

Synopsis for ACS Content Review Discussion with CSAC 8/28/2014

Background

Since the founding of the nation, the U.S. Census has mediated between the demands of a growing country for information about its economy and people, and the people's privacy and freedom from undue intrusion. From the first Census in 1790, questions have been added and scaled back, and starting with the introduction of the long form in 1940, more detailed questions have been asked of a sample of the public.

The American Community Survey (ACS), launched in 2005, is the long form of the census, which is now asked each year of a sample of the U.S. population in order to provide current data needed more often than once every ten years. In December of 2010, five years after its launch, the American Community Survey (ACS) program accomplished all of its primary objectives with the release of its first set of estimates for every area of the U.S. As a result, the Director of the Census Bureau concluded it was an appropriate time to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the ACS program. The assessment focused on strengthening programmatic, technical, and methodological aspects of the survey to assure that the Census Bureau is an efficient and effective shared service provider. The assessment also included an initiative to examine and confirm the value of each question on the ACS. This ACS Content Review project seeks to understand which federal programs use the information collected by each question and assess how the Census Bureau might reduce respondent burden.

Overview

Throughout 2014, as a part of this comprehensive questionnaire content review process, the Census Bureau will review every question on the ACS questionnaire and make recommendations regarding the findings. The first phase of this project collects and incorporates information from federal agencies and applies evaluation criteria developed by the ACS Sub-Committee of the OMB Interagency Committee on Statistical Policy (ICSP). Information requested from the federal agencies includes:

- 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
- 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.