

# Report on CSAC Working Group on the ACS

Robert A. Hummer

Department of Sociology and Carolina Population Center

University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill

September 16, 2016

# 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, Acting Division Chief Victoria Velkoff, and the entire ACS staff for the opportunity to work on this project with you

# Working Group Members

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

\*\* We have met 6 times thus far, 5 via conference call and once in person:  
2/23/16, 3/23/16, 4/15/16, 5/23/16, 6/24/16, 8/3/16

\*\* 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, David Waddington, Victoria Velkoff, & Tommy Wright

# Defining and Measuring Respondent Burden

- One of the key topics of our conference call in August
- 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
- 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
- Perhaps broaden the concept to “Respondent Burden and Overall Experience”?
- Working Group agrees that more research is needed on what exactly “respondent burden and overall experience” 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 selected for the ACS
- If burden is assessed largely by time, could lead to only one solution: cut time
- Findings of research on “respondent burden and overall experience” could help in both dealing with critics/complaints and in dealing with documented problems

# Matrix Sampling

- Overview provided by Todd Hughes to Working Group on 3/23/16
- Some potential reductions in burden (e.g. less time for each respondent), 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
- Our Working Group reactions were skeptical/negative... (perhaps) less burden coupled with 4 very important impacts on the quality and usability of the data. Glad that matrix sampling not part of ACS research plans in Tori's presentation!

# Use of Administrative Records

- Overview provided by Amy O'Hara to Working Group in spring; updated activities discussed on our August call
- Census Bureau work we heard about has focused on 4 (sets of) questions:
  - Housing: Property Tax, Property Value, Year Built, Acreage
  - Income
  - Phone Service
  - Condominium Status
- Very promising Working Group reaction to the ACS research 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. New cognitive research on income questions in progress. Seems to be a very promising avenue to pursue, particularly in lieu of the sensitivity of income questions on social and economic surveys
- Also agree that administrative data on housing (e.g., taxes, value, year built) is a potential fruitful avenue for research and potential implementation

# Other Research Areas For ACS

- Improving Survey Materials and Survey Wording
- Modifying Survey Modes (e.g. CATI)
- Use of Adaptive Design
- Improving Mail Materials
- Improving Messaging and Communication
- Improving GQ Data Collection and Products

\*\* Most of these new initiatives strongly informed by NAS/CNSTAT March meeting and 4 spring expert meetings; we do not yet have access to the summary report of those meetings and are reluctant to comment on these research initiatives at present, although all appear to be potentially useful \*\*

\*\* One exception: great to hear (8/3/16) about ACS research on evaluating GQ data products and using administrative records for institutional GQs...which were important recommendations of the CSAC Working Group on Group Quarters (Anderson, Elo, Hummer). We strongly endorse these. \*\*

# Looking Ahead

- Continue to endorse research work on defining and measuring “respondent burden and overall experience”; potential data collection among ACS sample members who were both respondents and non-respondents
- Continue to support research work on selectively/strategically using administrative records that have substantial potential to improve survey experience and improve data quality
- Will look forward to receiving and reading: 1) NAS/CNSTAT report on expert meetings from spring; and 2) Agility in Action 2.0
- Can more effectively assess a broader range of ACS plans once we have access to those documents