Within a few days of moving to Knoxville this month, Veronica Musa walked on a sidewalk with her 11-year-old son along Kingston Pike.

The Argentine mother, who came from the Netherlands, wanted to buy some groceries, and she was accustomed to walking to most places while living in the Dutch country with her husband.

“A lady stopped and pulled over and offered us a ride,” Musa said.

“I was confused. She said, ‘Oh my gosh, it’s too hot,’ and she gave us a ride to the supermarket.”

The stranger insisted on hanging around to give Musa and her son a ride home after shopping.

“It was so funny and adorable. It gave me a feeling that you forget how nice people can be,” Musa said, noting that kind of interaction with strangers would have been rare in the Netherlands.

Musa is among thousands of Hispanics estimated to have moved into the city within the last five years, according to the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2013 American Community Survey released this month.
What may be most interesting is that estimates also show a decline in the number of households in the city.

Margins of error

Experts say it’s important to note the estimates shown in the local survey figures, however, do contain noteworthy margins of error.

“In some instances, there is relatively little change when accounting for that (margin of error),” said Joan Snoderly, director of the Tennessee State Data Center at the University of Tennessee.

Even with noteworthy margins of error, one can get a sense of growth or decline on hundreds of various ACS characteristics, such as population, race, fertility and grandparents who live with their grandchildren, to name a few.

The 2013 survey shows an estimated 183,261 residents and annual growth since 2010.

The number of Hispanics grew by 6 percent in 2013 to approximately 9,300, although there’s a margin of error of about 2,000. The number of Asians grew 4 percent to 4,401, with a margin of error of 1,453.

The city’s white population has dropped slightly to roughly 135,000 in 2013, a 5 percent drop when compared to 2009. The city’s black population also dropped 3 percent to approximately 29,000.

By the numbers

Estimates show Knoxville’s population grew in the last four years, but the number of households has shrunk to 80,265 in 2013 from 86,597 in 2009.
“Be very careful when comparing 2009 to 2013 due to the recession in 2008 and the collapse of the construction industry,” Snoderly said. “Tennessee is continuing to rebound, and prices have skyrocketed.”

The Metropolitan Planning Commission releases annual reports of development activity. Those reports show the number of permits for residential and commercial construction has gone down considerably.

Knoxville had 559 residential building permits in 2013 compared to 661 in 2009 and 1,459 in 2004.

“You will see that the amount of recession and post-recession building activity in the city is about half to one-third the amount recorded in the mid-2000s,” said Terry Gilhula, MPC information and research manager. “So while people were still moving into the city, they were moving into existing units and building fewer new (dwellings).”

Snoderly said ACS figures show other evidence that people are moving into existing units and living with their families.

“Knoxville shows a huge increase in the fertility rate in 2012, thus an obvious increase in population with no increase in households ... There is also a large increase in the number of grandparents living with their own grandchildren under 18, thus suggesting that the older generation is moving in with their children,” she said.

An estimated 3,134 women between the ages of 15 and 50 gave birth in 2013. That’s compared to 1,991 in 2011 and 2,454 in 2009.

Planning ahead

Plan East Tennessee, a partnership of counties and municipalities, commonly uses annual census data to help with its regional report card, Snoderly said. PlanET is a partnership of five local counties and their municipalities.

“We are expecting 298,000 new residents by 2040, and we must plan now to ensure that our region remains beautiful, becomes healthier and offers pathways to success for all,” according to the authors of PlanET’s 2013 Livability Report Card.
Avery Archer, a new professor at UT, recently bought a condominium on Market Street after moving to the city from New York a year ago.

He takes public transportation to work.

“I don’t drive, which is not uncommon for a New Yorker. It is uncommon for Tennessee but because I don’t drive, I wanted to live somewhere where I could get to work easily.”

Census estimates show about 1,688 residents commuted to work using public transportation of the city’s 87,226 workers over age 16 in 2013.

why move to knoxville?

Musa moved to Knoxville when her husband Jorge Variego, also Argentine, accepted a job to teach music at UT.

Musa, a human rights attorney, earned her law degree in Argentina and a master’s degree in comparative law from the University of Florida, she said.

“We didn’t look for houses because, at least for the first year, we prefer to be in an apartment but we may get a house,” Musa said. “The area is really beautiful. I’m from the north of Argentina ... This place reminds me a lot of the place I grew up, so I like it a lot.”