

RESPONSE TO NATIONAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE SMALL POPULATIONS WORKING GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS

September 26, 2014

Overview

The charter for the National Advisory Committee (NAC) Small Populations Working Group (SPWG) was developed and finalized with input from the SPWG on December 31, 2012. The charter outlined the major tasks for this endeavor. The SPWG was tasked with reviewing, assessing, and providing feedback on research that can improve ACS estimates of small populations. The Census Bureau was looking to the SPWG to help define small populations, focusing on groups with high sampling variability that result in unreliable or highly volatile estimates, year after year. Small populations could include groups such as American Indian and Alaska Natives (AIAN), Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders, Middle Eastern and Northern Africans, same sex couples, rural populations, children with disabilities and others.

SPWG was also tasked with providing ideas and related research on ways to improve ACS estimates for small populations, including alternative methodologies, use of modeling, and other innovative ideas.

Acknowledgement and Acceptance of Recommendations

The U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey Office (ACSO) is pleased to accept the report of the SPWG. We appreciated working with the SPWG from December 2012 through March 2014. We also appreciated the SPWG's diligent and thorough consideration of various ACS topics and issues, and its thoughtful recommendations. This effort could not have been accomplished without the dedicated leadership of the SPWG Convener, Sela Panapasa.

The American Community Survey (ACS) collects information that represents the ever-changing dynamic trends and needs of the population within the United States of America. Since the full inception of the ACS in 2005, the Census Bureau has continuously worked to improve its weighting and sampling methodology and data collection procedures to ensure the highest level of data quality.

In addition, ACSO has produced several outreach and educational materials, and conducted a wide array of activities for stakeholders during the lifecycle of the survey. A good example of this are the Compass Handbooks. They were created to target specific audiences, such as the AIAN population. ACSO staff continues their collaboration with the Census Bureau's Communications Directorate, the Field Division, and others to ensure engagement of stakeholders on various ACS topics.

Census Bureau staff who worked with the SPWG generally agree with these recommendations. We have organized our responses into three broad categories:

1. Sampling Frame
2. Content Development and Data Collection
 - a) Content Review
 - b) Interview and Contact Procedures
3. Outreach and Promotion
 - a) Regional Activities
 - b) Outreach Materials

Materials

In addition to this document, we are providing the following materials to supplement this response:

- HUD Presentation

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- Sample Design FAQ
- Data Dissemination Report
- ACS Integrated Communications Plan
- Link to the ACS Website

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1. Sampling Frame

Recommendations listed under 4.2.1, 4.3.3, 4.3.5 are addressed in this section.

The ACS sample is designed to produce representative small area estimates with approximately equal reliability across geographic areas of similar size.

The ACS sample design has gone through several refinements since full implementation of the survey in 2005. The initial design was an extension of the design that was used for the Decennial Census long form sample. Since then, the number of strata has increased from seven to 16, and the ACS now uses survey response rates as well as updated occupancy data from the 2010 Census to determine strata. Additionally, the annual sample size has increased from 2.9 million addresses to 3.54 million. There have also been changes to the sub-sampling rates for non-response follow-up in select geographies.

The primary focus of the ACS is to produce reliable estimates for small geographic areas, while simultaneously minimizing the differences in estimate reliability across geographies of similar size. Current challenges include survey cost, a fixed annual sample size, a growing and changing population, and changes in survey response rates.

Using data collected from other sources, such as faith-based organizations or church rosters, in conjunction with the Master Address File (MAF) could affect the quality of the data. Additional challenges could include, but are not limited to:

- Impact on county representation for the sample
- Quality of the address frames
- Oversampling of a new group to the detriment of other groups

The Census Bureau is conducting research to explore how we may utilize administrative records for ACS and to improve the MAF. Currently the Geography Division is exploring the use of administrative data submitted by local governments to improve the quality of the MAF. This important decennial program has the potential to benefit both the decennial census and the ACS.

Data quality filtering based only on statistical quality is an integral part of the 1- and 3-year release strategy and limits the amount of unreliable estimates that are released for these products. We do not apply this filtering to the 5-year products. The only data suppression for the 5-year products, including the Selected Population Profile Tables, is implemented for data disclosure reasons. These suppressions continue to be applied to the ACS-derived products as they were to the Census long form estimates.

The Census Bureau has made specific changes to the sample design for American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) areas in recent years. Between 2010 and 2012, the initial selected housing units rose from $\approx 80,000$ housing units to $\approx 101,000$, representing a 26 percent increase. For the same period, final housing unit interviews among AIAN areas surged from $\approx 47,000$ to $\approx 84,000$.

The overall percent in sample for the U.S. increased from 2.1 percent in 2010 to 2.6 percent in 2012. In AIAN areas, the percent in sample grew significantly more during the same period. Since most of these areas only receive 5-year data, the full impact of these changes will not be realized until 2017, with the release of the 2012-2016 ACS 5-year estimates.

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Number of Housing Units in AIAN Area	Percent in Sample 2010	Percent in Sample 2012
Less than 400	9.6	13.6
401 to 1,200	7.5	10.3
1,201 to 8,000	6.0	7.6
8,001 and higher	4.3	5.0
Overall	8.6	12.0

The Census Bureau conducted an extensive research undertaking as part of the 2010 Decennial Census - the 2010 Census Race and Hispanic Origin Alternative Questionnaire Experiment (AQE) (for details, see www.census.gov/2010census/news/press-kits/aqe/aqe.html). The 2010 AQE examined alternative strategies for improving the collection of data on a race and Hispanic origin, with four goals in mind:

- 1) Increasing reporting in the race and ethnic categories as defined by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget;
- 2) Decreasing non-response;
- 3) Increasing the accuracy and reliability of the results; and
- 4) Eliciting detailed responses for all racial and ethnic communities (e.g., Chinese, Mexican, Jamaican, etc.)

The results of the AQE supported all of these objectives, and the successful strategies from the AQE research have been employed in the design of the Census Bureau's mid-decade research.

The Census Bureau is exploring several key dimensions for improving the questions on race and Hispanic Origin in a 2015 National Content and Self Response Test and a 2016 American Community Survey Content Test. These dimensions include question format, response categories, wording of the instructions, and question terminology. In addition, with the advent of new web-based technology to enhance question designs and data collection, we are exploring the use of detailed checkboxes and dedicated write-in spaces in our web-based instruments (e.g., internet, smartphone, telephone, in-person enumeration) for optimizing the reporting of detailed racial and ethnic groups (e.g., Marshallese, Algerian, Japanese, Ghanaian, Colombian, French, etc.).

2. Content Development and Data Collection

Recommendations listed under 4.2.2, 4.3.4, and 4.5 are addressed in this section.

a) Content Review

Throughout 2014, the Census Bureau is conducting a comprehensive questionnaire content review process. Under this project, the Census Bureau will review every question on the ACS questionnaire and make recommendations regarding the findings. The first phase of this project collected and incorporated information from Federal Agencies and applied evaluation criteria developed by the ACS Sub-Committee of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Interagency Committee on Statistical Policy (ICSP). Information requested from the federal agencies includes:

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- a clear explanation of each use of ACS estimates;
- any applicable legal requirements for their uses;
- the geographic levels at which the estimates are used;
- the specific questions necessary to accomplish each use; and
- whether alternative data sources can be utilized.

As information was collected from federal agencies, the Census Bureau fielded a survey to interviewers about the perceived cognitive burden, sensitivity, and difficulty of each question, researched which questions were essential to sampling frames for other federal surveys, and examined information about the estimates (coefficients of variation, allocation rates, etc.) and respondent burden (median seconds to answer, number of complaints, etc.). The results of this analysis inform recommendations about which questions could be retained in their current form, which could be removed from the survey, and which could be candidates for further research. These recommendations will be published in a *Federal Register* notice this Fall.

The next phase of this project will consider responses to the *Federal Register* notice, research findings, input from data users and stakeholders, and the availability and viability of alternative sources of these estimates. The resulting recommendations will be presented to Congress and submitted to OMB in early 2015. Assuming the Census Bureau receives a final determination from OMB by June, the modified questionnaire will be implemented in January 2016. The Census Bureau also will seek to improve the survey and reduce burden on an ongoing basis by conducting additional content reviews in the future.

b) Interview and Contact Procedures

As a representative of the federal government and the Census Bureau, the ACS Field Representatives (FRs) are trained on general rules of conduct when interacting with the public. These rules include professional demeanor and dress; respect for the respondent and their household; and leveraging translation services and multi-lingual FRs when encountering a language barrier.

The Census Bureau established the *American Indian and Alaska Native Policy Statement* pledging to consult with tribal leaders and cooperate with them on any activities regarding the Census that might affect their tribes. This policy applies to all activities of the Census Bureau. Because each nation forms its own government, the Census Bureau works with them individually. Each tribe has its own customs, beliefs, and cultural norms and the Census Bureau strives to respect them all.

For the Census Bureau, it is imperative that all Census operations, including the American Community Survey be conducted with the acknowledgement and cooperation of the tribal authority over those reservation areas.

The Census Bureau trains its FRs on how to conduct interviews in AIAN areas. This training includes a FRs first visit to an American Indian Reservation (AIR) through completion of the survey. Key guidelines include:

- Regional Office (RO) Management Staff or RO Partnership Staff will contact the tribal government and establish a contact person for the initial visit and subsequent visits.

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- The identified contact person must be notified before visiting the reservation.
- RO Management or RO Partnership Staff will provide the FRs with the protocol for each tribe
- Observe all posted signs, including areas that are closed to outsiders and restrictions to outsiders on tribal areas after dark
- Do not touch ceremonial/cultural objects such as eagle feathers, sacred bundles and ties, etc.

While these procedures are specific to AIAN areas, the Census Bureau is committed to working with stakeholders and partnership groups to expand efforts with small populations to establish guidelines, rules, or codes of conduct.

3. Outreach and Promotion

Recommendations listed under 4.2.3, 4.3.8, 4.3.9, and 5.2 are addressed in this section.

As noted previously, ACSO staff work with the Field Division on outreach activities. Below are examples of several initiatives, past and present.

a) Regional Activities

The Census Bureau engages and educates communities and stakeholders across the nation about the benefits of the ACS. The ACS has developed an integrated communications plan. A big part of this plan is the local field component. For example, the 24 Data Dissemination Specialists (DDS), who are employed across the regions, constantly work within the community to promote the importance of the ACS and other Census Bureau programs. Their outreach efforts include answering public and media inquiries; conducting presentations to local leaders and faith-based organizations; and providing training to data users in need of assistance using Census Bureau products. In July 2014, DDS staff conducted 160 outreach activities across the nation.

b) Outreach Materials

Currently, the Census Bureau does not produce population specific material. We are currently working with a communications contractor, to conduct message research to refresh ACS materials so that they may resonate more with our various respondents.

Next fiscal year, the Census Bureau will use the findings from that research to develop targeted materials by geographic areas and in some cases, population groups.

Given budget constraints, the ACS is unable to provide all materials in as many languages as the 2010 Census. However, the ACS does have some in-language materials. In addition to English, the ACS paper questionnaire is available in Spanish, Chinese, and Vietnamese (upon request). The Internet tool is also available in Spanish. The Questions and Answers brochure (ACS-51) for households is available in eleven languages:

- Arabic
- Chinese
- English
- French
- Haitian Creole

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- Korean
- Polish
- Portuguese
- Russian
- Spanish
- Vietnamese

Summary

Again, we greatly appreciate the SPWG's report and recommendations. These will be used to guide our plans for the ACS in the upcoming fiscal year. The ACS program is committed to establishing and maintaining processes that ensure the collection and dissemination of the highest quality data. As part of that effort, our goal is to continuously innovate and improve the ACS.