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American Community Survey Messaging and Mail Package

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Abstract and Paper

The American Community Survey (ACS) is sent to 3.5 million households each year. The data from this survey informs and drives decisions about improvements to roads and public transportation systems, ways to support schools and hospitals, economic growth strategies to create jobs in a given city, areas where emergency services are needed, tactics for helping a community recovering from a disaster, and much more. The public, however, is not sufficiently aware of the survey or its value to them. In addition, many people believe the questions are intrusive or burdensome and so are opposed to completing it.

The ACS uses a series of six mailings to contact respondents and encourage them to complete the survey. Previous follow-up studies with non-response households indicate that the top reasons for non-response are that households did not recall receiving mail about the ACS or that they did not open and/or read the materials.

In an effort to increase the likelihood that respondents notice or open ACS mailings, we tested “messages” to see how they resonated with recipients. The findings from the message testing supported the development of three alternate ACS mail package designs. The current ACS mail package and the alternate ACS mail package designs were tested with focus group and reviewed by an expert survey methodologist – with later refinements made to the three alternate mail designs. The current and alternate mail designs were then tested via online visual testing of 2,000 U.S. adults who handle the mail for their household.

The research showed that variations in visual design — such as placement of logos, bolded text, and accent boxes — impact recall of messages and evaluations of the importance and urgency of a survey request. In particular, visual design principles can enhance the survey request when tied to credible and respected institutions, such as the Census Bureau. This presentation will describe our results and share our designs.



**UNECE CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS
WORKSHOP ON STATISTICAL DATA COLLECTION: RIDING THE WAVE OF THE
DATA DELUGE**

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Introduction

Since the 2010 Decennial Census, the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey Office (ACSO) has seen a continued rise in respondent concerns about some of the questions asked on the American Community Survey (ACS); that the survey is mandatory, and whether the survey is constitutional or legitimate. This concern has been reflected in the number of phone calls, emails, letters, and other types of correspondence received; in particular, correspondence from congressional offices. The ACS program has explored, and continues to explore various ways to reduce respondent’s concerns, including respondent burden in our data collection activities. This paper discusses research around communication to help address this problem.

In October 2013, the ACSO contracted with Reingold, Inc. (and their partners Penn Schoen Berland and Decision Partners, hereinafter referred to as Team Reingold) to conduct messaging and mail package research. The research comprised seven iterative supportive projects that were qualitative and/or quantitative in their design. The research included proposed mail designs to replace the current ACS mail package that ACSO will experimentally test in the future. This paper briefly discusses high-level findings of this research and explores impacts for future work. A more detailed discussion of the messaging and mail package assessment research is provided in the “The Cumulative Findings Report” developed by Team Reingold at:

http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Downloads/library/2014/2014_Walker_02.pdf

Background

Every 10 years since 1790, Congress has authorized the government to conduct a national census of the U.S. population, as required by the U.S. Constitution. James Madison ensured that the Constitution gave Congress the authority to collect additional information beyond the population count in order to “enable [future legislators] to adapt the public measures to the particular circumstances of the community.”¹ In the twentieth century, the questions were divided between a “short” and “long” form. Only a subset of the population was required to answer the long-form questions. The most recent census consisted of a short form, which included basic questions about age, sex, race, Hispanic origin, household relationship, and owner/renter status.

After the 2000 Census, the long form became the American Community Survey (ACS). The ACS will continue to collect long-form-type information on an ongoing basis. The survey includes not only the basic questions from the 2000 Census, but also detailed questions about population and housing characteristics. It is a nationwide, continuous survey designed to provide communities with reliable and timely demographic, housing, social, and economic data every year. Since its start, the ACS has been

¹ Summary of debate on Census Bill, House of Representatives, 25–26 Jan., 2 Feb. 1790. (The Founders’ Constitution, 1987, University of Chicago, Volume 2, Article 1, Section 2, Clause 3, Document 19).

providing a continuous stream of updated information for states and local areas, and will revolutionize the way we use statistics to understand our communities. We sample approximately 3.5 million addresses annually.

Problem to Solve

Despite the many practical uses of data collected through the ACS, many respondents are not aware of the survey or its value, and some respondents are opposed to completing the survey because they find the questions intrusive or burdensome. This lack of awareness and resistance to the ACS presents challenges for conducting and maximizing its use, and thus its impact and benefit to the nation. Many people who could use ACS data to improve their businesses and organizations may not know what is available to them and how to use it.

To address the persistent concern expressed by respondents about the intrusive and burdensome nature of the ACS and the general lack of awareness of the survey, ACSO decided to conduct more messaging research - to determine what kinds of messages are resonating with respondents. In addition, the research addressed how the findings from the messaging research can inform our ACS mail package pieces. Team Reingold developed a research strategy to address this problem.

Prior Research²

In an effort to mitigate some of the concerns respondents have shared about the ACS questions, the ACSO continues to conduct research on how to best educate respondents about the value of ACS data in their everyday lives. Prior research on this subject matter has been extensive and include the following studies:

- Census Integrated Communications Program Evaluation (CICPE), 2009–2012
- 2010 Census Barriers Attitudes Motivators Survey (CBAMS) I and CBAMS II, 2008 and 2011
- 2010 Census Integrated Communications Program Paid Advertising Assessment Report
- 2010 National Partnership Research Final Report
- Paid Advertising Heavy-Up Experiment (PAHUE), 2010
- Gallup Census Continuing Tracking Survey (CCTS), December 2009–April 2010
- Continuous Attitude Tracking Study (CATS), October 2009–April 2010
- Mail-Back Audience Segmentation, 2007

In general, these studies helped us identify the most significant factors affecting survey response. Previous segmentation and focus groups studies have found that messages that appeal to community benefit are broadly effective (Bates *et al.*, 2009; Conrey *et al.*, 2012; Newburger, 2009a; Newburger, 2009b). Studies have also found that messages about mandatory participation are effective at boosting response rates, though many respondents react negatively to these messages (Leslie, 1996; Schwede, 2008; Navarro, 2011).

The research adopted several questions about benefits, harms, and likelihood to participate in data collections from the CBAMS I segmentation research, and used some of the key findings from the 2010 National Partnership Research to identify the kinds of community leaders that were interviewed. This research also benefited greatly from the robust research and experimentation conducted by ACSO in the development of the online response option (for an overview, see Tancreto (2013) “Evolution of ACS Respondent Contact Materials”). The research also incorporated feedback from Don Dillman, an

² American Community Survey Messaging and Mail Package Assessment Research: Cumulative Findings, December 19, 2014, Decision Partners, Penn Schoen Berland and Reingold, Inc.

expert in survey methodologist, and the Census Bureau's National Advisory Committee and Census Scientific Advisory Committee members to capture as much stakeholder feedback as possible.

Research Approach

From October 2013 through November 2014 Team Reingold worked with the Census Bureau to implement a series of seven iterative, mutually supportive qualitative and quantitative research studies designed to triangulate attitudes and messages about the ACS and identify effective mail package designs. The studies were:

- a) Mental Models interviews with individuals who work closely with ACS stakeholders (respondents and data users)
- b) Deliberative focus groups with stakeholders who are distrustful of the government
- c) Key informant interviews
- d) Comprehensive message testing: benchmark survey
- e) Comprehensive message testing: refinement survey
- f) Mail package focus groups and one-on-one interviews
- g) Online visual testing of alternative mail package designs

The full reports are accessible at: http://www.census.gov/acs/www/library/by_year/2014. The methodologies are described in detail in these reports, as well as the findings for each research project.

The goals of the research were:

- To develop and test messages and mail package designs to increase ACS self-response rates, thereby decreasing the expense of costly follow-up outreach to non-responders,
- To obtain insights to support general outreach, data dissemination, materials development, and call center and field operations.

Research Findings

Messaging Phase

The messaging research was comprised of five projects (a-e above) and included participants who are closely engaged with the ACS program, for example our field interview staff, telephone interviewers and call center staff, and state and census data center personnel. This phase of the research included the participation of private sector businesses, academic /research institutions, state and local governments, Tribal government and organizations, and community/advocacy associations. In addition, Team Reingold conducted focus groups with participants who are distrustful of the government, and two surveys to obtain feedback from the general population across the nation. (See details of this research in the attached report.)

Mail Package Assessment Phase

The mail package assessment research was comprised of two projects (f and g above) that entailed the redesign of the current ACS mail package pieces based on learnings from the messaging phase of the research. ACSO selected three design options from five options developed by Team Reingold. We solicited feedback from Don Dillman, an expert survey methodologist who has a long history with the Census Bureau and members of our Advisory Committees who represent a diverse group of our nation's population. The three alternate mail packages were tested in focus groups, alongside the current ACS mail package as the control, to glean information about what messages captured the attention of

participants. The final alternate designs represent a blend of the messaging elements that tested well. These are shown below with our current ACS mail piece. (See details of this research in the attached report.)

Final Alternate Mail Designs (for Experimental Testing)



Current ACS Mail Piece



Cumulative Research Findings

Overall, the research seems consistent with previous research. Focus group participants had more recognition of the Census Bureau's name versus the ACS name; preferred strong visual designs that highlighted key messages or terms; and preferred messages that clearly stated what they were suppose to do. The results of the research are extensive and detailed information can be found in the various reports written by Team Reingold.

The research findings from both phases (message and mail package assessment) yielded the following:³

1. Emphasize the favorable Census brand in ACS materials

Nearly all studies affirmed that people are largely unaware of ACS, but are highly aware of—and have favorable views toward—Census

³ American Community Survey Messaging and Mail Package Assessment Research: Cumulative Findings, December 19, 2014, Decision Partners, Penn Schoen Berland and Reingold, Inc.

- “American Community Survey” was a “blind spot” on designed materials; conversely, the Census Bureau logo received the majority of clicks in nearly every piece tested in online visual testing.
- More closely associating ACS with the Census brand may help reassure respondents as to the origin, purpose, and credibility of the ACS.
- Consider downplaying ACS designation in favor of prominent Census branding.

2. Use visual design principles to draw attention to key messages and help respondents better navigate materials

- Existing ACS materials lack a clear sense of visual hierarchy; testing found that techniques such as bolding, use of color, and accent boxes better drew participants’ eyes to key messages.

3. Use deadline-oriented messages to attract attention and create a sense of urgency

- Designs using prominent messages such as “open immediately” and “respond now” were described as more urgent, attention-grabbing, and important in visual testing, and may be more likely to promote early response.
- In qualitative research, participants frequently suggested that a stated deadline — or even the appearance of a deadline — would be a strong motivator to respond in a timely fashion, especially when coupled with mandatory messaging.

4. Prioritize a “governmental” appearance over a “marketing” approach

- Minimal, official-looking designs were more like what participants expected to receive from the government and therefore seemed more credible and important and less likely to be advertisements or junk mail.
- However, testing suggests that the most effective design will strike a balance between appearing official and being eye-catching and inviting enough to provoke respondents to notice, open, and complete the survey.

5. Emphasize effective “mandatory” messaging

- In line with existing research, in numerous studies we found the “required by law” message to be the single most effective message in attracting attention and motivating response.
- In focus groups, we found little resistance to more legal and punitive warnings — among both more altruistic and more skeptical participants.

6. Demonstrate benefits of ACS participation to local communities

- Several of our studies suggested that people evaluate ACS foremost in terms of visible, tangible benefits to their local communities.
- The top scoring messages focused on how local leaders can use ACS data to build roads, schools, and hospitals.

- Participants were often more interested in benefits to their own neighborhoods than for the nation, states, or even cities; simulation of state-level customization did not appear to yield meaningful benefits.

7. Draw a clearer connection between objectionable questions and real-world benefits

- Participants often objected to seemingly obscure questions as being overly intrusive or irrelevant, bringing them to question the importance and legitimacy of the survey.
- If respondents better understood the purposes and applications of certain questions, they may be less defensive and more inclined to respond.
- Interviewers should be well equipped to respond to common objections.

8. Streamline mail packages and individual materials

- Participants often felt that mailing packages contained too many and redundant pieces, wasting paper and money.
- Cluttered and wordy mail packages were seen as a “turn-off” for completing the survey.
- Several participants said they would expect all the information in the packets to be online, rendering much of the paper unnecessary.

9. Acknowledge language and cultural barriers to participation

- Language barriers can affect respondents’ ability to answer the survey and communicate with Census interviewers.
- Research suggested that Hispanic communities may be particularly sensitive to privacy or confidentiality issues insofar as they relate to immigration status.
- Greater availability and dissemination of Spanish- and other foreign-language materials could help improve response rates among hard-to-reach communities.

10. Utilize local influencers as trusted messengers

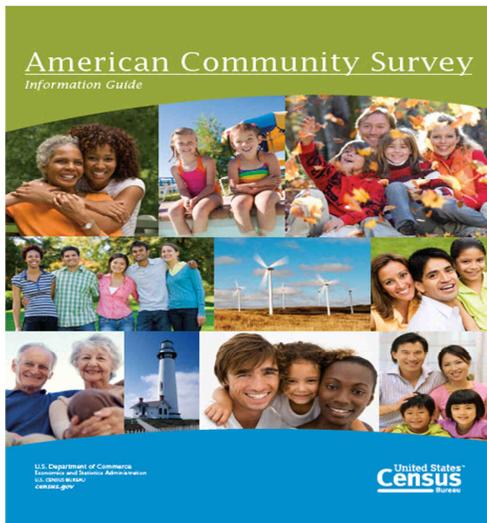
- In Key Informant Interviews, participants continually stressed communicating the value of ACS through trusted community channels— especially for high-interest populations.
- Local leaders and groups have greater trust built up in the community and are more likely to be credible messengers about local benefits than the Census Bureau.

11. Having the right tools and training is key to persuading respondents in the field

- Interviewers reported that available resources are often insufficient to the communications challenges they face, bringing them to work hard “on the fly” to convey ACS’ relevance to respondents.
- Equip staff with messages, materials, and training that enable them to underscore community value for respondents and other stakeholders.

Messages Used in Communication Activities

The lessons we learned from the ACS messaging research will serve as a basis for revising our ACS communication materials. Current ACS materials, for example, the info guide and promotional postcard shown below, will be updated to leverage what we have learned, and new materials will be developed to take advantage of key insights from the research. This will also extend throughout activities such as, social media, media relations, and partnership and stakeholder materials.



Future Work

The results and recommendations provided by Team Reingold, Don Dillman, and the advisory committee members offers the American Community Survey program valuable data to be used in future experimental testing. To study the various design and methodological changes proposed by the messaging research, the Census Bureau will field a series of experimental tests to systematically measure the effect of various changes to the ACS mail package pieces on response to the survey. The experimental testing will initially include three tests:⁴

1) Replacement Mail Questionnaire Package Test (March 2015)

This test will consider two experimental changes designed to reduce the number of materials and simplify the mail package in accordance with the findings from the messaging and mail package research. The first change measures the impact of removing the Instruction Card, the Instruction Guide, or both from the paper questionnaire mail package. The second change involves modifying the approach to how we present the choice option in this mail package.

2) Mail Contact Strategy Modification Test (April 2015)

⁴ American Community Survey Work Request, February 2014: Field Testing Revisions to the Mail Materials Based on the Results of 2013-2014 Qualitative Testing

This test will consider two experimental changes to enhance the effectiveness of the mailing pieces and sequences. The first change involves eliminating the first letter that provides advance notice that the address has been selected for the ACS, while converting a later reminder postcard into a letter containing specific instructions on how to log on to the ACS online survey, and sending the initial request to respond on a slightly earlier schedule. The second change involves modifying the approach to the last mailing (a postcard) that is currently sent only to households not sent to the Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) operation.

3) Official vs Blended Designs Test (Late 2015)

We will incorporate the results of the first two tests to determine the sequence, content, and number of mailings to each household for this test, and will use this test to compare the design schemes proposed by Team Reingold with the current production design.

Conclusion

As our nation continues to grow and change overtime, we need to ensure the ACS program can provide the country with the data needed for enriching the lives of its citizens. Therefore, the ACS program will benefit greatly from the research Team Reingold conducted. We will develop materials that will resonate with respondents of today. As we discussed earlier in this paper, previous research conducted by the Census Bureau and this new research continue to improve the program.

References

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Hughes, Todd, 2014. Field Testing Revisions to the Mail Materials Based on the Results of 2013-2014 Qualitative Testing. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Washington, D.C.