, but they are not a current alternative in this comparison. [C1]

Selection decisions for real research tasks

Neighborhood household income

Use ACS 5-year Detailed Table B19013 for tract-level median household income. The official 2024 table identifies the measure as median household income in the past 12 months, expressed in 2024 inflation-adjusted dollars, and publishes estimate and margin-of-error fields. Record the five-year period, geography identifiers, dollar basis and uncertainty together. [C1, C6, C7]

A recent profile for an area below 65000 people

If the area has at least 20,000 people and timeliness is the priority, inspect the ACS 1-year supplemental K20 catalog first. Select it only if the needed measure and geography exist. Otherwise use ACS 5-year and state its longer period. This is a conditional choice, not a claim that every area or measure is available. [C1, C6]

Annual change in a large area's characteristics

Use comparable standard ACS 1-year tables where the geography is eligible. Keep the universe, measure and geographic boundary consistent. Retain margins of error and apply appropriate significance testing before describing an apparent change as established. Do not insert the 2020 experimental 1-year estimates into a normal trend. [C1, C2]

Annual county population growth

Use county totals from one Population Estimates Program vintage for all years being compared. Preserve the reference dates and calculate change within that series. Do not take an earlier year from an old vintage and the later year from a new one. Use official download files when the current series is not available through the API. [C2, C3, C4]

An official 2020 population baseline

Use the 2020 decennial product appropriate to the required geography. The official P1 table contains total population and race categories. Keep that count tied to its census reference date. Use ACS rather than P1 when the question is median income, education or employment. [C2, C5, C8]

These are evidence-based selection rules for actual research questions. No geographic observations have been invented or used to imply that a local market study was performed.

Checks before a table becomes a decision

Check	What to record
Question and measure	Count, rate, percentage, mean or median; exact subject and universe.
Product and geography	Product family, table ID, geography type and geography identifiers.
Period and vintage	Full ACS period or population-estimate vintage and reference date.
Units and uncertainty	People, households, dollars or percentages; dollar year and margins of error where applicable.
Comparability	Matching period lengths, non-overlapping 5-year periods, stable definitions and boundaries.
Access and citation	Exact download or table URL, access date, file name and any unavailable field.

Reject these shortcuts

- Do not rank areas from ACS point estimates alone when uncertainty could change the conclusion.
- Do not compare a one-year ACS value with a five-year value as if both describe the same period.
- Do not turn a suppressed or missing value into zero. Keep the source annotation with the value.
- Do not average medians or add overlapping periods to make an unsupported combined estimate.
- Do not assume the standard ACS threshold guarantees availability of every table product.

What still needs a project decision

The decision-maker must specify the geography, measure, acceptable age of data and tolerance for uncertainty. This research does not assign numerical weights to those choices, declare one product best for all tasks or promise that a named future release is available.

Primary source register

The next page lists the official sources. The workbook includes the same register and a 50-cell comparison: five product families across ten dimensions. Dates identify the review, not a guarantee of future availability.

Sources and reuse notes

C1 Choosing ACS estimates. Accessed 9 October 2026. <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/guidance/estimates.html>

C2 Comparing ACS data. Accessed 9 October 2026.

<https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/guidance/comparing-acs-data.html>

C3 About population estimates. Accessed 9 October 2026. <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/popest/about.html>

C4 Population estimates datasets. Accessed 9 October 2026. <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/popest/data/data-sets.html>

C5 ACS and decennial census. Accessed 9 October 2026. <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/about/acs-and-census.html>

C6 ACS data tables. Accessed 9 October 2026. <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/data/data-tables.html>

C7 ACS household income table B19013. Accessed 9 October 2026. <https://api.census.gov/data/2024/acs/acs5/groups/B19013.html>

C8 Decennial census table P1. Accessed 9 October 2026. <https://api.census.gov/data/2020/dec/pl/groups/P1.html>

C10 Citing Census data and research. Accessed 9 October 2026. <https://www.census.gov/about/policies/citation.html>

Attribution and responsibility

The Census Bureau is the source of the original guidance and table definitions. Cleargrain is responsible for this synthesis and the selection recommendations. The Bureau's public-use statement asks users to attribute source data and distinguishes third-party conclusions from Census Bureau work. [C10]

This document paraphrases federal-agency factual guidance. It reproduces no Census logos, seals, third-party photographs or branded page design. It is not endorsed by the Census Bureau. Official source pages should be checked for updates when the comparison is reused.