

Report on New CSAC Working Group on the ACS

Robert A. Hummer

Department of Sociology and Carolina Population Center

University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill

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Origin of and Charge to Working Group

- Established in February 2016
- CSAC formally requested an ACS Working Group because of deep interest in helping the Census Bureau improve data quality of ACS while working to make the ACS as useful as possible and as least burdensome as possible for the American public
- Specific charge from the Census Bureau to our Working Group: “This group will review, assess, and provide feedback on topics related to reducing respondent burden in the American Community Survey (ACS). The group will provide scientific and technical expertise from the following disciplines: statistics, survey sample design and estimation, administrative records usage, cost-benefit analysis, and other fields of expertise, as appropriate, to address Census Bureau needs and objectives.”
- We thank Director John Thompson, Division Chief Deborah Stempowski, and the entire ACS staff for the opportunity to work on this project with you

Working Group Members

- Barbara Anderson
- Noel Cressie
- Irma Elo
- Gary Gates
- Robert Hummer (Convener)

** We have met twice thus far via conference call: 2/23/16 & 3/23/16

** We are working in collaboration with the following individuals from the Census Bureau: Mark Asiala, Eric Castro, Kimberly Collier, Tara Dunlop, Brenda Holmes, Todd Hughes, Sara Rosario Nieves, Amy O'Hara, Maria Olmedo-Malagon, David Raglin, Deborah Stempowski, & Tommy Wright

Defining and Measuring Respondent Burden

- Largely defined and measured by the length of time it takes to answer each question and overall survey; cognitive burden, sensitivity, and difficulty also taken into account
 - ~ 40 minutes average for survey
 - ~ 2,455,868 person hours/year
- Survey of field interviewers from 2014 tapped into issues of time, sensitivity of questions, repeated phone calls, and other issues...as perceived by field staff
- Begun early discussions on what exactly “respondent burden” specific to the ACS means (various dimensions), how it might be assessed, and how widespread (or not) it is felt by respondents (non-GQ & GQ) and non-respondents to the ACS
- Assessment of burden among respondents could be a very useful exercise to best understand “the problem”
- Burden assessed largely by time could lead to only one solution: cut time

Matrix Sampling

- Overview provided by Todd Hughes to Working Group on 3/23/16
 - Split questionnaire design... would divide ACS into possibly overlapping sets of questions and then administer these subsets to different subsamples; could also ask some questions less than every year
 - Some potential reductions in burden (i.e., less time for each respondent) and possibility of adding new items are upsides, but a number of potential downsides:
 - Substantial operational complexity
 - Sample sizes decrease for a number of ACS items; thus, variance estimates increase (esp. small areas, population subgroups, 1-year estimates)
 - Potentially major data user confusion
 - Potentially major impact on PUMS files
- * Initial Working Group reactions are skeptical... (perhaps) less burden coupled with 4 very important impacts on the quality and usability of the data

Use of Administrative Records

- Overview provided by Amy O'Hara to Working Group on 3/23/16
- Census Bureau work to date has focused on 4 (sets of) questions:
 - Year Built
 - Condominium Status
 - Phone Service
 - Income
- Very promising initial reaction to the work on income. IRS data available for ~88% of adults aged 15-64 and ~98% for adults 65+. Potential improvements in data quality also possible, at least for some, while reducing burden.
- Initial reactions for other items not as positive...burden not as clear, benefits not as promising.

Conclusions

- ACS Working Group new and just beginning its work
- Our very early (i.e., VERY EARLY) reactions:
 - Defining and measuring “respondent burden” may be a very useful exercise; potential data collection among respondents and non-respondents (perceived burden)?
 - Matrix sampling may be very tough to implement, may have modest influences on “burden”, and may have substantial downsides
 - Administrative records use may have substantial potential with regard to income
- Would like to hear more about potential of administrative records for use in certain GQs (prisons, nursing homes) where some data items don’t make sense to collect, where data quality may be poor, and where burden may truly be very high
- We’ll continue our work and will report back again in the fall