Since 1967, U.S. household income inequality has grown 18 percent. Nearly half of that growth occurred during the 1980s. More recently, the growth in income inequality has tapered off.\(^1\) Levels of inequality vary across the country. This report presents measures of household income inequality for counties in the United States, based on data pooled from 5 years (2006 to 2010) of American Community Survey (ACS) data.\(^2\)

TheACS surveys households in each month from January to December. It asks about income received during the previous 12 months. Each year’s survey covers 23 months, from January of the previous year to November of the survey year. In total, the 5-year ACS used in this report covers the 71-month period from January 2005 through November 2010. Pooling data allows more accurate measurement of inequality in less populous counties.

Figure 1 illustrates each county’s level of income inequality, as measured by the Gini index. The 5-year 2006–2010 Gini index for the United States as a whole was 0.467. County-level Gini indexes ranged from 0.645 to 0.207.

The South had a disproportionately large number of counties with high inequality, while counties in the Midwest had lower levels of income inequality.\(^3\) Specifically, 32 percent of the 1,423 counties in the South had Gini indexes ranking among the top fifth of all 3,143 U.S. counties. By contrast, 31 percent of the 1,055 counties in the Midwest had Gini indexes in the bottom fifth (Table 1).

Table 2 shows that the more unequal counties were also more populous. Thirty-four percent of Americans lived

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\(^2\) In this report, the term “county” is used to refer to counties and statistically equivalent entities. This includes parishes, boroughs, municipalities, census areas, independent cities, the District of Columbia, and historical counties. For details see <www.census.gov/geo/www/2010census/GTC_10.pdf> and <www.itl.nist.gov/fipspubs/ftp6-4.htm>.

Figure 1. Quintiles of Gini Index by County: 2006–2010
in a county that ranked in the top 20 percent of U.S. counties by Gini index. In every region, the counties in the most unequal fifth of U.S. counties accounted for a disproportionately large share of that region’s population. For example, only 8 percent of Midwestern counties had Gini indexes ranking among the top fifth of U.S. counties, but they contained 26 percent of the region’s population.

While Tables 1 and 2 describe the national distribution of Gini indexes across counties, Table 3 considers the national distribution of county-level Gini indexes across people. Specifically, Table 3 shows the proportions of each region’s population that ranked in each quintile of the national distribution of county-level Gini indexes across people. For example, the entry in the first row and the first column means that 17 percent of Westerners were among the top fifth of Americans with the highest county-level Gini indexes. This table reflects the same pattern as shown in Tables 1 and 2 above. Southerners disproportionately lived in more unequal counties than other Americans, while Midwesterners disproportionately lived in more equal counties than their compatriots.

For the 25 most populous counties in the nation, Table 4 lists their Gini indexes and the largest cities within their metropolitan statistical areas (MSA). These 25 counties contained 21 percent of the U.S. population. Nearly all were above the median county Gini index of 0.430; two major exceptions were San Bernardino County, CA, and Suffolk County, NY. San Bernardino County is the largest county by area in the contiguous United States, stretching from the western suburbs of Los Angeles to the eastern border of California. Suffolk County consists of the eastern two-thirds of Long Island. As such, these counties include more sparsely populated areas than other counties in this list.
Table 5 lists counties among the highest and lowest estimated Gini indexes.5 Many of the counties with low Gini indexes were either very low in population or a fast-growing county containing commuter towns within a large metropolitan area. Loving County, TX, is an example of the former kind of county; it had both the lowest population in the country as well as the lowest Gini index estimate. Kendall County, IL, near Chicago, is an example of the latter kind; it had the highest population growth rate between the 2000 and 2010 Censuses, more than doubling over that decade.

SOURCE AND ACCURACY

Data presented in this report are based on people and households that responded to the ACS in years 2006 through 2010. The resulting estimates are representative of the entire population. All comparisons presented in this report have taken sampling error into account and are significant at the 90 percent confidence level unless otherwise noted. Due to rounding, some details may not sum to totals. For information on sampling and estimation methods, confidentiality protection, and sampling and nonsampling errors, please see the “2010 ACS Accuracy of the Data” document located at <www.census.gov/acs/www/Downloads/data_documentation/Accuracy/ACS_Accuracy_of_Data_2010.pdf>.

5 Few of the highest estimated Gini indexes are statistically significantly different from one another, and none of the lowest estimated Gini indexes is statistically significantly different from any other. The Gini index estimate for Franklin County, MS, is not statistically significantly different from the next highest estimated Gini index, and the estimate for Manassas Park city, VA, is not statistically significantly different from the next lowest estimated Gini index. The counties listed are intended as typical examples of counties with relatively high and low Gini indexes, respectively.
WHAT IS THE AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY?

The American Community Survey (ACS) is a nationwide survey designed to provide communities with reliable and timely demographic, social, economic, and housing data for the nation, states, congressional districts, counties, places, and other localities every year. It has an annual sample size of about 3 million addresses across the United States and Puerto Rico and includes both housing units and group quarters (e.g., nursing facilities and prisons). The ACS is conducted in every county throughout the nation, and every municipio in Puerto Rico, where it is called the Puerto Rico Community Survey. Beginning in 2006, ACS data for 2005 were released for geographic areas with populations of 65,000 and greater. For information on the ACS sample design and other topics, visit <www.census.gov/acs/www>.