

# ACS Messaging and Mail Package Assessment Research

August 15, 2014

During FY14, the American Community Survey Office (ACSO) collaborated with Reingold, Inc., a national, full-service strategic communications firm with more than 25 years of experience. Reingold,, (partnering with Penn Scheon Berland and Decision Partners) conducted messaging and mail package assessment research to help us address the frequent questions/concerns we hear about the ACS surrounding privacy, intrusiveness, value of the data, and burden of completion. Our goal is that through this research, we will identify messaging and mail package enhancements that help us increase response rates for participants (and boost early response rates); link the value of ACS/Census data to key areas of interest for various stakeholder groups; and increase public awareness, support, and use, of ACS data.

The goals of this research are:

1. **Primary:** To develop and test messages to increase ACS self-response rates, thereby decreasing the expense of costly follow up with non-responders
2. **Secondary:** To obtain insights from message testing to support general outreach, data dissemination, materials development, and call center and field operations

The Messaging Research is divided into two phases. The **first phase** occurred between October 2013 and May 2014. During this phase, Reingold supported the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey Office (ACSO) in conducting a series of qualitative and quantitative research studies aimed at identifying effective messages about the American Community Survey (ACS).

In support of these goals, Reingold conducted five iterative, mutually supportive research studies designed to triangulate attitudes and messages about the ACS:

1. Mental Models interviews with individuals who work closely with ACS stakeholders (respondents and data users)
2. Deliberative focus groups with stakeholders who are distrustful of the government
3. Key informant interviews
4. Comprehensive message testing: benchmark survey
5. Comprehensive message testing: refinement survey

The full report for each of the above research components is accessible at:

<http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Downloads/library/2014/2014>

Cumulative findings from this research informed a second phase of testing to assess alternative messages and designs for ACS mail package materials. The results may also inform broader ACS messaging efforts, with the potential to be used in materials for outreach and field operations and to promote education and awareness about the ACS.

## KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS FROM THE MESSAGING PHASE

Below are key findings that emerged from the messaging research.

- **America knows Census—but not ACS.**  
People are largely unaware of ACS, but are highly aware of—and have favorable views toward—the Census Bureau and decennial census. More closely associating ACS with the Census brand

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could help build awareness and credibility for ACS.

- **“Community” is key.**  
Participants frequently evaluated ACS in terms of tangible, community-level benefits—like improvements to roads, schools, and hospitals. Messages that emphasize local impacts and concrete applications of ACS data may resonate with survey recipients.
- **“Why would they possibly need to know this?”**  
Survey questions seen as “irrelevant” often provoke concerns about privacy and the survey’s motives. If respondents better understand the purpose behind objectionable questions, they may be more inclined to participate.
- **“They already have this information.”**  
Participants often believed that the data ACS collect are already available from other sources, rendering ACS unnecessary. Demonstrating ACS’ unique value, including ways that ACS data are used by “existing” resources people value, could help dispel perceptions that ACS is redundant.
- **Distrust of government is pervasive.**  
Distrust of the federal government can color attitudes toward the ACS, and recent events such as the NSA leaks have heightened concerns about privacy and data security. As much as possible, separate ACS from views on the federal government.
- **Census is viewed more favorably than the Department of Commerce.**  
The Census Bureau saw higher favorability among research participants than did its parent department. Explore ways to associate the ACS with the Census brand, rather than the Commerce Department.
- **“No hablo Inglés.”**  
Cultural and language challenges create significant barriers to stakeholder engagement and participation in ACS. Consider tailoring ACS materials to acknowledge cultural nuances and making response options readily apparent in Spanish and other languages.
- **Focus on personal milestones—not sensitive topics.**  
Topics such as “disability status, income, and the age of children” used to describe the ACS triggered significantly less favorable perceptions than topics such as “school enrollment, occupation, and veteran status.”
- **Good tools and training are key in the field.**  
Resources available to field personnel are often insufficient to the communications challenges they face. Arm staff with messages, materials, and training that enable them to underscore ACS’ relevance—particularly at the local community level—for respondents and other stakeholders.
- **Local influencers are trusted messengers.**  
Leaders active with high-interest populations (low-income, minority, non-English, etc.) stressed the importance of communicating the value of ACS through trusted community channels. Partnering with community organizations to convey the legitimacy and value of ACS is likely to encourage trust and increase participation.

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The **second phase** of the messaging research – the mail package assessment - occurred between May 2014 and September 2014. In support of these goals, Reingold conducted two iterative research studies:

1. Focus groups - 6 total, with 30 to 35 one-on-one interviews across the country.
2. Online Visual Testing

The ultimate goal is to determine which messages and designs are most effective in compelling survey recipients to respond at an early stage in the ACS mailing sequence — and preferably online — thereby saving the Census Bureau the expense of costly follow-up efforts.

Reingold developed and tested three design concepts in addition to the existing ACS mail package, which they also tested as an experimental control. In addition to probing conversationally on effective elements of each design, they asked participants to rank the four concepts at each stage in order from the most effective to the least effective.

During this phase of the research Census requested, and received, feedback from members of both the Census Scientific and National Advisory Committees. Committee members received copies of the draft mail designs for the focus groups/one-on-one interviews and provided comments to Census that we vetted through the subteam managing this research effort. Census also sought the expert advice of respected survey methodologist, Don Dillman. We incorporated several of his recommendations into the online visual testing conducted in late August through early September.

## Key findings and implications from the mail package assessment are as follows:

- **The existing package was seen as most effective.**  
The existing ACS design was most frequently reported to be the most effective package. This design conveyed a strong sense of being official, important, and from the government, which participants deemed more essential than being attractive, colorful, or “friendly.” Alternative packages were frequently seen as appearing too “commercial.”
- **Consider a hybrid of effective design elements.**  
Still, based on positive responses to certain elements of other designs, it is clear that the existing package presents a number of areas for improvement, for consideration in further testing and revisions to the package design. Effective tactics to consider include using visual hierarchies to call out important messages, demonstrating local community benefits more clearly, rethinking the design of reminder postcards, incorporating “Keep this card” messaging, developing more engaging and streamlined brochures, and using alternative color schemes.
- **ACS doesn’t register.**  
Surprisingly, the concept of the “American Community Survey” barely registered with participants, despite long conversations about the mail package designs. Lacking prior awareness of the ACS, participants frequently thought the ACS designation was not essential to their understanding of the package and commonly conceived of the mailing as “a census survey” or confused it with the decennial census.
- **“Stick” above “carrot.”**  
A more punitive, “stick” approach to messaging resonated foremost with participants. However, more altruistic “carrot” messages — especially those about local community benefits — were an

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effective complement and offered participants a reason to *want* to complete the survey.

The full report for the mail package focus groups and one-on-one interviews is accessible at:

<http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Downloads/library/2014/2014>

The full report for the Online Visual Testing will also be posted at the above website once the results are finalized.

## Next Steps

At the end of the messaging and mail package assessment research Reingold will submit a set of recommendations to Census. Census will develop and implement field tests to prove Reingold's recommendations in a production environment. Final recommendations for program implementation is expected by the end of FY15.