



AUG 25 2015

MEMORANDUM FOR: Barbara A. Anderson  
Chair  
Census Scientific Advisory Committee

From: John H. Thompson  
Director  
U.S. Census Bureau 

Subject: The U.S. Census Bureau's Responses to the CSAC-Scientific  
Advisory Committee Recommendations

The U.S. Census Bureau thanks the CSAC-Scientific Advisory Committee for its advice. Your expertise is necessary to ensure that the Census Bureau continues to provide relevant and timely statistics used by federal, state, and local governments, as well as business and industry, in an increasingly technologically oriented society.

We are responding to the committee recommendations, submitted as a result of the April 16-17, 2015, meeting.

Attachment

## **Census Bureau Responses to the CSAC-Scientific Advisory Committee Recommendations from Spring 2015 Meeting**

### **1. Census Enterprise Data Collection and Processing Systems (CEDCaP) and Reorganized Census with Integrated Technology (ROCKIT)**

Census Scientific Advisory Committee (CSAC) commends the U.S. Census Bureau on the progress made toward the redesign of the 2020 Census operations and systems (ROCKIT, CEDCaP). The plans are well thought out, and the presentation was informative and professional. We request an update be given at each CSAC meeting to include status on accomplishments and plans, as well as risk identification and mitigation strategies.

#### **Census Response:**

The Census Bureau appreciates the Committee's acknowledgement of our work to date. We will be happy to provide updates on these matters, including information about risks and mitigation strategies, at future meetings.

### **2. BIG Data**

CSAC commends the Census Bureau for its initiative to establish a Big Data Center, which we believe will enhance its mission to provide U.S. economic and social statistics. The Center requires strategic direction, and the appointment of its Chief should be given top priority. Demonstration projects need to be chosen based on both statistical and computational principles; then they need to be assessed and the successful ones incorporated into the Census Bureau's operations. CSAC would like to ask the Director how many FTEs will be provided to the newly appointed Chief, and what will the Center's projected annual budget be for collaborative research projects with non-Census Bureau parties?

#### **Census Response:**

Census thanks the committee for its interest and support to the BIG Data Center initiative. The President's Budget has not yet been released to the public and the information is not available. For this reason, at this time we cannot provide details on the number of FTEs and requested budget for collaborative projects.

### **3. ACS Content Review**

CSAC was pleased to obtain more information about the ACS Content Review. CSAC was especially gratified that the Census recommendation to the OMB does not recommend deletion of the marital history or the undergraduate field of major items. CSAC would like to have more input into future review processes for deletion or addition of items to the ACS. CSAC has been very critical of the cost-benefit analysis used in 2014 to select questions for removal from the ACS. Among the critiques were the seeming lack of consideration of the research value of questions and the narrow focus on the value of small area estimates in the ACS. It would be useful to have a session where Census staff outline the theory, methods, and considerations used to add and/or delete questions from one or more of their major surveys. CSAC discussants could address the theory, methods, and considerations outlined by the Census staff and make

constructive suggestions regarding the ways that such procedures for additions/deletions could be improved in the future.

**Census Response:**

The Census Bureau welcomes CSAC's input on the processes of adding or deleting content to the ACS. As CSAC is aware, the Census Bureau develops our content review methodology under guidance from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), Interagency Council on Statistical Policy Subcommittee on the ACS.

The Content Review involved balancing the need for and specific uses of ACS data from federal agencies as well as non-federal data users against the time and cognitive difficulty associated with each survey question. The project laid the foundation for the Census Bureau moving forward with an extensive research agenda to meet the future vision of the program.

The CSAC could play an instrumental role in this future vision by assisting with the individual areas of research to address concerns in four broad areas:

- **Using Information Already Provided to the Government.** We are researching ways to use information that households have already provided to the federal government so we don't have to ask households twice for the same information. We are exploring this information as a substitute for some questions on the survey, potentially allowing for their removal.
- **Reducing Follow-Up Contact Attempts.** We reduced telephone follow-ups in 2013 and we will test how to reduce the number of times interviewers knock on respondents' doors.
- **Testing changes to ACS Messaging.** We will begin by testing changes to the mandatory language on the envelope. We will then test approaches that reduce the mandatory messaging in the materials and use a "more carrot than stick" strategy to encourage survey participation.
- **Reducing Survey Burden.** We are researching whether asking certain questions less frequently, or eliminating some subparts of questions on a given topic, would still serve the underlying legal and programmatic needs for that data. In addition, we are researching alternative ways of asking certain questions.

Census Bureau staff could provide CSAC with a session on these research areas—albeit not specifically focused on adding/deleting content—but rather where CSAC discussants could address the theory, methods, and considerations outlined by the Census Bureau staff and make constructive suggestions regarding ways to reduce respondent concerns and survey burden. This collaboration could be structured within the context of the associated request to authorize an ACS Working Group as discussed in Recommendation 5.2 below. We are confident this approach will serve as a positive mechanism to foster dialog, and we thank the committee for its continuing interest in finding ways to improve the management of survey content.

For more information about these areas of research, please see the report, "[Agility in Action: A Snapshot of Enhancements to the American Community Survey](#)," published June 30, 2015.

#### **4. General Survey Matters**

CSAC notes the importance and value of the portfolio of surveys that the Census Bureau conducts. CSAC respectfully requests one or more sessions at future meetings on questionnaire content, sampling design, and other matters that are common to all the surveys. In addition CSAC requests information about issues and challenges to Census Bureau surveys, such as SIPP, that have not been discussed recently with CSAC.

##### **Census Response:**

The Census Bureau welcomes the opportunity to share information with CSAC members about SIPP and other Bureau surveys. For the next CSAC meeting, we will plan to deliver a presentation on SIPP that covers the recent redesign of the survey and lessons learned in deploying the new instrument in the field; we will also discuss efforts to evaluate administrative data sources to enhance data quality and reduce respondent burden. At that time, we will seek clarification from CSAC members about other surveys of interest and plan to inform the committee about those at future sessions.

#### **5. Working Groups**

##### **5.1. ACS Group Quarters Working Group**

The ACS Group Quarters Working Group has interacted productively with ACS staff, making recommendations and receiving responses. This Working Group would like to give a final presentation at the fall 2015 CSAC meeting, after which this Working Group would be dissolved.

##### **Census Response:**

The ACS Group Quarters Working Group was indeed productive, and we thank you for this collaborative effort. The Census Bureau received ten recommendations from this group and ACSO has been actively following up on these. This partnership has not only helped the ACS GQ program, but will also help in planning the 2020 GQ operation. The ACSO provided an update on the disposition of the ten recommendations for the CSAC fall 2014 meeting. We look forward to hearing this group's final report.

##### **5.2. ACS Working Group**

CSAC has requested authorization for a new Working Group on the ACS. In light of issues that ACS has been confronting, a CSAC Working Group on this topic would be very appropriate.

##### **Census Response:**

The ACS welcomes continued assistance from the CSAC. The knowledge and expertise of the members can help ACS in a variety of ways. The ACS is exploring many new initiatives through research, including the possibility of ACS monthly estimates, evaluating the ACS product line to align with data user needs and changing trends, revising messages to ensure they resonate with the respondents, reducing the number of personal visits to non-responding

households, and an on-going review of questionnaire content. We look forward to hearing more about the specific ACS topics the CSAC would like to explore through a working group. Please see our thoughts on how we might structure an exchange of ideas in the response to Recommendation 3 above.

### 5.3. BIG Data Working Group

CSAC looks forward to the Working Group on BIG Data.

#### Census Response:

Census appreciates the work this group is currently doing and is looking forward to learn more about its progress at the upcoming fall meeting.

## 6. CSAC Member Travel

A combination of improved service and reluctant acceptance of restrictions for CSAC members has reduced the concern previously voiced by CSAC about travel arrangements. We had only one major incident this time. We would, however, request that the Bureau management continue to seek ways to help travel arrangements be more flexible and predictable. We would like tickets to be actually purchased and confirmed earlier and we would like more flexibility with unusual travel circumstances. We request that the travel policies for CSAC members be reviewed with respect to the following:

6.1. To what extent are the policies in place required by policy imposed outside Census and largely beyond its control and to what extent is the policy internal perhaps more restrictive. Could the policies, at least for voluntary outside consultants, be relaxed to enable tickets to be purchased earlier or optional use of the official agent as long as reimbursements do not exceed government rates for the same trip. We ask this question because many of the members travel for the government with other agencies like NSF and NIH and DO get earlier ticket purchases and more flexible reimbursement policies. We also note that some agencies seem to enable more flexibility for voluntary consultants for occasional meetings than they do for their regular employees with routine travel.

#### Census Response:

Census Bureau follows Federal Travel Regulation (FTR) and Department of Commerce (DOC) Travel Handbook. Both are external to Census. Per the FTR, Section §301-50.3, "... you must use your agency's existing Travel Management Service (TMS) to make your travel arrangements" and the DOC Travel Handbook Section C301-50.1 reads "It is mandatory to use the Travel Management Center for all official travel. The Department currently has a contract with ADTRAV to provide Travel Management Services." Using the TMS allows Census to track all travel for reporting purposes. ADTRAV is a full service travel agency that can issue all types of tickets. For early ticket release, contact Elaine Russell, Conference and Travel Management Services Branch (CTMSB), at 301-763-4850. We request that whenever you have a travel incident you contact us so that we can address and resolve the issue immediately.

6.2. We would also request a bit more attention to logistical details during the meeting, especially the coming and going. It would be good if a Census host would greet the team when they arrive at the gate and help expedite the check in process, as well as exit with the team in the evening to be sure the transportation is present before the team arrives.

Census response:

CTMSB staff does meet advisory committee members at the metro entrance when they arrive on our shuttle buses. Our functions are limited at the entrance gate. The security guards are required to process guests for entry into the Census Bureau complex. This entails verifying individual's identification, citizenship, and providing building passes. At the spring 2015 meeting there was a miscommunication on our part with the transportation staff regarding the departure time. This caused a delay in the members' departure from Census. Going forward, we will ensure departure times are verified and correct, and assign staff to escort members to the shuttles to ensure this does not happen in the future.