

What is the Current Population Survey?

The Current Population Survey (CPS) is a monthly household survey overseen by the U.S. Census Bureau. The CPS collects cross-sectional data on approximately 50,000 households each month and has been conducted for over 50 years.

The CPS has become the primary data source for studying labor force participation and is designed to be representative of the civilian, noninstitutionalized population. The CPS collects data on employment status for all household members 15 and older, but the published data are limited to respondents aged 16 and older. The CPS data are regularly used by policy makers and legislators to gauge the current economic circumstances in the U.S. These data are also useful in both planning and evaluating government programs.

The CPS consists of both a core monthly questionnaire and supplemental files. The core data files collect information on various aspects of employment such as employment status, earnings, and hours of work. In addition to employment characteristics, the CPS also collects data on key demographic factors such as race/ethnicity, gender, age, educational attainment, and marital status. CPS data can also be organized by occupation, industry, and class of the worker.

The supplemental data files consistently include the following topics:

- Annual Social and Economic Characteristics (ASEC)
- Food Security
- Civic Engagement; Voting and Registration
- School Enrollment and Internet Use
- Volunteerism
- Veteran Status/Characteristics
- Fertility
- Displaced Worker, Employee Tenure, and Occupational Mobility

What does the CPS offer family researchers?

The main data files in the CPS provide family researchers an opportunity to explore employment patterns in households. In addition, some of the CPS supplements, such as the Fertility supplement and ASEC, contain information on completed fertility and timing of the most recent birth. The ASEC also contains measures of receipt of child support and alimony payments.

The U.S. Census Bureau staff produces three different types of reports using CPS data: Population Characteristics, Special Studies, and Consumer Income and Poverty (<http://www.census.gov/main/www/cprs.html>).

- The *Population Characteristics* reports cover topics such as marital status/living arrangements and households/families of interest to family researchers.
- *Special Studies* reports include a host of topics applicable to family research including material well-being and poverty among families as well as fertility.
- Finally, *Consumer Income and Poverty* reports examine resources by key variables of interest to family demographers such as family size and sex.

What is new in the 2007 CPS?

The 2007 CPS contains two improvements allowing researchers to better identify cohabiting couples. First, the 2007 CPS includes a direct measure of cohabitation. The second improvement concerns the parent pointers. Prior to 2007, the CPS collected one “parent pointer” for each child. This variable allowed children to “point” to one parent (differentiated by biological, step, or adoptive) in a surveyed household. Prior to 2007, only children who “pointed” to a currently married parent were coded as living with two parents.

In 2007, the CPS began allowing children to point to two parents. This change allows the researcher to accurately identify children living with two biological parents who are not married but live in the same household and correctly label them as living with two parents.

How do I access the data?

For new users, the DataFerret application allows the researcher to search for items across multiple surveys, run frequencies and crosstabs, construct figures, and manipulate data through recoding or the creation of averages/standard deviations.

For the more advanced user, the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) provides CPS data files that are compatible with SPSS, SAS, and STATA (<http://www.nber.org/cps/>).

Where can I learn more?

Additional information regarding the CPS can be found at the CPS main webpage (<http://www.census.gov/cps/>). The U.S. Census also provides a tool allowing researchers to ask questions pertaining to using the data (<https://ask.census.gov/app/ask>).

Suggested Citation

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