



AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY

BRIEFING ON MESSAGING AND MAIL PACKAGE ASSESSMENT
RESEARCH

STATE DATA CENTERS & CENSUS INFORMATION CENTERS
STEERING COMMITTEE

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Research Goals

- **Primary:**

Develop and test messages and mail package refinements to increase ACS self-response rates

- **Secondary:**

- Apply insights from ACS message testing to support general outreach, data dissemination, materials development, and call center and field operations
- Help inform the 2020 Decennial Census Communications Campaign

Research Overview: Project Phases

- **Messaging Research**

- ✓ December 2013: Mental models interviews with internal stakeholders
- ✓ January 2014 – February 2014: Key informant interviews with stakeholders
- ✓ January 2014: Deliberative focus groups with stakeholders who are distrustful of the government
- ✓ January 2014 – February 2014: Message testing - Benchmark survey
- ✓ March 2014 – April 2014: Message testing: Refinement survey

- **Mail Package Assessment**

- ✓ May 2014: Creative design of mail package alternatives and messages to test
- ✓ June 2014 – July 2014: Focus groups and one-on-one interviews
- ✓ September 2014: Quantitative online visual testing

- **Field Test** – To be conducted by ACSO during or after Fall 2014, budget pending

Messaging Research

Deliberative Focus Groups

- Conducted focus groups in seven cities (emphasis was on recruiting participants from low-response areas):
 - Albuquerque, NM
 - Atlanta, GA
 - Dallas, TX,
 - Los Angeles, CA - conducted in Spanish with Spanish speakers
 - Richmond, VA
 - St. Louis, MO
 - Washington, DC
- There were 24 to 28 participants in each group
- Cities represented diversity in their geographic and racial composition

Key Messaging Research Findings

■ Key Findings across Initial Research

- America knows Census – but not ACS
- Perception of “irrelevant” or unnecessary questions raise concerns about privacy
- People believe the government already has the personal information ACS collects
- Distrust of government is pervasive
- Participants frequently evaluated the ACS in terms of tangible, community-level benefits - “Community” is key
- People for whom English is not their first language face unique barriers to response
- Ensure that when interacting with respondents, the field representatives have the right materials and messages
- People value convenience and choice in response options

Mail Package Assessment Research Phase

- Create designs of mail package alternatives and messages to test:
 - May 2014
- Mail Package Cognitive Interviews:
 - June 23, 2014 – July 2, 2014
- Online Visual Testing:
 - September 5, 2014 – September 19, 2014



Review of Mailing Packages

- Independent Expert Input
 - Don Dillman (external SME) reviewed the alternate mail designs and provided us with his feedback
 - Agrees with Reingold (contractor) that we should eliminate the prenotice letter and simplify the paper questionnaire mailing
 - Strengthen the cover letter mailing and communications across the mail pieces about the mandatory request

Theme 1: "Official"

Envelope

Front



Back



Theme 2: "Community"

Envelope

Front



Back



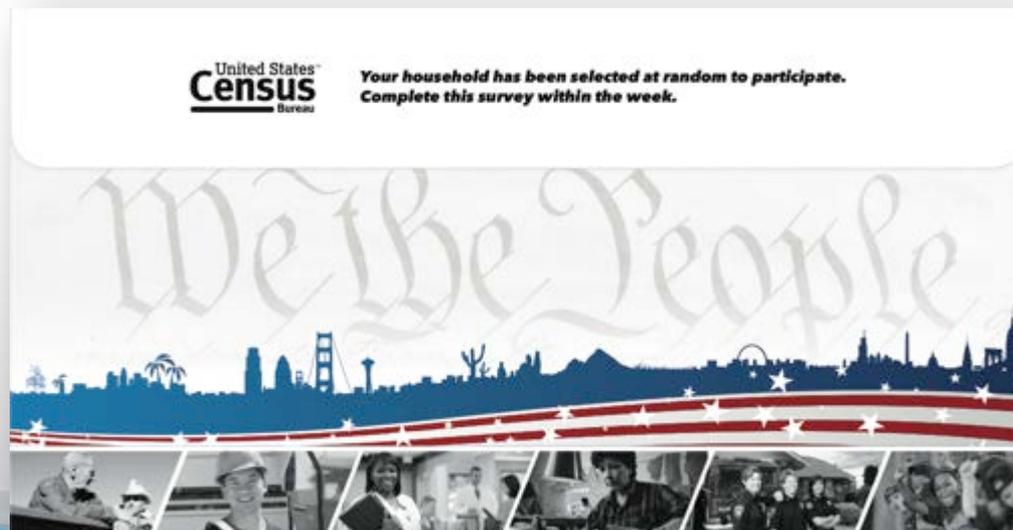
Theme 3: "Patriotic"

Envelope

Front



Back



Mail Package Assessment Focus Groups

- Conducted six focus groups with a broad range of participants (emphasis was on recruiting participants from low-response areas):
 - Chicago, IL
 - Fresno, CA
 - Miami, FL - conducted with bilingual English-Spanish speakers
 - New Orleans, LA
 - New York NY
 - Phoenix, AZ
- Each group was 90 minutes long – approximately 10 participants
- Cities represented diversity in their geographic and racial composition



Key findings from the mail package assessment

- The current package was seen as most effective
- Consider a hybrid of effective design elements
- The ACS name does not register
- “Punitive” messages resonate more than “altruistic” messages.

Online Visual Testing

- Uses three web-based exercises to identify key information about the designs:
 - **Mail stack exercise:** an interactive simulation of mail sorting
 - **Image click analyzer (heat map):** asks respondents to click on design elements, illustrating what attracts attention
 - **Message highlighting:** asks respondents to highlight words and phrases that they find compelling

Key findings from the Online Visual Testing

- Visual design elements and deadline messaging can have a significant impact on how people read and remember mail items
- The U.S. Census Bureau logo should be prominently featured on mail items

Key findings from the Online Visual Testing

- Key words and phrases in letters should be emphasized using callout boxes, line spacing, and bolded text
- “Your response is required by law” attracts more attention than any other message
- It is possible to overdo the commercial “marketing” look and feel

Reports

- The following reports are final:
 - Mental Models Interviews with Internal Stakeholders
 - Key Informant Interviews with Stakeholders
 - Deliberative Focus Groups with Stakeholders
 - Message Testing: Benchmark Survey
 - Message Testing: Refinement Study
 - Mail Package Research

- Access reports at:
 - http://www.census.gov/acs/www/library/by_year/2014

Next Steps - Field Test

- Census Bureau will receive recommendations – October 2014
- Census Bureau will develop and implement field tests – Fiscal Year 2015, budget pending
- Census Bureau will analyze and determine final recommendations for program implementation– Fiscal Year 2015

Questions?