

**The Who, What, and Where of America: Understanding the American Community Survey (Book Review)**

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**Abstract:**

This article is a review of the book *The Who, What, and Where of America: Understanding the American Community Survey* by Deirdre A. Gaquin.

**Keywords:** Book Review | American Community Survey | U.S. Census | Government Information | Library Science

# Review

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*The Who, What, and Where of America: Understanding the American Community Survey.* Deirdre A.

Gaquin. Lanham, MD: Bernan Press, 2010. \$95. ISBN: 978-1-59888-398-5.

The primary goal of the newest addition to the U.S. Census Bureau's modified decennial census program, the American Community Survey (ACS), is to provide snapshots of our communities in the years between the decennial censuses. For this reason, the ACS has been a welcome addition to the data program despite its challenges. Because of our rapidly changing demographics, community planners and government officials need access to more current data than the decennial census can provide. An event like Hurricane Katrina points to the necessity of having up-to-date data for emergency response planning.

Despite this benefit, the ACS can be difficult to use, thus the justification for *The Who, What, and Where of America*. The ACS sample size is much smaller than the original census long form. To compensate, the Census Bureau has created a tiered approach to data releases (one-year estimates, three-year estimates, and five-year estimates) in which the sample sizes are larger with each release and therefore information is available for smaller geographies. In other words, the one-year estimates are for geographic areas with 65,000 people or more; the three-year estimates are for geographic areas with 20,000 people or more; and the five-year estimates are for all geographic areas. In contrast to the decennial census data release, this tiered approach can be confusing for students and researchers.

In *The Who, What, and Where of America*, Gaquin provides a good overview of the major challenges and benefits of the American Community Survey in addition to providing data for the 2005–07 three-year estimate. This Bernan Press publication is the newest addition to the County and City Extra Series, which includes the popular *County and City Extra* and *Places, Towns, and Townships*. The two introductory chapters—“Understanding the ACS” and “Using the ACS”—are helpful for setting the scene, explaining the details of the ACS, and comparing it with the decennial census. The book's organization may be confusing for someone new to the details of the ACS, but Gaquin guides readers to additional information from the Census Bureau.

The “Who, What, and Where” of the title is the organizing structure for the book, and admittedly a clever approach. The “Who” section covers demographic characteristics such as age, race/ethnicity, and household structure. The “What” section details education levels, employment, and income; while the “Where” presents a picture of migration patterns, housing, and transportation in the United States. Each thematic section begins with a narrative description of the condition of the United States for the 2005–07 period and closes with detailed tables from ACS data available in American FactFinder. Gaquin provides the American FactFinder table numbers for users to refer to for additional data. Because she is using the 2005–07 three-year estimate, data tables are available for all states, all metropolitan areas, and

counties and cities with populations of 20,000 or more.

Gaquin provides useful and complete commentary to assist users in understanding the ACS. The narrative introduction would certainly be useful for a patron needing an entry point to the survey. Additionally, the reference tables are a well-constructed alternative to American FactFinder's somewhat confusing interface. For these reasons, the book would serve well as a ready reference source for certain demographic and socioeconomic characteristics.

Similar to other efforts at repackaging government information, however, little information is unique in this publication and much can be found for free through American FactFinder ([factfinder.census.gov](http://factfinder.census.gov)) and the Census Bureau's Compass Handbooks ([census.gov/acs/www/UseData/Compass/handbook\\_def.html](http://census.gov/acs/www/UseData/Compass/handbook_def.html)). Its usefulness, especially in the long term, is fairly limited because of its focus on a partial collection of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics in a specific three-year estimate.

In a year filled with budget crises, I would be reluctant to purchase a work with such limited scope and shelf life, especially as a print volume. This publication would have been much better served in an e-book format. Considering the price of the book and its specificity, I do not consider it an essential volume for libraries with limited budgets for print materials or space constraints.  
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