

Identifying a Population of Likely Incarcerated Older Adults in the American Community Survey

The American Community Survey (ACS) is a nationally representative survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. The survey collects demographic, economic, and geographic characteristics of adults in the United States, including those in group quarters. The methodology for surveying group-dwelling adults is complex, multi-step, and ultimately completed via in-person interviews, telephone, or mail. Please refer to the ACS and Puerto Rico Community Survey (PRCS) Design and Methodology (Version 3.0) – Chapter 8: Data Collection and Capture for Group Quarters for details about the sampling frame for group-quarter facilities and individuals within selected facilities.

Using ACS data, researchers can identify survey respondents living in group quarters who reside in either jails/prisons or nursing homes. Federal policies can restrict eligibility and create barriers to accessing certain social safety net programs—including Medicaid, Social Security, and Supplemental Security Income—for individuals who are incarcerated. In contrast, individuals residing in nursing homes are generally expected to have access to these same programs. This policy-driven difference allows us to leverage variation in program receipt by classifying survey respondents living in group quarters into two groups: those likely to be incarcerated and those likely to reside in nursing homes.



To verify that we accurately identified persons residing in jails/prisons versus those residing in nursing homes, we used multiple data sources to confirm (1) the expected numbers and (2) the distinct demographic characteristics of these two groups. We confirmed the estimated number of likely incarcerated adults aged 55+ and their demographic characteristics using data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics - Survey of Prison Inmates, the primary source of information about persons incarcerated in the U.S.

We confirmed the estimated number of likely nursing home residents with the reported number of adults aged 55+ residing in nursing homes as reported by the American Community Survey, and compared the demographics against existing peer-reviewed literature.

For more information, please see the publication:

Miller KEM, Shen K, Yang Y, Williams BA, Wolff JL. Prevalence of Disability Among Older Adults in Prison. JAMA Network Open. 2024 Dec 2;7(12):e2452334. doi: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.52334.