



Topical Module History Report: 2009–2019

Delivering specialized housing data to meet changing user needs

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Introduction

Users asked. We delivered.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the U.S. Census Bureau (Census Bureau) launched the American Housing Survey (AHS) in 1973. Since then, we have been working continuously to improve the AHS and make it more helpful to data users.

In 2008, a landmark report from the National Research Council (NRC) marked a turning point for the AHS. The report made several recommendations for strengthening the AHS, including increasing the use of topical modules to respond to the growing need for new and more specialized housing-related data (National Research Council 2008).

While HUD had previously included questions on special topics in the AHS, in the 2009 survey we added the first “modern” topical module addressing an issue of special interest to many users—the impact of Hurricane Katrina on households in New Orleans, LA.

Motivated by the NRC recommendations, after the 2009 AHS, HUD re-evaluated the survey questions and decided to implement a rotating topical module strategy. We identified three topics in the 2009 survey (and prior years) that were the best candidates for being transformed into rotating topical modules: journey to work (a.k.a., commuting), neighborhood quality and features, and household safety features. The remaining survey questions were designated as “core” modules. We then solicited input from HUD survey users and users of external surveys to identify additional topics that should be included in the survey as rotating topical modules.

Beginning with the 2011 AHS, HUD officially implemented the rotating topical module strategy, and this strategy has been in place in every survey year since. The AHS topical modules place an array of unique new data sets at users’ fingertips and enable HUD to examine a range of emerging issues that intersect with housing. We have collected data on everything from health and safety hazards and disaster preparedness to public transportation and access to nutritious food. Armed with these data, users can answer research questions they have not been able to fully examine before, such as: What role do the arts play in people’s choice of neighborhoods? Are housing costs affecting post-secondary education enrollment? What is the relationship between food insecurity and high housing costs?

Filling gaps, minimizing burden

Data collected in the AHS topical modules fill critical research gaps. For many of these topics, the AHS is the only national-level survey conducted with such a large random sample, which regularly captures this detailed household-level information. And because the topical modules are embedded in the AHS, the rich body of household data in the core modules provides the context users need to dig deeper into these critical topics.



Importantly, the topical modules allow HUD and the Census Bureau to collect this new information without increasing respondent burden. Instead of appearing in every survey, the topical modules are rotated into the survey every 4 or 6 years. To further expand the number of topics we cover without increasing overall respondent burden, in 2013, we began randomly splitting the AHS sample into two groups—administering some topical modules to half of the sample and the remaining modules to the other half.

Ensuring data quality and relevance

The addition of the AHS topical modules is one critical way in which HUD and the Census Bureau ensure that the AHS continues to deliver accurate, up-to-date data you can apply to your work. We keep the modules relevant by regularly reaching out to the AHS user community to seek input on topics to include in the rotating modules. We ensure that the topical modules obtain the highest quality data by collaborating with agencies and organizations that bring deep knowledge and specialized subject matter expertise to the development of module questions and analysis of results.

This report presents the topical modules that have been included in the survey since the 2009 AHS. You will see what we measured, discover how organizations are using data from these modules to examine a wide variety of issues, and find suggestions for how you can use these data to answer your organization’s most pressing housing-related questions.

AHS Topical Modules (2009–2019)

Year	Topics
2009	Hurricane Katrina
2011	Health and Safety Characteristics (aka Healthy Homes), Extended Disabilities and Home Accessibility
2013	Public Transportation and Pedestrian Accessibility, Community Involvement (aka Neighborhood Social Capital), Movers Leaving and Entering Unit (aka Doubled-up Households), Neighborhood Quality and Features, Emergency and Disaster Preparedness, Delinquent Payments and Notices
2015	Health and Safety Characteristics (aka Healthy Homes), Arts and Culture, Housing Counseling, Food Security
2017	Emergency and Disaster Preparedness, Delinquent Payments and Notices, Commuting Modes and Commuting Costs, Evictions, Urbanization
2019	Food Security, Disabilities and Home Accessibility, Post-Secondary Education, Hurricane Harvey

To learn more, visit the American Housing Survey [website](#) or email us at helpdesk@huduser.gov or call us at 1-800-245-2691.



About the American Housing Survey (AHS)

The American Housing Survey (AHS), funded by HUD and conducted by the Census Bureau, is the nation's most comprehensive housing survey. The AHS is a longitudinal survey, providing detailed, up-to-date information on housing costs, housing quality, and neighborhood assets. After a major redesign in 2015, the AHS sample features two parts: an integrated national sample, and 20 independent metropolitan area samples chosen from America's top 50 largest cities. The national longitudinal sample provides statistical data for the entire United States, plus representative samples for each of the country's 15 largest metropolitan areas. For the 20 additional metropolitan areas, the Census Bureau goes back to the same housing units every 4 years, collecting longitudinal data on a wide range of geographic areas.

What is an AHS module?

The AHS questionnaire includes several hundred questions across a variety of housing and neighborhood topics. The questions are organized into a number of separate groups or modules (for example, a module on mortgage questions and a module on remodeling questions). We devote about two-thirds of the questionnaire to permanent core modules, which collect basic housing data in every survey year. The other one-third of the questionnaire is devoted to topical modules, described in this report, which are rotated into the survey every 4 or 6 years based on the needs of HUD and the AHS user community. Data from both types of modules are available for download on the AHS website in two formats: as summary tables, which can be accessed through the AHS Table Creator online tool; and as public use file (PUF) microdata.

Chapter 1. 2009 AHS Topical Module

Measuring the impact of Hurricane Katrina

In the 2009 AHS, HUD debuted the first “modern” topical module—a series of specific questions aimed at obtaining information from residents of the New Orleans, LA (NOLA) metropolitan area who had been displaced by Hurricane Katrina.

Hurricane Katrina Module

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina slammed into the city of New Orleans, leaving more than 400,000 displaced residents in its wake. Unlike any disaster in the nation's history, Hurricane Katrina contributed to the unprecedented displacement of an entire city, whose population was scattered nationwide.



With the addition of the Hurricane Katrina topical module, data from the 2009 AHS provided the first comprehensive look at the quality and characteristics of the housing supply in the New Orleans metropolitan area since 2004—one year before the hurricane hit. The 2009 module collected data from about 6,000 housing units, including all units first surveyed in the 2004 New Orleans Metropolitan Area survey, plus additional cases. With the new data, users have the ability to examine important changes over time.

Examining the storm’s effect on NOLA households

The 2009 module questionnaire asked questions designed to capture the experience of Katrina-displaced residents. It included questions about where householders went when they evacuated the city and whether they were still in transition. The module also asked about the cost of repairs that were made as a result of hurricane damage and about how long the reconstruction work lasted. It also included questions about sources of funding, including homeowners’ insurance, federal flood insurance, and other financial assistance. In addition, the module collected data on recent movers, including pre- and post-Katrina housing type, geographic locations, and other information about the characteristics of the householder’s pre-Katrina unit.

The 2009 AHS displacement data informed a 2011 Census Bureau study on the movement of New Orleans householders in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (Geaghan 2011). Other research is being conducted using the AHS topical module data to better understand what happened to occupants of affected housing units pre- and post-Katrina, including a study that is measuring how housing unit characteristics influenced the long-term recovery of displaced residents. Researcher Elizabeth Fussell, an associate professor of Population Studies and Environment and Society at Brown University explains, “These data deepen our understanding of how important the housing stock is in a disaster. By focusing on how people are sorted into housing, and how that makes them vulnerable to displacement because of a disaster, we are better able to help those who are affected.”

Informing policy, preparedness, and response

Data collected in this module are valuable to policymakers and others involved in planning for and responding to disasters. By enabling users to examine gaps in rebuilding funding, time lags, and bottlenecks, as well as compare housing stock and demographic characteristics of affected areas before and after Katrina, these data provide valuable insights that will help inform disaster preparedness and future response.



Chapter 2. 2011 AHS Topical Modules

Exploring home health and safety

Two topical modules made their debut in the 2011 AHS: Health and Safety Characteristics, and Extended Disabilities and Home Accessibility. These new modules collected data on two critical issues in America’s communities: potential health hazards in the home, and housing modifications made to assist older occupants and people with disabilities.

Health and Safety Characteristics (aka Healthy Homes) Module

Identifying unhealthy conditions in America’s housing stock is a prerequisite to correcting them. To help obtain a clearer picture of the prevalence of unhealthy homes in the U.S., we developed the Health and Safety Characteristics (aka Healthy Homes) topical module. For the first time, the 2011 AHS collected detailed data about housing-related hazards and their effects on health. With the AHS’ large random sample and nationwide reach, these data tell a story about the link between housing and occupant health, and the size and scope of the problem across America, which had not been possible before. No other regularly administered survey routinely captures these data or provides the ability to subset the data in such meaningful ways.

Bridging the gap between housing conditions and health

HUD’s Office of Lead Hazard Control and Healthy Homes (OLHCHH) collaborated with environmental health experts from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC’s) National Center for Environmental Health (NCEH) to create the questions included in this module. The [questionnaire](#) included questions addressing key injury hazards, such as lighting in staircases; hot water temperature; and swimming, electrical, and fire hazards. It also addressed housing conditions that can affect occupant health, such as the presence of asthma triggers—including cockroaches, mice, dust, and mold—and the need for emergency treatment of these conditions.

Sample: 2011 National - Health and Safety Characteristics - All Occupied Units

Health of Household
Health of householder
Excellent
Very good
Fair
Poor
Not reported
Child Health and Safety
Children younger than 5 live in or regularly visit household
Electrical outlets covered
All
Some
None
Not reported



Evaluating the problem to inform policy

“With this more complete and accurate look at health and safety hazards in the housing stock, we can improve national surveillance on housing characteristics and look for opportunities that can lead to improvements over time,” notes Dr. Peter Ashley, director of HUD’s Policy and Standards Division in OLHCHH. HUD uses the Healthy Homes module data to inform ongoing research, policies, and programs to improve healthy housing. For example, HUD researchers Veronica Helms and Elizabeth Rudd are using the module data in the first-ever study of unhealthy housing among children living in HUD-assisted housing. In collaboration with CDC and the Environmental Protection Agency, HUD researchers also are using the module data to create a lead hazard exposure index (Deener et al. 2019), which will help local housing and health policymakers, as well as HUD program administrators, identify and target neighborhoods most at risk of exposure to deteriorated lead paint.

Other organizations in the public and non-profit sectors use these data in their work related to health and unhealthy housing. For example, Johns Hopkins University used the Healthy Homes module data in a study on childhood asthma (Hughes et al. 2017).

There is much potential in these data, especially for researchers who typically may not use housing data. For example, public health researchers can link these data to other data sources to examine disparities and determine how housing relates to other social determinants of health. Community public health organizations can use the AHS metropolitan area samples to examine local and regional differences in health intervention programs.

Extended Disabilities and Home Accessibility Module

Nearly 22 million homes in the United States include an adult over the age of 65, and 1 in 3 of these older adults reports that they have trouble using some feature of their home. We created this topical module on extended disabilities and home accessibility to address these urgent issues.

For the first time, we were able to examine the accessibility of the U.S. housing stock related to mobility, and visual and auditory impairments, and find out whether older occupants and people with disabilities live in accessible homes.

Sample: 2011 National - Disabilities - All Occupied Units

Households with Disabled Persons
With a disabled person
Without a disabled person
Not reported
Hearing Disabilities
With hearing disability
No hearing disability
Not reported



Answering questions about accessible aging

The ability to identify characteristics of homes that limit accessibility and better understand the accessibility modifications made to homes of elderly occupants and people with disabilities is critical to HUD and other researchers who are interested in removing barriers to independent living. Since 2009, the Demographics core module of the AHS has included a six-question series about disabilities. The Extended Disabilities and Home Accessibility module asked an extended battery of questions about types of disabilities not covered in the six-question series.

The [questionnaire](#) collected data about the presence of 22 different accessibility features in the housing unit—from extra-wide doorways to wheelchair-accessible climate controls and kitchen cabinets—and about whether anyone in the household used these features on a regular basis. With input from CDC, we adapted questions from a 1995 AHS supplement for use in the 2011 topical module.

Assessing housing stability for vulnerable populations

At HUD, we are using these data to evaluate the state of housing needs for elderly occupants and people with disabilities and estimate the extent to which the current housing stock is meeting their needs. Collecting these data helps advance our strategic goals of improving housing stability and expanding the supply of affordable rental homes for groups who need it most.

The Remodeling Futures project, conducted by Harvard University's Joint Center for House Studies (JCHS), uses the data in research to better understand the implications of an aging population for the home improvement industry. For example, AHS module data informed JCHS research examining the growing need for accessibility features related to aging in place (Will 2015) and exploring the importance of addressing accessibility deficiencies in the nation's housing stock (Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University 2014). The Bipartisan Policy Center cites 2011 AHS data on geographic differences in accessible housing in its Senior Health and Housing Task Force recommendations to meet the housing needs of older Americans (Bipartisan Policy Center 2016). Other groups, including the National Association of Home Builders, AARP, and other advocates for people who are older or have disabilities, can use the data to accurately assess the market for remodeling and new construction and to better serve this growing segment of the population.



Chapter 3. 2013 AHS Topical Modules

A closer look at neighborhoods

Topical modules included in the 2013 AHS collected a new and unique body of data on wide-ranging aspects of neighborhood life, such as the need to temporarily move in with other households, neighborhood conditions, public transportation and pedestrian friendliness, social connections and trust, difficulty paying housing costs, and emergency preparedness. Also new in 2013, rather than administering each topical module to every respondent, HUD randomly split the national and metropolitan samples. With this change, we could maximize the number of rotating topical modules and reduce respondent burden, while still providing national estimates that were statistically reliable.

Public Transportation and Pedestrian Accessibility Module

Housing and transportation—the typical household’s two largest expenses—are closely connected and directly impact quality of life in America’s neighborhoods. Public transportation provides more options for workers to live in affordable housing. Supporting walkability is part of HUD’s commitment to healthy housing. As a result, the ability to evaluate public transportation and pedestrian accessibility is critical to HUD’s mission, and was an important driver for the development of this AHS topical module.

Underscoring the connection between housing and transportation

The Public Transportation and Pedestrian Accessibility module collects a wealth of data on how households use public transportation, bike, and walk. We reviewed several public transportation surveys to develop the module questions, including the commuting questions in the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey, the 2002 National Survey of Pedestrian and Bicyclist Attitudes and Behaviors, and the 2009 National Household Travel Survey.

The module asks people how close they live to public transportation; how often they use it; their public transportation costs and destinations; and, if applicable, the reasons why they don’t use public transportation. On the pedestrian accessibility side, the [questionnaire](#) asks people how often they walk or bike, whether their neighborhood has sidewalks or bike lanes, whether the sidewalks are well lit and in good condition, and any concerns they may have about walking or biking in their neighborhood.



Advancing strategic goals, informing important lines of research

Although the module includes content from other surveys, the data in this module are uniquely valuable because the AHS provides a much larger sample and allows for cross-tabulations by special populations. For example, the data allow us to better understand public transportation use among HUD-assisted renter households. And because the AHS includes data on housing and utility costs, this module lets us look at transportation costs relative to other housing costs—an important line of research for HUD.

Collecting this kind of data helps HUD advance some of its most important programmatic and research efforts and accomplish some of its most

critical strategic goals. Public transportation data collected through this module inform our efforts to increase economic security and self-sufficiency; improve housing stability and public safety; drive economic development; and promote walkable communities that are healthy, affordable, and diverse.

Researchers at the University of California-Los Angeles Luskin School of Public Affairs used the 2013 AHS data to investigate the relationship between residential parking that is bundled into the cost of housing and the use of public transportation (Manville and Pinski 2020). Likewise, Virginia Tech researchers used module data to study public transportation impacts on housing values (Hopkins 2018). Other organizations interested in transit-centered development, such as Reconnecting America, Strategic Economics, and the Center for Neighborhood Technology, can use these data to study household transportation and explore ways to integrate housing, transportation, and jobs.

Community Involvement (aka Neighborhood Social Capital) Module

Neighborhood social capital—the social ties and activities that neighborhoods bring to bear to solve social problems—is a critical neighborhood asset that contributes to community well-being. The 2013 AHS was the first national-level survey to examine this powerful concept. The module asked 21 questions drawn from similar surveys that had been field-tested over the previous 18 years in neighborhoods in Chicago and a few other U.S. cities (Sampson and Graif 2009). As part of the 2013 AHS, these questions were fielded to a much larger and more geographically diverse sample, giving us a chance to ask residents in 25 metropolitan areas for their thoughts about important aspects of their neighborhoods.

Sample: 2013 National - Public Transportation - All Occupied Units

Amenities Accessible by Public Transit
Grocery store
Personal services
Retail shopping
Entertainment
Health care services
Personal banking
Household Uses Public Transportation
Yes
No
Not reported



Hearing directly from residents about where they live

This module collected data on the ways neighborhoods are organized, and the extent to which householders’ shared expectations about social networks, connections, and trust are seen as assets of their neighborhoods. We developed this module in consultation with researchers who had previously conducted similar smaller-scale surveys, including Robert Sampson at Harvard University, and Cathy Haggerty and Michele Zimowski at NORC at the University of Chicago.

The 21 questions were specifically chosen to measure five neighborhood social capital metrics:

- Shared expectations for social control, or how likely neighbors would be to report or intervene to solve a neighborhood problem, such as vandalism
- Social cohesion and trust, or whether households considered their neighborhood to be close-knit
- Organizational involvement, or the degree to which households participated in neighborhood groups, religious organizations, and civic organizations
- Neighborhood social ties, or the degree to which households considered themselves to be friends with their neighbors
- Volunteerism, or how often households volunteered within their neighborhood

Taking neighborhood-level data to scale

HUD is working to take these neighborhood-level results to scale nationwide. Because these data paint a clear picture of people’s day-to-day experiences in their neighborhoods, the data also help HUD achieve goals related to improving public safety, ensuring diverse and equitable communities, and building capacity at the community level. We are also using the data to look at the impact of neighborhood social capital on the housing choices of tenants who are receiving housing assistance from HUD.

Other researchers, such as Colleen Wynn, Ph.D., an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Indianapolis, use the data to answer critical questions about how where people live impacts their well-being (Wynn 2018). Wynn explains, “By measuring the way people actually feel about their neighborhoods, we are able to look at whether things like social control and cohesion act as a buffer against negative impacts in neighborhoods and to see if we’ve been missing some of the ways neighborhoods are beneficial.”

Sample: 2013 National - Community Involvement - All Occupied Units

Household Involvement in Organizations
Member of a neighborhood watch, community council, etc.
Yes
No
Not reported
Member of a religious organization
Yes
No
Not reported
Member of a civic, service, or social organization
Yes
No
Not reported



The module provides opportunities for researchers to look at these data along with the rich level of household data found in the AHS to uncover insights that cannot be found in other data sets. Even researchers who may not normally work with housing data can find interesting community-level data at the intersection of housing and neighborhood social capital that could be used to find out more about residents, such as their housing experiences, their families, and their feelings about their larger communities. Organizations doing work on the ground—including law enforcement officers, health-related professionals, organizers, and policymakers—can benefit from understanding how communities operate. These insights can help inform the ways in which programs are developed and policy is delivered.

Movers Leaving and Entering Unit (aka Doubled-Up Households) Module

Doubling up—when individuals and families live in someone else’s home because a lack of money or other means of support prevents them from having a regular place to stay—is often a precursor to homelessness. Because so little is known about doubled-up households, capturing the movement of this vulnerable population is a high priority for HUD.

With the addition of the Doubled-Up Households module, the 2013 AHS became the only current survey to provide the level of detail necessary to accurately measure households that are doubled up due to economic hardship. Data from this module adds to existing research on where people live before and after they become homeless (Culhane, Lee, and Wachter 1996).

The Doubled-Up Households module explores the reasons why households with multiple families choose to move into and out of their homes to share housing burdens. Its [questionnaire](#) collected data on whether people moved due to lack of financial means; whether their households had trouble paying utility bills, rent, and mortgage; and if they recently received a notice of utility shut-off, eviction, or foreclosure. It also asked about where people would stay if they left their current household.

Sample: 2013 National - Movers Leaving and Entering Unit - All Occupied Units

Household Member Moved Out of Unit in Past Year
How Many Moved Out
1 person
2 persons
3 persons
4 persons or more
Reason for Stay
Stayed due to lack of money or financial support
Did not stay due to lack of money or financial support
Not reported

Filling an important gap in our understanding of homelessness

HUD created this module with extensive input from leading homelessness scholars—including experts from the Urban Institute, University of Pennsylvania, United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), Westat, the Homelessness Research Institute at the National Alliance to End Homelessness, Abt Associates, and Wayne State University.

Data from this module complements data from other data sources—including the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) and other research that uses data from SIPP. However,



there are critical differences. SIPP questions do not address the issue of risk of housing loss or directly allow for an assessment of “economic” doubled-up households, which is of greatest interest to HUD.

Seeking answers to inform action across the field

Understanding how the doubled-up population fits into the overall picture of homelessness is mission-critical for HUD. Collecting these data supports several of our strategic goals—in particular, it advances our goal to end homelessness and substantially reduce the number of Americans with severe housing needs. An analysis of the 2013 module data included in the Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress provided critical insights into people who may be vulnerable to experiencing homelessness (Henry et al. 2014). USICH uses the findings from this module in their work to affect homelessness (Solari et al. 2016b).

Neighborhood Quality and Features Module

The physical characteristics of a neighborhood can have a powerful effect on quality of life and the value of homes in a community. But these effects can be difficult to measure. This rotating topical module incorporates the 2009 AHS questions on neighborhood quality and features.

Creating a central database of neighborhood characteristics

The module [questionnaire](#) asks householders about the characteristics of their neighborhoods—from parks, roadways, and grocery stores, to abandoned buildings, and trash or litter. For many of the items in this module—such as the quantity of housing designed specifically for people ages 55 and older—the AHS is the only national-level data source that allows users to estimate these important neighborhood features. Previously, there was no consistent procedure for collecting information on the presence or condition of these neighborhood characteristics.

Questions in the Neighborhood Quality and Features module were taken mostly verbatim from the 2009 AHS and neighborhoods questions included in earlier surveys, with a few modifications. For example, HUD consulted with food accessibility researchers at the United States Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service to modify 2009 questions about grocery store accessibility.

Sample: 2013 National - Neighborhoods - All Occupied Units

Neighborhood Shopping
Grocery store and drug store within 15 minutes of your home
Full-service grocery store
Convenience store
Not reported
Only grocery store within 15 minutes of your home
Full-service grocery store
Convenience store
Not reported
Only drug store within 15 minutes of your home
No grocery stores or drug stores within 15 minutes of your home
Not reported



Data from this module inform HUD’s efforts to improve quality of life and enhance and preserve community assets in America’s neighborhoods—two of HUD’s key strategic goals.

Understanding the value of neighborhood amenities

The Neighborhood Quality and Features module fills gaps in the research base for users across many disciplines. For instance, the module is the only source for the data the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) needs to estimate how demand for senior housing matches supply. According to Dr. Paul Emrath, vice president for survey and housing policy research at NAHB, “The most important thing this data allows us to do is to be able to look at the impact of neighborhood characteristics on the value of a home. It helps us understand what the neighborhood does to the value of the homes in it.” For example, being able to examine and document how proposed changes, such as the addition of multifamily units, may affect the value of existing homes in the neighborhood is a big issue for communities making land-use decisions.

Another unique feature of the Neighborhood Quality and Features module is the subjective information it provides. With detailed data directly from householders on how satisfied they are with their current home and neighborhood; developers can plan communities with the kinds of homes and neighborhood amenities prospective buyers really want.

Emergency and Disaster Preparedness Module

Monitoring the housing stock’s susceptibility to disasters and residents’ readiness for them is a priority for HUD—especially since America’s low- and moderate-income communities are often the hardest hit by these emergencies. HUD developed this topical module to measure national preparedness for a disaster—with an eye on the vulnerable populations we serve. Much of the module’s content is based on Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) guidelines for disaster preparedness and other disaster preparedness surveys. However, no other survey has attempted to measure national household disaster preparedness with a sample size as large as the 2013 AHS, and no other disaster preparedness survey permits cross-tabulations by the socioeconomic groups of special interest to HUD.

Understanding whether households are ready...or not

HUD set out to determine how prepared American households are for any kind of emergency or disaster—from tornados and hurricanes to earthquakes and other events. We asked householders whether they had an evacuation plan and meeting point, and about whether they had emergency supplies, such as adequate food, water, or a generator. The [questionnaire](#) also asked about whether household members had the financial means to relocate during an evacuation; where they would stay; and whether they had enough reliable vehicles to evacuate all persons, pets, and supplies.



Building the knowledge base nationally and in communities

HUD consulted with the National Disaster Housing Task Force and other organizations to develop this topical module. Data from this module help HUD connect household emergency plans with housing, demographic, and income characteristics. Our Office of Disaster and Emergency Management uses the data to understand the readiness of HUD-assisted households and to carry out our strategic goals of facilitating disaster preparedness, recovery, and resiliency.

Data from this topical module are valuable to many other national, regional, and local organizations. For example, local planning agencies in the metropolitan areas covered in the AHS use the data to inform their activities. NAHB uses the data to report on preparedness among people living in different kinds of housing units (Miller 2014). The Mid-America Regional Council, the South Florida Regional Planning Council, Reconnecting America, the City of Des Moines, and the Jacob France Institute of the University of Baltimore also have expressed interest in these data.

Delinquent Payments and Notices Module

Missing a rent or utility payment or receiving an eviction notice is a crucial sign that a household's housing situation is unstable. With this topical module, we collected new data on how many owners or renters had difficulty paying their housing and utility costs and whether they believed they were at risk for foreclosure or eviction. The [questionnaire](#) covered topics such as mortgage, rent, and utility payment activity, threatened foreclosure and eviction notices, and the likelihood of leaving home due to eviction or foreclosure. These data have been used to examine the relationship between income and missed rents and mortgage payments (Solari et al. 2016a). Data from this module can also be used to study the link between housing cost burden and the likelihood that households will miss rent or mortgage payments.

Sample: 2013 National - Emergency and Disaster Preparedness - All Occupied Units

House or Building Number Clearly Visible
Yes
No
Not reported
Generator Present
1-unit buildings
Yes
No
Not reported
Non-Perishable Emergency Food
Yes
No
Not reported

Sample: 2013 National - Delinquent Payments and Notices - All Occupied Units

Utility Activity in Last Three Months
Received notice of utilities shut-off due to missed payment(s):
Yes
Have or had utilities shut-off:
Yes
No
Not reported
No
Not reported



Understanding the barriers to housing security

HUD uses these data to test new ways of measuring “housing insecurity”—an umbrella term that encompasses several dimensions of housing problems people may experience, including affordability, safety, quality, insecurity, and loss of housing.

Chapter 4. 2015 AHS Topical Modules

Understanding how counseling, culture, hazards, and the cost of food affect American households

In 2015, the AHS underwent a major redesign. For the first time since 1985, HUD and the Census Bureau selected new national and metropolitan area longitudinal samples. While we changed the AHS sample design, we continued the process of supplementing the AHS core question modules with rotating topical modules.

The 2015 AHS added new topical modules on the use and benefits of housing counseling services, the importance of community arts and cultural venues, and access to and affordability of food. The 2015 survey also included an updated module on potential health and safety hazards in the home. We also added questions addressing neighborhood features and quality, as well as some home safety features, back into the core modules.

Health and Safety Characteristics (aka Healthy Homes) Module (Revised)

The 2015 AHS added a revised version of the Healthy Homes module, which first appeared in the 2011 AHS. The updated topical module included new and revised questions about secondhand smoke, radon exposure, and preventive asthma medications. The 2015 [questionnaire](#) asked about air and water quality and the presence of musty smells and tobacco smoke inside the home. It also included questions on testing for and work done to reduce the level of radon. Questions from the 2011 module on householder health, winter heating hazards, and smoke and carbon monoxide detectors were dropped.

Sample: 2015 National - Health and Safety Characteristics - All Occupied Units

Radon in the Home
Air tested for radon
Radon level too high
Action has been taken to reduce radon level:
Yes
No
Not reported

HUD’s Office of Lead Hazard Control and Healthy Homes closely coordinated with environmental health experts from CDC’s National Center for Environmental Health and a national non-profit organization—the National Center for Healthy Housing—to create questions for this module. There is no other regularly administered survey that routinely captures these data, which allow for the more accurate identification of health and safety hazards present in the home.



These data will be valuable to researchers and organizations interested in the link between housing and health. The Urban Institute, for example, used 2015 module data to explore the relationship between housing and asthma among school-age children (Ganesh et al. 2017).

Arts and Culture Module

Why do different demographic groups gravitate to different kinds of neighborhoods? HUD developed this topical module—which measures the importance of access to arts and culture—to add another dimension to our understanding of neighborhood choice and satisfaction.

This AHS topical module collected new data on householders’ access to arts and cultural venues and events—including musical, theatrical, and dance performances, literary events, film screenings, museum and gallery exhibits, and crafts and performing arts festivals. The [questionnaire](#) asked about the importance respondents placed on such amenities, and the role these amenities played in their choice of current neighborhood. This module was the first to capture nationally representative data, from the housing unit perspective, on how people value proximity to arts and cultural venues in their neighborhoods.

Understanding how arts and culture impact and serve communities

HUD worked closely with the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) to develop the module questions, analyze the data, and interpret results. HUD set out to better understand the social and economic impacts of arts and cultural venues on neighborhoods, and we use these data to analyze how arts and cultural amenities affect housing costs, residential choice, and neighborhood satisfaction.

The NEA was motivated to collaborate on this module by its organization-wide need to learn more about peoples’ attachment to their communities through art. Module questions that asked about people’s attitudes filled an important gap for the NEA. Sunil Iyengar, director of NEA’s Office of Research & Analysis, describes the value of this information: “With these data, we have the unrivaled ability to start to talk about arts institutions as cultural assets in communities...to say they are valued by this much...and to make a link between these cultural amenities in people’s communities and people’s housing preferences.” The NEA analyzed data from the 2015 Arts and Culture module to describe adults who value living near arts/cultural venues and who cite greater access to arts venues as a reason for their neighborhood choice (National Endowment for the Arts 2019).

Sample: 2015 National - Arts and Culture - All Occupied Units

Access to Arts and Cultural Events Played Role in Neighborhood Choice
Yes
No
Not reported
Importance of Living Near Arts and Cultural Events
Very important
Important
Not important
Not reported



Delivering valuable insights across many disciplines

The Arts and Culture module gives researchers the ability to analyze targeted data on proximity to the arts together with a wide range of variables already embedded in the AHS, such as household characteristics and the types of housing units in which people live. As a result, the module can be a valuable tool for users in many disciplines. Community-based arts organizations can use the data to better understand how people value the arts, the degree to which they are served by arts establishments in their communities, and what needs to be done to more fully serve neighborhoods through the arts. Many others—from community planners to policymakers and householders—want and need reliable information about neighborhood arts and culture because these factors can play a large role in where people want to live, and how they spend their time and money.

In the future, groups interested in arts programming and affordable housing could use this kind of data, in combination with other data sets, to do geo-mapping—mapping where arts organizations are located compared to where people live—as a way to flag pockets that lack access to the arts.

Housing Counseling Module

Homeowners who may be struggling to keep their homes, along with renters who have issues with their apartment or landlord, and those who want to become owners, often turn to government agencies and other groups for counseling and advice. With the development of the Housing Counseling module, the AHS became the only federal nationally representative household survey to collect data on these kinds of counseling services.

The module's [questionnaire](#) collected a wealth of data about the number of homeowners and renters who have sought professional housing counseling, why they sought advice, how much they paid for these services, and whether the advice was helpful. Housing counseling experts within the Housing Counseling Program at HUD developed these questions to help fill a critical gap in this line of research. Most existing studies of housing counseling have been small-scale evaluation studies or larger scale analyses of administrative data. For example, NeighborWorks America conducts a small private survey of housing counseling, and the Census Bureau's Economic Census collects data on businesses that provide housing counseling to low-income individuals and families but does not collect data on households that receive counseling.

Sample: 2015 National - Housing Counseling - All Occupied Units

Received Professional Housing Counseling
Yes
Homeownership counseling
Rent counseling
Both
Not reported
No
Not reported



Food Security Module

Food-insecure households lack access to enough affordable and nutritious food. While a few state-level studies have shown a link between food insecurity and high housing costs, this 2015 AHS Food Security module was the first to collect the detailed level of national data needed to help us understand how food security is related to where people live.

The module collected new data on the relationship between food security and housing quality and affordability. The [questionnaire](#) asks about food-related concerns, such as whether household members were worried food would run out before money was available to buy more, if they could afford to eat balanced meals, or if they had to cut the size of a meal because they lacked money to purchase food.

Understanding how housing affects access to food

HUD partnered with the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA’s) Economic Research Service (ERS) to adapt a set of 10 questions from the ERS’ U.S. Household Food Security Survey Module, which measures the prevalence of household food security in the United States. This and other federal surveys include field food security questions, but none include detailed housing data. Motivated by a need to better understand the relationship between housing affordability and food security, the USDA collaborated with HUD to develop questions for the 2015 Food Security module.

Sample: 2015 National - Food Security - All Occupied Units

Households in the Last 30 Days
Worried Food Would Run Out Before Getting Money to Buy More
Often true
Sometimes true
Never true
Not reported
Could Not Afford to Eat Balanced Meals
Often true
Sometimes true
Never true
Not reported

Telling the whole story behind food insecurity

At HUD, these data support our efforts to uncover where problems with housing may lead to poor outcomes. HUD uses the data to understand the relationship between food security and housing burden at the household level, and to examine the role housing and food assistance may have in moderating the effects of food insecurity. We are also analyzing how HUD assistance programs, especially rental assistance, affect food security. HUD is conducting research using the 2015 module data to look at the relationship among housing affordability, food stamps, and food insecurity.



Users across many disciplines can use these data to look at how the concept of food security is related to where people live and determine the part housing plays in the food security problem. George Carter, Ph.D., a survey statistician in HUD’s Office of Policy Development and Research, notes that “organizations in the public and private sectors can use this data to look at the predictors of food insecurity and to tell a story about the mechanisms going on behind the scenes that can lead to food insecurity. The more you know about what causes food insecurity, the more you know about how to intervene to improve people’s health.”

Translating research into community interventions

City planners can use data from the AHS Food Security module to identify areas with food security challenges. Healthcare organizations with a focus on prevention can use the data to consider how interventions that improve food security can positively impact health outcomes and translate this research into practice. “Rather than only examining the problem through a single lens,” Carter adds, “this research can bring together groups who may not think their goals are related—for example, those focused on increasing affordable housing and those focused on hunger.”

Chapter 5. 2017 AHS Topical Modules

New insights on commuting, emergency preparedness, delinquent payments, evictions, and urbanization

The 2017 AHS rotated in four topical modules. These modules collected new data on how people commute to work and commuting costs, the causes and effects of evictions, and whether people consider their neighborhood to be “urban,” “suburban,” or “rural.” The 2017 AHS also added updated modules on disaster and emergency preparedness; and delinquent payments and notices for mortgage, rent, or utility bills.

Emergency and Disaster Preparedness Module (REVISED)

We revised this module—which first appeared in the 2013 AHS—to expand the kinds of data we collect on household preparedness for emergencies and disasters. The revised module continued to ask about emergency supplies and whether a household would have the financial means, a place to stay, and reliable vehicles to relocate during an evacuation. The 2017 module [questionnaire](#) added new questions about a household’s first source of emergency information during a disaster and whether the home was covered by flood insurance. We also collected new data about disaster repairs in renter-occupied units and the presence of a tornado safe room or shelter.



Examining readiness nationwide and in high-risk areas

HUD collaborated with the National Disaster Housing Task Force and experts in the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Individual and Community Preparedness Division to develop questions for this updated module.

Data from this module can be used alongside other data on high-risk areas to determine whether susceptible populations are adequately preparing for disasters. For example, AHS module data complement data collected by FEMA’s National Household Survey (NHS), an annual survey that tracks progress in personal disaster preparedness. The telephone survey measures the public’s preparedness actions for hazards they are likely to face and assesses attitudes and experiences that can motivate actions to prepare. The NHS includes a nationally representative sample and a series of hazard-specific oversamples in U.S. counties where particular hazards—such as earthquakes, floods, wildfires, hurricanes, winter storms, extreme heat, tornadoes, and urban events—present a risk to those living there.

According to Christi Collins, a branch chief in FEMA’s Individual and Community Preparedness Division (ICPD), “The data from HUD’s American Housing Survey help to bolster some of the data FEMA collects independently. By helping us connect the who—the demographics—to the where—the hazard risks—we can create relevant messages for the public that will likely have a greater success rate.”

Delinquent Payments and Notices Module (REVISED)

Many of the questions in the 2017 AHS Delinquent Payments and Notices topical module previously appeared in the 2013 AHS. The 2017 module [questionnaire](#) continued to ask questions about utility payment activity and foreclosures and eviction notices, whether people had to move due to lack of financial means or other support, and where they would stay if they left the household. The revised module collected new data on delinquent payments in renter-occupied units. We also expanded the universe in several foreclosure-related questions, to ask the questions of a wider range of households.

Sample: 2017 National - Emergency and Disaster Preparedness - All Occupied Units

First Source of Emergency Information During Disaster
Family, friends, or neighbors
Radio
Television
Internet (including Facebook and Twitter)
Other source
Not reported

Sample: 2017 National - Delinquent Payments and Notices - All Occupied Units

Utility Activity in Last Three Months
Received notice of utilities shut-off due to missed payment(s)
Yes
Have or had utilities shut-off
Yes
No
Not reported



Commuting Modes and Commuting Costs Modules

Where a household lives greatly impacts how much the household spends on transportation. HUD includes data on commuting costs and modes of transportation in the AHS to ensure that the survey provides users with the most comprehensive housing-related data possible. Two new 2017 AHS topical modules—Commuting to Work by Mode of Transportation, and Annual Commuting Costs by Type of Commuter—collected critical new data on commuting, including time and distance traveled, number of days worked per week, modes of transport, and costs of commuting during a typical work week. By asking specific commuting questions and looking at differences across populations and geographies, AHS data on commuting costs and transportation behavior complement and expand on commuting data found in other federal surveys.

Telling the larger story of commuting

HUD consulted with commuting experts at the Census Bureau to develop questions for this module. The Census Bureau did not have a counterpart in its larger surveys that directly asked about commuting costs. It wanted to supplement the deep, neighborhood-level commuting information already collected in its existing surveys (e.g., the American Community Survey) with a variety of detailed commuting modes and cost data from the AHS so as to tell the larger story of commuting. The goal was to gain a better understanding of how people got to work, the distance they traveled, their work schedules, and costs by mode of transportation. The Census Bureau also wanted to know who was paying the most to commute and why.

The Census Bureau plans to use the data collected through these modules in its ongoing work on the Supplemental Poverty Measure—its official update on the prevalence of poverty in the United States. The Census Bureau is exploring the possibility of using these data to estimate work-related expenses, with the goal of gaining a more refined understanding of variations in commuting costs across geographies. As Brian McKenzie, chief of the Census Bureau’s Journey to Work and Migration Statistics Branch, explains, “This detailed, topic-specific information, combined with the rich demographic and geographic information from other larger surveys, provides a nice overview and a more complete understanding of the commuting picture.”

HUD uses data from these topical modules to develop better estimates of housing costs that include commuting costs. Because the AHS estimates can also be tied to housing conditions, these data provide information critical to HUD’s work that is not available in other surveys that ask about housing and commuting.

Sample: 2017 National - Commuting to Work by Mode of Transportation - All Occupied Units

Respondent Worked for Pay in the Last Year ¹
How Often Commutes to Work in a Typical Week
1 day
2 days
3 days
4 days
5 days
6 days
7 days
Does not leave home for work
Not reported



Applying commuting data to address a range of challenges

In addition to helping users better understand household expenses, these commuting data can be helpful in studying worker productivity, the housing market, ways to link housing to jobs, and more efficient community planning. For example, this kind of information, available at the metropolitan-area level, can be valuable to those in the real estate industry as they increasingly focus on walkability to work and access to rail stops as neighborhood amenities.

Evictions Module

Evictions—whether formal or informal—can have severe consequences for families. It is a key contributor to housing instability, and places families at risk of slipping deeper into poverty or even into homelessness. This 2017 AHS topical module collected new data on the causes, process, and effects of eviction on renters who were forced to move. The [questionnaire](#) includes items on the types of warnings or notices received, what led to the move (for example, rent raised, property condemned), whether households were behind on rent payments, and whether children had to switch schools because of the move. With the addition of this one-of-a-kind module, the 2017 AHS conducted the first national-level survey on the prevalence of evictions. No other federal survey includes these or similar questions.

Estimating evictions to inform interventions

HUD developed the 2017 AHS Evictions module in collaboration with the Harvard University Department of Sociology, the University of Wisconsin Survey Center, and noted Princeton sociologist Matt Desmond, who has done extensive fieldwork on housing and poverty among low-income renters. The content of these questions was taken from Desmond’s Milwaukee Area Renters Study.

As of the publication of this report, HUD is still reviewing the evictions data and has not released estimates to the public.

Urbanization Module

In 2017, HUD added an “urbanization” question to the 2017 AHS, asking members of households whether they considered their neighborhood to be “urban,” “suburban,” or “rural.”



Comparing urbanization definitions

HUD added the urbanization question to replicate the main findings of a similar survey conducted by the real estate company, Trulia. We also wanted to provide empirical evidence of how existing federal urbanization definitions align with people's description of their neighborhood. At the same time, by adding the urbanization question, HUD was able to collect data that will help inform discussions regarding the next generation of federal definitions, including the Census Bureau's 2020 Urban Areas and the Office of Management and Budget's 2023 Core-based Statistical Areas.

With the 2017 Urbanization module, HUD collected data from nearly 76,000 households, including approximately 2,150 households in each of 25 large metropolitan areas. We are considering ways to formally publish findings from the urbanization question.

Sample: 2017 Urbanization Table 5: Neighborhood Description by Place Size

Census Places (2016)
Not incorporated/Not CDP
Respondent's Neighborhood Description
Weighted Sum of Households
Urban
Suburban
Rural

Accessing the AHS urbanization data

HUD has created numerous tables comparing existing urbanization definitions to householder's neighborhood descriptions. HUD can also create custom tables, or researchers can request access to the internal microdata via a Census Research Data Center. More information on the how to request access is available from the Census Bureau.

Chapter 6. 2019 AHS Topical Modules

Measuring the household impact of disabilities, high food costs, college enrollment, and Hurricane Harvey

The 2019 AHS added new topical modules on the housing experiences of students enrolled in post-secondary education and the receipt of disaster assistance after Hurricane Harvey. The 2019 survey also rotated in a topical module on food security first deployed in 2013, along with a newly updated module on home accessibility modifications. Data from these modules will be released in late 2020. The AHS website will have updated information on data releases from these new topical modules.

Food Security Module (Reinstated)

The Food Security module, which appeared first in the 2015 AHS, was rotated back into the 2019 AHS with no changes. The questionnaire in the 2019 module collected important data on the relationship between food security and housing costs. Results also provide users with longitudinal information they can use to compare changes in food security estimates over time.



Disabilities and Home Accessibility Module (Revised)

Using the AHS 2011 Disabilities and Home Accessibility module as a base, we developed the 2019 module to take a closer look at the varying levels of home accessibility in American households¹. The 2019 module digs deeper into fewer issues than the earlier module, so users can accurately measure the specific accessibility features that are lacking, and fully understand where deficiencies exist in the housing stock.

Unlike the earlier module, the 2019 module does not ask about user-home mismatch or the history of adding accessibility features. Instead, the new 13-item module focuses on three themes: extended disability, features of the home, and future plans. It asks questions about a wide array of mobility limitations. For instance, in addition to looking at wheelchair accessibility, the module also sets out to understand safety and accessibility features relevant to millions of Americans who have mobility limitations that do not require wheelchairs. It also examines accessibility for householders who have some level of limitation or frailness, but no diagnosed disability.

HUD consulted with Harvard University's Joint Center for House Studies, the National Association of Home Builders, AARP, and advocates for people with disabilities to develop this module.

[We will insert Data Table and link when available.]

Post-Secondary Education Module

We know that where students live affects their success in college. But there are major gaps in the research and limited national data on the issue. HUD developed the AHS Post-Secondary Education topical module to help build a more robust research base on the actual housing conditions that college students experience nationwide, including those living in HUD-assisted households. These data filled a critical gap—the 2019 AHS offers the only in-depth national data currently available on post-secondary students' housing issues.

Uncovering housing issues that affect student success

The Post-Secondary Education module expands on the current education questions in the AHS. The module collects more details about the experiences of household members attending a post-secondary institution, while continuing to identify those attending high school. The questionnaire asks about enrollment in college and vocational, technical, trade, and business schools. It also collects data on whether the student's enrollment is full- or part-time, whether the school is public or private, and whether the household member lived in the housing unit or dorm while enrolled.

¹ A HUD-commissioned study of the 2011 AHS accessibility module questions concluded that several of the accessibility questions were likely too difficult for respondents to answer correctly. Following the report's recommendations, as well as discussions with experts, HUD elected to substantially revise the module for 2019.



HUD collaborated with ED to construct this module. ED wanted to examine housing conditions for students enrolled in college and understand the post-secondary education experience of housing-benefit recipients. The agency wanted to explore the types of housing college students live in, how housing situations differ among students enrolled in different types of institutions and programs, and how students pay for their housing while enrolled in postsecondary education.

Documenting the impact of student housing insecurity

Earlier research examined student enrollment and housing separately or focused only on students in college- or university-owned housing. For the first time, the new AHS module data distinguish between students living in housing owned by the institution and housing that is not. The data also allow for analysis of the intersection between current school enrollment, program type, and other variables. New questions regarding postsecondary enrollment shed light on housing conditions that affect student success, including housing costs, the types of neighborhoods in which students live, their neighborhood search process, housing quality, and the demographics of their households. Erin Berg, in ED’s Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, explains that the module provides “insight into what role college attendance plays in housing instability as well as the role housing instability plays in college attendance and completion.”

These data can support expanding efforts—at the federal, state, and local levels—to help students overcome barriers to graduation. ED and other federal agencies can use data from this module to inform national-level policy decisions, financial aid programs, and other housing interventions aimed at helping students complete their post-secondary education. The module gives college and university leaders involved in awarding financial aid the information they need to more accurately estimate the actual housing costs students face in their campus communities. Other local decision-makers can use data to understand the housing conditions and challenges college students face in their communities.

Hurricane Harvey Module

When Category 4 Hurricane Harvey hit South Texas and Louisiana in August 2017, it brought unprecedented devastation to these communities. In the aftermath of Harvey, state and local officials and organizations in the affected areas stepped in, mitigating the hurricane’s impact by offering a wide range of resources to help disaster victims with critical needs. HUD developed this topical module to determine whether people affected by Hurricane Harvey were interested in receiving state or local resources to help with recovery efforts. What we learn can help inform decision-making regarding disaster relief services during future weather disasters.



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