Finding Data About My Community

► **As communities grow and change, community members, business owners, and elected officials need to have accurate, relevant data about their communities. Data is important for decision-making and planning.**

For Alabama, there are numerous sources of information about the state, counties, and communities. In years past, community data was hard to find online and challenging to understand when accessed. Today, many entities have interactive data interfaces and visualizers, allowing you to access data effortlessly and in an easy-to-understand format.

A data interface is an online location where someone can access and use a database, such as a government website where nationwide survey results are stored. An interactive data interface allows users to sort, manage, and search the information effortlessly. A data visualizer is an online tool that turns data into easy-to-understand charts, graphics, and plots. Below are some places where you can find user-friendly sources of information and data visualizations about your community.

US Census

The US Census is conducted every 10 years, but the US Census Bureau also conducts other surveys more often, such as the American Community Survey (ACS). The US Census data website integrates multiple survey sources into one data visualizer at https://data.census.gov.

To search for information about a specific place, type that information into the search bar. For example, if you live in Conecuh County and want more information about the county, enter "Conecuh County" in the search bar and then click the link for "view profile" on the right-hand side under the image of the county map. Once on the place profile, you can view general information about population, education, housing, businesses, race and ethnicity, income and poverty, employment, health and healthcare, and family living arrangements and housing. You can easily see additional datasets depicted by location, such as the language spoken at home or the percentage of the veteran population living there.

US Bureau of Labor Statistics

The US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) publishes data related to employment predictions, productivity, inflation, pay, and more. The BLS data can be found at www.bls.gov/data/. While most data are not easily visualizable in an interactive county format, the BLS website provides options to create customized maps. You can create custom maps for county unemployment and other statistics. For example, when searching for employment information, you can easily create a statewide map with a few clicks, and then, when clicking on a specific county, discover in-depth data on that county's employment statistics.

US Bureau of Economic Statistics

The US Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) collects income and gross domestic product data, and more. Most US BEA data is statewide; however, BEA does publish some county-by-county datasets. BEA data can be found at www.bea.gov/data. Their regional, statewide, and county economic datasets can be found by clicking Data by Place on the central BEA data website.

BEA data includes information on trade, investment, inflation, employment, gross domestic product (GDP), consumer spending, and income. It is important to note that most BEA datasets are national or state datasets. County and community data are available for GDP, income, and employment. While BEA data is easily accessible using tables, it is important to note that BEA does not have the same data visualization tools that other websites, like the US Census Bureau, have for interacting with the data.

Alabama Crime Statistics

The Alabama Law Enforcement Agency (ALEA) publishes crime data on https://crime.alabama.gov/. The county visualizer is still under construction; however, county counts and depictions can be viewed through the interactive dashboard and maps.

Data Visualizers Using Existing US Government Survey Data

Although the US Census Bureau has a user-friendly website, several other private and public entities have created data visualization websites using US Census Bureau data. Below are a few of the most user-friendly data visualizers for looking at data on Alabama communities and counties.

Know Your Community—Government & Economic Development Institute at Auburn University

The Government Economic Development Institute (GEDI) at Auburn University has a user-friendly web page for Alabama communities and counties called *Know Your Community* at https://auburn.edu/outreach/gedi/.

Kids County—Annie E. Casey Foundation

The Annie E. Casey Foundation takes data from various government sources to create the Kids Count dataset. This data includes a great deal of information about children and youth in Alabama and a great deal of other US Census data in their data visualizer. The website is https://datacenter.aecf.org/. You can sort Alabama data by county, county school district, or city school district.

Prosperity Now Scorecard

Prosperity Now is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the elimination of economic inequality. Prosperity Now combines multiple health, community, economic, and financial datasets to create their Scorecard Dataset. While Prosperity Now uses its Scorecard Dataset to advocate for policy changes, the dataset is informative for anyone interested in city, county, or community-level visualizations of US government data. You can see the Prosperity Now Scorecard data visualizer at https://scorecard.prosperitynow.org/.

County Health Rankings & Roadmaps

If you're interested in health data, the County Health Rankings Dataset created by the Population Research Laboratory at the University of Wisconsin provides an easy-to-use data visualizer. On this website, you can find information on all things related to health, such as quality of life, length of life, diabetes, low birth weight, mental distress, health behaviors (smoking, obesity, alcohol consumption, sexually transmitted infections, etc.), clinical care (number of physicians, dentists, mental health providers, etc.), food insecurity, drug-related deaths, sleep, socioeconomic factors related to health, physical environment, and more. The data can be found at www.countyhealthrankings.org/.

Economic and Natural Hazard Profiles— Headwaters Economics

Headwaters Economics is an independent non-profit organization that used funding from the US Bureau of Land Management, USDA Forest Service, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service to create a data visualizer for demographic and natural hazard data. The Economic Profiles Data Visualizer provides information on demographics, socioeconomic trends, and key indicators on land and natural hazards. You can view these profiles at https://headwaterseconomics.org/ under the Tools section.

University of Wisconsin Migration Statistics

If you are interested in county-level data, the University of Wisconsin has a user-friendly website that allows you to create charts depicting net migration by US county at https://netmigration.wisc.edu/. The available data for Alabama goes back almost 75 years so you can make interesting and informative tables by county.

County Explorer—National Association of Counties

The County Explorer is another option for looking for facts about your local county, including employment and population statistics. The County Explorer can be found at https://ce.naco.org/. One useful tool on this website is the ability to compare counties.

Summary

Regardless of what data set you decide to use to compile data about your community or county, remember that it is important to note when the data were collected and published. Each of the above websites will have the dataset date labeled. When preparing reports or graphs using the data, include the dataset information to help others better understand and interpret the data. Whether you use the US Census data, another government dataset such as the Bureau of Labor Statistics, or a third-party data visualizer such as the County Health Roadmaps, there are numerous user-friendly options to find data about your local community.

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For more information, contact your county Extension office. Visit www.aces.edu/directory.

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