

Census & Veterans

A census-in-action fact sheet

Executive summary

Census Bureau data plays a vital role in ensuring that veterans receive the services, benefits, and recognition they deserve. The decennial census provides the population foundation that ensures accuracy in all other surveys, while the American Community Survey (ACS) offers yearly updates on the demographic, social, and economic characteristics of veterans. Together, these sources guide decisions about veterans' health care, housing, workforce programs, and community support.

Veterans' service organizations, policymakers, and federal agencies—including the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Department of Labor (DOL), and Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)—rely on these data to allocate funding, evaluate program effectiveness, and identify emerging needs.

How census and ACS data power decisions for veterans

Understanding veterans' needs

The ACS provides unique statistics about veterans, including:

- Veteran status and period of service
- Service-connected disability status and rating¹
- Income, employment, housing, and educational attainment

These data allow communities and federal agencies to measure how veterans are doing in civilian life and to compare outcomes across states, counties, cities, towns, and rural areas.

Guiding Federal programs and services

Census and ACS data underpin major veterans' programs:

- **Healthcare Access:** VA uses ACS data to plan where to locate clinics and hospitals based on veteran population size and need.
- **Housing assistance:** The Department of Housing and Urban Develop-

¹ VA disability ratings are based on the severity of service-connected disabilities.

ment's Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) relies on census/ACS data on poverty, housing costs, and local demographics to direct resources.

- **Workforce development:** The Department of Labor uses ACS data to track employment outcomes and labor-force participation among veterans, informing job training and transition programs.

Funding allocation

Billions of federal dollars for veterans' programs are distributed each year with guidance from census data. Funding for health care facilities, housing vouchers, and local service grants is shaped by population counts and demographic detail from the decennial census and ACS.

Policy and research

Congress, state and local governments, and nonprofits depend on Census Bureau veteran data to:

- Draft and evaluate legislation related to veterans' benefits
- Monitor civil rights protections such as employment non-discrimination for disabled veterans
- Conduct research on veterans' experiences in education, housing, and employment

Veteran data highlights from the ACS

What the ACS tells us about veterans:

- 16 million veterans live in the United States
- Veterans are older on average than the general population, with about half age 65 or older and about one-quarter age 75 or older
- American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) people serve in the U.S. military at higher rates than any other racial or ethnic group

Why a good count matters for veterans

When veterans are missed in the decennial census or underrepresented in the ACS, it has real-world consequences. Inaccurate data can mean:

- Fewer resources for VA healthcare in communities with large veteran populations
- Misallocation of housing vouchers for homeless veterans
- Incomplete understanding of service-connected disability trends

Ensuring an accurate census count is critical to making sure veterans receive the benefits and services they earned.

Additional examples

The information above provides a snapshot, but the relationship between Census Bureau data and veterans' wellbeing runs deeper. The sections below expand on how decennial census and ACS data is used to shape services and opportunities for veterans.

Health care services

- **Clinic placement:** The VA uses ACS veteran population data to determine where new clinics should be built, particularly in rural areas where access to care is limited.
- **Specialized services:** ACS disability data help the VA identify areas with high concentrations of veterans who need specialized care, such as prostheses or mental health support.
- **Rural health initiatives:** Census data define rural areas (see *Census & Rural Communities*), determining a veteran's eligibility for rural veteran health programs and telehealth initiatives.

Housing and homelessness programs

- **HUD-VASH:** Combines HUD housing vouchers with VA case management. ACS poverty and housing cost data help determine geographic allocations.
- **Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP):** Uses census/ACS data on local unemployment and poverty rates to plan employment supports for homeless veterans.
- **Community planning:** Local Continuums of Care (regional homelessness planning bodies) rely on ACS data to estimate need and compare veteran homelessness rates with civilian populations.

Workforce and Education

- **Job training and placement:** DOL's Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS) uses ACS data to track labor force participation and unemployment rates by veteran status.
- **Apprenticeship programs:** ACS educational attainment data informs where programs to retrain veterans should be expanded.
- **GI Bill benefits:** Census/ACS data on local college enrollment and veteran educational attainment helps evaluate GI Bill program effectiveness.

Policy development and enforcement

- **Civil-rights protections:** Data on veterans with service-connected disabilities is used to enforce VEVRAA (Vietnam Era Veterans' Readjustment Assistance Act), which prohibits discrimination against veterans.
- **Congressional oversight:** Lawmakers use ACS veteran data to identify disparities in access to health care, jobs, and housing.
- **State-level programs:** State veterans' agencies rely on ACS data to

target outreach, design transportation services, and plan state-funded housing assistance.

Community and nonprofit uses

- **Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs):** Groups like the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America use ACS data to understand member needs and advocate for policy changes.
- **Nonprofit grantmaking:** Foundations funding veterans’ services often require census/ACS data to document community need.
- **Local planning:** Counties and cities use ACS veteran data to assess demand for local veterans’ programs, such as mental health support groups or job fairs.

Expanded veteran stats from the ACS

- **Distribution:** Veterans are concentrated in the South and West.
- **Poverty rates:** Veterans overall experience lower poverty rates than non-veterans, but younger veterans and female veterans are more likely to live in poverty.
- **Disability status:** About 25% of veterans report a service-connected disability.
- **Educational Attainment:** Veterans are more likely to have completed high school but vary widely in college completion rates.
- **Labor force participation:** Veterans in prime working age groups participate in the labor force at slightly higher rates than non-veterans, but post-9/11 veterans face higher unemployment.

Conclusion

Census and ACS data is indispensable for ensuring that veterans receive the services they deserve—from health care to housing to education and employment. Without accurate, timely, and comprehensive data, federal and local programs risk failing to meet veterans’ needs. An accurate decennial census and ACS are essential to honoring the nation’s commitment to those who have served.

This fact sheet was developed by [Census Counts](#) and Census Funder Collaborative. To the best of the authors’ knowledge, all information above is correct as of 2026-05-06. This content may be adapted or reused, with no rights reserved. The lead author was Meghan Maury-Fox. H James Lucas created the design. All text is set in MD UI or MD IO, new typefaces designed by Rutherford Craze and published by independent typefoundry Mass-Driver™.

Can’t I just Google that?

Sure...but where is Google getting *their* information from? Most publicly available information about veterans traces back to the Census Bureau. News articles, state reports, and even data from private analytics firms rely on census or ACS tables as the baseline source. Without Census Bureau data, there would be no consistent, reliable, or comparable information about veterans across communities in the United States.