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MEMORANDUM FOR ACS Research and Evaluation Workgroup

From: Donna M. Daily
Chief, American Community Survey Office

DONNA DAILY Digitally signed by DONNA DAILY Date: 2026.09.09 08:38:22 -04'00'

Prepared by: Elizabeth Poehler and Dorothy Barth
American Community Survey Office

Subject: Improving Survey Self-Response: Two Decades of American Community Survey Contact Strategy Research

The final American Community Survey (ACS) Research and Evaluation report, "Improving Survey Self-Response: Two Decades of American Community Survey Contact Strategy Research," is attached. The report summarizes research and subsequent changes to the ACS self-response contact strategy since the ACS began in 2005 through 2025. The report also summarizes tests that were conducted but did not result in any changes. The Census Bureau's Disclosure Review Board (DRB) has reviewed this data product for unauthorized disclosure of confidential information and approved the disclosure-avoidance practices applied to this release. The DRB approval number is CBDRB-FY25-ACSO003-B0023.

If you have any questions about this report, please contact Elizabeth Poehler at 301-763-9305 or Dottie Barth at 301-763-1833.

Attachment

cc:
ACSO
Stephanie Baumgardner
Joy Barger
Nicole Butler
Cassie Fisher
Marcella Jones-Puthoff
Justin Maietta
Greg Seymour
Tavia Simmons
Michelle Wiland
Brian Wilson

DSSD
Lauren Contard
Kelly Mathews
Michael Risley
Lindsay Longsine
Leann Weyl
Celeste Picone
Mary Frances Zelenak

CBSM
Jessica Holzberg
Kathleen Kephart

DSMD
Rachel Horwitz

9/8/2026

Improving Survey Self-Response: Two Decades of American Community Survey Contact Strategy Research

FINAL REPORT

Elizabeth Poehler and Dorothy Barth
American Community Survey Office

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since its inception in 2005, the American Community Survey (ACS) has used multiple methods to collect responses, including paper questionnaires, phone interviews, in-person interviews, and, since 2013, online responses. The U.S. Census Bureau sends mailings to encourage self-response—an approach known as the self-response or mail contact strategy.

Although the ACS maintains higher response rates than most surveys because of its mandatory nature, it, too, has experienced a downward trend in response rates, mirroring the steady decline seen across all surveys. To combat the declining response rates, the Census Bureau has conducted extensive research over the past two decades to improve the ACS mail contact strategy. This document is a comprehensive reference guide to the research, covering results that have led to changes to the mail contact strategy and materials, as well as those that have not.

While many valuable lessons have been learned from twenty years of research on ACS mail materials, some key insights stand out. They are as follows:

- Use as few materials in the mailings as possible. Adding materials for specific subpopulations, such as non-English speakers, should be done sparingly and only for the target population, if possible.
- Reduce the number of messages communicated. Choose a maximum of three key messages to emphasize, preferably in bold font, in every mailing.
- Write and design the materials using plain language guidelines. A good starting point is the Plain Language Guide developed to help federal employees comply with the Plain Writing Act of 2010.
- Make a strong connection to the Census Bureau brand because it is widely known and recognized.
- Maintain a governmental look and feel; it is expected for government surveys.
- Emphasize the mandatory messaging. It is a strong motivator for response, even if people say they don't like it.
- Create a strategic plan for messaging that includes a thorough review of research-based results from a variety of disciplines.
- Conduct cognitive testing to confirm understanding and interpretation of messages, but be cautious about drawing conclusions about the impact of messages on response rates from this type of testing.
- Conduct a holistic review of messages periodically and continue testing as much as possible.
- Communicate with Census Bureau interviewers to continuously and consistently update materials to meet emerging needs they observe while working with respondents.

Looking ahead, potential areas for future exploration include:

- Focusing more on communicating data security. Access to online surveys must strike a balance between ease of access and security (barriers).
- Diminishing the use of more expensive modes of data collection, especially as response rates continually decrease. A centralized outbound telephone operation was already removed from the ACS. We expect the use of paper questionnaires to continue declining, prompting efforts to reduce the number of people who receive them.
- Monitoring the way people interact with the United States Postal Service (USPS) and change their behaviors around traditional mail use, such as the frequency of retrieving mail.
- Researching underlying barriers and motivations to survey response.
- Considering the potential for more customization by geography or personalization. The size of the ACS target population makes this challenging, but technological advancements could make it possible.
- Optimizing the survey for mobile devices and a "digital first" approach.
- Considering the use of different contact modes and other motivation factors (such as gamification).
- Exploring responsive contact strategies.
- Exploring how artificial intelligence can be used, such as providing help to respondents.
- Developing smaller, targeted and iterative research studies with faster turnaround times.
- Developing a messaging and communication strategy that strongly considers issues of literacy, numeracy, and the digital divide in the adult population.

The goal of future research efforts will be to continuously adapt contact strategies and messaging to an increasingly reluctant and diverse population while maintaining data quality and response rates. This will help ensure the ACS remains the premier source of detailed information on people and housing in the United States.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since its inception, the American Community Survey (ACS) has used a multi-mode *data collection strategy*. The term *data collection strategy* refers to the methods by which a survey organization collects data from sampled households, including the methods and modes used to contact the household and the ways in which household members can respond. From the beginning in 2005, the survey has used mailings, phone calls, and personal visits to contact households in sample and has collected data from respondents via self-responses (paper questionnaires), interviewer-administered telephone interviews, and face-to-face interviews. In 2013, the option to self-respond online (via the internet) was introduced. To solicit self-responses, the U.S. Census Bureau sends requests by mail to the sampled addresses.[1] The timing, number, and types of mailings sent are collectively referred to as the *self-response contact strategy* or the *mail contact strategy*.[2]

Over the years, the Census Bureau has maintained a robust research and evaluation program to continuously test ways to improve its strategies to optimize survey response. The core of the report highlights research conducted by the Census Bureau. However, Census Bureau staff have consistently collaborated with experts from other government agencies, private industry, and academia to evaluate and enhance ACS program initiatives. These collaborations have been, and continue to be, a key driver of ACS research and production improvements and are summarized in Appendix A.

This document summarizes findings from Census Bureau research, spanning more than two decades, on the self-response contact strategy. It includes research that led to successful changes to the contact strategy and materials, as well as research that did not, and a discussion of current and future testing. The document is intended to serve as a comprehensive reference, enabling readers to efficiently review the vast body of research to improve the ACS program's survey contact strategy over the past two decades.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1. The ACS Overview

The ACS is the cornerstone of the Census Bureau's effort to keep pace with the nation's ever-increasing demand for timely, relevant data on population and housing characteristics. This survey provides current demographic, social, economic, and housing information about America's communities every year—information that, until 2010, was available only once a decade. Implementation of the ACS is viewed by many as the single most important change in

[1] While the ACS also samples group quarters, this report focuses on housing units. This report also does not address the mail contact strategy used in Puerto Rico.

[2] The variation in wording is usually author dependent; one is named after the strategy to elicit a mode of response (self-response), the other is based on how the response is solicited (mail). Both are referring to the same methods.

the way detailed decennial census information is collected since 1940, when the Census Bureau introduced statistical sampling to collect "long form" data from a sample of households. The long form of the census was a questionnaire used during the decennial census to collect detailed socioeconomic and housing data from a sample of the population, whereas the short form collected basic demographic questions. Beginning with ACS's full implementation in 2005, the ACS replaced the census long-form questionnaire.

Because the ACS replaced the long form of the decennial census, the Census Bureau is legally required to conduct the survey under the same obligation it has to conduct the decennial census. So too are individuals in sampled households legally obligated to answer all ACS questions as accurately as possible. The relevant laws pertaining to the ACS are Title 18 U.S.C Section 3571 and Section 3559, which amends Title 13 U.S.C. Section 221. The laws that impose these obligations are what this report refers to as the "mandatory nature" of the survey.

As with the long form, information from the ACS is used to administer many kinds of government programs and to help inform how trillions of dollars in federal funds are distributed each year. Obtaining more current data throughout the decade from the ACS has long-lasting value for policy and decision making across federal, state, local, and tribal governments, the private sector, and virtually every local community in the nation.

The ACS is conducted throughout the United States and in Puerto Rico, where it is called the Puerto Rico Community Survey (PRCS). For this report, a discussion of the contact strategy used in Puerto Rico is not included.

2.2. The ACS Methods Panel Program

The Census Bureau conducts ongoing research to improve the ACS, its operations, and the resulting data products. A major component of ACS research focuses on testing changes to data collection methods to reduce survey costs and respondent burden and to improve response rates, data quality, and efficiency. This research program is called the ACS Methods Panel.

Research on data collection methods generally includes a field test component, which typically involves a control group (that uses current production methodology) and one or more experimental treatments. Ideas for testing come from program staff or from collaborative efforts with expert survey methodologists outside the Census Bureau and are informed by the survey research literature and other Census Bureau programs, especially research conducted for the decennial census. Similarly, ACS research informs methods and tests for the decennial census and other Census Bureau surveys.

ACS Research and Evaluation (ACS R&E) projects are governed by the ACS R&E Workgroup, which includes Census Bureau subject matter experts, statisticians, and survey methodologists. Test proposals are evaluated by the workgroup based on several criteria, including alignment

with strategic goals of the Census Bureau and ACS program, benefits to stakeholders and data users, potential for follow-on investments, and feasibility. Researchers conduct R&E projects under the oversight and guidance of the R&E Workgroup and the ACS program senior-level managers. Once a work request is approved, the researchers develop an analysis plan. This plan outlines the history, motivations, objectives, and research questions related to the project. It also explains, in detail, the methodology and metrics that will be used to answer the research questions. Design assumptions and limitations are also included. R&E Workgroup members with expertise in the research area, known as critical reviewers, are assigned to review the analysis plan and provide feedback and guidance on the research questions, methodology, and limitations. Methods Panel tests that include qualitative or quantitative testing with the public require approval of the Office of Management and Budget under the Paperwork Reduction Act before testing can begin. Once the research is complete, the findings are documented in a written report that follows the methodology outlined in the analysis plan. After the report is drafted, it undergoes review and is presented to the ACS R&E Workgroup and senior-level ACS program managers before finalization. Finalized papers are published online in the ACS Research & Evaluation Program Library.

Generally, Methods Panel field tests are conducted using the production ACS sample. This allows the ACS program to address survey issues and needs in an agile, cost-effective manner. As experiments are proposed for the ACS Methods Panel research program, concerns about the potential for negative impacts on official ACS estimates are considered. Most proposals for experiments on the ACS self-response contact strategy are approved for testing with the production sample, as they aim to improve response rates. If they fail, they are unlikely to negatively affect production response rates or responses. Tests involving changes to content or other significant methodological changes are conducted using an independent sample separate from the ACS production sample to support robust research to improve the ACS while isolating any impact on production estimates. Tests on content changes are not discussed in this paper.

To support an agile testing approach, the monthly ACS production sample of approximately 295,000 housing unit addresses is divided into 24 nationally representative Methods Panel Groups (MPGs), each with approximately 12,000 addresses. Each MPG is a representative subsample of the entire monthly sample, and each monthly sample is representative of the entire yearly sample and the country. This process, which was implemented in 2014, eliminated the need for stand-alone sampling specifications and software development, marking a significant evolution in the program's approach.

When experiments are conducted, one or more MPGs are randomly assigned to experimental treatments for the test, as needed. The number of groups assigned to each treatment depends on the estimated values of the statistic of interest, estimates of the effective sample size, and estimates of the resulting effect sizes. Statistics of interest (such as rates, proportions, or percentages) are computed for each treatment in a test, and the results are compared to

determine whether any treatment has a statistically significant effect on the statistics. Effective sample sizes are the estimated number of addresses in each group that will be in scope for the test. Resulting effect sizes represent the minimum statistically significant differences between the statistics of interest for two treatments. Estimates for the statistics of interest and effective sample sizes are based on results from previous panels, typically from the same panel or a period of the previous year.

Additionally, after data anomalies were observed during the 2015 Replacement Mail Questionnaire Package Test and in subsequent postal-tracking research (Heimel, 2016), we determined that large differences in the sample sizes of the mail treatments can lead to varying delivery times. This results in variations in return rates unrelated to the experimental treatments. Subsequently, we revised the sample allocation approach for ACS Methods Panel tests such that the control treatment is the same size as the experimental treatment(s).

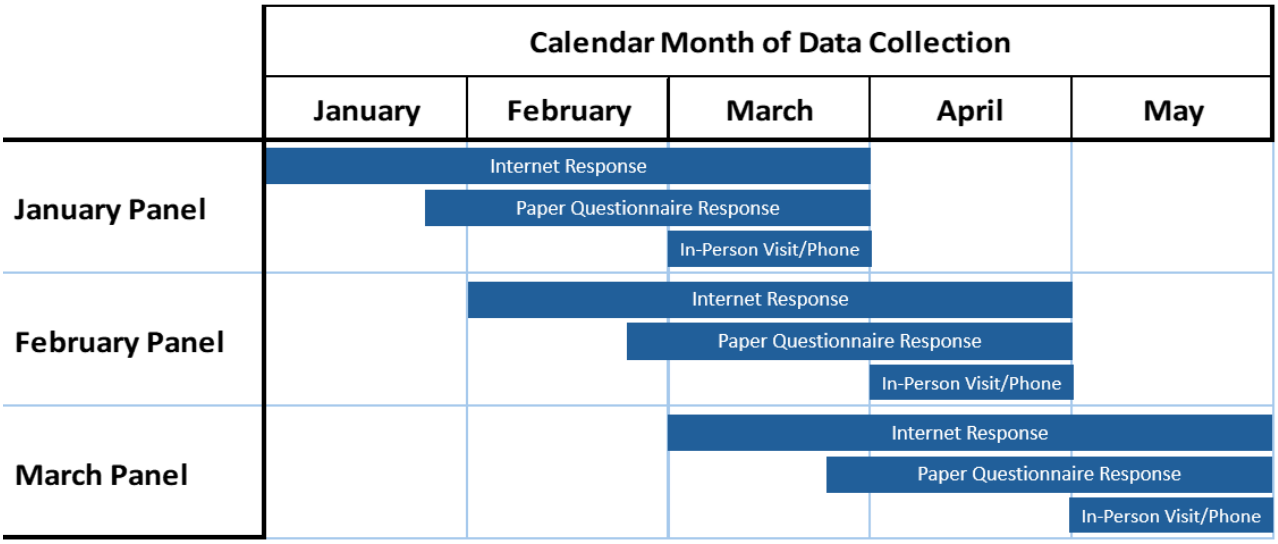
2.3. The Current (2025) ACS Data Collection and Self-Response Contact Strategies

Before diving into the self-response contact strategy, it is helpful to understand the overall data collection strategy for most housing units. The ACS divides the overall housing unit sample into monthly independent samples, which are called panels. The series of monthly samples is used to produce annually updated estimates. Five years of samples are required to produce data for small areas (census tracts and block groups).

Data collected for each panel of housing unit addresses consists of four modes of response: internet (introduced in 2013), paper, telephone, and personal visits.[3] Data collection for each monthly panel lasts for three months. For most housing unit addresses, the initial mode of contact involves mailed requests to elicit self-response to the survey via the internet, followed by an option to complete a paper questionnaire and return it by mail. Additionally, respondents can call the Census Bureau's Telephone Questionnaire Assistance (TQA) line to complete the survey or have questions answered. If the Census Bureau does not receive a response or the household refuses to participate, the address may be selected for nonresponse follow-up, including contact by telephone and personal visits. (This operation is called Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing, or CAPI.) Self-response returns are accepted during this entire three-month period. Figure 1 shows this overall data collection strategy for the January, February, and March panels.

[3] Other procedures are used to survey people living in other types of situations or geographies, such as group quarters (i.e., nursing homes, prisons, dorms) or in Remote Alaska and Puerto Rico. This paper focuses on survey methods for housing units. Housing units in Puerto Rico follow a different contact strategy and are not discussed in this paper.

Figure 1. ACS Housing Unit Data Collection Strategy

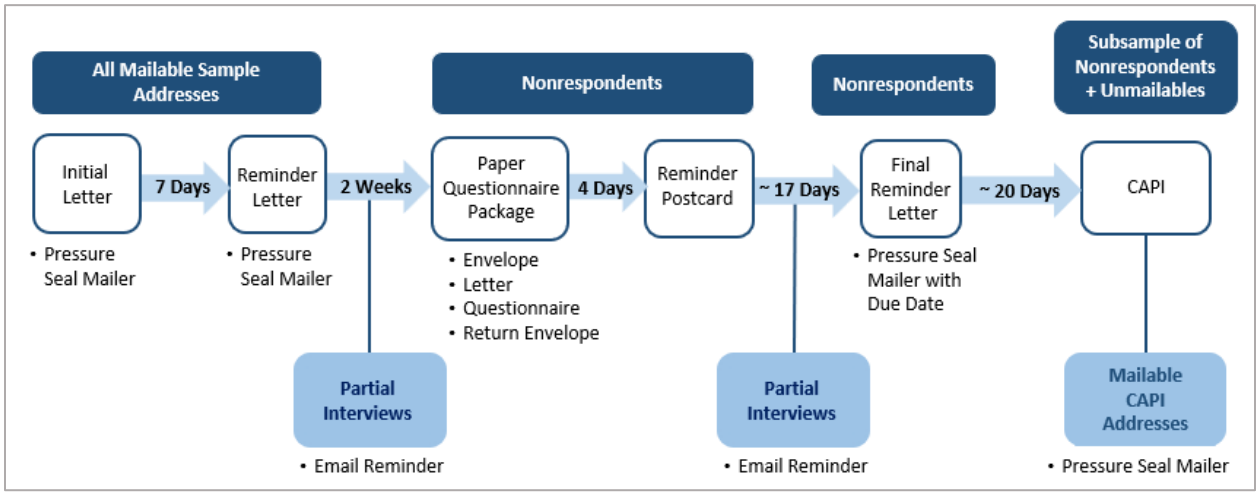


Note: Telephone Questionnaire Assistance is offered throughout the three-month data collection period for each panel; thus, telephone interviews initiated by the respondent may occur at any time. Each panel has a data-collection cutoff date shortly after the end of the third month; responses received after this date are not included.

To support the publication of statistics for small areas and subpopulations, it is critical that the ACS collect sufficient data using the most cost-effective methods. To do this, the ACS program relies on high levels of self-response, as it is the least expensive method of data collection. To encourage self-response, the Census Bureau sends as many as six mailings to a mailable, sampled address before using interviewers to conduct in-person or telephone interviews. The list of mailable, sampled addresses is updated three times during the self-response phase of data collection to remove households that already responded. The sooner an ACS response is received from a household, the fewer mailings we send to that address. Figure 2 shows the current (2025) ACS self-response contact strategy.[4] The CAPI operation is included in this figure (and in similar figures throughout this paper) because self-response continues to be accepted and solicited throughout all three months of data collection.

[4] The mail contact strategy used in Puerto Rico is different from the stateside strategy and is not discussed in this paper. See the ACS and Puerto Rico Community Survey (PRCS) Design and Methodology Report for more information (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024).

Figure 2. 2025 ACS Self-Response Contact Strategy



The Census Bureau sends the first two mailings to all mailable addresses in the monthly sample. The first mailing is an initial pressure seal mailer that includes an internet user ID and instructions on how to respond online. It also provides the TQA phone number, which respondents can call if they have questions or need help. A week later, the same addresses are sent a second mailing—a reminder pressure seal mailer. After the second mailing, a reminder email is sent to respondents who log in to the survey and provide a valid email address but do not complete the survey.

Addresses in the monthly sample for which a response is not received by a cutoff date after the second mailing comprise the second mailing universe.[5] These nonresponding addresses are sent the third and fourth mailings. The third mailing is a package that includes a letter, a paper questionnaire, and a business reply envelope. Four days later, these addresses are sent a fourth mailing (a reminder postcard), encouraging them to respond. After the fourth mailing, a reminder email is sent to respondents who log in to the survey and provide a valid email address but do not complete the survey.

Addresses for which a response is not received by a cutoff date after the fourth mailing comprise the third mailing universe. These addresses are sent the fifth mailing about three weeks after the fourth mailing. The fifth mailing is the Due Date Letter, a pressure seal mailer that asks recipients to respond online or by mail before the printed due date.

Two to three weeks later, responding addresses are removed, and the unmailable and undeliverable addresses (from the initial sample) are added to create the universe of addresses eligible for the CAPI nonresponse follow-up operation.[6] Of this universe, a subsample is chosen

[5] Addresses deemed "undeliverable as addressed" (UAA) by the United States Postal Service are not included in the second and subsequent mailing universes.
[6] CAPI interviews start at the beginning of the month following the fifth mailing.

to be included in the CAPI operation. Mailable addresses from this subsample comprise the fourth mailing universe. At the start of the interviewing month, these addresses are sent the sixth mailing (CAPI Internet Letter)—a pressure seal mailer that asks recipients to respond online to avoid an in-person interview. Census Bureau field representatives may first attempt to interview those selected for CAPI by phone, if possible. If the FR cannot complete a phone interview, they visit the address to conduct an in-person interview.

The mail materials for the current self-response contact strategy are included in Appendix B. For more information about the ACS data collection strategy and other methodology, see the ACS and Puerto Rico Community Survey (PRCS) Design and Methodology Report (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024).

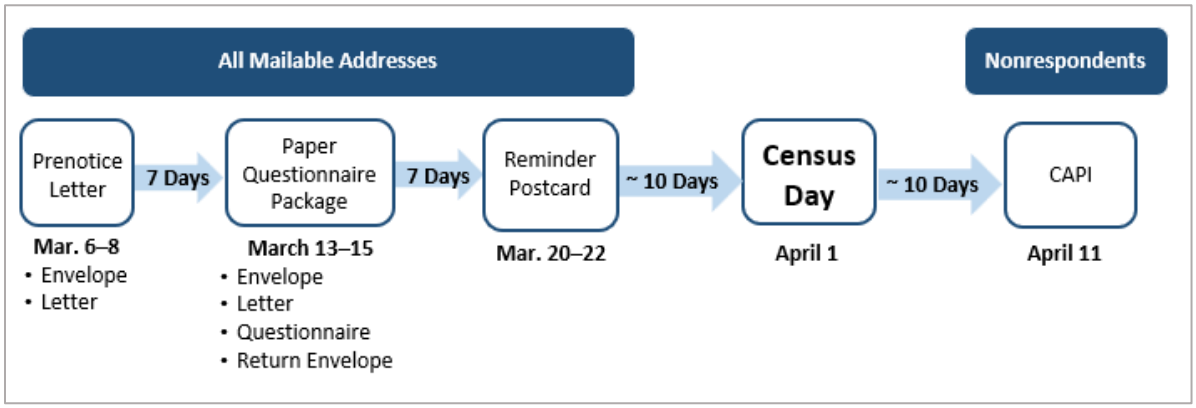
3. THE ORIGIN OF THE ACS CONTACT STRATEGY AND MATERIALS

The ACS program achieved full implementation in 2005, following a series of development and demonstration phases. This section describes the research that informed the initial contact strategy and materials for the ACS in 2005.

3.1. 2000 Census Contact Strategy

The initial ACS contact strategy was developed based on the 2000 Census strategy, which was founded on research and concepts formulated by Don Dillman and documented in his book, Mail and Telephone Surveys: The Total Design Method (Dillman, 1978).[7] This initial contact strategy consisted of three mailings, followed by a nonresponse follow-up CAPI operation (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. 2000 Census Contact Strategy



[7] Dillman's research and subsequent books (Dillman, 2000; Dillman et al., 2009; Dillman et al., 2014), along with personal consultations, were also used to identify research opportunities for the ACS and refine the contact strategy.

3.2. 2003 Mandatory Versus Voluntary Testing

In 2003, before full implementation, the Census Bureau conducted research—at the request of Congress, federal agencies, and other data users—to address specific questions about the operational feasibility and survey quality of the ACS if it were to become a voluntary rather than a mandatory survey. As noted in Section 2.1, a law obligates both the Census Bureau to conduct the survey and individuals in households to respond. However, Congress has the authority to change laws, so Congress required the Census Bureau to study the impact of changing the mandatory requirement to a voluntary one. In response, the Census Bureau conducted robust research and analysis to understand the impact on overall costs, statistical accuracy, data uses, and the value of such a change.

The research analyzed the effect of making the survey voluntary on self-response rates, cooperation rates for CAPI interviewing, response reliability, and data collection costs. For the test mail materials, all references to the mandatory nature of the survey were removed and replaced with motivational messages. (For example, "Your response is required by law." became "Your response is important to your community.") The letters also included the statement, "... you may decline to answer any or all questions."

Test results showed that the mail response rate for the "voluntary" treatment was more than 20 percentage points lower than the "mandatory" treatment. The overall response rate across all data collection modes was 12 percentage points lower for voluntary treatment. The increase in nonresponse would also significantly reduce the reliability of the ACS estimates (Griffin et al., 2003).

The ACS annual sample size of 3 million was designed to produce tract-level estimates over a 5-year period. The standard errors for a 5-year average estimate from the ACS are approximately 1.33 times larger than those for a corresponding estimate from the census long form. To most data users, this decrease in reliability relative to the decennial long-form sample was a worthwhile trade-off for receiving annual data. However, any reduction below the planned initial annual sample of 3 million would reduce reliability. A reduction in unit response would increase the variance of the estimates, thereby reducing their reliability and increasing the number of unpublishable data cells because the estimates would fail to meet statistical standards for accuracy.

Also, a decrease in self-response causes more cases to shift to personal visits, with higher weights due to additional subsampling weights. As more cases shift to personal visits, a higher proportion of the completed interviews carry these higher weights. This contributes to an increase in sampling error and, thus, to a decrease in the reliability of sample estimates.

The study concluded that the reliability of ACS estimates would suffer if the survey were conducted using voluntary methods without an increase in the sample size. To maintain data

quality, the initial annual sample size of a voluntary ACS would need to increase from 3 million to 3.7 million households, with a commensurate overall increase in the total cost of data collection from $155 million to $214 million. The test results were sufficiently compelling enough to inform changes in the messaging for the ACS respondent materials mailed to homes during the initial self-response phase of data collection (Griffin et al., 2003 & 2004).

For more information about the testing that led to the 2005 ACS contact strategy, see:[8]

Landreth (2002). Results and Recommendations from Cognitive Interviews with Selected Materials Accompanying the American Community Survey

Griffin et al. (2003). Report 3: Testing the Use of Voluntary Methods

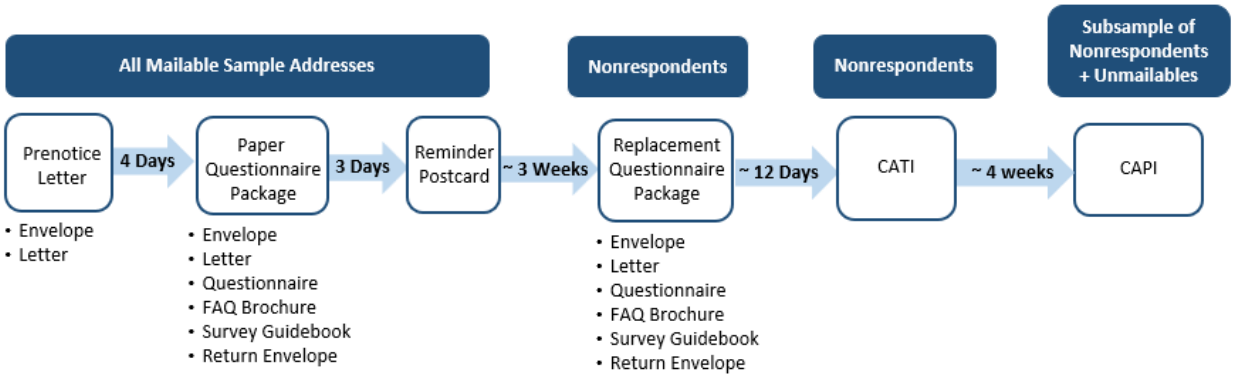
Griffin et al. (2004). Report 11: Testing the Use of Voluntary Methods-Additional Results

Additional reports on the impact of a mandatory vs. voluntary ACS can be found here: Mandatory vs. Voluntary Methods Research

3.3. 2005 ACS Contact Strategy and Materials

When the ACS was implemented in 2005 as a Title 13 data collection effort, it was implemented as a mandatory survey. The ACS program adopted the mailing strategy from the 2000 Census, with language updates tailored to the survey and the mandatory message. Additionally, the ACS program introduced a second questionnaire mailing to nonrespondents. The idea of sending a second questionnaire to nonrespondents was considered for the 2000 Census, but it could not be implemented due to the volume of mailings and other factors. Additionally, after the fourth mailing was sent, households that had not yet responded and for whom a telephone number was available were called as part of a centralized Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) operation.[9] See Figure 4 for an overview of the 2025 contact strategy.

Figure 4. 2005 ACS Contact Strategy



[8] References in each section are listed in chronological order of testing, not alphabetically.

[9] A centralized operation typically refers to having staff co-located physically. For the centralized CATI operation at the Census Bureau, telephone interviewers were located in up to three phone centers. That staff would make outbound calls to sampled households.

4. RESEARCH RESULTING IN CHANGES TO CONTACT STRATEGY AND MATERIALS

After the initial contact strategy for the ACS was established, research continued to evolve to improve the survey's response rates and data quality. Ideas for testing in the ACS program originate with program staff or through collaborations with expert survey methodologists outside the Census Bureau and are guided by the survey research literature and findings from other Census Bureau programs—particularly research conducted for the decennial census. In turn, ACS research helps shape methodologies and testing for the decennial census and other Census Bureau surveys.

This section documents the changes made to the contact strategy and materials from 2008 to 2025. After changes are made, an evaluation is conducted to assess the impact on the production ACS. Not every test has a documented evaluation, but results are presented when available. Table 1 provides a high-level summary of changes to the contact strategy and materials by year.

Table 1. Changes to Contact Strategy and Materials by Year

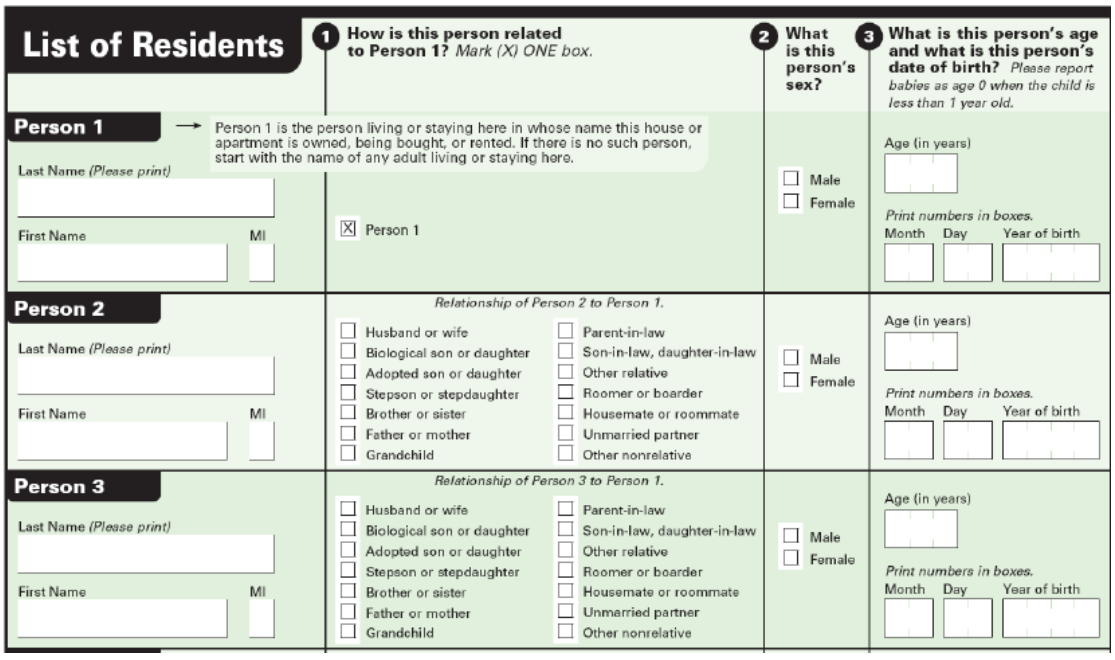
Implementation Date	Change
January 2008	Change to a sequential design on the paper questionnaire
January–November 2010	Updated messaging during the 2010 Census
January 2011	Added a multilingual brochure and a new postcard mailing
January 2013	Added an Internet Response Option
August 2015	Removed the pre-notice letter Changed the first reminder from a postcard to a letter and updated messaging
May 2016	Removed the instruction guide from the paper questionnaire package
October 2017	Eliminated the centralized CATI operation
January 2018	Updated confidentiality messaging Removed the director's signature
September 2018	Changed the initial reminder letter and final postcard to pressure seal letters
January 2020	Updated materials design, emphasized mandatory messaging Changed the questionnaire paper size
March–December 2020	Updated messaging during the 2020 Census
October 2020	Added a due date to the fifth mailing Added a pressure seal letter for mailable addresses in the CAPI sample
January 2022	Added email reminders for internet response breakoffs
February 2022	Changed the initial mail package to a pressure seal mailer
January 2024	Updated messaging and design elements in the mail materials

4.1. 2008: Change to a Sequential Design on the Paper Questionnaire

The section of the ACS questionnaire that collects basic demographic information (name, sex, age, date of birth, relationship, Hispanic origin, and race) from individuals in the household was revised from a grid approach to a sequential design, based on the 2007 ACS Grid-Sequential Test. The change to the questionnaire was implemented in 2008.

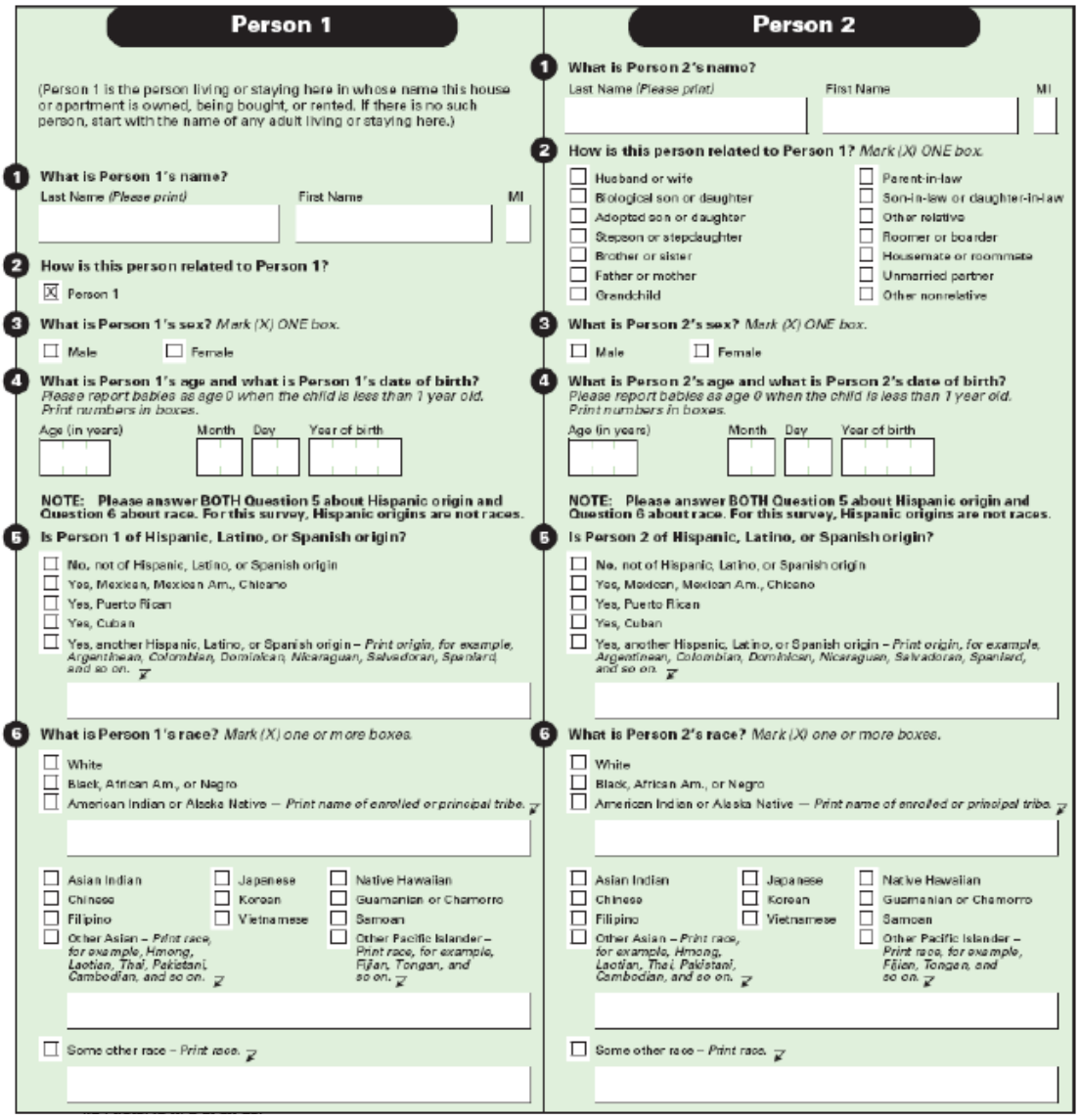
To inform the test, the Census Bureau conducted cognitive pretesting on format changes to the paper questionnaire. The questionnaire section that collects demographic information was presented in both grid (matrix) and sequential formats. The results from cognitive testing informed the materials used in the 2007 ACS Grid-Sequential Test (Gerber & Dusch, 2007). The field test included a national sample of approximately 30,000 addresses, with equal allocation between the two treatment groups. The grid layout was the same as that used in the 2000 Census. The name of each person is down the left side of the page, with a column for each of the basic demographic questions (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Example of a Grid Layout



The sequential design asks all basic demographic questions for each person before asking them for the next person (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Example of a Sequential Layout



Person 1

(Person 1 is the person living or staying here in whose name this house or apartment is owned, being bought, or rented. If there is no such person, start with the name of any adult living or staying here.)

1 **What is Person 1's name?**
Last Name *(Please print)* | First Name | MI

2 **How is this person related to Person 1?**
☒ Person 1

3 **What is Person 1's sex?** *Mark (X) ONE box.*
☐ Male ☐ Female

4 **What is Person 1's age and what is Person 1's date of birth?**
Please report babies as age 0 when the child is less than 1 year old. Print numbers in boxes.
Age (in years) | Month | Day | Year of birth

NOTE: Please answer BOTH Question 5 about Hispanic origin and Question 6 about race. For this survey, Hispanic origins are not races.

5 **Is Person 1 of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?**
☐ No, not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin
☐ Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano
☐ Yes, Puerto Rican
☐ Yes, Cuban
☐ Yes, another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin – *Print origin, for example, Argentinean, Colombian, Dominican, Nicaraguan, Salvadoran, Spaniard, and so on.*

6 **What is Person 1's race?** *Mark (X) one or more boxes.*
☐ White
☐ Black, African Am., or Negro
☐ American Indian or Alaska Native – *Print name of enrolled or principal tribe.*
☐ Asian Indian ☐ Japanese ☐ Native Hawaiian
☐ Chinese ☐ Korean ☐ Guamanian or Chamorro
☐ Filipino ☐ Vietnamese ☐ Samoan
☐ Other Asian – *Print race, for example, Hmong, Laotian, Thai, Pakistani, Cambodian, and so on.* ☐ Other Pacific Islander – *Print race, for example, Fijian, Tongan, and so on.*
☐ Some other race – *Print race.*

Person 2

1 **What is Person 2's name?**
Last Name *(Please print)* | First Name | MI

2 **How is this person related to Person 1?** *Mark (X) ONE box.*
☐ Husband or wife ☐ Parent-in-law
☐ Biological son or daughter ☐ Son-in-law or daughter-in-law
☐ Adopted son or daughter ☐ Other relative
☐ Stepson or stepdaughter ☐ Roomer or boarder
☐ Brother or sister ☐ Housemate or roommate
☐ Father or mother ☐ Unmarried partner
☐ Grandchild ☐ Other nonrelative

3 **What is Person 2's sex?** *Mark (X) ONE box.*
☐ Male ☐ Female

4 **What is Person 2's age and what is Person 2's date of birth?**
Please report babies as age 0 when the child is less than 1 year old. Print numbers in boxes.
Age (in years) | Month | Day | Year of birth

NOTE: Please answer BOTH Question 5 about Hispanic origin and Question 6 about race. For this survey, Hispanic origins are not races.

5 **Is Person 2 of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?**
☐ No, not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin
☐ Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano
☐ Yes, Puerto Rican
☐ Yes, Cuban
☐ Yes, another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin – *Print origin, for example, Argentinean, Colombian, Dominican, Nicaraguan, Salvadoran, Spaniard, and so on.*

6 **What is Person 2's race?** *Mark (X) one or more boxes.*
☐ White
☐ Black, African Am., or Negro
☐ American Indian or Alaska Native – *Print name of enrolled or principal tribe.*
☐ Asian Indian ☐ Japanese ☐ Native Hawaiian
☐ Chinese ☐ Korean ☐ Guamanian or Chamorro
☐ Filipino ☐ Vietnamese ☐ Samoan
☐ Other Asian – *Print race, for example, Hmong, Laotian, Thai, Pakistani, Cambodian, and so on.* ☐ Other Pacific Islander – *Print race, for example, Fijian, Tongan, and so on.*
☐ Some other race – *Print race.*

The test concluded that the mail response rate was significantly higher for the sequential format than for the grid format. The sequential format also either maintained or reduced the incidence of missing data amongst basic demographic items and significantly reduced "person-incompleteness." The sequential format also significantly reduced the rate of discrepancies between the count on the front of the form and the count of people provided in the basic demographic section (person count discrepancy rate); average household size was not impacted.

The second objective of the test was to determine whether moving the rostering instructions from page 2, next to the matrix, to the form cover increased or decreased the person-count discrepancy rate. The change in roster instruction placement had no significant effect on the count discrepancy rate or average household size (Chesnut, 2008).

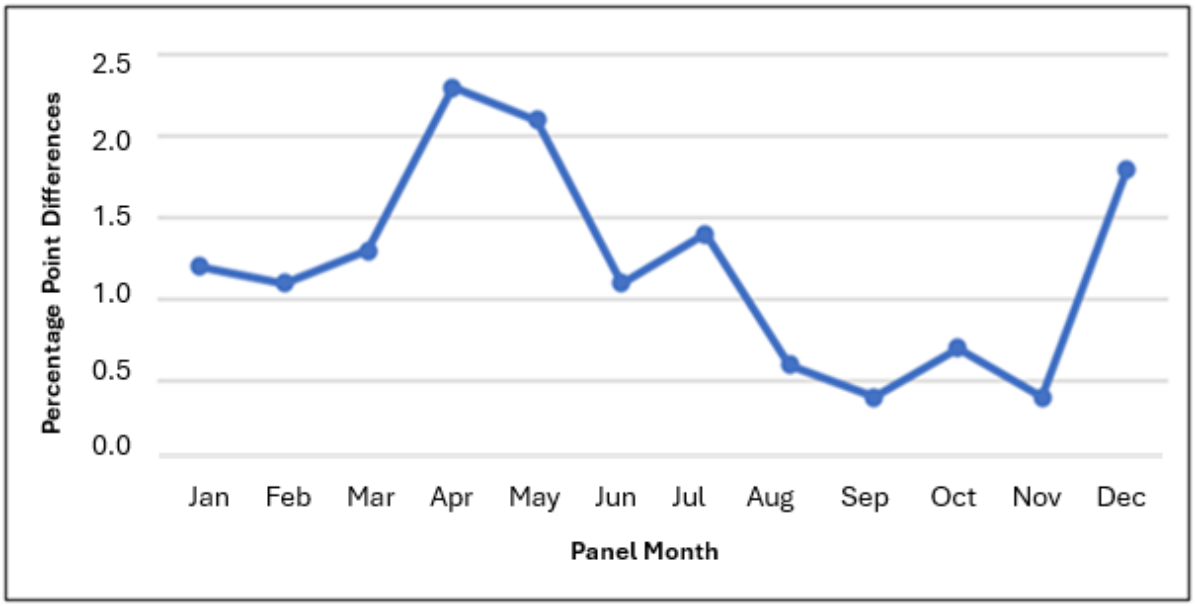
For more information about the 2007 ACS Grid-Sequential Test, see:

Gerber & Dusch (2007). Comparing Navigation in Two Formats for Demographic Items in the American Community Survey

Chesnut (2008). Effects of Using a Grid Versus a Sequential Form on the ACS Basic Demographic Data

After the basic demographic section of the ACS questionnaire was changed from a grid approach to a sequential design in the January 2008 panel, an evaluation was conducted. The ACS self-response rate increased by 1.2 percentage points from 2007 to 2008, reaching 60.2 percent in 2008. Figure 7 shows that self-response rates increased consistently across all 2008 monthly panels compared with the same panels in 2007. All increases from 2007 to 2008 are statistically significant.

Figure 7. ACS Self-Response Rate Percentage Point Differences: Each monthly panel of 2008 compared to the same monthly panel of 2007



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2007 and 2008 American Community Survey
DRB Approval Number: CBDRB-FY25-ACSO003-B0023
Note: All differences shown are statistically significant increases in response based on two-tailed t-tests at the α=0.1 level. The weighted response rates account for both the initial sample design and CAPI subsampling.

4.2. 2010: Updated Messaging during the 2010 Census

From January through November 2010, the messaging and color on ACS letters and envelopes were changed to distinguish the ACS from the 2010 Census, given the similarities in mailing materials. The messaging changes were designed to help the ACS respondent understand that during the 2010 Census, their response to both the 2010 Census and the ACS was required. The additional text was as follows:

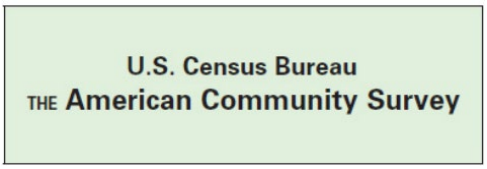
Pre-Notice Letter: The American Community Survey is a separate part of the 2010 Census program. Some households, including yours, will receive both the American Community Survey and the 2010 Census this year. Your response to **both** is required by U.S. law.

In their own way, the American Community Survey and the 2010 Census provide an important picture of America. They show not only the number of people who live here, but how we live as a nation…

Initial Questionnaire Package Letter: Some households, including yours, will receive both the American Community Survey and the 2010 Census this year. **Your response to both is required by U.S. law.**

Replacement Paper Questionnaire Package Letter: We realize that you may have recently answered the 2010 Census. Some households, including yours, will receive both the American Community Survey and the 2010 Census this year. **Answering both is important and is required by U.S. law.**

Envelopes: The Envelopes were updated to include this box above the address window:



Existing messaging on the envelopes was maintained, but the background was changed from white to green.

FAQs: Additionally, Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) on the TQA line were also added to address specific questions about responding to the 2010 Census and ACS.

The materials were cognitively tested in 2009 (Schwede & Sorokin, 2010; Schwede, 2013). Recommendations from cognitive testing informed the material designs used in 2010. While some changes positively affected response during the 2010 Census, no conclusive results suggested that we should keep these changes post-census (Chesnut, 2011). All mailings returned to the previous design in December 2010. An assessment of the potential impact of publicity for the 2010 Census on ACS self-response was also conducted (Baumgardner, 2013).

For more information on these materials, see:

Schwede & Sorokin (2010). Cognitive Testing Results for the ACS Field Flyer for Use in 2010: ACS Messaging Project Phase 3 Final Report

Schwede (2013). Cognitive Testing of Modified American Community Survey Envelopes and Letters for Use during the 2010 Census: ACS Messaging Project Final Report on Phases 1 and 2

Chesnut (2011). Evaluation of the ACS Mail Materials and Mailing Strategy during the 2010 Census

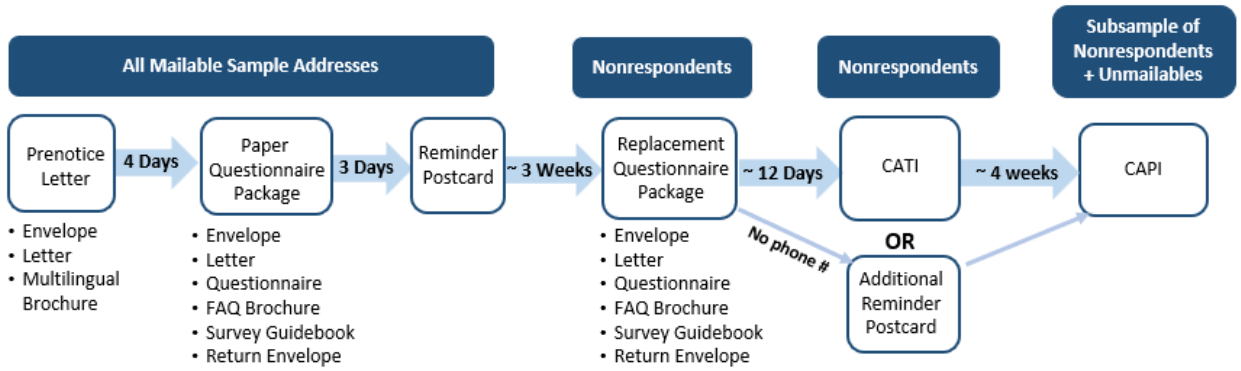
Baumgardner (2013). Tracking American Community Survey Mail Response During the 2010 Census

4.3. 2011: Added Multilingual Brochure and New Postcard Mailing

From 2005 to 2011, changes to the formatting and messages in the mail materials were minimal.[10] When the director changed, the signature was updated. Periodically, there were line spacing changes, a URL changed from underlined to not underlined, and messages in two letters changed from "I" statements to "we" statements (i.e., "I asked you to help us…" to "We asked you to help us…").

In January 2011, a multilingual brochure was added to the prenotice letter mailing to help non-English speakers respond to the survey. After the replacement questionnaire package was sent, addresses with phone numbers went to CATI, and addresses without phone numbers received an additional reminder postcard. In both materials, some new messages were communicated to respondents, but the additions were relatively minor, as described in Figure 8.

Figure 8. 2011 ACS Contact Strategy



4.3.1. Multilingual Brochure

Before adding the multilingual brochure, the only non-English information available to respondents was a short message in Spanish on the questionnaire cover. The Multilingual Brochure Test was conducted to determine the effects of including a multilingual brochure on ACS response among non-English-speaking households. The multilingual brochure provided information about the ACS and included instructions on how households can obtain telephone

[10] During the 2010 Census, additional messages were added addressing how the ACS is different from the decennial census. See Section 4.2 for more information.

assistance in their preferred language. The brochure contained information in English, Spanish, Chinese, Korean, and Russian.

Messaging in the multilingual brochure primarily repeats the messages in the other mail materials and letters. This approach makes sense, as the brochure's primary purpose is to communicate in other languages. One message is unique to the multilingual brochure:

> "Because you are living in the United States, you are required by law to respond to this survey."

This message is strategic to this mail piece because it communicates that everyone living in the U.S., including non-citizens, must complete this survey. This message may be particularly relevant to the segment of the ACS audience that needs help in a foreign language.

Cognitive pretesting informed the brochure design used in the field test (Pan et al., 2008). The field test evaluated whether to include the brochure in the pre-notice mailing, in the paper questionnaire mailing, or omit it. The test showed a statistically significant increase in the percentage of mail responses from the following types of households: Chinese, Korean, and Russian-speaking households; Chinese, Korean, and Russian-speaking linguistically isolated households; Spanish-speaking linguistically isolated households; and combined test-language-speaking linguistically isolated households. There was no difference in any evaluation measures between the pre-notice and paper questionnaire package placement (Joshipura, 2010).

For more information about the Multilingual Brochure tests, see:

Pan et al. (2008). Cognitive Testing of ACS Multilingual Brochures in Multiple Languages

Joshipura (2010). Evaluating the Effects of a Multilingual Brochure in the American Community Survey

4.3.2. Additional Reminder Postcard

Before the additional reminder postcard was added, households for which a telephone number was unavailable did not receive contact from the Census Bureau for over a month, between the replacement questionnaire package and the start of CAPI. In 2009, 42 percent of nonresponding addresses after the replacement questionnaire mailing lacked a phone number.

The Additional Mailing Test evaluated the impact on response and costs of sending an additional mailing. The test had three treatments: a treatment in which a postcard was sent as the additional mailing, a treatment in which a questionnaire was sent as the additional mailing, and a control treatment in which no additional mailing was sent. Sending an additional reminder postcard increased the mail response rate by 1.6 percentage points, and sending an additional questionnaire increased it by 1.8 percentage points compared to the control treatment. Both treatments also led to a statistically significant decrease in the CAPI workload

of about 1,000 cases per month compared with the control treatment (Chesnut, 2010). There was no statistically significant difference in response rates or CAPI workload between the two experimental treatments. For cost reasons, the postcard was added as an additional mailing.

This new postcard was larger than the reminder postcard and was printed on green cardstock instead of white. The messages in the postcard elevated the urgency and importance of responding:

- "Within the last few weeks, the U.S. Census Bureau mailed American Community questionnaire packages to your address twice."
- **"Your response is critically important to your local community and to your country."** [in bold font]
- Additionally, for the first time, respondents were instructed that they could call to complete the survey by telephone.

For more information about the Additional Reminder Postcard tests, see:

Schwede (2008). "'Carrot' or 'Stick' Approach to Reminder Cards: What Do Cognitive Respondents Think?"

Chesnut (2010). Testing an Additional Mailing Piece in the American Community Survey

4.4. 2013: Changed Mailings to Maximize Internet Response

In January 2013, the ACS program introduced a new internet option as a response mode (in English and Spanish) based on two experimental tests (Tancreto et al., 2012; Matthews et al., 2012). The mailouts were changed to maximize internet response, as follows, and as shown in Figure 9:

Pre-Notice Letter: The letter was updated to indicate that the respondent would receive instructions for completing the survey rather than receiving a questionnaire. The multilingual brochure was not updated and did not mention the option to respond online. This was intentional because responses in languages other than English and Spanish were not possible online.

Paper Questionnaire Package: The first paper questionnaire package was replaced with an internet response invitation package that included a letter, a card with instructions for responding online, and a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) brochure. The letter was updated to reference the internet instructions and response rather than the paper questionnaire.

New motivational messaging was added to the letter:

- "The Census Bureau is using the Internet to collect this information in an effort to conserve natural resources, save taxpayers' money, and process your data more efficiently."

- The letter also mentioned that if a person "was unable to complete the survey online, there is no need to contact us. We will send you a paper questionnaire in a few weeks."

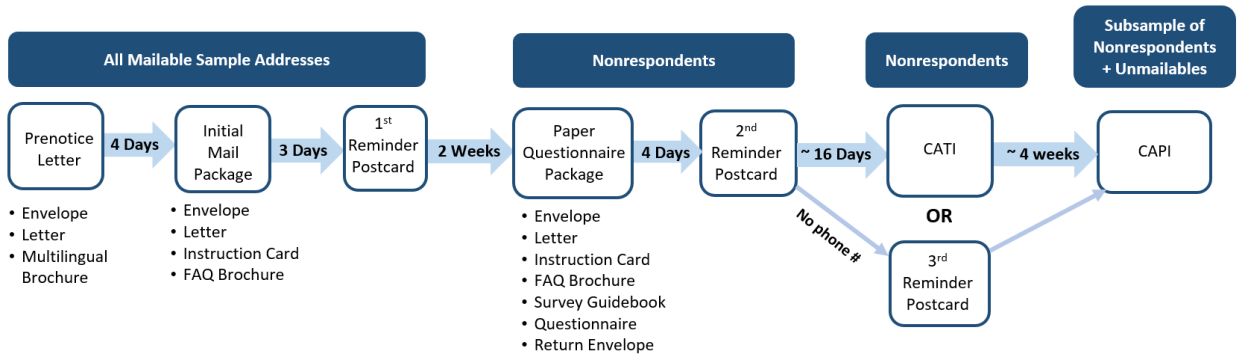
An internet instruction card was added to the package, repeating the URL from the letter and including the User ID on the address label. This information was provided in English and Spanish.

Reminder Postcard: The reminder postcard was updated to reference online responses rather than questionnaire responses.

Replacement Questionnaire Package: The replacement paper questionnaire package was mailed a week earlier than previously. The letter in the package was updated to indicate that a response could be submitted either online or via a paper questionnaire. No new motivational messaging was included, and the bulk of the letter remained unchanged. An internet instruction card was also included in this mailing.

Additional Reminder Postcard: An additional reminder postcard was sent four days after the questionnaire mailing. As a reminder, the text was similar to other reminders but sought to elicit a response by emphasizing time sensitivity: **"Now is the time to complete the survey if you have not already done so."** [in bold font] The postcard messaging was updated to reflect that responses could be provided via the internet or a paper questionnaire.

Figure 9. 2013 ACS Contact Strategy with an Internet Response Option



For more information about these tests, see:

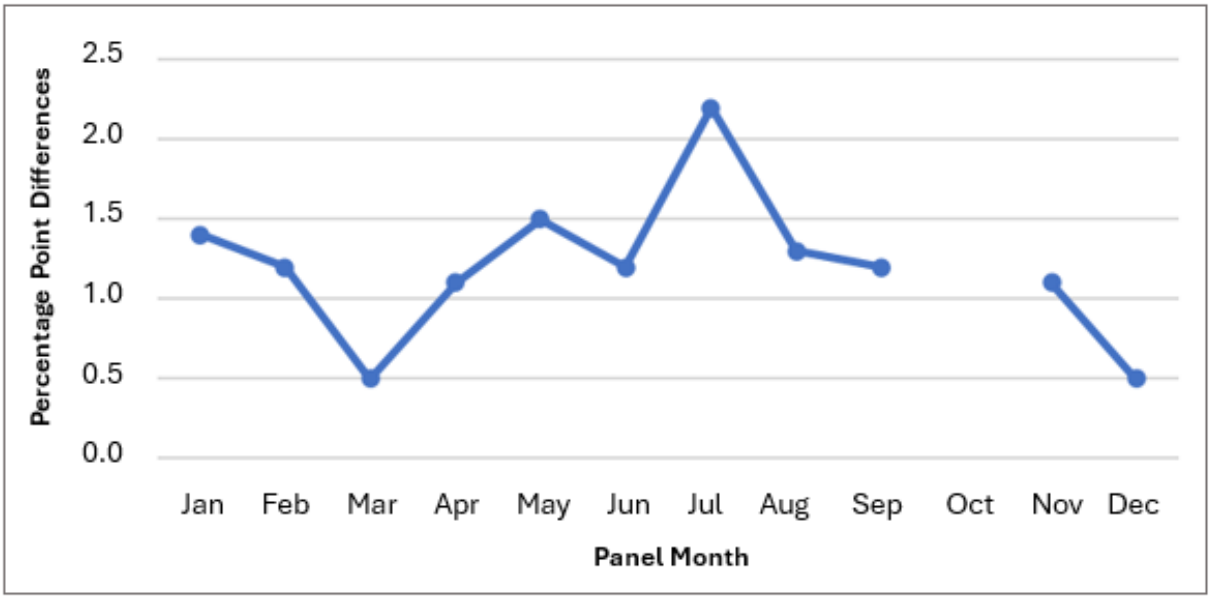
Tancreto et al. (2012). 2011 American Community Survey Internet Tests: Results from First Test in April 2011

Matthews et al. (2012). 2011 American Community Survey Internet Tests: Results from Second Test in November 2011

Once implemented, the 2013 ACS self-response rate increased by 1.3 percentage points compared to 2012, reaching 61.1 percent. An increase in self-response rates was seen for each 2013 panel compared to the same panel in 2012 (see Figure 10). The October 2013 panel was

excluded from the chart because of a government shutdown that affected operations that month. All increases from 2012 to 2013 were statistically significant.

Figure 10. ACS Self-Response Rate Percentage Point Differences: Each monthly panel of 2013 compared to the same monthly panel of 2012



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2012 and 2013 American Community Survey
DRB Approval Number: CBDRB-FY25-ACSO003-B0023
Note: October 2013 is excluded from the graph because a government shutdown impacted survey operations. All differences shown are statistically significant increases in response based on two-tailed t-tests at the $\alpha = 0.1$ level. The weighted response rates account for both the initial sample design and CAPI subsampling.

Additional information about the effect of adding the internet response option was documented in the following evaluations:

Baumgardner et al. (2014). The Effects of Adding an Internet Response Option to the ACS

Baumgardner (2014a). Response Rates for the January, February, and March 2013 American Community Survey Panels

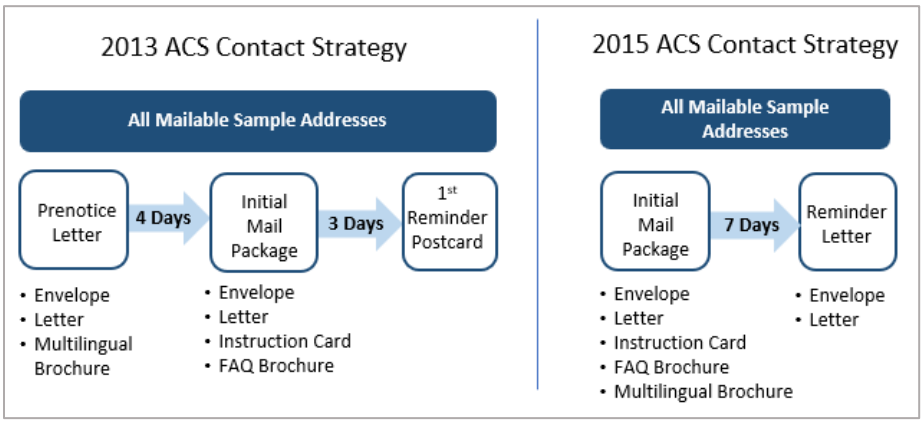
Clark (2014). Review of Item Response Distributions from Self-Administered Modes to Detect Processing Errors

Appendix C contains references for a compilation of research, including cognitive and field testing, that the Census Bureau conducted before implementing the internet response instrument as a new response mode. Appendix C also contains references for research done after the new internet instrument was implemented—including usability testing, device usage research, and internet response evaluations.

4.5. 2015: Removed Pre-Notice Letter and Changed Reminder

In August 2015, the pre-notice letter was removed from the contact strategy. The initial mail package was sent at the same time as the pre-notice was previously sent, seven days before the first reminder. Below is a side-by-side comparison showing how the contact strategy changed in 2015.

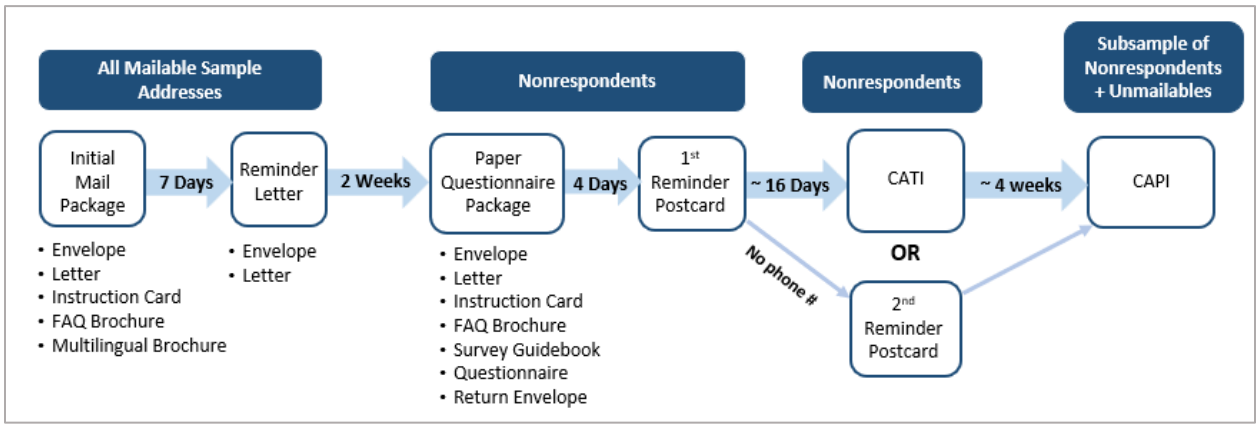
Figure 11. Comparison of the ACS Contact Strategy Starting in 2013 To How It Changed in 2015



The first reminder was also changed from a postcard to a letter (as seen in Figure 12). With more space for text in a letter than on a postcard, the following changes were made to the messaging in the new reminder letter:

- Added a new callout box with the URL for the internet response landing page in large bold font, and included the User ID in the letter inside the callout box
- Changed the phrasing from "local and national leaders use the information from this survey…" to "Local communities depend on the information from this survey … "
- Added the sentence, "Responding promptly will prevent your receiving additional reminder mailings, phone calls, or personal visits from a Census Bureau interviewer."
- Added the sentence, "Your response to this survey is required by law."

Figure 12. 2015 ACS Contact Strategy (beginning with the August panel)



These changes were made based on the results of the 2015 ACS Mail Contact Strategy Modification Test. This experiment explored:

- Eliminating the prenotice letter and sending the initial mailing four days earlier.
- Strengthening messaging in the reminder contacts.
- Sending the additional reminder postcard to all nonresponding addresses, including those eligible for CATI.

The study found that eliminating the prenotice and sending the initial mailing earlier decreased the total self-response return rate by 1.4 percentage points before the paper questionnaire mailing. However, at the end of the self-response data collection phase, there was no measurable decrease in the total self-response return rate. A reminder letter that highlighted the User ID and included mandatory language, sent after the initial package, significantly increased total self-response return rates by 3.8 percent compared to a reminder postcard. Therefore, the findings suggested we could drop the prenotice if we use a letter for our first reminder contact and send the initial mailing earlier. In general, increasing early response means sending fewer mailings and, therefore, reducing operational costs.

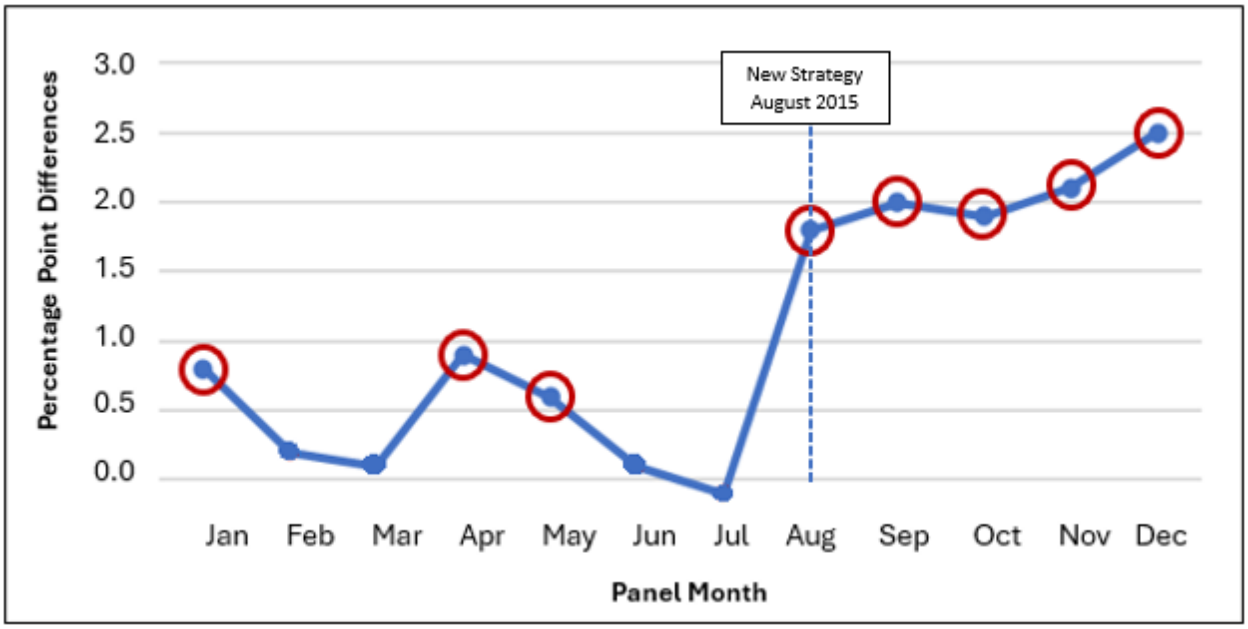
Sending the additional reminder postcard to addresses eligible for CATI increased total self-response return rates for all mail contact strategies tested. While sending the postcard would increase mailing costs, increasing self-response could potentially reduce CAPI workloads. We did not see a difference in CATI response rates. The study found conflicting results on the effects on cost (Clark, DiFiglia et al., 2015). Therefore, the additional reminder postcard was not sent to CATI addresses; we continued to send it to addresses without phone numbers (which were not eligible for CATI).

For more information about the 2015 ACS Mail Contact Strategy Modification Test, see:

Clark, DiFiglia et al. (2015). 2015 Mail Contact Strategy Modification Test

This change in the contact strategy was evaluated by comparing response rates after the change (starting with the August 2015 panel) with those before the change. Compared to 2014, the 2015 self-response rate increased 1.1 percentage points to 62.1 percent. When comparing the monthly 2015 panels to the 2014 panels, the impact of this change in contact strategy can be seen in Figure 13. The data points circled in the graph represent statistically significant increases.

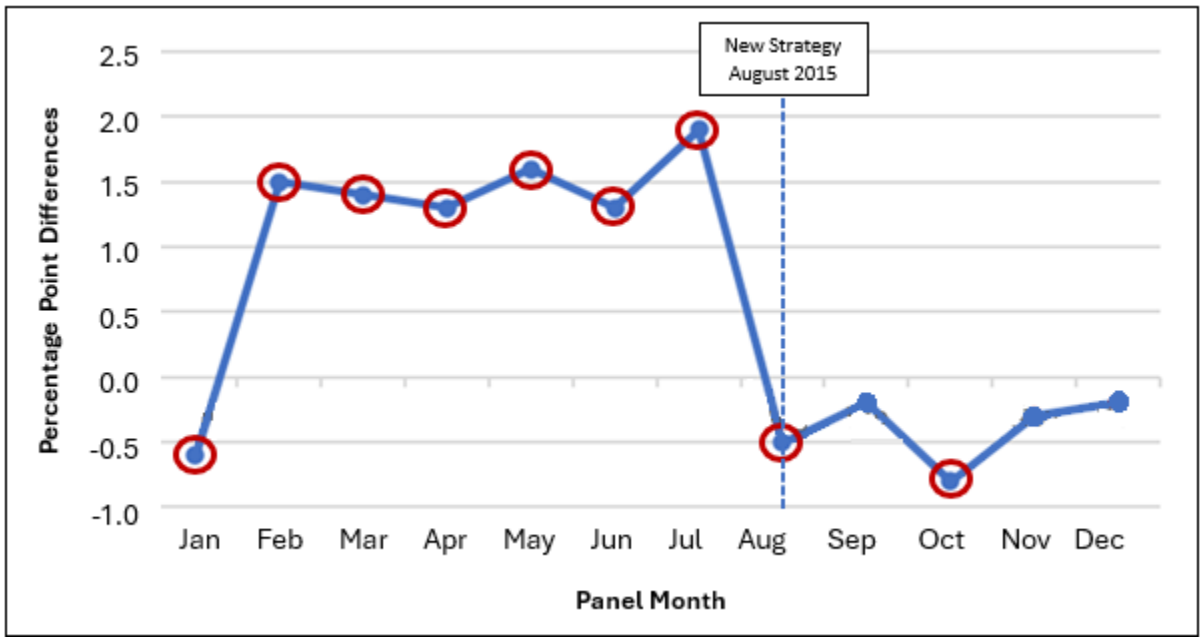
Figure 13. ACS Self-Response Rate Percentage Point Differences: Each monthly panel of 2015 compared to the same monthly panel of 2014



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2014 and 2015 American Community Survey
DRB Approval Number: CBDRB-FY25-ACSO003-B0023
Note: The data points circled in the graph represent statistically significant increases based on two-tailed t-tests at the α=0.1 level. The data points not circled represent differences that are not statistically significant, indicating insufficient evidence to conclude that the changes affected response in those monthly comparisons. The weighted response rates account for both the initial sample design and CAPI subsampling.

Likewise, self-response rates increased for most early 2016 panels (February–July) compared to the same panels in 2015 (see Figure 14).

Figure 14. ACS Self-Response Rate Percentage Point Differences: Each monthly panel of 2016 compared to the same monthly panel of 2015



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 and 2016 American Community Survey
DRB Approval Number: CBDRB-FY25-ACSO003-B0023
Note: The data points circled in the graph represent statistically significant increases and decreases based on two-tailed t-tests at the α=0.1 level. The data points not circled represent differences that are not statistically significant, indicating insufficient evidence to conclude that the changes affected response in those monthly comparisons. The weighted response rates account for both the initial sample design and CAPI subsampling.

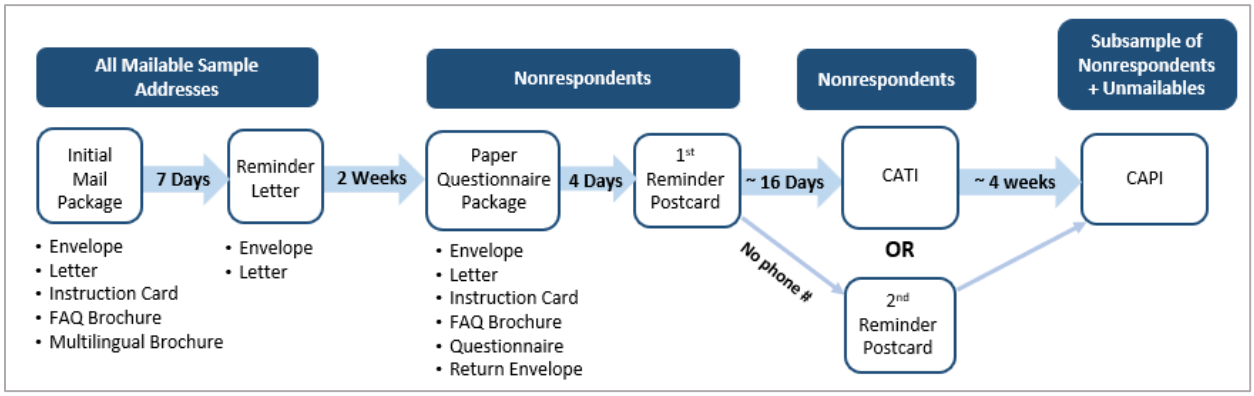
For more information about the impact of these changes, see:

Clark & Roberts (2016). Evaluation of August 2015 ACS Mail Contact Strategy Modification

4.6. 2016: Removed the Instruction Guide from the Paper Questionnaire Package

In May 2016, the instruction guide (also referred to as the "Survey Guidebook") was removed from the paper questionnaire package (see Figure 15). The instruction guide provided detailed instructions on responding to questions in the ACS. The guide's content was moved online to the ACS respondent help web page in a section entitled "Instructions for Completing the Survey Questionnaire."

Figure 15. 2016 ACS Contact Strategy (beginning with the May panel)



This change was made based on results from the 2015 Replacement Mail Questionnaire Package Test. The test included a control and four experimental treatments:

> Control: Included an instruction card, included an instruction guide, and emphasized choice in messaging in the letter in the paper questionnaire package.
>
> Treatment 1: Excluded the instruction card, excluded the instruction guide, and emphasized choice in the letter in the paper questionnaire package.
>
> Treatment 2: Excluded the instruction card, excluded the instruction guide, and reduced the emphasis on choice in the letter in the paper questionnaire package.
>
> Treatment 3: Included an instruction card, excluded the instruction guide, and emphasized choice in the letter in the paper questionnaire package.
>
> Treatment 4: Excluded the instruction card, included the instruction guide, and reduced the emphasis on choice in the letter in the paper questionnaire package.

None of the treatments had a significant effect on self-response return rates. Removing the instruction guide did not significantly impact section completion rates, item nonresponse rates, or item response distributions. However, we found a pattern in item nonresponse rates for the mail mode. For most items, the rates were nominally higher for the treatment without the instruction guide. The Census Bureau decided to remove the instruction guide, which would yield greater cost savings than removing the instruction card.

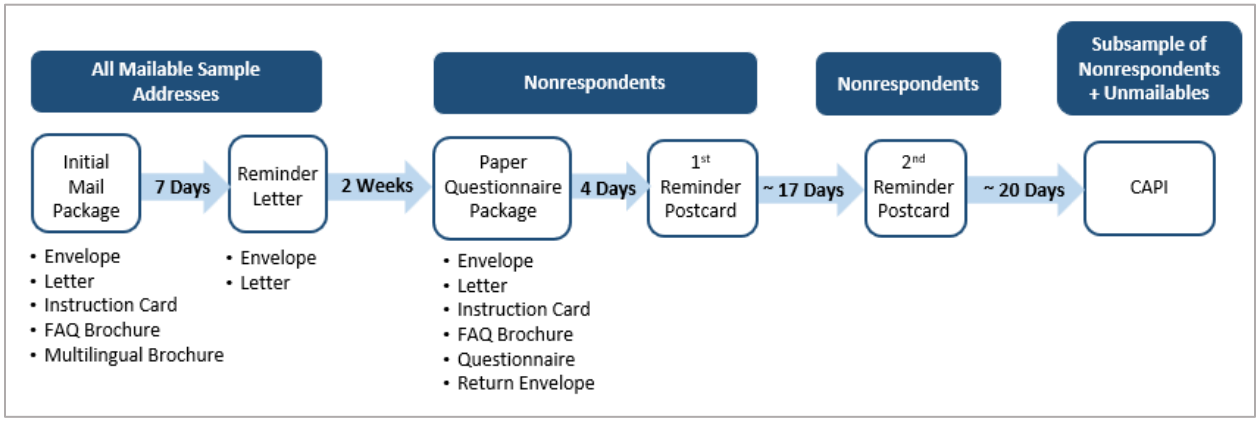
For more information about this test, see:

Clark, Roberts et al. (2015). 2015 Replacement Mail Questionnaire Package Test

4.7. 2017: Eliminated the CATI Operation

In October 2017, the ACS program stopped collecting information from respondents through a centralized CATI operation. The last month of the CATI operation was September 2017. This decision was based on cost and performance data, which showed that the cost per interview for CATI exceeded the cost per interview for CAPI. Also, response rates for the CATI operation had been dropping for several years. While the centralized CATI operation was eliminated, field representatives can still call respondents during the CAPI phase of data collection. After eliminating CATI, we began sending the fifth mailing to all remaining nonrespondents as of October 2017. While the postcard was mailed in October, the addresses were a part of the September panel. See Figure 16 for the updated contact strategy.

Figure 16. 2017 ACS Contact Strategy (beginning with the September panel)



For more information about this decision, see:

U.S. Census Bureau (2017). ACS Notification: Change in Methodology for Nonresponse Follow-Up Data Collection

Before this decision, several changes to the CATI operation were made to improve telephone response and increase operational efficiencies. This included changing the source of phone numbers, modifying call parameters and workload size, and incorporating cell phone numbers.

More information on those studies can be found here:

Mills (2016a). Evaluation of Transitioning Telephone Number Sources for the American Community Survey

Mills (2016b). Simulated Effects of Changing Calling Parameters and Workload Size on CATI Productivity

Mills (2017). Investigating the Use of Cellular Telephone Numbers in the ACS CATI Operation

4.8. 2018: Updated Confidentiality Messaging, Removed the Director's Signature, and Replaced a Letter and a Postcard with Pressure Seal Mailers

4.8.1. Updated Confidentiality Messaging

In January 2018, changes to the Census Bureau's confidentiality messaging required updates to the ACS mail materials. Images of the materials are in Appendix D.

Letters: Added two sentences to the first, third, and fifth mailing: "The Census Bureau is not permitted to publicly release your responses in a way that could identify you. Per the Federal Cybersecurity Act of 2015, your data are protected from cybersecurity risks through screening of the systems that transmit your data."

FAQ Brochure: In 2017, the answer to "Will the Census Bureau keep my information confidential?" was: "Yes. All of the information the Census Bureau collects for this survey about you and your household is confidential by law (Title 13, U.S. Code, Section 9). By law, every Census Bureau employee—including the Director as well as every field representative—has taken an oath and is subject to a jail term, a fine, or both if he or she discloses ANY information that could identify you or your household." In 2018, that was changed to say "Yes. The Census Bureau is required by law to protect your information. The Census Bureau is not permitted to publicly release your responses in a way that could identify you. Per the Federal Cybersecurity Enhancement Act of 2015, your data are protected from cybersecurity risks through screening of the systems that transmit your data."

Multilingual Brochure: In 2017, the answer to "Will my answers to this survey be kept confidential?" was "Yes. All of the information the Census Bureau collects for this survey about you and your household is confidential by law (Title 13, United States Code)." In 2018, that was changed to say, "Yes. The Census Bureau is required by law to keep your information confidential. The Census Bureau is not permitted to publicly release your responses in a way that could identify you. Per the Federal Cybersecurity Enhancement Act of 2015, your data are protected from cybersecurity risks through screening of the systems that transmit your data."

4.8.2. Removed the Director's Signature

Social exchange theory argues that one way to build trust that a survey request is legitimate is to have the request come from a real person with authority within the organization and to include a signature on the correspondence (Dillman et al., 2007). A signature is also a standard part of a business letter.

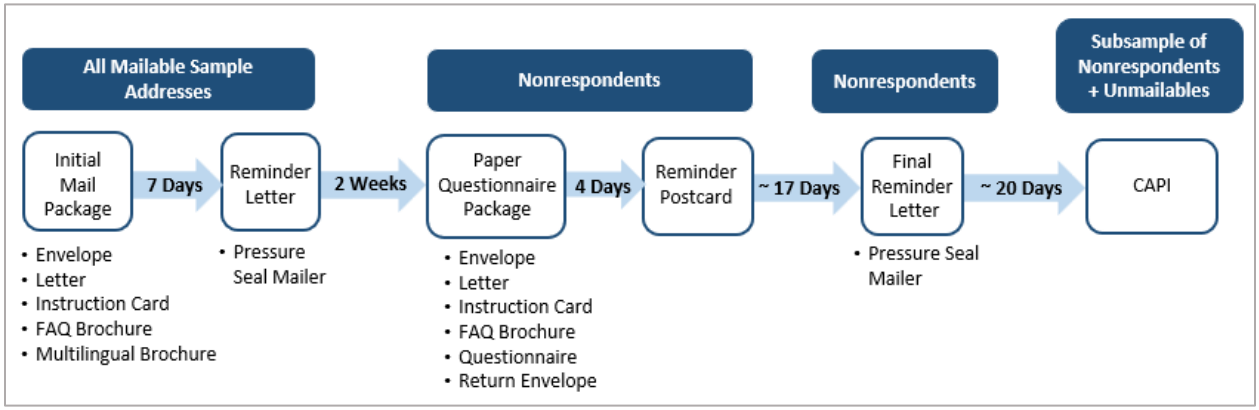
Letters included in ACS mailings, therefore, typically bear the signature of the Census Bureau director. At times, however, the Census Bureau is without a permanent director (such as when a director resigns and there is no immediate replacement). During these times, the director's signature is removed from the ACS letters. The letters and postcards are printed in advance, so materials with the signature are used until new materials can be designed and printed. Pressure seal mailers (see Section 4.8.3) are printed on demand, so updates can be made much sooner. When the Census Bureau has a director, we update the letters to include the signature again.[11]

At the time of this change to the materials, no formal test was conducted. The change was made based on operational need (i.e., lack of a director). A test conducted later in 2021, however, confirmed that there is no statistically significant difference in response rates when mail materials contain the director's signature versus when they do not (see Section 4.13).

4.8.3. Replaced a Letter and a Postcard with Pressure Seal Mailers

Beginning in September 2018, pressure seal mailers were used in place of the Reminder Letter with an envelope (second mailing) and the Second Reminder Postcard (fifth mailing); see Figure 17. A pressure seal mailer is a one-page document with a pre-applied adhesive that is folded and sealed with pressure. This type of mailer does not require a separate envelope. There were no changes to the content of the second mailing, aside from the confidentiality messaging mentioned above. Changing from a postcard to a pressure seal letter allowed us to include the User ID directly in the letter. The results of the 2017 Pressure Seal Mailing Materials Test informed the decision to begin using the pressure seal mailers in production.

Figure 17. 2018 ACS Contact Strategy (beginning with the September panel)



[11] This mix of how materials are printed and how quickly they can be updated can result in a respondent receiving some mailings with a signature and some mailings without a signature.

The Pressure Seal Mailing Materials Test evaluated three experimental treatments and one control, as described in Table 2.

Table 2. 2017 Pressure Seal Mailing Materials Test Treatments

Treatment	1st Mailing	2nd Mailing	3rd Mailing	4th Mailing	5th Mailing
Treatment 1 (Control)	Initial Mail Package	Reminder letter (in an envelope)	Paper Questionnaire	Reminder Postcard	2nd Reminder Postcard
Treatment 2	No change	Pressure seal letter	No change	No change	No change
Treatment 3	No change	Pressure seal letter	No change	No change	Pressure seal letter
Treatment 4	No change	Pressure seal letter	No change	Pressure seal letter*	Pressure seal letter

*This pressure seal letter was folded in half (bifold); the other pressure seal letters were trifolds.

The study found that replacing the Reminder Letter in the second mailing with a pressure seal mailer would not adversely affect self-response and would yield cost savings. Replacing both the second and fifth mailings with a pressure seal letter (Treatment 3) would increase self-response among those mailed the fifth mailing, but it did not have an overall impact on self-response before CAPI. Although there was a slight increase in implementation costs, Treatment 3 was decided upon. Treatment 4 would affect self-response, but not enough to overcome the cost increase.

For more information about the test, see:

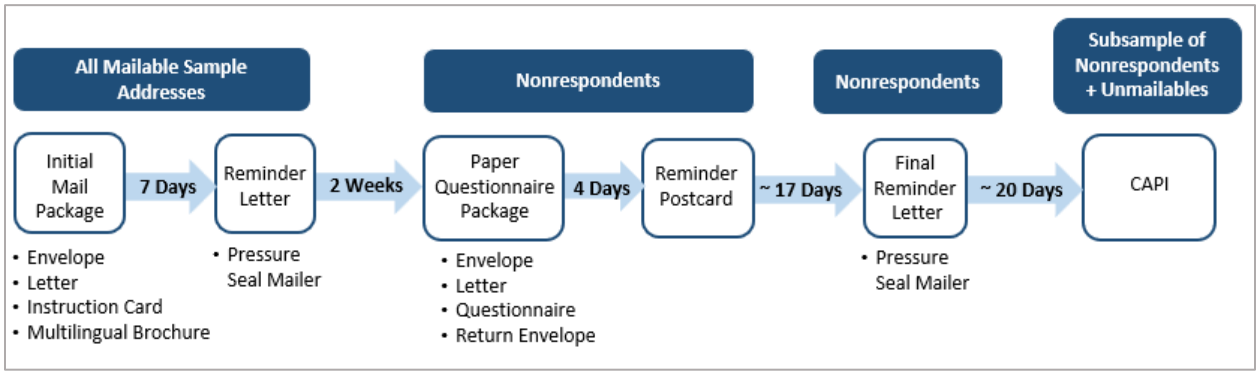
Risley et al. (2018). 2017 Pressure Seal Mailing Materials Test

While no formal evaluation of this change's impact on production ACS was conducted, a comparison of the panels before and after the change showed no clear effect. This was expected, as Treatment 3 in the test results showed no effect on overall self-response.

4.9. 2020: Updated Materials Design, Emphasized Mandatory Messaging, and Changed Questionnaire Size

In January 2020, in response to successful results from field tests conducted in 2015 and 2018, many changes were made to the letters, the envelopes, and the postcard. The FAQ brochure was no longer included in the mailings, and the instruction card was removed from the paper questionnaire package. The size of the paper questionnaire was also modified, so the questionnaire cover and the outgoing envelope were both updated. A discussion of the changes is presented in Section 4.9.1, and the change in questionnaire paper size is discussed in Section 4.9.2. Additional changes that took effect in November 2020 are discussed in Section 4.10. See Figure 18 for the updated contact strategy; images of the materials are in Appendix E.

Figure 18. 2020 ACS Contact Strategy (January to September)



4.9.1. Updated Materials Design and Mandatory Messaging

The new ACS mail materials were designed to increase readability and to emphasize (1) the benefits of survey participation, (2) the mandatory nature of the survey, and (3) that the U.S. Census Bureau was conducting the survey.

To increase readability: The FAQ brochure in the first and third mailings and the instruction card in the third mailing were excluded to simplify the content, allowing readers to focus more on what they need to do. Content from the FAQ brochure was transferred to the back of the letters in the first and third mailings. Also, the following changes were made to the materials:

- Switched from Helvetica font to Avenir font.
- Increased spacing between lines.
- Bolded sentences containing key information.
- Increased white space by moving text from the front of the letters to the back.
- Emphasized the URL to the response landing page and the internet User ID by adding thick grey boxes around them.
- Omitted the security panel from the pressure seal mailers, since the letters became bifold instead of trifold.
- Removed the sentences about cybersecurity from the fifth mailing to increase white space. The messaging is only legally required to be in one mailing, but it remains in the first and third mailings.

To emphasize the benefits of survey participation: Bolded bullet points were added to the benefits in the first letter. The messaging also changed from mentioning “schools, hospitals, and fire stations … floods and natural disasters … “ to “… improving roads and reducing traffic, building schools, and planning for the health care needs of the elderly.” Some of the messaging on the survey’s benefits was also changed in the third letter.

To emphasize the mandatory nature of the survey: The following changes were made:

- Added a sentence in every letter and on the postcard, in bold font, that said, "**Your response is required by law**," or similar messaging.
- Added a bold **"… required by law …"** sentence to the front page of the paper questionnaire.
- Added a bold box saying **"YOUR RESPONSE IS REQUIRED BY LAW"** to the front of the postcard.

To emphasize that the Census Bureau, which is more widely recognized than the ACS, conducts the survey, the following changes were made:

- Moved the Census Bureau logo from the bottom left of the letters to the top left, a more prominent place on the letters.
- Moved the Census Bureau logo from the bottom left to the top left of the return address on the envelopes, postcard, and pressure seal letters.
- Added the Census Bureau logo to the flap of the envelopes in the first and third mailing.
- Deleted the "U.S. Department of Commerce" and the "Economics and Statistics Administration" from all letters and envelopes to declutter and draw more attention to the Census Bureau logo. The Department of Commerce logo is still used.
- Deleted "An Equal Opportunity Employer" from the envelopes to declutter and draw more attention to the Census Bureau logo.

For more information about the tests that led to these design changes, see:

Barth et al. (2016). 2015 Envelope Mandatory Messaging Test

Oliver et al. (2016). 2015 Summer Mandatory Messaging Test

Risley & Berkley (2020). 2018 ACS Mail Materials Test

4.9.2. Questionnaire Size Change

The paper questionnaire also changed sizes in 2020. In the summer of 2019, we decided to move to a standard questionnaire size, which required a change to the envelopes. The pre-2020 questionnaires had non-standard paper dimensions (10⅛" x 10⅜"), severely limiting the pool of vendors available to print them. By 2020, only one contractor could print the questionnaire in non-standard dimensions, which was a risk to the program.

In the 2013 ACS Questionnaire Design Test (QDT), the Census Bureau examined whether to modify the questionnaire from its then-current size (non-standard, 28 pages) to either a standard size (44 pages) or another experimental non-standard size (36 pages). The QDT results

did not conclusively show that one length or format would yield significantly higher self-response rates. No changes to a standard-size questionnaire were made after the QDT, as the Census Bureau had just begun a comprehensive review of the ACS questions at that time (2014 ACS Content Review). Changes to the questionnaire length were delayed until results from the Content Review were available.

The non-standard questionnaire was printed on 28 pages and mailed folded in half. Moving to the standard paper size increased the form length from 28 to 48 pages. The increased number of pages in the questionnaire meant it could not be folded before being placed in an envelope, so it would need to be mailed flat. The outgoing envelopes changed to 9" x 11⅝". The business reply envelopes changed to 9" x 11½". All new envelopes now have a side flap instead of a top flap.

For more information about the tests that led to these design changes, see:

Wakim & Davis (2014). 2013 ACS Questionnaire Design Test

Chappell & Obenski (2014). Fiscal Year 2014 Content Review Results

4.10. 2020: Updated Messaging During the 2020 Census and the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Several Census Bureau studies have found that the public has heard of the census but is generally unaware of the ACS. This general lack of awareness leads to questions about the legitimacy of the survey. In 2020, the ACS continued to collect data at sampled addresses while the 2020 Census was underway; therefore, respondents at sampled addresses could receive materials for both the census and the ACS, which could be confusing and burdensome. In 2020, messaging in ACS mail materials was updated to legitimize the ACS and distinguish it from the 2020 Census. The messaging for these materials was developed based on the 2010 study (discussed in Section 4.2), and cognitive testing was conducted in 2018.

For example, in the initial mail package letter, the following text was added:

> "The American Community Survey is **not** the 2020 Census. This survey asks questions about topics not included in the 2020 Census, such as veteran status, transportation, and internet access."

The materials were intended for use from March through September 2020. However, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted operations for the 2020 Census and the National Processing Center (NPC). The materials with the 2020 Census messaging were used through December to coincide with extended 2020 Census data collection activities.

The COVID-19 pandemic also impacted the ACS mailings from March 2020 through April 2021. To mitigate operational interruptions and address staffing constraints, the ACS program

implemented several changes to the mail contact strategy, including reducing the number of mailings, modifying the initial mail package to a pressure seal letter for some panels, and omitting a paper questionnaire package for a subsample of nonresponding housing units. Information about the pandemic's impact is documented in Appendix F.

For cognitive testing results, see:

Holzberg, Katz, Luck et al. (2021). Cognitive Testing of the 2020 American Community Survey Mailing Materials

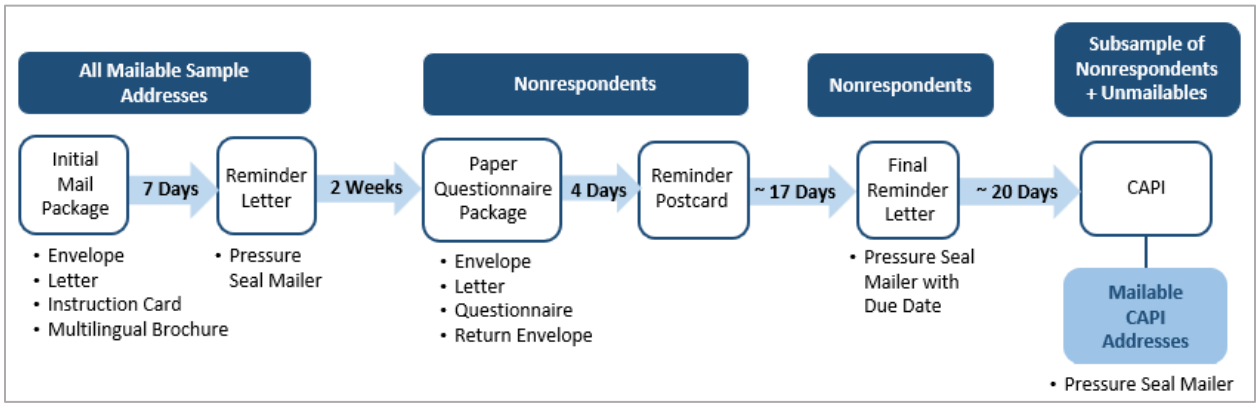
For field testing results, see:

Spiers & Heimel (2021). 2020 Specialized Mail Materials Test

4.11. 2020: Added a Due Date to the Fifth Mailing and Added a Pressure Seal Letter for Mailable Addresses in the CAPI Sample

In October 2020, we added a due date to the fifth mailing and began sending an additional pressure seal mailer to all mailable addresses in the CAPI Sample, as noted in Figure 19. These changes were implemented to boost self-response, which was alarmingly lagging due to COVID-19-related disruptions to data collection operations. (See Appendix F for more details.) The due date letter had been tested, but was implemented early, before the final report was published. The new pressure seal letter sent to addresses in the CAPI sample had not been tested, but a similar letter, called the "Internet Letter," was being sent from the Census Bureau's regional offices (ROs). This section describes these changes in greater detail.

Figure 19. 2020 ACS Contact Strategy (Beginning in October)



4.11.1. Added a Due Date

The 2019 Due Dates Test evaluated the use of a due date and the addition of consequence messaging in the final pressure seal reminder. The test examined the impact on response rates of adding a due date to the outside of the pressure seal reminder, to the call-out box inside the reminder, or to both. The test also evaluated consequence messaging, a communication

strategy inspired by loss-aversion theory. Loss-aversion theory posits that people would rather avoid a loss than reap a reward because the pain of losing is psychologically more powerful than the pleasure of gaining (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979; Tversky and Kahneman, 1992). The figures and table below describe the usage of a due date tested in the materials.

Figure 20. Call-out Box on the Outside of the Pressure Seal Mailer: Control (Left) and Experiment (Right)

Figure 21. Call-out Box on the Inside of the Pressure Seal Mailer: Control (Top) and Experiment (Bottom)

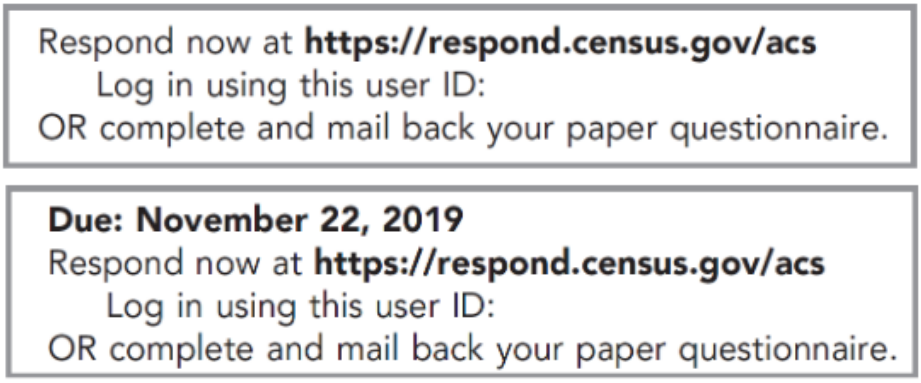


Table 3. Due Date Consequence Message Variations Used in the Letter

Treatment	Due Date Consequence Message
Neutral Message	Respond by November 22, 2019, or a Census Bureau interviewer may come to your home to complete the survey in person.
Add Message	If you do not respond by November 22, 2019, we will add you to our schedule for a visit.
Remove Message	Respond by November 22, 2019, to be removed from our schedule for a visit.

Five experimental treatments and a control were studied. The experimental design is described in Table 4 below.

Table 4. 2019 ACS Due Dates Test Treatments

Treatment	Due Date on Outside of Pressure Seal Mailer	Due Date Messaging in Letter
Control	No due date	No due date message
Envelope	Call-out box	Call-out box only
Box Only	No due date	Call-out box only
Neutral Message	No due date	Call-out box and "Neutral" message
Add Message	No due date	Call-out box and "Add" message
Remove Message	No due date	Call-out box and "Remove" message

The results of this test indicated that adding a due date to the letter only in the inside call-out box (Box Only treatment) did not increase self-response. Adding the due date to the outside of the mailer and to the call-out box in the letter (Envelope treatment) increased self-response. Of the three treatments that included an additional consequence message, the Add Message and Remove Message treatments performed better than the Control for recipients of the mailing. When considering the entire mailing universe, only the Remove Message treatment remained significantly different from the Control. Therefore, the Census Bureau implemented the "Remove Message" treatment ("Respond by [due date] to be removed from our schedule for a visit.") with a due date also displayed in call-out boxes inside and outside of the mailer.

For more information about this test, see:

Risley & Oliver (2021). 2019 ACS Due Dates Test

Kephart et al. (2022). Cognitive Testing of the 2019 American Community Survey Due Date Test

4.11.2. Added a Pressure Seal Letter for Mailable Addresses in the CAPI Sample

As stated previously, to combat decreasing CAPI response, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, the ACS program decided to send a pressure seal letter to all mailable addresses in the CAPI sample.

During the CAPI month, field representatives attempt to address potential concerns and gain cooperation by requesting letters for respondents that contain additional information. For several years, one of the most frequently used letters was the "Internet Letter," which encouraged an online response and provided the recipient with internet login instructions. Before October 2020, some of the Census Bureau's Regional Offices sent the Internet Letter to all addresses in the CAPI sample; other Regional Offices sent it at the discretion of the field representative. The ACS program decided to standardize the use of the letter across all regions and improve efficiency by printing and mailing the letters from the National Processing Center.

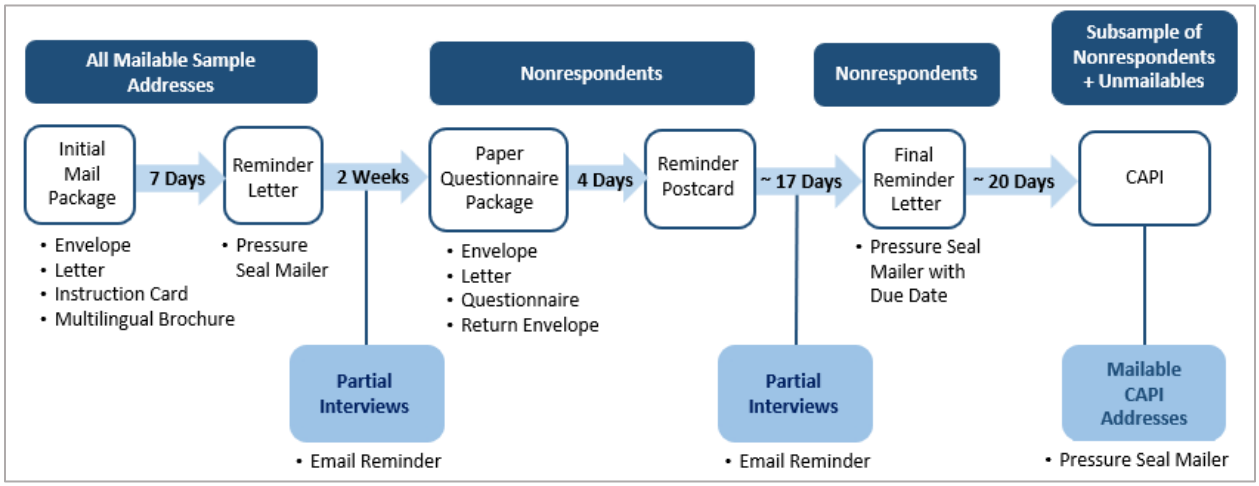
Before implementing the letter, changes were made to the Regional Offices' letters to reduce text by removing messaging unrelated to the letter's primary purpose, which obscured salient messages. The letters were also updated to match other ACS mailings (e.g., font, logo, look and feel). The updates were made without first performing a field test because we had strong evidence the messaging and design of the new letter would be more effective at motivating response than the existing letter based on lessons learned from the results of ACS testing of self-response materials, as well as the best practices suggested by communications and survey literature (Oliver et al., 2017; Risley & Berkley, 2020). Changes to the letter were developed with input from the Regional Offices.

We decided to use pressure seal letters and send them from the National Processing Center with the Regional Offices' return addresses to save time and money and hopefully increase self-response from addresses in the CAPI sample.

4.12. 2022: Added Email Reminders for Internet Response Breakoffs

In January 2022, after the second and fourth mailings, we began sending email reminders to respondents who had only partially completed the survey, as seen in Figure 22.

Figure 22. 2022 ACS Contact Strategy (January panel)

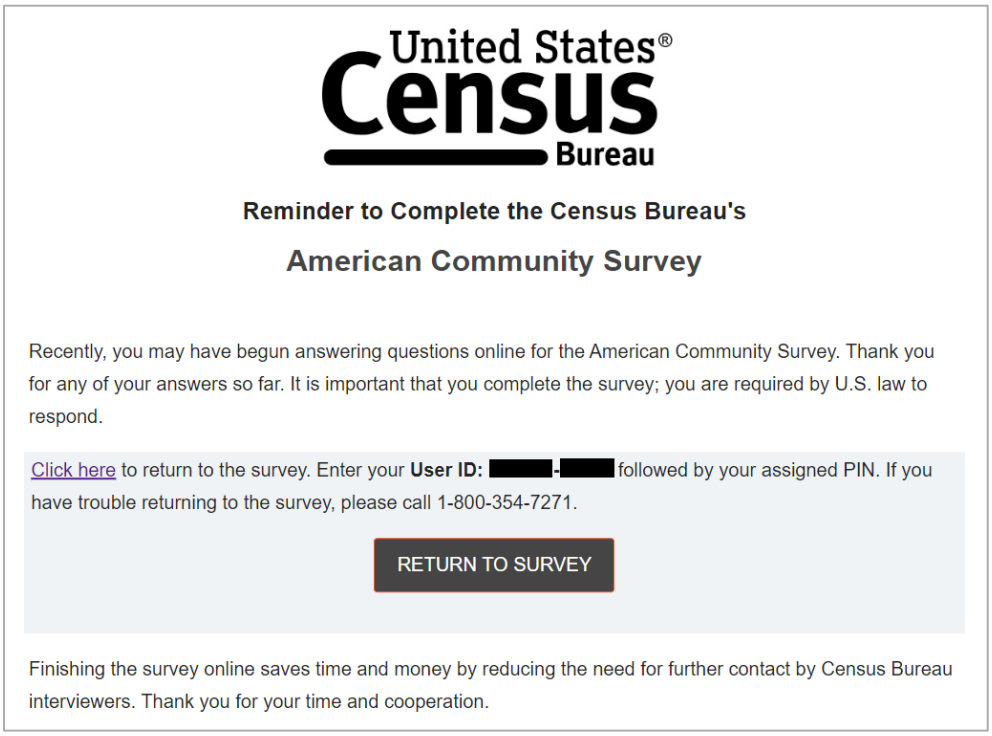


If a respondent starts the survey online but does not complete it, the response is considered a "partial interview." Sample addresses with a partial interview continue to receive reminder mailings. The 2014 ACS Internet Test recommended sending email reminders to partial interview cases (when the respondent provides a valid email address). This was implemented in production in January 2022.[12] The email includes a link to the online survey, clear instructions about how to log in, and prominently displays the user identification number (see Figure 23). The email is sent only once to a respondent, either before the third or fifth mailing, depending

[12] Resource constraints and competing program priorities led to the time lag between the test and implementation.

on when they started filling out the online survey. If a complete response is not received, the sample address continues to receive reminder mailings.

Figure 23. Image of the ACS Reminder Email



For more information about this test, see:

Zelenak (2016). 2014 American Community Survey Internet Test

An evaluation of this change in production did not show an impact on response rates because so few email reminders were sent. In January 2022, the emails were sent from the domain "@subscriptions.census.gov" with the subject line "Census Bureau Survey." Beginning in June 2023, the emails were sent from the domain "@census.gov" with the subject line "American Community Survey." Although the update has not yet affected overall response rates due to the limited number of email reminders sent, the change to the domain and subject line has increased the percentage of respondents returning to the internet survey and providing complete responses. Roughly 14 percent of respondents who receive the email before the third mailing complete the survey, and 7.5 percent of respondents who receive the email before the fifth mailing complete the survey.

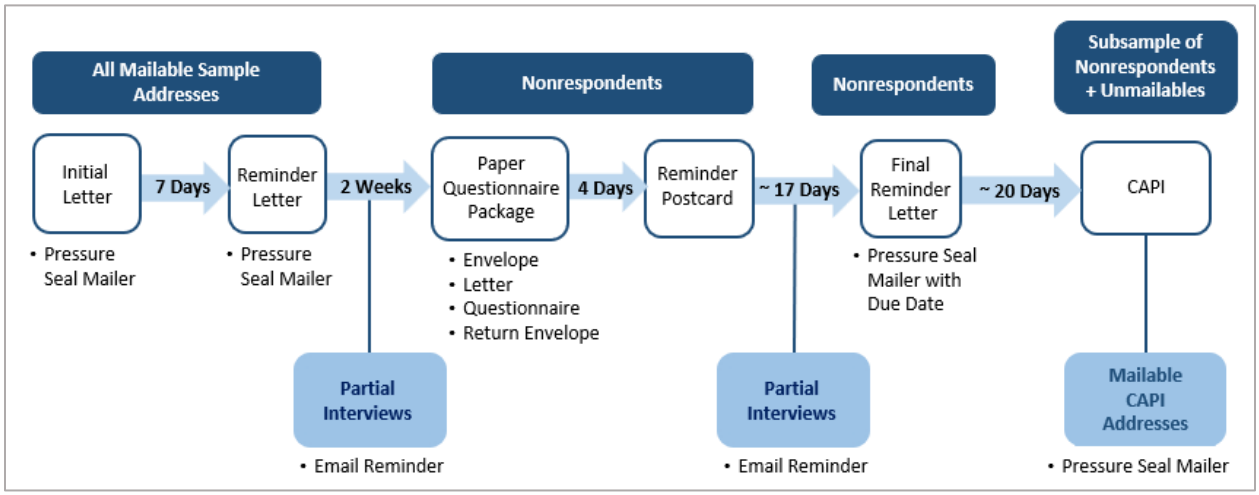
4.13. 2022: Changed the Initial Mailing Package to a Pressure Seal Mailer

As mentioned in Section 4.10, the ACS mail contact strategy was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Limited by social distancing requirements, staff shortages, and paper shortages, mailing operations had to be modified. One change during this time was the use of a pressure

seal letter in some panels instead of the initial mail package. Unexpectedly, the panels that used the pressure seal letter had a nominally higher number of returns than the panels that used the initial mail package.

In 2021, we tested the effectiveness of using a pressure seal letter in the first mailing under typical ACS contact-strategy conditions. We also tested the effect of removing or deemphasizing the reference to a paper questionnaire being sent in a few weeks. The resulting pressure seal letter was implemented as the first ACS mailing beginning in February 2022, as shown in Figure 24).

Figure 24. 2022 ACS Contact Strategy (Beginning in February)



The 2021 Initial Mailing Pressure Seal Test evaluated the changes described above. The test included a control and four experimental treatments:

Control: Initial mail package with standard questionnaire reference language.
Treatment 1: Initial mail package without a paper questionnaire reference.
Treatment 2: Pressure seal letter with standard questionnaire reference language.
Treatment 3: Pressure seal letter without a paper questionnaire reference.
Treatment 4: Pressure seal letter with a de-emphasized paper questionnaire reference.

When combining treatments, the pooled pressure seal letter treatments had higher return rates of 1.2 percentage points before the paper questionnaire package mailing than the pooled initial mail package treatments, regardless of the paper questionnaire reference language. When comparing the questionnaire reference language, the treatment without the language had higher return rates than the de-emphasized language (by 1.3 percentage points) and the standard language (by 1.5 percentage points). There were no differences in return rates between the de-emphasized language and the standard language.

Based on these results, the first mailing was changed to a pressure seal letter starting in February 2022. Due to a shortage of pressure seal paper, we could not begin in January. Additionally, because of concerns about households without internet access, the ACS program decided to use the de-emphasized paper questionnaire reference for those letters.

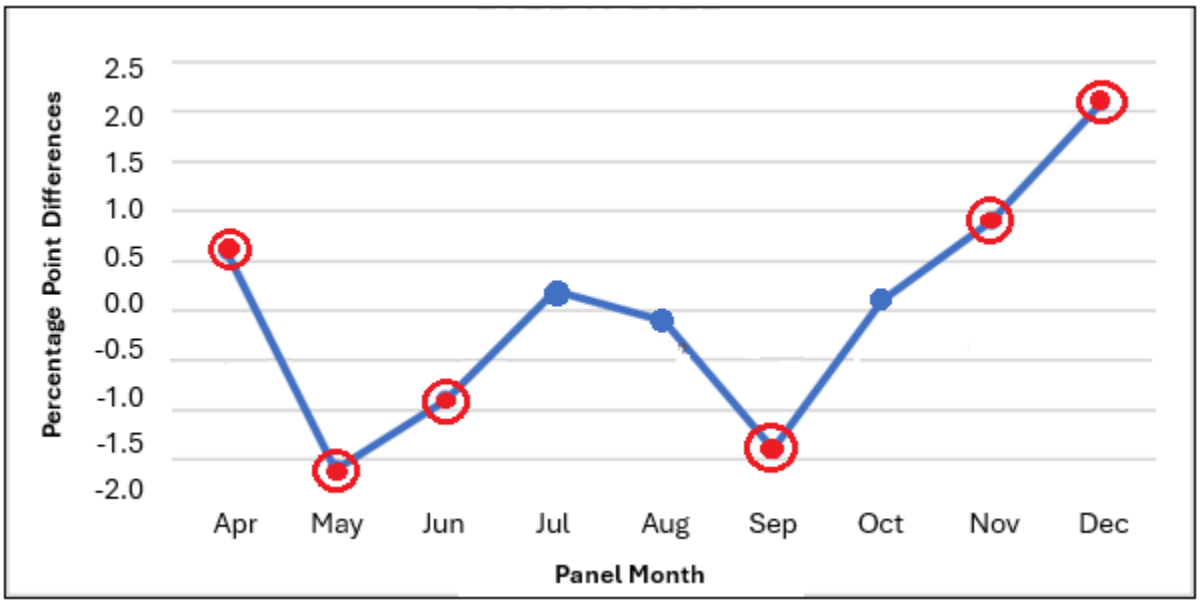
This study also evaluated the use of a letter with and without the Census Bureau director's signature. While ACS letters typically include the director's signature, we omit it when the position is vacant. We wondered if this would raise concerns with respondents about the letter's validity. The results of this evaluation showed no significant differences in self-response return rates. There was a statistically significant decrease of 0.1 percentage points in response via the Telephone Questionnaire Assistance operation when the signature was omitted. The results of this study will be used as needed in the future to inform decisions regarding the signature.

For more information about this test, see:

Longsine & Spiers (2023). 2021 Initial Mailing Pressure Seal Test

Once implemented in February 2022, the impacts on the ACS were evaluated. The following chart (Figure 25) compares the self-response rate by panel between 2021 and 2022. The chart starts with the April 2021 panel because the ACS contact strategy remained affected by pandemic-related limitations through the March 2021 panel. Comparing the April through December panels for 2021 and 2022, there are three panels with higher self-response rates in 2022 and three with lower self-response rates in 2022. Significant differences are indicated by the circled data points on the chart. Three panels showed no statistically significant differences in response rates between the two years. These data indicate that the change to using a pressure seal letter for the initial mailing had a neutral effect on self-response rates throughout the year.

Figure 25. ACS Self-Response Rate Percentage Point Differences: Each monthly panel of 2022 compared to the same monthly panel of 2021



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2021 and 2022 American Community Survey
DRB Approval Number: CBDRB-FY25-ACSO003-B0023
Note: The data points circled in the graph represent statistically significant increases and decreases based on two-tailed t-tests at the α=0.1 level. The data points not circled represent differences that are not statistically significant, indicating insufficient evidence to conclude that the changes affected response in those monthly comparisons. The weighted response rates account for both the initial sample design and CAPI subsampling.

4.14. 2024: Updated Materials with Design Changes

In 2017, the Census Bureau began the Strategic Framework Project—a long-term, multi-phase project to update the messaging in the ACS mail materials. The project included researching best practices in messaging to increase survey cooperation, assessing messaging in the then-current ACS mail materials, developing new materials based on the research, and testing the new materials (qualitatively and quantitatively).

After conducting research on best practices in communication across a variety of disciplines, the Strategic Framework Project team, comprised of subject-matter experts from different directorates throughout the Census Bureau, made recommendations for messaging in ACS mail materials in two reports (Oliver et al., 2017; Schreiner et al., 2020). Following the recommendations, four new sets of ACS mail materials were designed. The Census Bureau conducted cognitive testing of the materials in three rounds (Martinez et al., 2023).

The four sets of ACS mail materials were field tested in the 2021 ACS Strategic Framework Mail Materials Test. The experimental treatments employed unique design concepts to capture the readers' attention and highlight key messages in the mailings. Plain language writing and design principles were used to create respondent-centered materials that were easier to read and understand. The different design concepts used in the test are outlined in Table 5.

Table 5. Design Concepts used in the Experimental Treatments of the 2021 ACS Strategic Framework Mail Materials Test

Treatments	Description
Icon Treatment	Icons and symbols drew attention to key information, with some use of green color.
Column and Header Treatment	Key information was organized in columns. Headers in green font also emphasized key information.
Sidebar Treatment	Graphic images were embedded in a sidebar to emphasize key information, with some use of green color.
Minimalist Treatment	Key messages in bold stood out because the letters used as little text as possible. No graphics or color were used.
Control Treatment	2021 ACS Production materials.

Since the treatments were designed holistically, with numerous changes across all mailings, the test results could not determine the effectiveness of individual messages or design concepts. Below are some of the motivational messaging concepts that were tested in three treatments (the Icon, Column and Header, and Sidebar Treatments):

Conformity: Framing the request to respond to the survey as an action consistent with one's previous behavior and with actions of those in one's community.

- Many households across the nation have already responded. We need your response too.
- Millions of households participate in the ACS every year. Be the voice of your community.

Community Benefits: Highlighting the benefits of the survey statistics that are more relatable to one's personal life in the community, rather than broad national-level benefits.

- Your community may need new or improved roads to help your work commute, services for disabled veterans and the elderly, opportunities for local businesses, and access to high-speed internet service.
- Non-profit groups use the ACS to plan and build parks and playgrounds in communities across the country.
- … opportunities for new businesses in your area; parks and playgrounds for enjoyment and recreation, and access to high-speed internet service.

Civic responsibility: Framing survey participation as a civic responsibility or duty to the community in which one lives.

- Just as we are required to report for jury duty, file taxes, and earn a license to drive, we are also required to respond to this survey.
- .. doing your part to ensure that decisions about your community can be made using the best data available.

- Your participation helps ensure that community leaders have the information they need to make decisions that affect our lives.

The Minimalist Treatment did not include new messaging, and it was the least text-dense of all the experimental treatments. The Minimalist Treatment achieved a significantly higher self-response rate than all other treatments, including the control treatment that used production ACS materials. Because the ACS is a mandatory survey, the strongest motivator for response appears to be a bold-faced sentence stating, "**Your response is required by law.**" Reducing text in the letters allows that message to be emphasized even more. Thus, while other surveys have successfully used a variety of motivational messages to increase response rates, the 2021 ACS Strategic Framework Mail Materials Test did not demonstrate that including these messages increases response rates for a mandatory survey.

While some messaging and design elements in the test require follow-up testing before production implementation, we were able to implement certain aspects of the experiment in January 2024, without further testing. The design changes in 2024 included:

- Moving the return address to the upper right-hand corner of the letter.
- Changing "census.gov" in the lower right-hand corner to census.gov/acs."
- Deleting all references to "toll-free number" and deleting the parentheses around the phone number.
- Deleting "https://" from the response URL.
- Increasing the font size of the response landing page URL.
- Redesigning the second letter to be more like the "Minimalist" design from the test.

For more information about the field test and associated research, see:

Decision Partners, Penn Schoen Berland, & Reingold, Inc. (2014). Messaging and Mail Package Assessment Research: Cumulative Findings

Fulton et al. (2016). Effectiveness of Messaging to Encourage Response to the ACS

Oliver et al. (2017). Strategic Framework for Messaging in the American Community Mail Materials

Schreiner et al. (2020). Assessment of Messaging in the 2018 American Community Survey Mail Contact Materials

Martinez et al. (2023). Cognitive Testing of 2020 American Community Survey Strategic Framework Materials

Oliver et al. (2023). 2021 ACS Strategic Framework Mail Materials Test Report

Comparing 2023 and 2024 self-response return rates at specific points in data collection, the data suggest that these design changes encouraged earlier self-response and reduced workloads for additional mailings, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Self-Response Return Rates in 2023 and 2024

Timing of Data Collection Period	2023	2024	Difference
Before the paper questionnaire mailing	22.5	23.2	0.7*
Before the final reminder mailing	36.4	36.9	0.5*

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2023 and 2024 American Community Survey
DRB Approval Number: CBDRB-FY25-ACSO003-B0023
Note: An asterisk (*) indicates a statistically significant difference. Significance is based on two-tailed t-tests at the α=0.1 level. The weighted response rates account for both the initial sample design and CAPI subsampling.

5. RESEARCH NOT RESULTING IN CHANGES TO CONTACT MATERIALS

In addition to the tests highlighted in Section 4, which resulted in changes to the ACS contact strategy and materials, the Census Bureau has conducted other tests whose results did not provide enough evidence to support making changes. Analysis plans developed before each test identify the metrics used to evaluate the test, typically response rates, data quality, and costs. If any of these areas return negative results, we may decide not to proceed with a change in methodology.

This section outlines those tests, with one exception. The 2013 Questionnaire Design Test contained two components: changes to the paper questionnaire and changes to how its data were captured. Although the paper questionnaire remained unchanged, the data capture methodology was modified based on the test results. See Section 5.2 below for more details.

Table 7. Research *Not* Resulting in Changes to Contact Materials or Strategy

Test Year	Test Objective
2013	Model-based approach to mode switching
2013	Questionnaire paper size
2014	Removing the pre-notice
2015	Including a “Why We Ask” mail package insert
2017	Provide paper questionnaires earlier to sampled addresses in specified areas
2018	Including a data slide in the mailing
2024	Changing the timing of the fifth mailing and the CAPI mailing

5.1. Model-Based Mode of Data Collection Switching

Dr. Robert Groves, former director of the Census Bureau, highlighted the need for the Census Bureau to stay relevant by using real-time, mixed-mode data collection methods, especially as passive data sources become more common. He advocated for surveys that adapt during data collection based on respondents’ preferences and paradata (data about the data collection process), to improve timeliness, reduce costs, and minimize respondent burden.

In response, the Census Bureau simulated an adaptive survey design in both of the 2011 ACS Internet Tests. The goal was to explore a model-based approach to determine when to switch the type of survey invitation from internet response to paper questionnaires at the household level, while balancing cost, error, and timeliness.

First, a statistical model was built using administrative data to predict the likelihood that a household would respond online on each day of data collection after receiving the initial invitation. Then, households were grouped by their likelihood of responding online, and each group was assigned a mode-switch day—the point at which they should be mailed a paper questionnaire if they hadn't responded yet.

The group-based assignments minimized the time required to follow up with internet nonrespondents while controlling costs and reducing errors. Without adaptive design, all cases would receive mail materials prompting an online response, followed 13 days later by a paper questionnaire. Using an adaptive design, the study found that moving some groups to mail earlier could reduce follow-up times by several days, with only a small increase in costs and little impact on response rates. The average time to switch modes was 9.1 days. The study showed some initial cost increases but was unable to fully assess the approach's cost impacts.

While the simulation showed that an adaptive design may speed up follow-up with nonrespondents, implementing such an approach would have created complexities with workload management. Future advancements in mode-switching capabilities could allow respondents more time to respond in their preferred mode.

For more information about the simulation, see:

Chesnut (2013). Model-Based Mode of Data Collection Switching from Internet to Mail in the American Community Survey

5.2. 2013 Questionnaire Design Test

During the 2010 ACS Content Test, the Census Bureau determined that the ACS paper questionnaire lacked sufficient space to accommodate proposed content changes. Thus, we needed to test alternative questionnaire designs to accommodate future content needs on the ACS questionnaire. The 2013 Questionnaire Design Test assessed the impact of the number of questionnaire pages and the size of the questionnaire paper. The test also assessed changes made to the questionnaire to make it more compatible with Optical Character Recognition (OCR) software, modifying response formats to enable automated capture rather than manual keying. The results are discussed in the two sections that follow.

5.2.1. Questionnaire Size Testing

The 2013 Questionnaire Design Test examined the impact of a longer 36-page questionnaire compared to the then-current 28-page form. It also examined whether changing the form's paper size to a standard 8.5” x 11” booklet (44 pages) affected responses compared with 28-page and 36-page booklets, both 10.25” x 10.5” respectively.

The test concluded that neither the length nor the format of the questionnaires, nor the size of the mailing envelope, affected self-response rates for mail responses or mail and internet responses combined. We hypothesized that the survey's mandatory nature led people to respond regardless of the questionnaire's length or format.

Changes to the questionnaire format did not consistently affect item-missing data rates for either the 36-page or 44-page treatment compared with the 28-page form. Focusing on mail responses, the test found significant differences in item-missing data rates. There were a few questions for which item-missing data rates were lower for the 44-page questionnaire than for the 36-page questionnaire. There were also a small number of questions where significant differences were observed in the analysis of response distributions, primarily in comparisons between the 44-page treatment and the 28-page form. The results, however, were too weak and inconsistent to identify the 44-page treatment as the overall superior option.

In summary, the results did not conclusively indicate that any treatment was superior to the others. In 2020, the size of the paper questionnaire was changed. (See Section 4.9 for more details.)

For more information about the 2013 Questionnaire Design Test questionnaire changes, see:

Terry (2013). Cognitive Pretesting for Navigation of 2013 ACS Questionnaire Design Test Questionnaires

Wakim & Davis (2014). 2013 ACS Questionnaire Design Test

5.2.2. Optical Character Recognition Testing and Implementation

Although no changes were made to contact materials as a result of the 2013 Questionnaire Design Test, one aspect of the test led to operational improvements. The test included a treatment to evaluate Optical Character Recognition (OCR) technology for capturing numeric write-ins on ACS paper questionnaires. The control treatment utilized a production questionnaire (10.25 inches by 10.5 inches, 28 pages). The OCR treatment paper questionnaire closely resembled the control treatment questionnaire, with enhancements that enabled the use of OCR.

At the time of the test, clerks in the National Processing Center (NPC) manually keyed all numeric and character write-in fields from scanned images. For the OCR treatment, the

software electronically extracted the scanned numeric write-in fields and applied OCR technology to interpret the entries. As part of this test, clerks also independently keyed the numeric fields. The evaluation compared the values of the numeric fields resulting from keying and OCR.

Overall, the OCR failed to read almost 27 percent of the values because of its inability to determine the numbers in the field with an acceptable level of confidence. When the OCR could read the value, it matched the keyed value about 73 percent of the time; it did not match for just 0.3 percent of all keyed values. When the OCR value and the keyed value did not match, the OCR value was determined to be correct after adjudication about 34 percent of the time. When the OCR value was incorrect, the magnitude of the difference between the OCR and the keyed value appeared nominal in most cases. Additionally, of all values read by OCR, only 0.3 percent were in error, which is below the 1 percent error rate required for keyed batches.

As a result of the test and evaluation, the ACS program began using OCR to interpret numeric fields. This resulted in greater data-processing efficiency, lower costs, and improved data quality.

For more information about the 2013 Questionnaire Design Test OCR results, see:

Baumgardner (2014b). Evaluation of the use of Optical Character Recognition to capture American Community Survey numeric write-ins in the 2013 Questionnaire Design Test

5.3. 2014 Prenotice Test

For surveys that collect data via mail-back paper questionnaires, it is well established that a prenotice (or pre-notification) letter significantly improves response rates. The literature on invitations to participate in web surveys builds on previous research suggesting that the design of mailed invitations or advance letters can affect response rates in both mail surveys and interviewer-administered surveys (e.g., De Leeuw et al., 2007; Dillman, 2007; Dillman et al., 1995; Hembroff et al., 2005). However, in the 2012 National Census Test, in the context of an "internet push" strategy where response by internet is promoted before providing a mail-back paper questionnaire response option, there was no significant difference in response between otherwise similar panels where one used a prenotice, and the other did not.[13]

Building on the results of this test, in the 2014 ACS Prenotice Test, the ACS tested the effects of removing the prenotice letter on response and cost. We found that the treatment group that did not receive a prenotice had a significantly lower overall self-response rate. The report also

[13] The 2012 National Census Test was a test of decennial census methodology and did not test the ACS contact strategy or materials. A summary of results from the 2012 National Census Test, along with other tests, can be found in the 2020 Census Research and Testing 2012 National Census Test Contact Strategy, Optimizing Self-Response report (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).

describes how any initial cost savings from not printing and mailing a prenotice are offset by higher costs due to increased workloads in follow-up data collection modes.

While the test recommended keeping a prenotice letter, a later test (see Section 4.5) showed a better response when using a letter with a User ID, allowing the household to respond online. Since we started using letters containing a response User ID, prenotice letters without a User ID are no longer viable.

For more information about the 2014 Prenotice Test, see:

Murphy & Roberts (2015). 2014 Prenotice Test

5.4. 2015 "Why We Ask" Mail Package Insert Test

The ACS provides vital information about our nation and its people, though respondents may not be aware of why each question is asked. A better understanding of why the Census Bureau asks each question and how the data from their responses are used to benefit their community has proven effective in addressing respondent concerns. A new insert (a one-page, front-and-back, full-color flyer) was developed for inclusion in a mailing to respondents; it provided short summaries of why the Census Bureau asked each series of questions. The "Why We Ask" Mail Package Insert Test was conducted to assess whether housing units that received the insert showed changes in unit response rates or item response rates, and to estimate the potential cost impact of any such changes.

The test showed no significant differences in the self-response return rates between treatments. There were also no significant differences in form-completeness metrics between the treatments. When comparing item nonresponse rates, only one item showed a significant difference between treatments. Including the new insert would increase costs to the ACS program without improving response or data quality. Therefore, this proposal was not pursued.

For more information about this test, see:

Heimel & Barth (2016). "Why We Ask" Mail Package Insert Test

5.5. 2017 ACS Mail Design Test

In 2015, the Census Bureau tested the impact of softening the mandatory language in the ACS mail materials (Oliver et al., 2016). All experimental treatments with softened language resulted in lower response rates in that study. The 2017 Mail Design Test was conducted to identify an alternative treatment to one tested in 2015 that would maintain the softening of the mandatory language in the mail materials while producing higher self-response rates.

The 2017 Mail Design Test evaluated three ACS mail materials and messaging designs. It assessed the impact on self-response, cost, and reliability of replacing the current mailing

design with one of the three experimental treatments. All three experimental treatments resulted in a decrease of 1.0 to 1.7 percentage points in final response rates. These designs would result in decreased reliability of the estimates (an increase in the margin of error of 2.9 to 3.6 percent) and increased costs (approximately $8 million) relative to the control treatment if the current sample size were retained. Therefore, none of the experimental treatments were implemented.

For more information about the 2017 ACS Mail Design Test, see:

Martinez et al. (2018). Cognitive Pretesting of the 2017 American Community Survey Mail Design

Oliver and Longsine (2018). 2017 ACS Mail Design Test

5.6. 2017 Adaptive Strategy Test

In 2013, the Census Bureau introduced the internet mode as a new, more convenient way for respondents to complete the ACS. Overall, ACS response rates increased. However, in some regions of the country, the introduction of the internet mode led to a decrease in response rates (Baumgardner et al., 2014). The 2017 Adaptive Strategy Test aimed to determine whether a revised mailing strategy would increase self-response rates in areas where response rates had declined.[14]

The Census Bureau targeted Census tracts believed to be associated with a preference for the mail response mode. Two treatments were tested: an experimental treatment (the "Choice" method), where housing units received the paper questionnaire in the initial mailing package and the third mailing and the control (or "Push" method), which followed the current mailing strategy of including the paper questionnaire in the third mailing and offering only internet self-response in the first two mailings.

While the Choice method had a higher mail response than the Push method (by 9.6 percentage points), the Push method had a higher internet response than the Choice method (by 11.3 percentage points). Overall, the Push method (current production) had higher self-response than the Choice method (by 1.7 percentage points). Since the Push method is more effective at achieving a higher overall self-response rate and the Choice method is much more expensive than the Push method, we did not implement the Choice method.

For more information about the 2017 Adaptive Strategy Test, see:

Longsine & Risley (2019). 2017 Methods Panel Adaptive Strategy Test Report

[14] This test expanded on research initially conducted for two 2011 ACS Internet Tests (see Tancreto et al., 2012 and Matthews et al., 2012), an associated simulation of mode switching (see Section 5.1), as well as the 2015 National Content Test (Phelan, 2016).

5.7. 2018 Data Slide Test

Increasing survey participation requires overcoming factors that contribute to nonresponse. The two primary reasons respondents refuse or are reluctant to answer the ACS are privacy concerns (unwillingness to share personal information and mistrust that personal information will remain confidential) and legitimacy concerns (doubt that the ACS is a legitimate survey) (Zelenak & Davis, 2013).

To address these concerns, the Census Bureau created an interactive infographic, also known as a "data slide," that presented ACS statistics for the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. The data slide statistics were intended to alleviate potential privacy concerns by informing sampled households that data from the ACS are used only for aggregate statistics, thereby reassuring them that no individual person's data are revealed. It was also hypothesized that, for those questioning the survey's validity, including a data slide in the mailing could lend legitimacy to the survey, given the significant cost and effort required to design, print, and mail it.

The 2018 Data Slide Test involved sending the data slide to a subsample of ACS addresses. Some addresses received it in the initial package (first mailing), others in the paper questionnaire package (third mailing), and some did not receive it at all. For the data slide to be successful, the response would have to increase enough to offset the additional costs of producing the slide.

The test analyses showed no overall impact on self-response for addresses that received the data slide, compared with control cases that did not. The analysis revealed an increase in internet response and a decrease in mail response for the experimental treatment that included the data slide in the initial mailing package. Results also showed an increase in internet responses for addresses that received the data slide in the third mailing. However, the effect on self-response observed in either treatment would not be sufficient to cover the cost of printing the data slide, and including a data slide in production would increase costs for the ACS program.

The analyses of responses to survey items showed no evidence that including a data slide in either the first or the third mailing had a positive or negative impact on data quality. With the added cost and no quality benefits, the data slide was not included in ACS production materials.

For more information about the 2018 Data Slide Test, see:

Heimel et al. (2019). 2018 Data Slide Test Report

5.8. 2024 Mailout Timing Test

One feature of the ACS contact strategy that has largely gone untested is the timing of the mailings.[15] The 2024 ACS Mailout Timing Test evaluated minor adjustments to the timing of two mailings—the Due Date Letter and the CAPI Internet Letter.

The Due Date Letter is a pressure seal letter with a stated survey response due date. It is sent as the fifth mailing to all mailable addresses in the third mailing universe. The 2024 ACS Mailout Timing Test tested mailing out the Due Date Letter four days earlier to provide more time for self-responses (particularly mail returns) to be received and processed before the CAPI universe is created. The stated survey response due date was also moved up by four days.

The CAPI Internet Letter is a pressure seal letter sent to all mailable addresses selected for CAPI. This letter provides an internet user ID and instructions on how to respond online to avoid an in-person interview with a field representative. The 2024 ACS Mailout Timing Test evaluated mailing the CAPI Internet Letter two days earlier, due to concerns that the short period between mailing the CAPI Internet Letter and the start of CAPI might cause some recipients to receive it after a field representative has already contacted them. The hope was that sending the letter to households earlier would lead more households to self-respond before being contacted by field representatives, thereby increasing the proportion of CAPI respondents who self-respond.

Sending the Due Date Letter four days earlier was found to significantly increase self-response before CAPI. These increases in self-response were due to an increase in both internet response and mail response. However, because of the cap on CAPI workload size, the increase in self-response did not increase the CAPI workload. The rise in self-response would have needed to be much larger to reduce the CAPI workload below the cap. Additionally, the earlier cut date, which increased the number of households receiving the Due Date Letter, increased mailing costs.

There was no evidence that sending the CAPI Internet Letter two days earlier increased self-response for the CAPI sample. Similarly, no difference was found in refusal rates or the average number of contact attempts. However, the earlier mail date was found to increase the rate at which households respond before first contact by a field representative. Despite the increase, the rate remained very small, suggesting that even with the earlier mail date of the CAPI Internet Letter, most households responding by internet do so after a field representative has contacted them. Based on these findings, the timing of the mailouts for the Due Date Letter and the CAPI Internet Letter remained unchanged.

[15] The only testing of timing to mailouts for ACS mailings before this test was the 2015 ACS Mail Contact Strategy Modification Test, which tested a change in timing to the initial mailing.

For more information about the 2024 Mailout Timing Test, see:

Risley et al. (2025). 2024 American Community Survey Mailout Timing Test

6. RESEARCH PENDING IMPLEMENTATION OR FURTHER RESEARCH

This section outlines the results of tests that have not yet been implemented. Testing of an open-ended feedback item and research on perceived respondent burden identified potential enhancements to the survey, though both remain unimplemented due to operational considerations. The 2021 Regional Office Internet Letter Test evaluated adjustments to response options in the fifth mailing. While offering TQA as a response option in the fifth mailing increased self-response, implementation has been deferred due to operational concerns and current testing on that mailing. The research is described in detail below.

Table 8. Research Pending Implementation or Further Research

Test Year	Change Tested
2018	Adding an open-ended feedback question
2017–2018	Adding respondent burden questions
2021	Modifications to the CAPI Internet letter

6.1. Open-Ended Feedback Question

The Census Bureau conducted cognitive testing of a respondent feedback option for the ACS. The test aimed to develop wording that would enable ACS respondents to provide their feedback at the end of the survey, rather than having to contact the Census Bureau directly by phone, email, or mail. Paper and internet mock-up versions of the item were tested; they differed in wording and formatting. Participants were asked to provide their thoughts and answer questions about the versions.

Testing found that participants understood the purpose of each feedback item and the types of comments they could provide. The types of comments included respondents' experiences, positive or negative feedback, survey questions, survey length, and any personal or privacy concerns. Participants reacted positively to the version that included “Thank You” language; participants viewed it as a sign of appreciation for completing the survey. The final recommendation for the comment/feedback item wording was “You may use the space below to share any comments about your experience with the survey,” with the “Thank You” language included on the page.

As of this report's publication, the open-ended feedback question has not been included in the ACS due to operational constraints.

For more information about the cognitive test, see:

Katz et al. (2019). Cognitive Pretesting of the American Community Survey Respondent Comment/Feedback Item

6.2. Respondent Burden Questions

Minimizing respondent survey burden may help decrease nonresponse and increase data quality, but the measurement of burden has varied widely. In federal surveys, federal agencies must estimate the burden on the public using measures of time and financial resources. However, the time it takes to complete a survey likely doesn't fully quantify a respondent's experience with the survey. In the early 2000s and 2010s, researchers paid greater attention to respondents' subjective perceptions of burden, measured by including additional questions in surveys. Despite reliance on these questions as key measures, little qualitative research has been conducted for household surveys.

We conducted a literature review, focus groups, and cognitive interviews with prior ACS respondents to examine potential sources of burden in the ACS, including survey length, sensitivity, contact strategy, respondents' knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about burden, and overall perceptions of burden. Generally, respondents in the focus groups and cognitive interviewing did not find the ACS burdensome. When deciding whether it was burdensome, respondents considered the process of responding to the questionnaire, the value of the data, the mandatory nature of the response, and, to a lesser extent, the contacts they received, suggesting these constructs are key components of burden in the ACS.

There were differences in perceptions of burden based on the mode of response to the ACS and participants' household characteristics. Questions on perceptions of burden generally performed well in cognitive testing; however, we recommend field-testing a short series of optional burden questions on the ACS to assess response length, overall burden, effort, and privacy. If added to the ACS, questions on perceived burden would enable the Census Bureau to track trends in perceived burden over time, examine differences in perceptions by respondent subgroups, and assess the effects of experimental treatments on perceived burden.

As of this report's publication, respondent burden questions have not been included in the ACS.

For more information about the cognitive test, see:

Holzberg, Katz, & Davis (2021). Measuring Respondents' Perceptions of Burden in the American Community Survey

6.3. 2021 Regional Office Internet Letter Test

Starting in October 2020, the ACS program began sending out a new pressure seal “Internet Letter” to all eligible addresses selected for the CAPI operation (see Section 4.11.2). The letter includes instructions on how to respond online to bypass an in-person interview. The 2021 Regional Office Internet Letter Test focused on experimenting with two aspects of the letter: the external message on the mailer and the response options offered.

The test included a control and three experimental treatments, each exploring variations in two design elements. The external message on the pressure seal mailer was either “YOUR RESPONSE IS PAST DUE” or “YOUR RESPONSE IS REQUIRED BY LAW,” both in all capital letters. Inside the letter, the response options were either a URL to the internet response form or both the TQA phone number and the survey URL. The results showed no significant differences in overall response rates between treatments, nor in self-response rates, refusal rates, or the average number of contact attempts during CAPI.

However, when applying logistic regression to assess the impact of individual elements, we found that including the TQA option as a response option increased self-response rates. This increase was attributed to higher TQA and mail responses. Our analysis also confirmed that the current TQA operation could effectively handle the additional call volume. The logistic regression analysis also revealed a significant interaction effect on mail response, combining the external message “Your Response is Required by Law" and offering TQA as a response option.

While recommendations were made to implement the two changes, implementation was postponed due to budget concerns with the TQA operation. Since then, the ACS program has worked to improve the efficiency of the Interactive Voice Recognition (IVR) system for handling respondent questions and reducing TQA costs. The ACS program also developed two research projects to change the timing of mailings, potentially affecting how the results of the Regional Office Internet Letter test would be implemented. Therefore, we decided to wait until those research studies were completed. The 2024 Mailout Timing Test (see section 5.8) was one test. The other is an upcoming project that will test the timing of sending the paper questionnaire (discussed in Section 7). The materials for that test require changes to the fifth mailing. Therefore, we will postpone implementing the suggested changes from this test until we know more about the future of the fifth mailing.

For more information about the 2021 Regional Office Internet Letter Test, see:

Risley & Spiers (2023). 2021 Regional Office Internet Letter Test

7. CURRENT TESTING

The Census Bureau is currently conducting two ACS tests and planning for future tests. Discussion of the two current testing activities follows in sections 7.1 and 7.2. Future tests will continue to focus on changes to data collection methods to reduce survey costs and respondent burden and to improve response rates, data quality, and efficiency.

As plans for future tests evolve, the Census Bureau will notify the public in a few ways. First, the Census Bureau publishes Federal Register Notices for tests to solicit public comments on test plans. As of the publication of this report, the most recent Federal Register Notice for the ACS Methods Panel research program was Federal Register: ACS Methods Panel Tests. In general, Census Bureau notices can be found here: Federal Register: Agencies - Census Bureau. Second, the Census Bureau publishes a biannual report, called Agility in Action, that summarizes plans and results of research and testing for the ACS program. The Agility in Action reports encompass a diverse range of research, including, but not limited to, research on mail contact materials. Additionally, this report may be updated periodically to reflect changes to the contact materials resulting from testing.

7.1. 2025 Response Option and Error Message Design (RED) Test

At present, the Census Bureau is undergoing a technological transformation, building a more modern, data-centric ecosystem that includes a new data-collection platform. Part of this transformation includes developing an evidence-based framework of standards and guidelines for Census Bureau data-collection instruments. To support this effort, the ACS Methods Panel program was used to collect data that informed these standards.

In 2025, the Census Bureau conducted the Response Option and Error Message Design (RED) Test. The RED Test evaluated two components of the ACS internet instrument. The first component tested was the use of response buttons versus radio buttons and check boxes. Response buttons have an outline around the clickable area and highlight the whole response field once a selection is made. The second component tested was how error messages are displayed. Error messages alert respondents that a survey response is invalid or missing. The RED Test evaluated the current ACS display for alert messages against the U.S. Web Design System (USWDS) recommended display (see Alert | U.S. Web Design System (USWDS)).

Analysis of this test is underway, with results expected to be published in 2026 in the ACS Research & Evaluation Program Library.

7.2. Questionnaire Timing Test

In 2026, the Census Bureau is conducting the Questionnaire Timing Test to evaluate the timing of mailing the paper questionnaire and the impact of Quick Response (QR) codes on response.

Over time, the ACS program has modified the ACS mail contact strategy to emphasize responding online over the other response modes. Mailing the paper questionnaire later may push respondents to respond online sooner, reducing the number of paper questionnaires sent and decreasing the costs of questionnaire printing, assembly, mailing, and processing.

In addition to changing the timing of the paper questionnaire mailing, we were also interested in testing the addition of a QR code to the ACS mailing materials. A QR code is a two-dimensional barcode that can be read by smartphones and tablets (either by a QR reader or a camera mobile application) and sends the user to a linked website. Currently, an ACS respondent must type the URL provided in the mailing materials to access the survey. However, providing a QR code might help respondents access the survey more quickly, reducing respondent burden.

The Questionnaire Timing Test includes a control treatment and two experimental treatments:

Control: Current production mail materials and timing.
Treatment 1: Use of QR codes.
Treatment 2: Use of QR codes and sending the paper questionnaire in the fifth mailing.

The results of this test are expected to be published in the ACS Research & Evaluation Program Library in 2027.

8. DISCUSSION

The ACS is a vital tool for understanding the people, households, and communities across the country. The Census Bureau takes its obligation to provide timely, relevant, and high-quality information about the nation for small geographic areas and small populations seriously. Data from the survey, along with other parts of the Decennial Census Program, help inform how trillions of dollars in federal funds are distributed each year to states, communities, tribal governments, and other recipients.

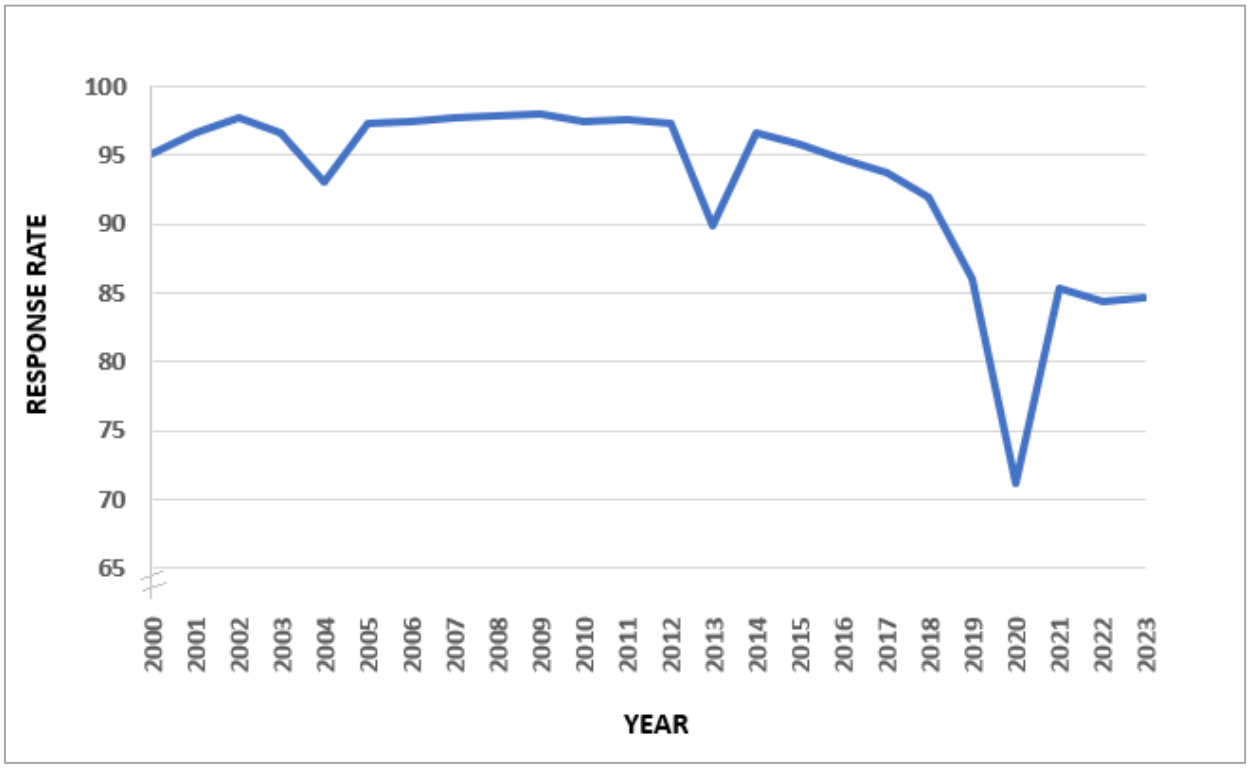
Over the past twenty years, therefore, Census Bureau research has focused on achieving optimal data quality for timely, useful products for a wide variety of federal, state, and local government and commercial uses within available resources. The ACS Methods Panel research program, in particular, has been central to meeting those goals.

Investing in the ACS Methods Panel research program has counteracted downward pressures on response rates stemming from changes in civic engagement, public trust in government, and ACS funding. The steady decline in response rates to household surveys over the past few decades is well documented in the survey research literature (Atrostic et al., 2001; Tourangeau & Plewes, 2013; Czajka & Beyler, 2016).

The mandatory nature of the ACS helps maintain higher response rates than most surveys, but a decline in response rates over time is still evident.

Figure 26 shows the total housing unit response rate over time for the ACS.

Figure 26. ACS Housing Unit Response Rates by Year



Source: Response Rates | American Community Survey | U.S. Census Bureau
DRB Approval Number: CBDRB-FY25-ACSO003-B0023
Note: Data from 2000 through 2004 reflect testing years when the survey was not fully operational. Full implementation of the survey began in 2005. Operational disruptions led to lower response rates than a typical year in 2013, 2018, 2019, and 2020. Federal government shutdowns impacted the 2013, 2018, and 2019 response rates. The response rates in 2020 were affected by the effects of the pandemic.

The overarching motivation for most of the tests discussed in this report has been to improve self-response rates in the ACS. Improving self-response rates, especially early self-response, lowers costs for the ACS program by reducing the number of mail materials that must be printed and mailed. Higher self-response rates also have the potential to reduce the CAPI workload, which in turn can improve the variance of the estimates.

It has become increasingly difficult to improve, or at least maintain, ACS self-response rates as survey costs rise and respondents become more reluctant and less available to participate. This is evident in the ACS not only in response rates but also in changes over time to the self-response contact strategy.

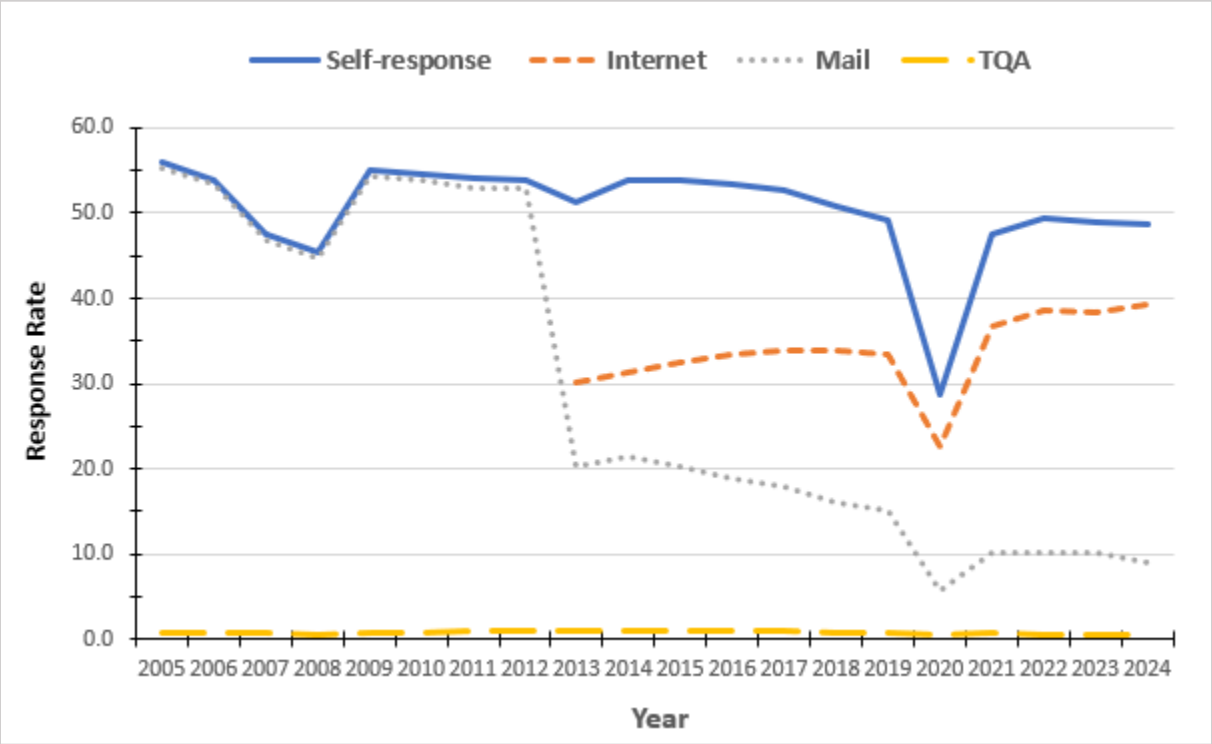
To combat declining self-response rates, the ACS program has:

- Increased the number of mailings sent to sampled households—from four in 2005 to six in 2025,
- Incorporated stronger messages in the materials (e.g., bold mandatory messages, due dates, stronger appeals to community use of the data and impacts, and more direct language about prompt and required response),
- Reduced distractions (fewer materials in the mailings), and
- Adopted alternate contact methods, such as email reminders.

Despite these changes to the contact strategy and messaging, self-response rates have continued to decline.

Figure 27 shows the self-response rate over time and by mode, before the start of CAPI.

Figure 27. ACS Self-Response Rates Before CAPI: Over Time and by Mode



Source: 2005 to 2024 American Community Survey Production Self-Response Rates
DRB Approval Number: CBDRB-FY25-ACSO003-B0023
Note: Operational disruptions led to lower response rates than a typical year in 2013, 2018, 2019, and 2020. Federal government shutdowns affected response rates in 2013, 2018, and 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic affected response rates in 2020.

In the past few years, it has also been challenging to detect the effect on response rates after experimental changes are put into production. We conjecture that the changes to the ACS methodology are combating and neutralizing an increasing downward trend in response rates.

A test may indicate an improvement is expected, but by the time the change is implemented, the impact is neutralized. Although experimental changes may seem to have no impact, without them, response rates might be even worse.

Over time, the messaging used in the mail materials has become stronger. However, the types of motivational messages have not changed much. This lack of change could reflect that the respondents' barriers to responding and motivations for responding have remained consistent. The more significant change appears to be that an increasing number of people are reluctant to participate in the survey. The stability of the messaging could also suggest that mandatory messages are the strongest motivator for response, while other messages may not have enough impact to detect changes. Alternatively, it could be that we have yet to find a way to identify effective messaging for respondents.

Despite these challenges, we have learned many lessons about messaging and self-response contact strategies for the ACS. Some of the lessons learned could likely have a positive impact on other surveys.

A summary of some key takeaways from the past twenty years of ACS research includes:

- Use as few materials in the mailings as possible. Adding materials for specific subpopulations, such as non-English speakers, should be done sparingly and only for the target population, if possible.
- Reduce the number of messages communicated. Choose a maximum of three key messages to emphasize, preferably in bold font, in every mailing.
- Write and design the materials using plain language guidelines. A good starting point is the Plain Language Guide developed to help federal employees comply with the Plain Writing Act of 2010.
- Make a strong connection to the Census Bureau brand because it is widely known and recognized.
- Maintain a governmental look and feel; it is expected for government surveys.
- Emphasize the mandatory messaging. It is a strong motivator for response, even if people say they don't like it.[16]
- Create a strategic plan for messaging that includes a thorough review of research-based results from a variety of disciplines.
- Conduct cognitive testing to confirm understanding and interpretation of messages, but be cautious about drawing conclusions about the impact of messages on response rates from this type of testing.
- Conduct a holistic review of messages periodically and continue testing as much as possible.

[16] The Paperwork Reduction Act requires any federal information collection, such as a survey, to include a statement informing respondents whether they are required to respond.

- Communicate with Census Bureau interviewers to continuously and consistently update materials to meet emerging needs they observe while working with respondents.

As we move forward, some opportunities and risks need to be considered. When evaluating the use of newer technologies for a government survey, we face more constraints than a private survey would. In many corporate spaces, being on the leading edge of technology is an advantage, but in the survey world, and especially in the government, we have waited for stabilization. The public does not expect the government to use cutting-edge technology and may not treat the use as legitimate. Additionally, supporting a diversity of modes and technology requires additional development, testing, and support time, which often leads to a cost-benefit analysis conclusion that does not support expanded technology. This reticence to adapt, however, can also leave government surveys behind in their ability to adjust methodology or to have the technical skills on staff to do so. Balancing the leading edge of technology with the needs of those who have chosen not to adapt or cannot afford to do so will remain a challenge in addressing the digital divide.

Potential areas for future exploration include:

- Focusing more on communicating data security. Access to online surveys must strike a balance between ease of access and security (barriers).
- Diminishing the use of more expensive modes of data collection, especially as response rates continually decrease. A centralized outbound telephone operation was already removed from the ACS. We expect the use of paper questionnaires to continue declining, prompting efforts to reduce the number of people who receive them.
- Monitoring the way people interact with the United States Postal Service (USPS) and change their behaviors around traditional mail use, such as the frequency of retrieving mail.
- Researching underlying barriers and motivations to survey response.
- Considering the potential for more customization by geography or personalization. The size of the ACS target population makes this challenging, but technological advancements could make it possible.
- Optimizing the survey for mobile devices and a “digital first” approach.
- Considering the use of different contact modes and other motivation factors (such as gamification).
- Exploring responsive contact strategies.
- Exploring how artificial intelligence can be used, such as providing help to respondents.
- Developing smaller research studies with faster turnaround times.
- Developing a messaging and communication strategy that strongly considers issues of literacy, numeracy, and the digital divide in the adult population.

Ultimately, the goal of the ACS research program is to continuously adapt contact strategies and messaging to an increasingly reluctant and diverse population while maintaining data

quality and response rates, ensuring the ACS remains the premier source of detailed information about people and housing in the United States. Any strategy used will be under pressure to cut operational costs, leading to further trade-offs in managing costs while maintaining or even improving data quality.

For these reasons, it is essential to continue to maintain a robust ACS research program. The Census Bureau's investments in research, the ACS Methods Panel research program, and emerging technologies will help the ACS program continue to find new efficiencies, increase access and utility, and meet high expectations for a modern information system.

The ACS program must remain adaptable to a host of changes—public perceptions of government, survey response rates, available technology, changing data needs, etc. The program must continuously balance the need to work within a set budget with the need to maintain high-quality data to provide the best up-to-date information about our nation's people and economy.

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Appendix A. ACS Research Done in Collaboration with Others in Government Agencies, Commercial Entities, and Academia

From its inception as a test pilot program to the present, the Census Bureau has consistently sought advice and collaborated with experts in academia, government, and the commercial industry to continually improve all aspects of producing ACS statistics. This appendix provides documentation for the results of these collaborative efforts. Many of the recommendations that resulted from the work detailed in this appendix informed the research cited in the body of this report.

The Census Bureau periodically holds workshops with members of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) to seek advice on how to improve the ACS. NAS is a prestigious, congressionally chartered organization of scientists and engineers. The National Research Council (NRC) is the operating arm of the NAS, along with the National Academy of Engineering (NAE) and the National Academy of Medicine (NAM). The NRC carries out most of the studies and research for these organizations. The Committee on National Statistics (CNSTAT) is a specific committee within the NRC focused on improving statistical methods and information for policy decisions. Summaries of several of these consultations are provided below. Additionally, we summarize consultations and contract work with academic and commercial vendors. The collaborations are presented in chronological order.

1998: The American Community Survey: Summary of a Workshop (NRC Workshop)

When the American Community Survey (ACS) was in its development stage, it was decided that the survey would be a continuous, large-scale (250,000 housing units per month), predominantly mailout/mailback survey that would collect information similar to that on the decennial census long form. The development of the ACS raised interesting questions about methods for combining information from surveys and administrative records, weighting to address nonresponse and undercoverage, estimation for small areas, sample design, and calibration of the output from this survey with that from the long form. To assist the Census Bureau in developing a research agenda to address these and other methodological issues, the Committee on National Statistics held a workshop on September 13, 1998. The report summarizes the discussion and recommendations that resulted from the workshop (National Research Council, 2001).

For more information about this workshop, see:

National Research Council. (2001). *The American Community Survey: Summary of a Workshop*

2007: Using the American Community Survey: Benefits and Challenges (NRC Workshop)

After the ACS was in production for two years, the National Research Council met again to discuss priority areas for continued research and development by the Census Bureau to guide the evolution of the ACS and provide detailed, comprehensive analysis and guidance for users in federal, state, and local government agencies, academia, and media.

The workshop topics included the basics of how the ACS design and operations differed from the decennial census long-form sample; using the ACS for such applications as formula allocation of federal and state funds, transportation planning, and public information; and challenges in working with ACS estimates that cover periods of 12, 36, or 60 months, depending on the population size of an area. The report summarizes the discussion and recommendations that resulted from the workshop (National Research Council, 2007).

For more information about this workshop, see:

National Research Council. (2007). *Using the American Community Survey: Benefits and Challenges*

2010: Measuring the Group Quarters Population in the American Community Survey (NRC Workshop)

The ACS was launched in 2005 as a replacement for the long form of the decennial census. During the first year of the implementation, the Census Bureau collected ACS data only from households. In 2006, a sample of group quarters (GQs)—such as correctional facilities, nursing homes, and college dorms—was added to the ACS to more closely mirror the design of the census long-form sample.

The Census Bureau asked the National Research Council to review and evaluate the statistical methods used for measuring the GQ population. The NRC submitted two reports with recommendations. The Interim Report presents recommendations to improve the sample design, sample allocation, weighting, and estimation procedures to assist the Census Bureau's work in the very near term. The final report expanded on the recommendations in the interim report and addressed this by adding additional recommendations to improve Group Quarters data collection.

For more information about this workshop, see:

Interim Report: National Research Council. (2010). *Measuring the Group Quarters Population in the American Community Survey: Interim Report*

Final Report: National Research Council. (2012). *Small Populations, Large Effects: Improving the Measurement of the Group Quarters Population in the American Community Survey. Panel on Statistical Methods for Measuring the Group Quarters Population in the American Community Survey*

2012: Benefits, Burdens, and Prospects of the American Community Survey: Summary of a Workshop (NAS Workshop)

In June 2012, the Committee on National Statistics (sponsored by the Census Bureau) convened a Workshop focused on the Benefits (and Burdens) of the ACS. Numerous federal agencies use ACS data to administer programs. Yet, the ACS only moved from abstraction to reality for most users in 2010, when the first ACS estimates for small areas (based on 5 years of collected data) were made available. Hence, the workshop marked the opportunity to develop a picture of the breadth of the nonfederal user base of the ACS—among them, the media, policy research and evaluation groups (that distill ACS results for the media and broader public), state and local agencies, businesses and economic development organizations, and local and regional planning authorities—and to gather information on users' experiences with the first full releases of ACS products.

In addition to covering innovative uses of the information available continuously in the ACS, the workshop gave expression to the challenges and burdens associated with the survey: the time burden placed on respondents, the challenges of explaining and interpreting estimates with increased levels of variability, and the privacy and confidentiality implications of some of the ACS content. Benefits, Burdens, and Prospects of the American Community Survey: Summary of a Workshop provides a factual summary of the workshop proceedings and hints at the contours of the ACS user constituency, providing critical input to the ongoing review and refinement of the ACS program (National Research Council, 2013).

For more information about this workshop, see:

National Research Council. (2013). Benefits, Burdens, and Prospects of the American Community Survey: Summary of a Workshop

2013 – 2014: American Community Survey Messaging and Mail Package Assessment Research (Reingold, Inc. Research)

Between October 2013 and November 2014, Reingold, Inc. supported the Census Bureau in conducting a series of related research studies to improve the design of the American Community Survey (ACS) mail package and messaging for potential ACS respondents. The goals of this research were:

- To develop and test messages and mail package designs to increase ACS self-response rates, thereby decreasing the expense of costly follow-up outreach to non-responders.
- To obtain insights to support general outreach, data dissemination, materials development, and call center and field operations.

In support of these goals, Team Reingold conducted seven iterative, mutually supportive qualitative and quantitative research studies designed to triangulate attitudes and messages about the ACS and identify effective mail package designs:

1. Mental Models Research: Interviews with individuals who work closely with ACS stakeholders (Respondents and Data Users) (Kovacs et al., 2014)
2. Deliberative Focus Groups: Deliberative focus groups with stakeholders who are distrustful of the government (Orrison & Ney, 2014)
3. Key Informant Interviews: Insights from leaders who use data professionally or work for organizations that conduct outreach to low-income, minority, or immigrant populations. (Hagedorn, Green, et al., 2014b)
4. Benchmark Survey: Comprehensive message testing (Hagedorn, Green, et al., 2014a)
5. Refinement Survey: Comprehensive message testing (Hagedorn & Green, 2014)
6. Mail package focus groups and one-on-one interviews: Key considerations for ACS mail package testing and recommends two alternate mail package designs for field-testing. A report on these findings was not produced but is summarized in the Cumulative Findings Report.
7. Online visual testing of alternative mail package designs (Hagedorn, Panek, et al., 2014)

In July 2014, the Census Bureau engaged expert mail survey researcher Dr. Don Dillman to review Team Reingold's proposed alternative mail package designs before the final round of testing (Dillman, 2014). Additionally, in July 2014, Team Reingold provided draft designs to members of the Census Bureau's National Advisory Committee and Census Scientific Advisory Committee. The resulting feedback was factored into the recommendation made in the final cumulative findings report.

The research findings were intended to guide effective messaging and designs to encourage participation in the ACS. Many of the recommendations have been field-tested and subsequently implemented in ACS production.

For a summary of this research, see:

Cumulative Findings Report (Decision Partners, Penn Shoen Berland, & Reingold, Inc., 2014)

2015: Realizing the Potential of the American Community Survey: Challenges, Tradeoffs, and Opportunities (NAS Workshop)

The ACS became an invaluable resource for many stakeholders, particularly for meeting national and state-level data needs. However, there were significant challenges for the survey in producing reliable estimates for smaller geographic areas, which was a concern given the unique role of the decennial census long form, and subsequently the ACS, in providing data with a geographic granularity that no other federal survey could match. In addition to addressing the primary challenge associated with the reliability of the estimates, this workshop held discussions to assess different aspects of the survey to identify opportunities for refinement based on the experience of the first few years (National Research Council, 2015).

For more information about this workshop, see:

National Research Council. (2015). *Realizing the Potential of the American Community Survey: Challenges, Tradeoffs, and Opportunities*

2016: Reducing Response Burden in the American Community Survey (NAS Workshop)

This public workshop addressed concerns raised by the public and Congress regarding the actual and perceived burden of the continuous ACS, which replaced the previous decennial census long-form sample. The workshop considered the burden from the questionnaire, as well as communication and follow-up procedures with respondents. The workshop also addressed approaches that promise to reduce burden, some of which may also improve accuracy and/or reduce costs. Four main areas of investigation were explored: Building respondent support through communication and education (including respondent materials), using administrative records to eliminate questions, using matrix sampling and other statistical methods, and changing the group quarters data collection strategy (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016).

For more information about this workshop, see:

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2016). *Reducing Response Burden in the American Community Survey: Proceedings of a Workshop*

2016: Expert Review of ACS Messaging and Mail Materials (Meetings with Dr. Don Dillman)

In July 2016, the Census Bureau held a series of meetings with Dr. Don Dillman. Dr. Dillman was the Regents Professor of the Department of Sociology and Deputy Director for Social and Economic Sciences Research (SESRC) at Washington State University. He was a leader in survey research methodology and made significant contributions throughout his career.

During a series of meetings at the Census Bureau, Dr. Dillman walked through all the ACS materials and provided a detailed critique of their content and messaging. He offered many suggestions for improvements, but the three key takeaways were that the ACS program should:

- Place greater emphasis on the benefits to respondents.
- Make the messaging between mailings more distinct, but mutually supportive.
- Attach the response request to the Census Bureau, since it is more widely known than the American Community Survey.

Dr. Dillman's suggestions, along with lessons learned from past ACS mail messaging tests, were incorporated into the design of the mail materials for the 2017 American Community Survey Mail Design Test.

2019: Improving the American Community Survey (NAS Workshop)

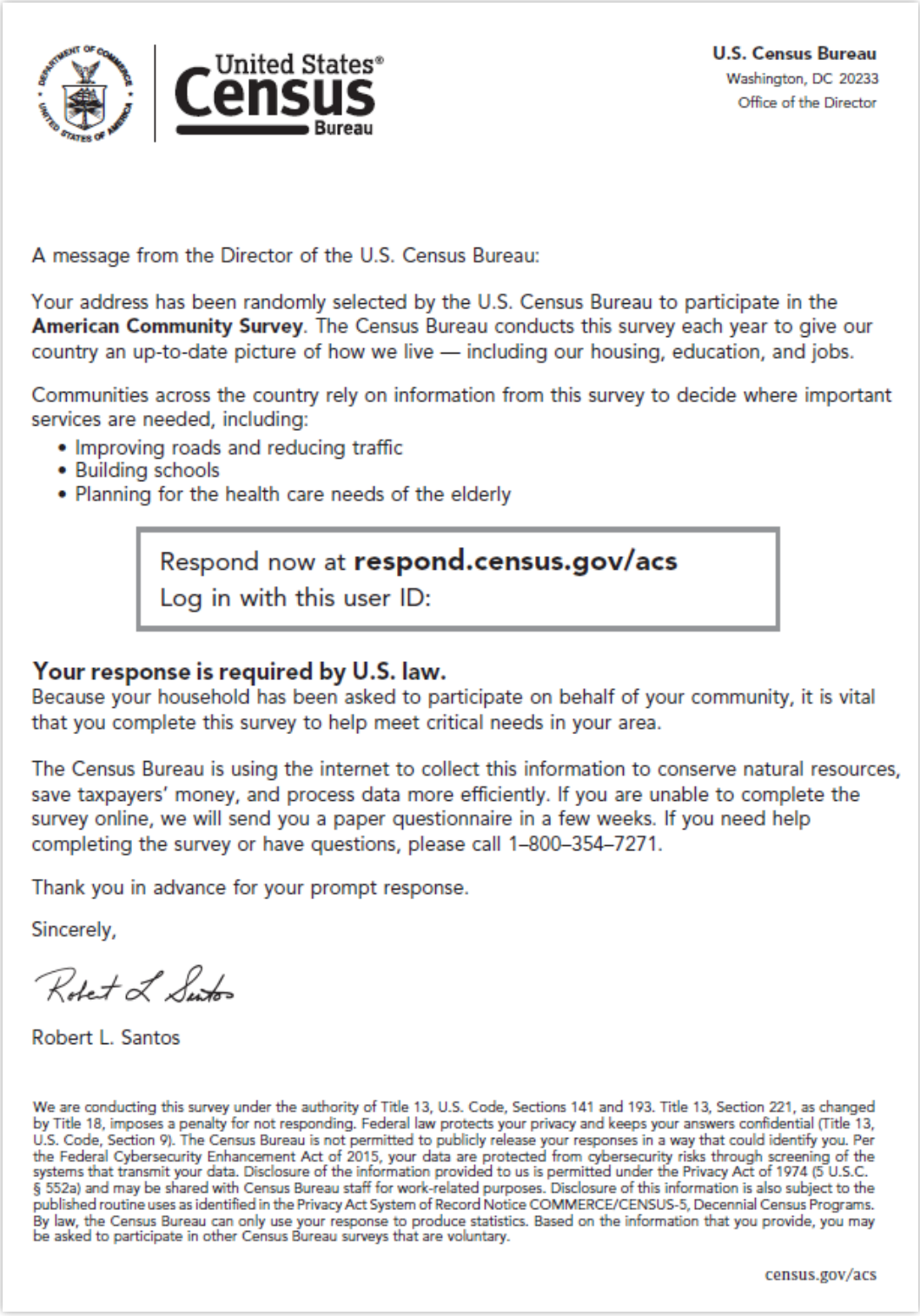
The ACS reached critical milestones beginning with full-scale operations in 2005, including comprehensive nationwide coverage, and, 5 years later, the ACS replaced the long-form sample questionnaire in the 2010 Census as a critical source of detailed demographic and socioeconomic information. This workshop focused on a variety of improvements, including exploring the use of administrative records and third-party data to enhance ACS operations, as well as potential ways to boost respondent participation through improved communication (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019).

For more information about this workshop, see:

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2019). *Improving the American Community Survey: Proceedings of a Workshop*

Appendix B. 2024 and 2025 ACS Self-Response Contact Strategy Materials

Figure 28. 2024 and 2025 ACS: First Mailing: Bifold Pressure Seal Letter (Inside)



United States® Census Bureau

U.S. Census Bureau
Washington, DC 20233
Office of the Director

A message from the Director of the U.S. Census Bureau:

Your address has been randomly selected by the U.S. Census Bureau to participate in the **American Community Survey**. The Census Bureau conducts this survey each year to give our country an up-to-date picture of how we live — including our housing, education, and jobs.

Communities across the country rely on information from this survey to decide where important services are needed, including:

- Improving roads and reducing traffic
- Building schools
- Planning for the health care needs of the elderly

Respond now at **respond.census.gov/acs**
Log in with this user ID:

Your response is required by U.S. law.
Because your household has been asked to participate on behalf of your community, it is vital that you complete this survey to help meet critical needs in your area.

The Census Bureau is using the internet to collect this information to conserve natural resources, save taxpayers' money, and process data more efficiently. If you are unable to complete the survey online, we will send you a paper questionnaire in a few weeks. If you need help completing the survey or have questions, please call 1–800–354–7271.

Thank you in advance for your prompt response.

Sincerely,

Robert L. Santos

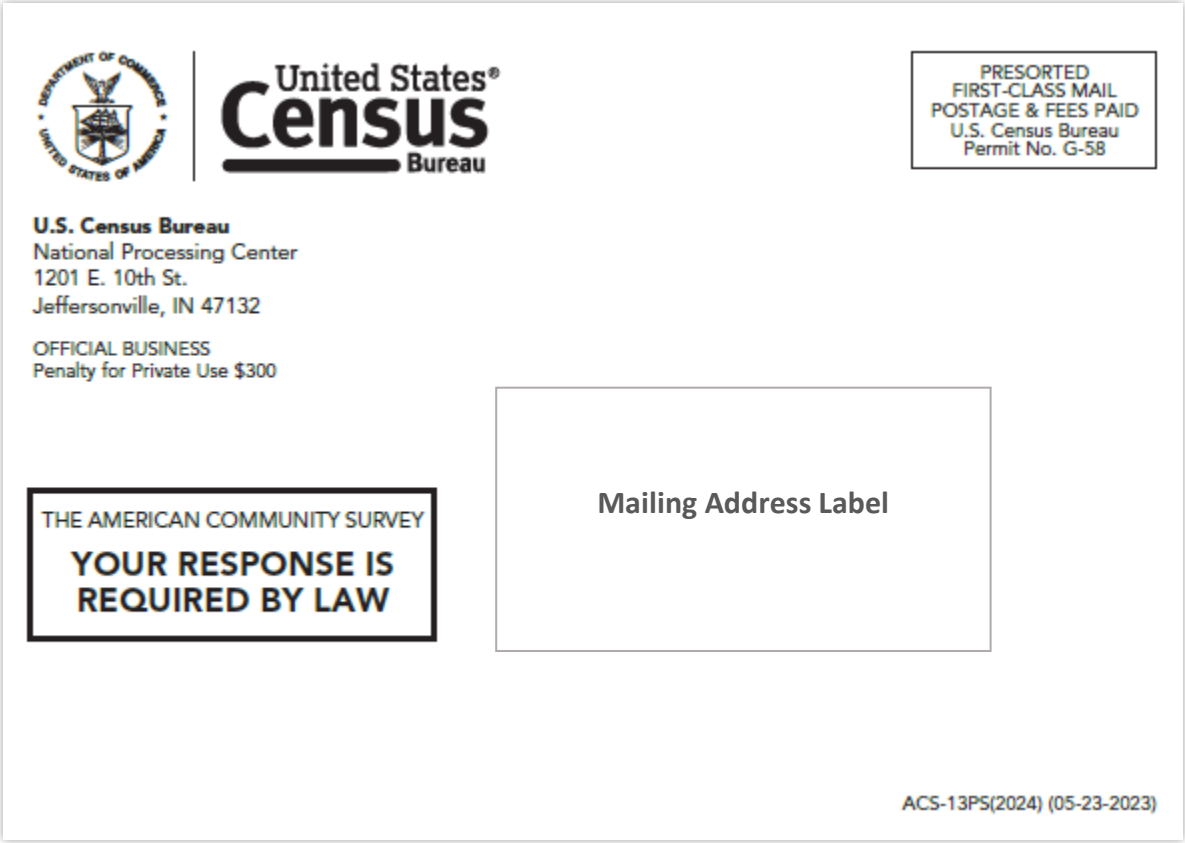
Robert L. Santos

We are conducting this survey under the authority of Title 13, U.S. Code, Sections 141 and 193. Title 13, Section 221, as changed by Title 18, imposes a penalty for not responding. Federal law protects your privacy and keeps your answers confidential (Title 13, U.S. Code, Section 9). The Census Bureau is not permitted to publicly release your responses in a way that could identify you. Per the Federal Cybersecurity Enhancement Act of 2015, your data are protected from cybersecurity risks through screening of the systems that transmit your data. Disclosure of the information provided to us is permitted under the Privacy Act of 1974 (5 U.S.C. § 552a) and may be shared with Census Bureau staff for work-related purposes. Disclosure of this information is also subject to the published routine uses as identified in the Privacy Act System of Record Notice COMMERCE/CENSUS-5, Decennial Census Programs. By law, the Census Bureau can only use your response to produce statistics. Based on the information that you provide, you may be asked to participate in other Census Bureau surveys that are voluntary.

census.gov/acs

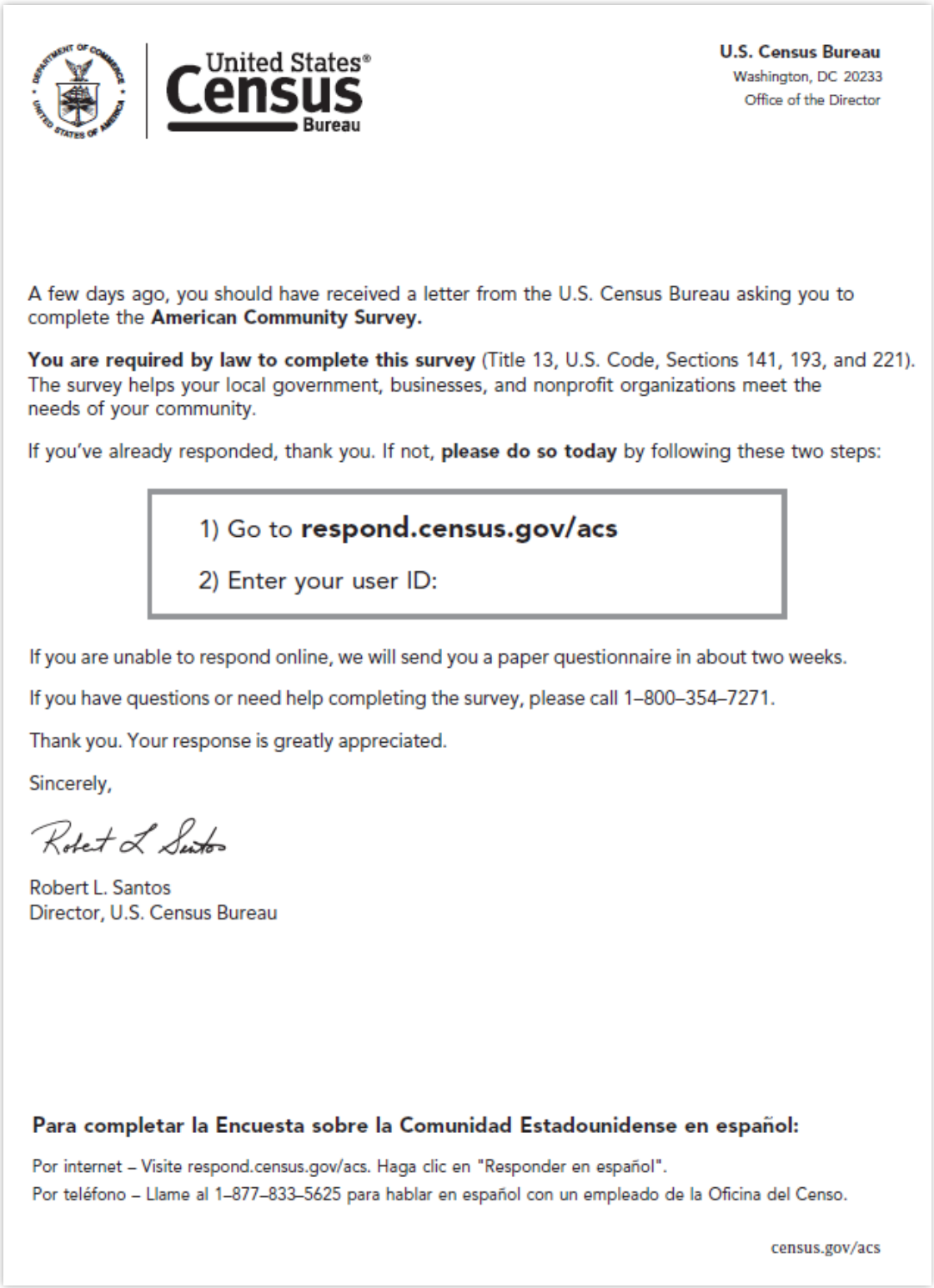
Note: The user ID is printed on the letter and is unique to each address.

Figure 29. 2024 and 2025 ACS: First and Second Mailings: Bifold Pressure Seal Letters (Outside)



NOTE: The only difference between the outside of the first and second mailings is the form number. The form number for the second mailing is ACS-20PS(2024) (05-23-2023).

Figure 30. 2024 and 2025 ACS: Second Mailing—Bifold Pressure Seal Letter (Inside)



United States® Census Bureau

U.S. Census Bureau
Washington, DC 20233
Office of the Director

A few days ago, you should have received a letter from the U.S. Census Bureau asking you to complete the **American Community Survey.**

You are required by law to complete this survey (Title 13, U.S. Code, Sections 141, 193, and 221). The survey helps your local government, businesses, and nonprofit organizations meet the needs of your community.

If you've already responded, thank you. If not, **please do so today** by following these two steps:

1) Go to **respond.census.gov/acs**

2) Enter your user ID:

If you are unable to respond online, we will send you a paper questionnaire in about two weeks.

If you have questions or need help completing the survey, please call 1–800–354–7271.

Thank you. Your response is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Robert L. Santos
Director, U.S. Census Bureau

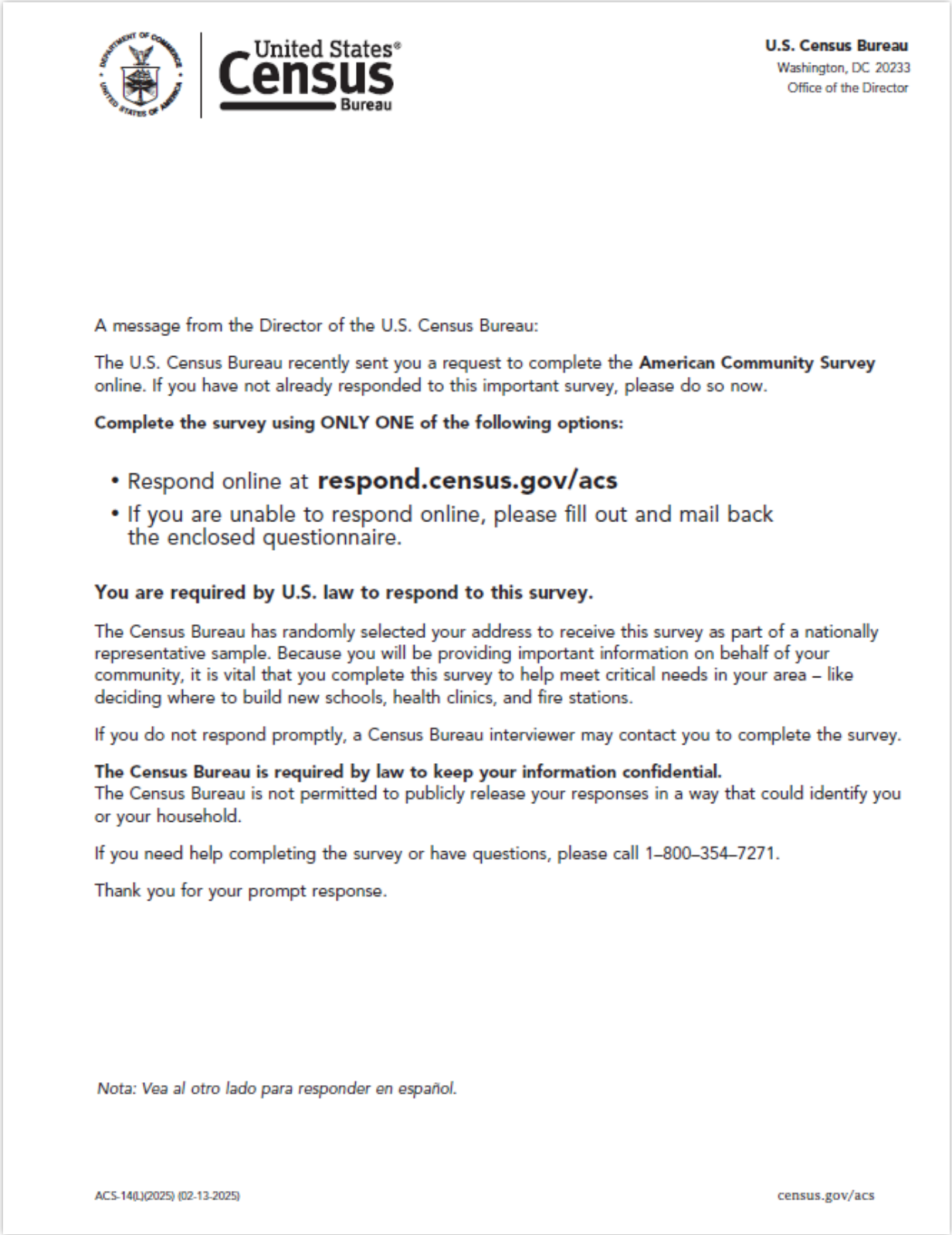
Para completar la Encuesta sobre la Comunidad Estadounidense en español:

Por internet – Visite respond.census.gov/acs. Haga clic en "Responder en español".
Por teléfono – Llame al 1–877–833–5625 para hablar en español con un empleado de la Oficina del Censo.

census.gov/acs

Note: The user ID is printed on the letter and is unique to each address.

Figure 31. 2024 and 2025 ACS: Third Mailing—Letter (Front)



United States® Census Bureau

U.S. Census Bureau
Washington, DC 20233
Office of the Director

A message from the Director of the U.S. Census Bureau:

The U.S. Census Bureau recently sent you a request to complete the **American Community Survey** online. If you have not already responded to this important survey, please do so now.

Complete the survey using ONLY ONE of the following options:

- Respond online at **respond.census.gov/acs**
- If you are unable to respond online, please fill out and mail back the enclosed questionnaire.

You are required by U.S. law to respond to this survey.

The Census Bureau has randomly selected your address to receive this survey as part of a nationally representative sample. Because you will be providing important information on behalf of your community, it is vital that you complete this survey to help meet critical needs in your area – like deciding where to build new schools, health clinics, and fire stations.

If you do not respond promptly, a Census Bureau interviewer may contact you to complete the survey.

The Census Bureau is required by law to keep your information confidential.
The Census Bureau is not permitted to publicly release your responses in a way that could identify you or your household.

If you need help completing the survey or have questions, please call 1–800–354–7271.

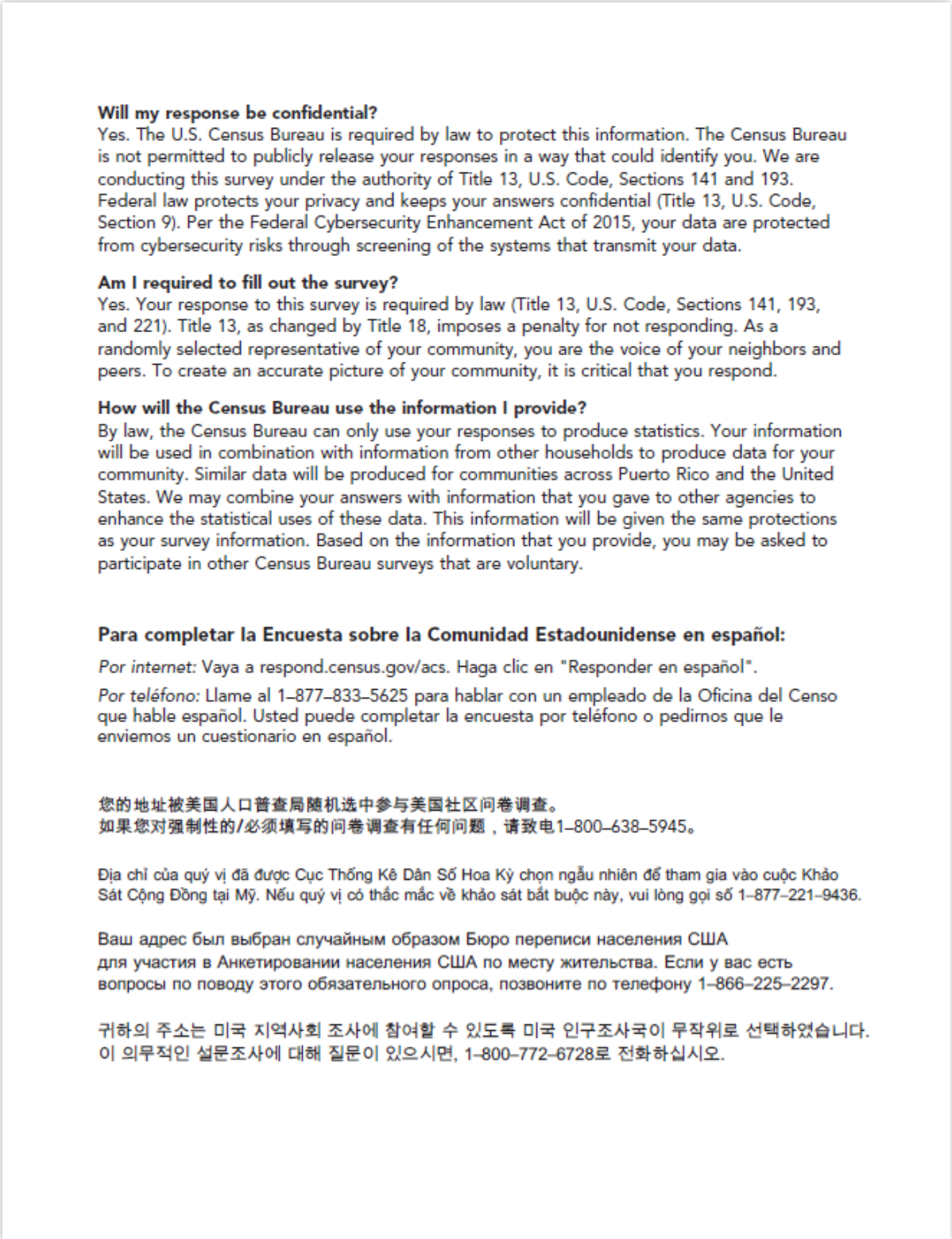
Thank you for your prompt response.

Nota: Vea al otro lado para responder en español.

ACS-14(L)(2025) (02-13-2025)

census.gov/acs

Figure 32. 2024 and 2025 ACS: Third Mailing—Letter (Back)



Will my response be confidential?
Yes. The U.S. Census Bureau is required by law to protect this information. The Census Bureau is not permitted to publicly release your responses in a way that could identify you. We are conducting this survey under the authority of Title 13, U.S. Code, Sections 141 and 193. Federal law protects your privacy and keeps your answers confidential (Title 13, U.S. Code, Section 9). Per the Federal Cybersecurity Enhancement Act of 2015, your data are protected from cybersecurity risks through screening of the systems that transmit your data.

Am I required to fill out the survey?
Yes. Your response to this survey is required by law (Title 13, U.S. Code, Sections 141, 193, and 221). Title 13, as changed by Title 18, imposes a penalty for not responding. As a randomly selected representative of your community, you are the voice of your neighbors and peers. To create an accurate picture of your community, it is critical that you respond.

How will the Census Bureau use the information I provide?
By law, the Census Bureau can only use your responses to produce statistics. Your information will be used in combination with information from other households to produce data for your community. Similar data will be produced for communities across Puerto Rico and the United States. We may combine your answers with information that you gave to other agencies to enhance the statistical uses of these data. This information will be given the same protections as your survey information. Based on the information that you provide, you may be asked to participate in other Census Bureau surveys that are voluntary.

Para completar la Encuesta sobre la Comunidad Estadounidense en español:

Por internet: Vaya a respond.census.gov/acs. Haga clic en "Responder en español".

Por teléfono: Llame al 1–877–833–5625 para hablar con un empleado de la Oficina del Censo que hable español. Usted puede completar la encuesta por teléfono o pedirnos que le enviemos un cuestionario en español.

您的地址被美国人口普查局随机选中参与美国社区问卷调查。
如果您对强制性的/必须填写的问卷调查有任何问题，请致电1–800–638–5945。

Địa chỉ của quý vị đã được Cục Thống Kê Dân Số Hoa Kỳ chọn ngẫu nhiên để tham gia vào cuộc Khảo Sát Cộng Đồng tại Mỹ. Nếu quý vị có thắc mắc về khảo sát bắt buộc này, vui lòng gọi số 1–877–221–9436.

Ваш адрес был выбран случайным образом Бюро переписи населения США для участия в Анкетировании населения США по месту жительства. Если у вас есть вопросы по поводу этого обязательного опроса, позвоните по телефону 1–866–225–2297.

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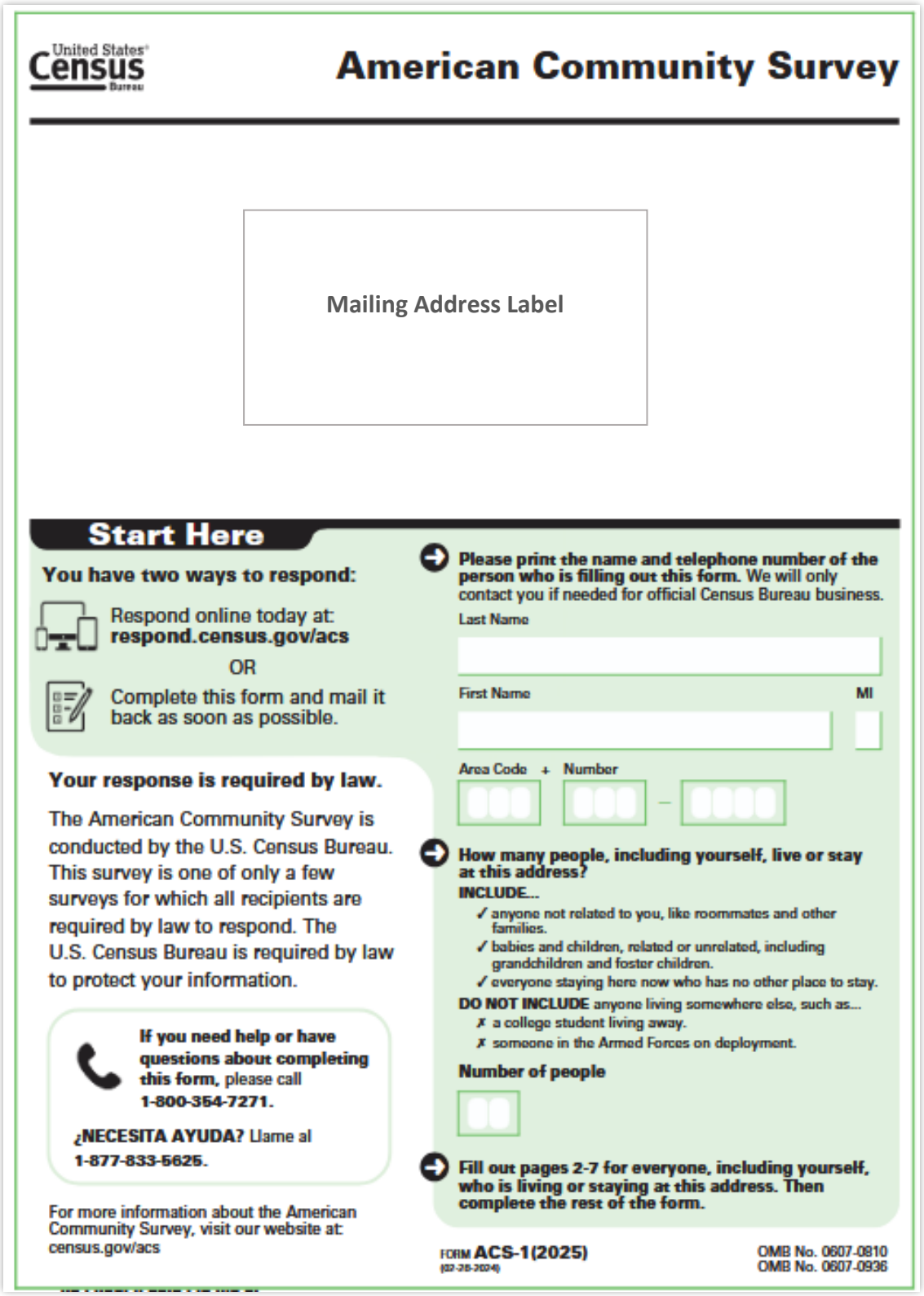
Figure 33. 2024 and 2025 ACS: Third Mailing—Front Page of the Paper Questionnaire



United States Census Bureau

American Community Survey

Mailing Address Label

Start Here

You have two ways to respond:

Respond online today at:
respond.census.gov/acs

OR

Complete this form and mail it back as soon as possible.

Your response is required by law.

The American Community Survey is conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. This survey is one of only a few surveys for which all recipients are required by law to respond. The U.S. Census Bureau is required by law to protect your information.

If you need help or have questions about completing this form, please call **1-800-354-7271.**

¿NECESITA AYUDA? Llame al **1-877-833-5625.**

For more information about the American Community Survey, visit our website at: census.gov/acs

Please print the name and telephone number of the person who is filling out this form. We will only contact you if needed for official Census Bureau business.

Last Name

First Name MI

Area Code + Number

How many people, including yourself, live or stay at this address?

INCLUDE...

- ✓ anyone not related to you, like roommates and other families.
- ✓ babies and children, related or unrelated, including grandchildren and foster children.
- ✓ everyone staying here now who has no other place to stay.

DO NOT INCLUDE anyone living somewhere else, such as...

- ✗ a college student living away.
- ✗ someone in the Armed Forces on deployment.

Number of people

Fill out pages 2-7 for everyone, including yourself, who is living or staying at this address. Then complete the rest of the form.

FORM **ACS-1(2025)** (02-26-2024)

OMB No. 0607-0810
OMB No. 0607-0936

Figure 34. 2024 and 2025 ACS: Third Mailing—Envelope (Front)

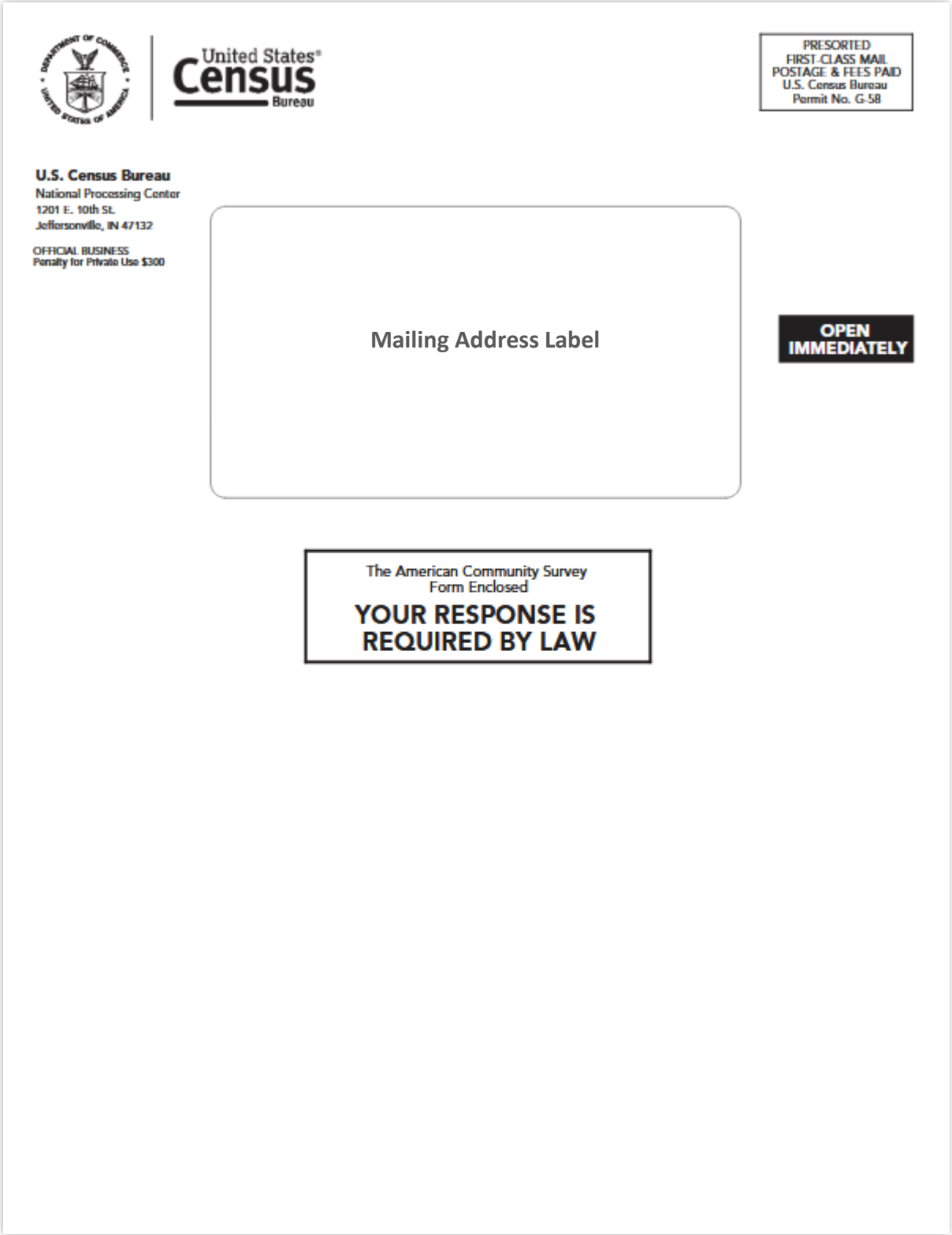
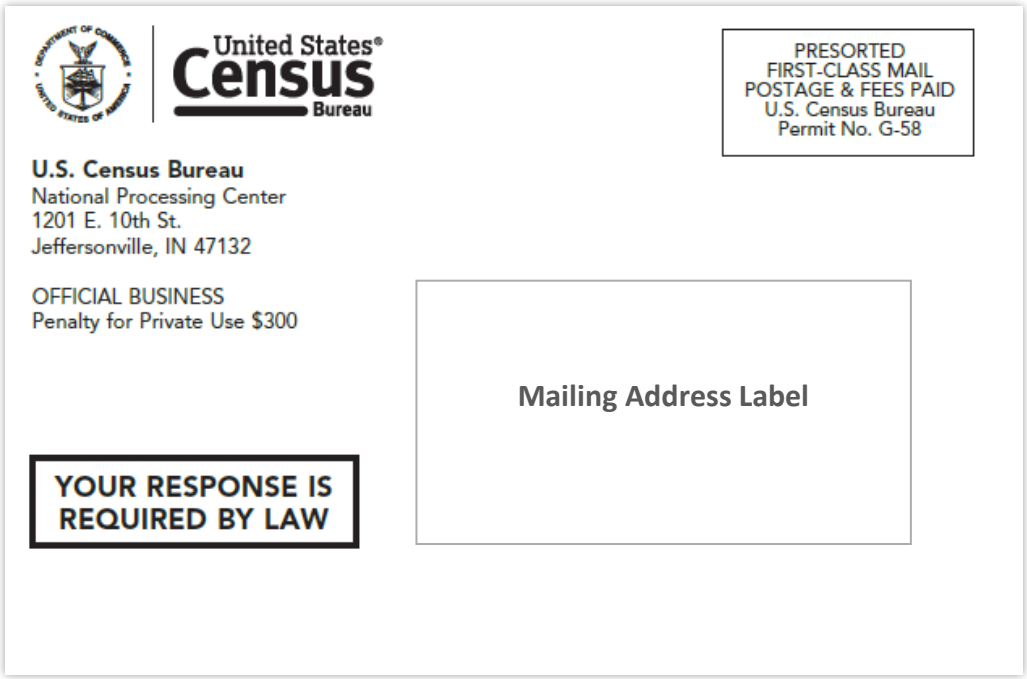


Figure 35. 2024 and 2025 ACS: Third Mailing—Envelope (Back)

Figure 36. 2024 and 2025 ACS: Fourth Mailing—Postcard



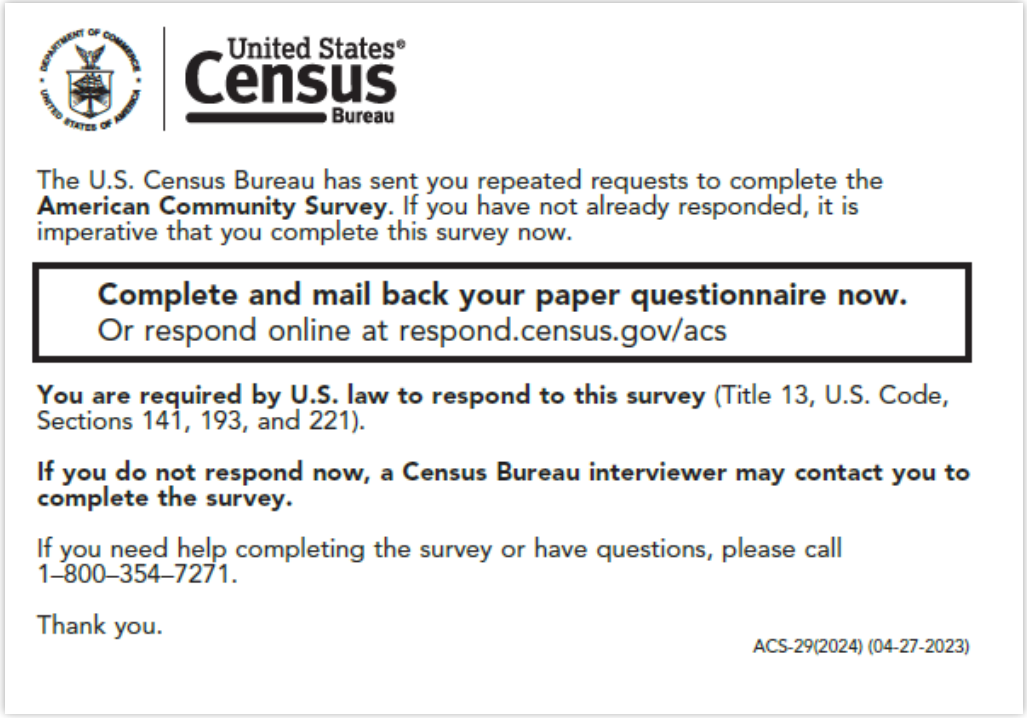
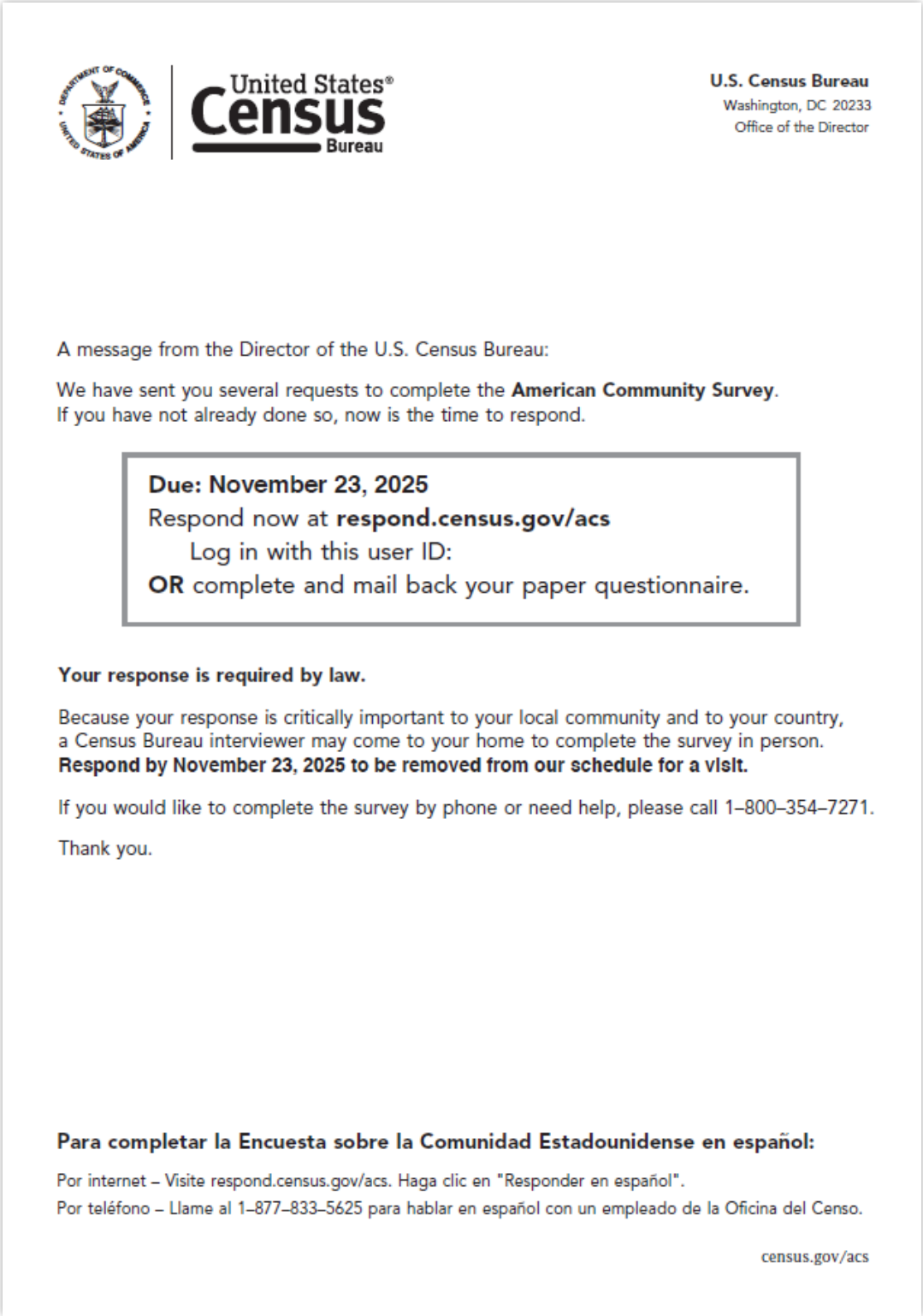


Figure 37. 2024 and 2025 ACS: Fifth Mailing—Bifold Pressure Seal Letter (Inside)



United States® Census Bureau

U.S. Census Bureau
Washington, DC 20233
Office of the Director

A message from the Director of the U.S. Census Bureau:

We have sent you several requests to complete the **American Community Survey**.
If you have not already done so, now is the time to respond.

Due: November 23, 2025
Respond now at **respond.census.gov/acs**
Log in with this user ID:
OR complete and mail back your paper questionnaire.

Your response is required by law.

Because your response is critically important to your local community and to your country, a Census Bureau interviewer may come to your home to complete the survey in person. **Respond by November 23, 2025 to be removed from our schedule for a visit.**

If you would like to complete the survey by phone or need help, please call 1–800–354–7271.

Thank you.

Para completar la Encuesta sobre la Comunidad Estadounidense en español:

Por internet – Visite respond.census.gov/acs. Haga clic en "Responder en español".
Por teléfono – Llame al 1–877–833–5625 para hablar en español con un empleado de la Oficina del Censo.

census.gov/acs

Note: The date shown in the image above is fictitious and used only as an example. During printing, the User ID is printed along with the due date.

Appendix C. Research on the ACS Internet Response Instrument

Below is a list of research papers documenting results from cognitive and field testing of the ACS internet response instrument. The research is listed in chronological order of testing, from oldest to most recent, rather than alphabetically by primary author.

Research Before the ACS Internet Response Instrument Implementation

Griffin, D., Fischer, D., & Morgan, M. (2001). "Testing an Internet Response Option for the American Community Survey." U.S. Census Bureau. https://www.census.gov/library/working-papers/2001/acs/2001_Griffin_01.html

Ashenfelter, K., Holland, T., Quach, V., Nichols, E., & Lakhe, S. (2011a). "ACS Internet 2011 Project: Report for Rounds 1 and 2 of ACS Wireframe Usability Testing and Round 1 of ACS Internet Experiment Mailing Materials Cognitive Testing." U.S. Census Bureau. https://www.census.gov/library/working-papers/2011/adrm/ssm2012-01.html

Ashenfelter, K., Holland, T., Quach, V., Nichols, E., & Lakhe, S. (2011b). "Report for Round 3 of Usability Testing of the 2011 American Community Survey Online Instrument: Focus on Login and Roster Features." U.S. Census Bureau. https://www.census.gov/library/working-papers/2012/adrm/ssm2012-10.html

Ashenfelter, K., Holland, T., Quach, V., Nichols, E., & Lakhe, S. (2013). "Final Report for the Usability Evaluation of ACS 2011 Online Instrument Rounds 4a and 4b." U.S. Census Bureau. https://www.census.gov/library/working-papers/2013/adrm/ssm2013-04.html

Leeman, J., Fond, M., & Ashenfelter, K. (2012). "Cognitive and Usability Pretesting of the Online Version of the Puerto Rico Community Survey in Spanish and English." U.S. Census Bureau. https://www.census.gov/library/working-papers/2012/adrm/ssm2012-09.html

Tancreto, J., Davis, M., & Zelenak, M. (2012). "Design of the American Community Survey Internet Instrument." U.S. Census Bureau. https://www.census.gov/library/working-papers/2012/acs/2012_Tancreto_02.html

Tancreto, J., Zelenak, M., Davis, M., Ruiter, M., & Matthews, B. (2012). "2011 American Community Survey Internet Tests: Results from First Test in April 2011." U.S. Census Bureau. https://www.census.gov/library/working-papers/2012/acs/2012_Tancreto_01.html

Matthews, B., Davis, M., Tancreto, J., Zelenak, M., & Ruiter, M. (2012). "2011 American Community Survey Internet Tests: Results from Second Test in November 2011." U.S. Census Bureau. https://www.census.gov/library/working-papers/2012/acs/2012_Matthews_01.html

Nichols, E. (2012). "The April 2011 American Community Survey Internet Test: Attitudes and Behavior Study Follow-up." U.S. Census Bureau. https://www.census.gov/library/working-papers/2012/acs/2012_Nichols_01.html

Horwitz, R., Tancreto, J., & Zelenak, M. (2012). "Data Quality Assessment of the American Community Survey Internet Response Data." U.S. Census Bureau. https://www.census.gov/library/working-papers/2012/acs/2012_Horwitz_02.html

Horwitz, R., Tancreto, J., Zelenak, M., & Davis, M. (2013). "Use of Paradata to Assess the Quality and Functionality of the American Community Survey Internet Instrument." https://www.census.gov/library/working-papers/2013/acs/2013_Horwitz_01.html

Horwitz, R., Tancreto, J., Zelenak, M., & Davis, M. (2013). "Using Paradata to Identify Potential Issues and Trends in the American Community Survey Internet Instrument." U.S. Census Bureau. https://www.census.gov/library/working-papers/2013/acs/2013_Horwitz_02.html

Research on the Internet Instrument and Internet Response After Implementation

Baumgardner, S, Griffin, D, & Raglin, D. (2014). "The Effects of Adding an Internet Response Option to the American Community Survey." U.S. Census Bureau. https://www.census.gov/library/working-papers/2014/acs/2014_Baumgardner_04.html

Olmsted-Hawala, E., Nichols, E., Holland, T., & Gareau, M. (2016). "Usability Testing of the ACS on Smartphones and Tablets – Phase 1: Before Optimization." U.S. Census Bureau. https://www.census.gov/library/working-papers/2016/acs/2016_Olmsted_01.html

Sawyer, R. (2017). "Evaluation of Changes Implemented in the 2016 ACS Internet Instrument." U.S. Census Bureau. https://www.census.gov/library/working-papers/2017/acs/2017_Sawyer_01.html

Lenox, M. & Tracy, B. (2019). "2019 American Community Survey Online Instrument Usability Assessment." The MITRE Corporation presented the assessment to the American Community Survey Office in the U.S. Census Bureau.

Link, M. & Lopez, J. (2022). "Qualitative Data Collection: ACS Internet Instrument Improvement: Independent ACS Review & Recommendations Report." Report prepared by RTI International for the U.S. Census Bureau.

Mills, G., Longsine, L., & Sawyer, R. (2021). "Respondent Device Analysis for the Internet Instrument on the American Community Survey." U.S. Census Bureau. https://www.census.gov/library/working-papers/2021/acs/2022_Mills_04.html

Olmsted-Hawala, E., Berger, M., Goerman, P., & Holzberg, J. (2022). "Usability and Cognitive Testing of the Login Screen for the American Community Survey in English and Spanish." U.S. Census Bureau. https://www.census.gov/library/working-papers/2022/adrm/rsm2022-03.html

Olmsted-Hawala, E., Berger, M., Kephart, K., Betasarí, O., & Nichols, E. (2023). "Usability and Cognitive Testing of the Rostering Screens for the American Community Survey in English and Spanish." U.S. Census Bureau. https://www.census.gov/library/working-papers/2023/adrm/rsm2023-07.html

Appendix D. 2018 and 2019 Self-Response Contact Strategy Materials

Figure 38. 2018 and 2019 ACS: First Mailing—Letter

ACS-13(L)(2017)
(6-2017)

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
Economics and Statistics Administration
U.S. Census Bureau
Washington, DC 20233-0001
OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

A message from the Director, U.S. Census Bureau ...

Your household has been randomly selected to complete a very important national survey, the American Community Survey. The U.S. Census Bureau conducts this survey to give our country an up-to-date picture of how we live—our education, employment, housing, and more. Using the enclosed instructions, please complete the survey online as soon as possible at:

https://respond.census.gov/acs

The Census Bureau is using the Internet to collect this information in an effort to conserve natural resources, save taxpayers' money, and process your data more efficiently. If you are unable to complete the survey online, there is no need to contact us. We will send you a paper questionnaire in a few weeks.

This survey collects critical information used to meet the needs of communities across the United States. For example, results from this survey are used to decide where new schools, hospitals, and fire stations are needed. This information also helps communities plan for the kinds of emergency situations that might affect you and your neighbors, such as floods and other natural disasters.

The Census Bureau chose your address, not you personally, as part of a randomly selected sample. You are required by U.S. law to respond to this survey. The U.S. Census Bureau is required by law to keep your information confidential. The Census Bureau is not permitted to publicly release your responses in a way that could identify you. Per the Federal Cybersecurity Enhancement Act of 2015, your data are protected from cybersecurity risks through screening of the systems that transmit your data. The enclosed brochures answer frequently asked questions about the survey.

If you need help completing the survey, please call our toll-free number (1–800–354–7271).

Thank you.

Enclosures

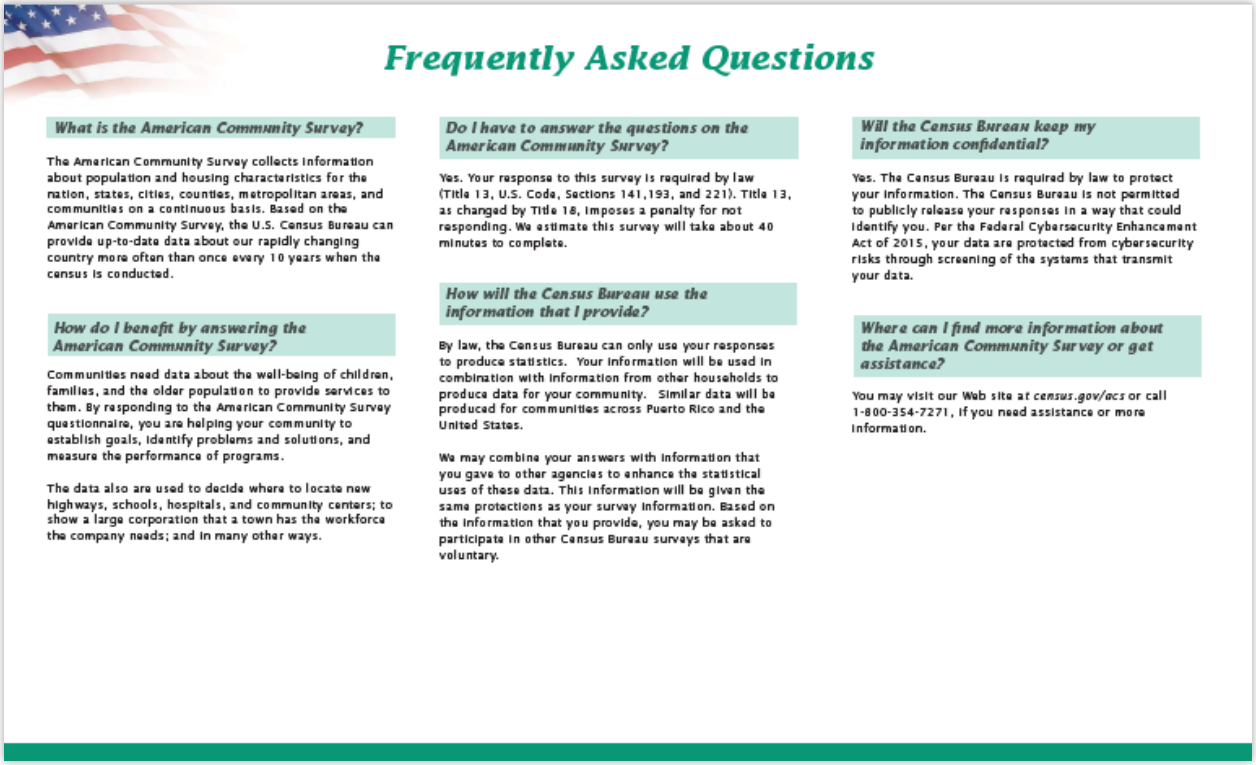
United States Census Bureau

census.gov

Figure 39. 2018 and 2019 ACS: First Mailing—Envelope

Figure 40. 2018 and 2019 ACS: Third Mailing—Envelope

Figure 41. 2018 and 2019 ACS: First and Third Mailings—Frequently Asked Questions Brochure



Frequently Asked Questions

What is the American Community Survey?

The American Community Survey collects information about population and housing characteristics for the nation, states, cities, counties, metropolitan areas, and communities on a continuous basis. Based on the American Community Survey, the U.S. Census Bureau can provide up-to-date data about our rapidly changing country more often than once every 10 years when the census is conducted.

How do I benefit by answering the American Community Survey?

Communities need data about the well-being of children, families, and the older population to provide services to them. By responding to the American Community Survey questionnaire, you are helping your community to establish goals, identify problems and solutions, and measure the performance of programs.

The data also are used to decide where to locate new highways, schools, hospitals, and community centers; to show a large corporation that a town has the workforce the company needs; and in many other ways.

Do I have to answer the questions on the American Community Survey?

Yes. Your response to this survey is required by law (Title 13, U.S. Code, Sections 141,193, and 221). Title 13, as changed by Title 18, imposes a penalty for not responding. We estimate this survey will take about 40 minutes to complete.

How will the Census Bureau use the information that I provide?

By law, the Census Bureau can only use your responses to produce statistics. Your information will be used in combination with information from other households to produce data for your community. Similar data will be produced for communities across Puerto Rico and the United States.

We may combine your answers with information that you gave to other agencies to enhance the statistical uses of these data. This information will be given the same protections as your survey information. Based on the information that you provide, you may be asked to participate in other Census Bureau surveys that are voluntary.

Will the Census Bureau keep my information confidential?

Yes. The Census Bureau is required by law to protect your information. The Census Bureau is not permitted to publicly release your responses in a way that could identify you. Per the Federal Cybersecurity Enhancement Act of 2015, your data are protected from cybersecurity risks through screening of the systems that transmit your data.

Where can I find more information about the American Community Survey or get assistance?

You may visit our Web site at *census.gov/acs* or call 1-800-354-7271, if you need assistance or more information.

Figure 42. 2018 and 2019 ACS: First Mailing—Internet Instruction Card (Front and Back)

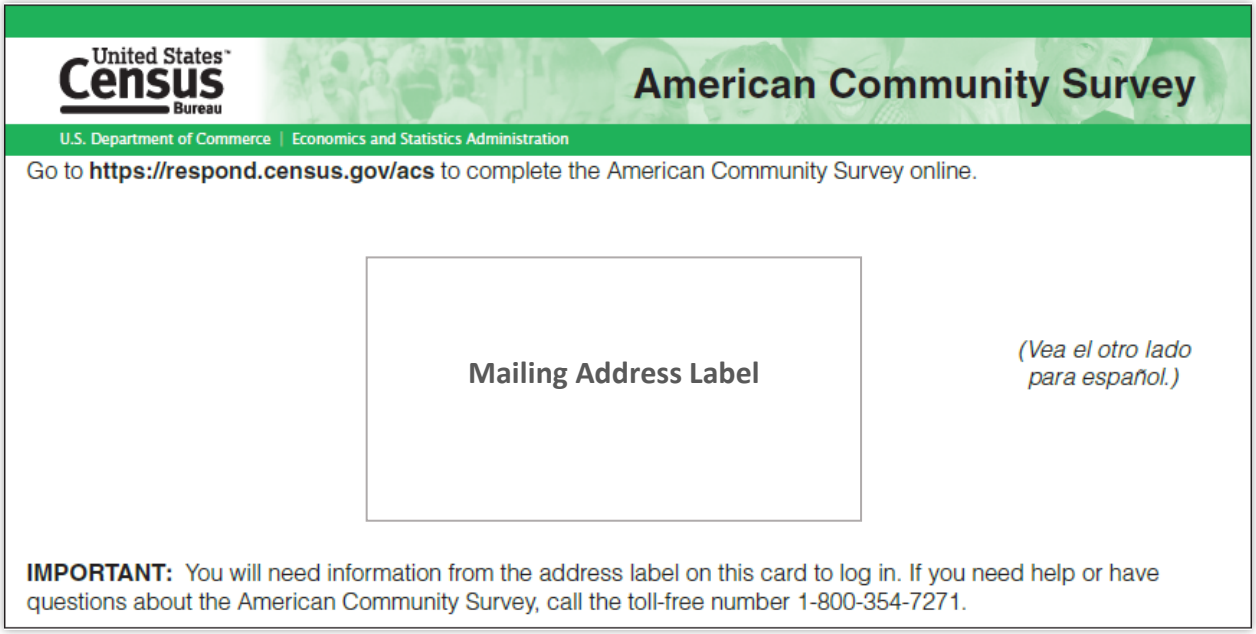


Figure 43. 2018 and 2019 ACS: First Mailing—Multilingual Brochure

The U.S. Census Bureau is conducting the American Community Survey

In a few days you will receive an American Community Survey questionnaire in the mail. Because you are living in the United States, you are required by law to respond to this survey. If you have questions about the form, please call us toll-free at 1-800-354-7271.

What is the American Community Survey?

The American Community Survey is an important survey conducted by the Census Bureau. It is designed to give communities current information about its people and housing. In order to make well-informed decisions, a community needs accurate and reliable information. By responding to this survey, you are helping your community to get this kind of information.

Will my answers to this survey be kept confidential?

Yes. The U.S. Census Bureau is required by law to keep your information confidential. The Census Bureau is not permitted to publicly release your responses in a way that could identify you. Per the Federal Cybersecurity Enhancement Act of 2015, your data are protected from cybersecurity risks through screening of the systems that transmit your data.

La Oficina del Censo de los Estados Unidos está realizando la Encuesta sobre la Comunidad Estadounidense

En unos días, recibirá por correo un cuestionario de la Encuesta sobre la Comunidad Estadounidense. Como usted esta viviendo en los Estados Unidos, la ley exige que usted responda a esta encuesta. Si tiene preguntas sobre el cuestionario, llámenos al 1-877-833-5625 para hablar con uno de nuestros empleados que habla español. La llamada es gratis. El empleado podrá contestar sus preguntas o usted podrá completar la encuesta por teléfono.

¿Qué es la Encuesta sobre la Comunidad Estadounidense?

La Encuesta sobre la Comunidad Estadounidense es una encuesta importante realizada por la Oficina del Censo de los Estados Unidos. Está diseñada para brindar información actual a las comunidades sobre las personas y las viviendas. Para poder tomar buenas decisiones, una comunidad necesita información precisa y confiable. Al responder a esta encuesta, usted está ayudando a su comunidad a obtener este tipo de información.

¿Serán confidenciales mis respuestas a esta encuesta?

SÍ. La Oficina del Censo de los EE.UU. está obligada por ley a mantener confidencial su información. A la Oficina del Censo no se le permite divulgar sus respuestas de manera que este hogar pudiera ser identificado. En conformidad con la Ley para el Fortalecimiento de la Seguridad Cibernética Federal del 2015, sus datos están protegidos contra los riesgos de seguridad cibernética mediante los controles aplicados a los sistemas que trasmiten su información.

Important Information From the U.S. Census Bureau

Información Importante de la Oficina del Censo de los Estados Unidos

美国人口普查局
重要通知

Thông tin quan trọng từ Văn phòng Thống kê Dân số Hoa Kỳ

Важная информация от Бюро переписи населения США

미국 인구조사국에서 전해드리는 중요한 정보

Issued September 2017 ACS-9 (2017)

United States Census Bureau

U.S. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration U.S. CENSUS BUREAU census.gov

美国人口普查局正在进行美国社区问卷调查

您将在几天内收到一份邮寄的美国社区问卷调查。由于您目前居住在美国，因此根据法律规定，您必须答复此问卷调查。这个调查问卷只有英文版。请拨打我们的免费电话：1-800-638-5945，我们将有会说中文的工作人员回答您的问题，或者您能够在电话上用中文回答调查的问题。

什么是美国社区问卷调查？

美国社区问卷调查由美国人口普查局主持，是一项重要的调查。目的是为了向各个社区提供有关居民和住房方面的最新信息。一个社区要做出明智的决策，需要真实准确的信息。您答复此问卷调查，就是在帮助您所在社区获取这样的信息。

我对这次调查的回答，人口普查局是否会保密？

是的。根据法律规定，美国人口普查局将对您的信息保密。人口普查局不得以可识别您的身份的方式公开发布您的回复。依据2015年联邦增强网络安全法案，通过监察传输您资料的系统，来确保您个人资料受到保护，避免网络安全风险。

Văn phòng Thống kê Dân số Hoa Kỳ đang thực hiện cuộc Khảo sát Cộng đồng tại Mỹ.

Trong một vài ngày nữa quý vị sẽ nhận được bản câu hỏi Khảo sát Cộng đồng tại Mỹ qua thư tín. Vì quý vị đang sống ở Hoa Kỳ, nên luật bắt buộc quý vị phải trả lời cuộc khảo sát này. Nếu quý vị có thắc mắc về mẫu đơn, xin gọi chúng tôi theo số điện thoại miễn phí 1-877-221-9436. Bản câu hỏi khảo sát chỉ có bằng tiếng Anh.

Cuộc Khảo sát Cộng đồng tại Mỹ là gì?

Cuộc Khảo sát Cộng đồng tại Mỹ là một cuộc khảo sát quan trọng được Văn phòng Thống kê Dân số Hoa Kỳ thực hiện. Nó được thiết kế để cung cấp cho cộng đồng thông tin hiện tại về người dân và nhà cửa. Nhằm có được những quyết định thức thời có ích lợi trực tiếp cho những nhu cầu của cộng đồng quý vị, những thông tin cần được chính xác và đáng tin cậy. Bằng cách trả lời cuộc khảo sát này, quý vị đang giúp cộng đồng mình lấy được loại thông tin này.

Liệu các câu trả lời khảo sát của tôi có được giữ bí mật không?

Có. Cục Thống Kê Dân Số Hoa Kỳ được pháp luật yêu cầu bảo mật thông tin của quý vị. Cục Thống kê không được phép công bố công khai các phản hồi của quý vị theo cách có thể nhận diện quý vị. Theo Luật Tăng Cường An Ninh Mạng của Liên Bang 2015, số liệu của quí vị sẽ được bảo vệ để tránh khỏi các nguy cơ về an ninh mạng qua cách kiểm duyệt các hệ thống chuyển số liệu của quí vị.

Бюро переписи населения проводит Анкетирование населения США по месту жительства

Через несколько дней Вы получите по почте анкету Анкетирование населения США по месту жительства. Так как Вы проживаете в США, Вы обязаны в соответствие с законом дать ответы на вопросы данного исследования. Анкета составлена только на английском языке. Позвоните по бесплатному номеру 1-866-225-2297, и Вам ответит русскоговорящий сотрудник. Вы сможете получить ответы на Ваши вопросы и Вам помогут заполнить анкету по телефону.

Что представляет собой Анкетирование населения США по месту жительства?

Анкетирование населения США по месту жительства – это важнейшее исследование, проводимое Бюро переписи населения США. Его цель – обеспечить общество актуальной информацией о населении и жилищных условиях. Для принятия обоснованных решений на местах необходимо иметь точную и достоверную информацию. Отвечая на вопросы данного исследования, Вы помогаете своему району получить такую информацию.

Будет ли сохранена конфиденциальность моих ответов?

Да. По закону Бюро переписи населения США обязано соблюдать конфиденциальность ваших данных. Ему запрещено публично раскрывать Ваши ответы таким образом, чтобы по ним можно было установить Вашу личность. Защиту Ваших данных от кибер-рисков регулирует федеральный закон «О повышении кибербезопасности» от 2015 года, в соответствии с которым регулярно проводится проверка систем передачи данных.

미국 인구조사국에서는 미국 지역사회조사를 실시하고 있습니다.

며칠 안으로 미국 지역사회조사 설문지를 우편으로 받으실 것 입니다. 미국에 사시는 모든 분은 법에 의해 이 설문에 응답하셔야 합니다. 설문지는 영어로만 되어있습니다. 한국어로 설문을 작성하고 싶으시거나 질문이 있으시면, 무료전화 1-800-772-6728 로 전화를 주십시오. 한국어 담당직원과

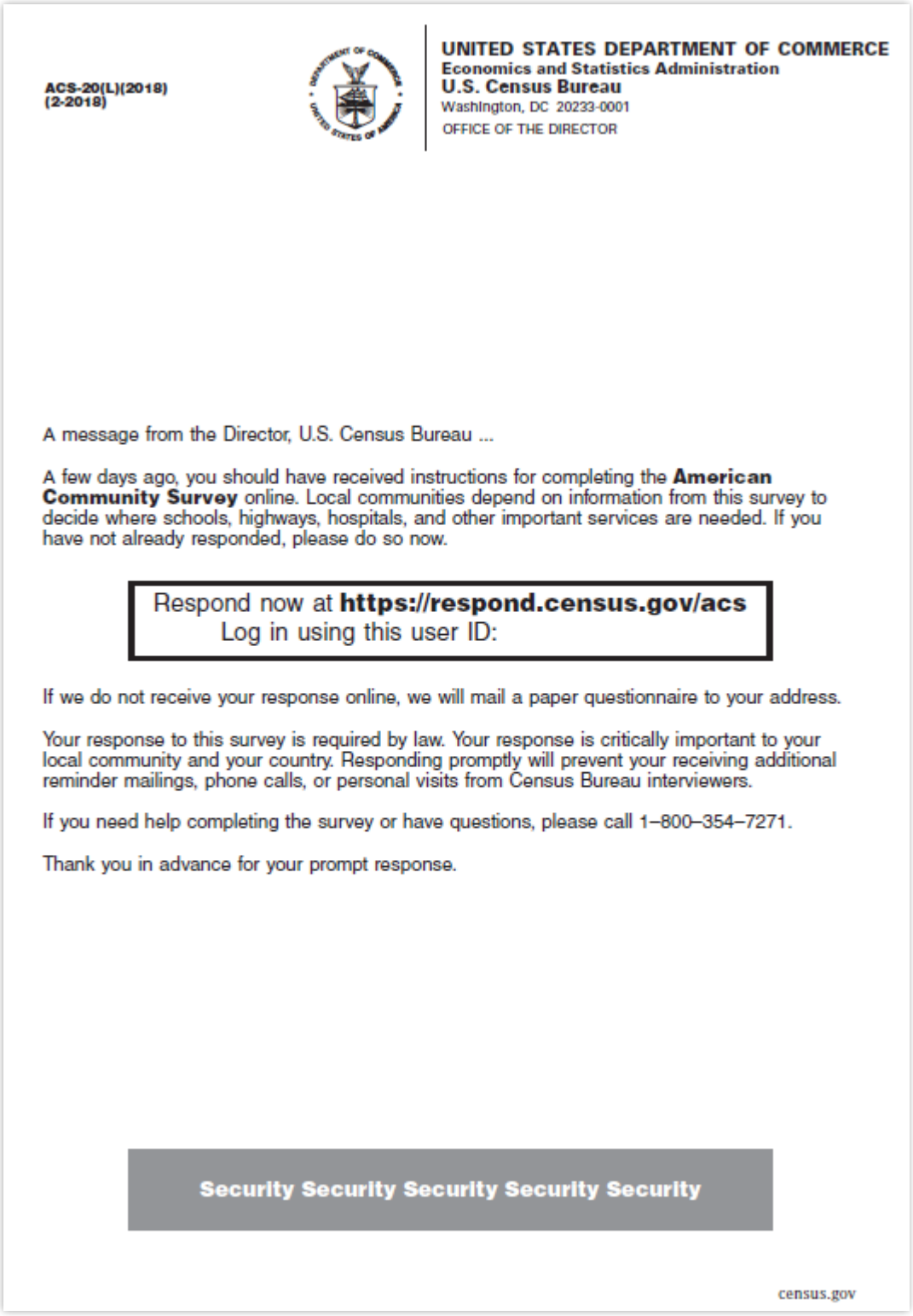
미국 지역사회조사란 무엇인가요?

미국 지역사회조사는 미국 인구조사국에서 시행하는 중요한 설문조사입니다. 이 설문조사는 지역사회 주민들과 주택에 관한 최근 정보를 알려드리고자 계획되었습니다. 지역사회가 정보에 기초한 합리적인 결정을 내리기 위해서 정확하고 믿을 수 있는 정보가 필요합니다. 귀하의 설문응답은 지역사회가 이런 정보를 수집하는 데 도움을 줍니다.

설문조사에 대한 답변은 보호됩니까?

네. 미국 인구조사국은 법에 따라 귀하의 정보를 비밀로 유지해야 할 의무가 있습니다. 미국 인구조사국은 귀하가 공급한 정보를 귀하의 신상을 알 수 있는 형태로 일반에 공개할 수 없으며, 2015년 연방 사이버보안강화법에 따라, 귀하의 데이터는 데이터 전송 시스템의 정기적 검사를 통해 사이버 보안의 위협으로부터 보호됩니다.

Figure 44. 2018 and 2019 ACS: Second Mailing—Trifold Pressure Seal Letter (Inside)



ACS-20(L)(2018)
(2-2018)

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
Economics and Statistics Administration
U.S. Census Bureau
Washington, DC 20233-0001
OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

A message from the Director, U.S. Census Bureau ...

A few days ago, you should have received instructions for completing the **American Community Survey** online. Local communities depend on information from this survey to decide where schools, highways, hospitals, and other important services are needed. If you have not already responded, please do so now.

Respond now at **https://respond.census.gov/acs**
Log in using this user ID:

If we do not receive your response online, we will mail a paper questionnaire to your address.

Your response to this survey is required by law. Your response is critically important to your local community and your country. Responding promptly will prevent your receiving additional reminder mailings, phone calls, or personal visits from Census Bureau interviewers.

If you need help completing the survey or have questions, please call 1–800–354–7271.

Thank you in advance for your prompt response.

Security Security Security Security Security

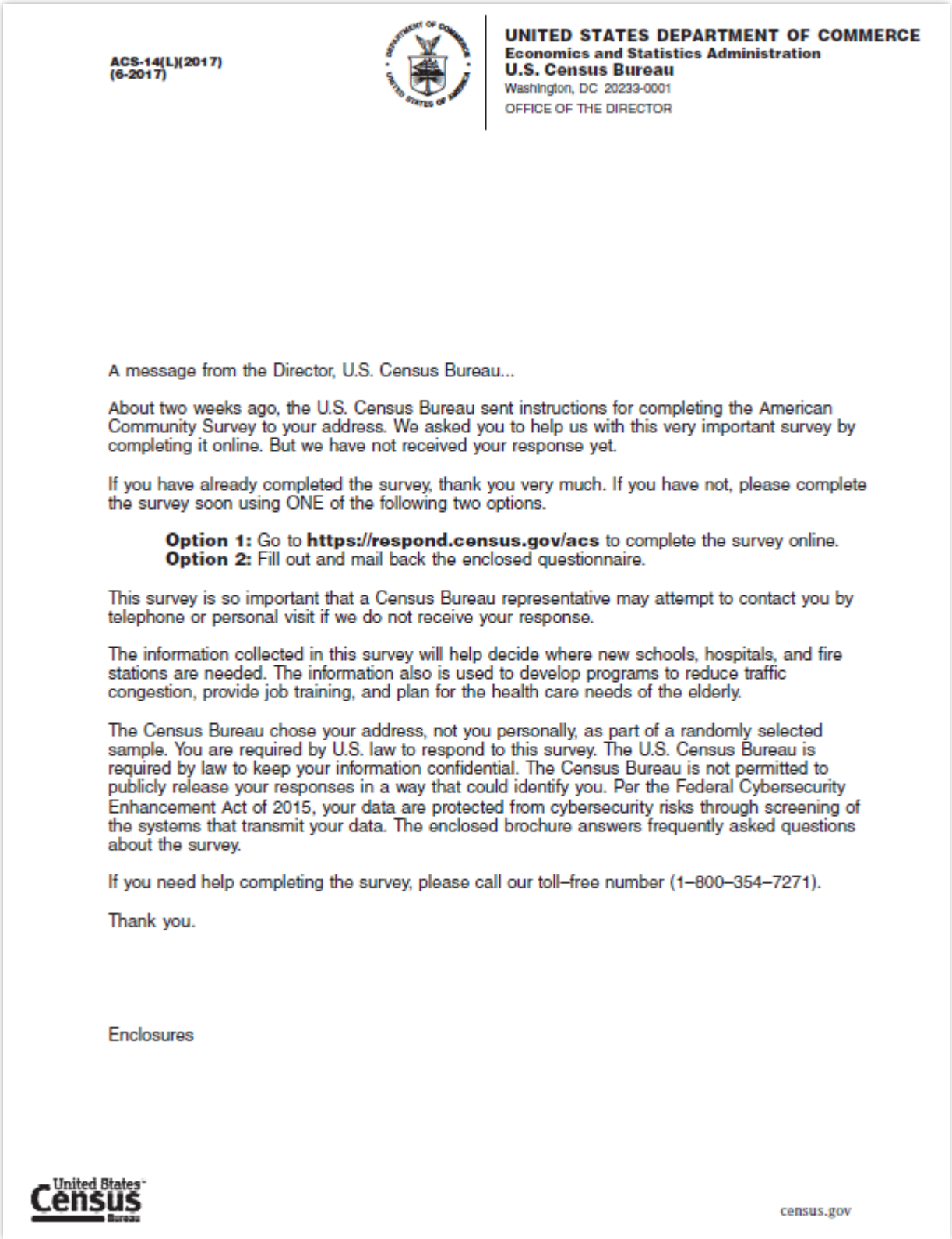
census.gov

Note: The user ID is printed on the letter and is unique to each address. The Security box at the bottom of the letter was included to prevent someone from reading the User ID while the letter was still folded.

Figure 45. 2018 and 2019 ACS: Second Mailing—Trifold Pressure Seal Letter (Outside)

Figure 46. 2018 and 2019 ACS: Fifth Mailing—Trifold Pressure Seal Letter (Outside)

Figure 47. 2018 and 2019 ACS: Third Mailing Letter



ACS-14(L)(2017)
(6-2017)

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
Economics and Statistics Administration
U.S. Census Bureau
Washington, DC 20233-0001
OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

A message from the Director, U.S. Census Bureau...

About two weeks ago, the U.S. Census Bureau sent instructions for completing the American Community Survey to your address. We asked you to help us with this very important survey by completing it online. But we have not received your response yet.

If you have already completed the survey, thank you very much. If you have not, please complete the survey soon using ONE of the following two options.

Option 1: Go to **https://respond.census.gov/acs** to complete the survey online.
Option 2: Fill out and mail back the enclosed questionnaire.

This survey is so important that a Census Bureau representative may attempt to contact you by telephone or personal visit if we do not receive your response.

The information collected in this survey will help decide where new schools, hospitals, and fire stations are needed. The information also is used to develop programs to reduce traffic congestion, provide job training, and plan for the health care needs of the elderly.

The Census Bureau chose your address, not you personally, as part of a randomly selected sample. You are required by U.S. law to respond to this survey. The U.S. Census Bureau is required by law to keep your information confidential. The Census Bureau is not permitted to publicly release your responses in a way that could identify you. Per the Federal Cybersecurity Enhancement Act of 2015, your data are protected from cybersecurity risks through screening of the systems that transmit your data. The enclosed brochure answers frequently asked questions about the survey.

If you need help completing the survey, please call our toll–free number (1–800–354–7271).

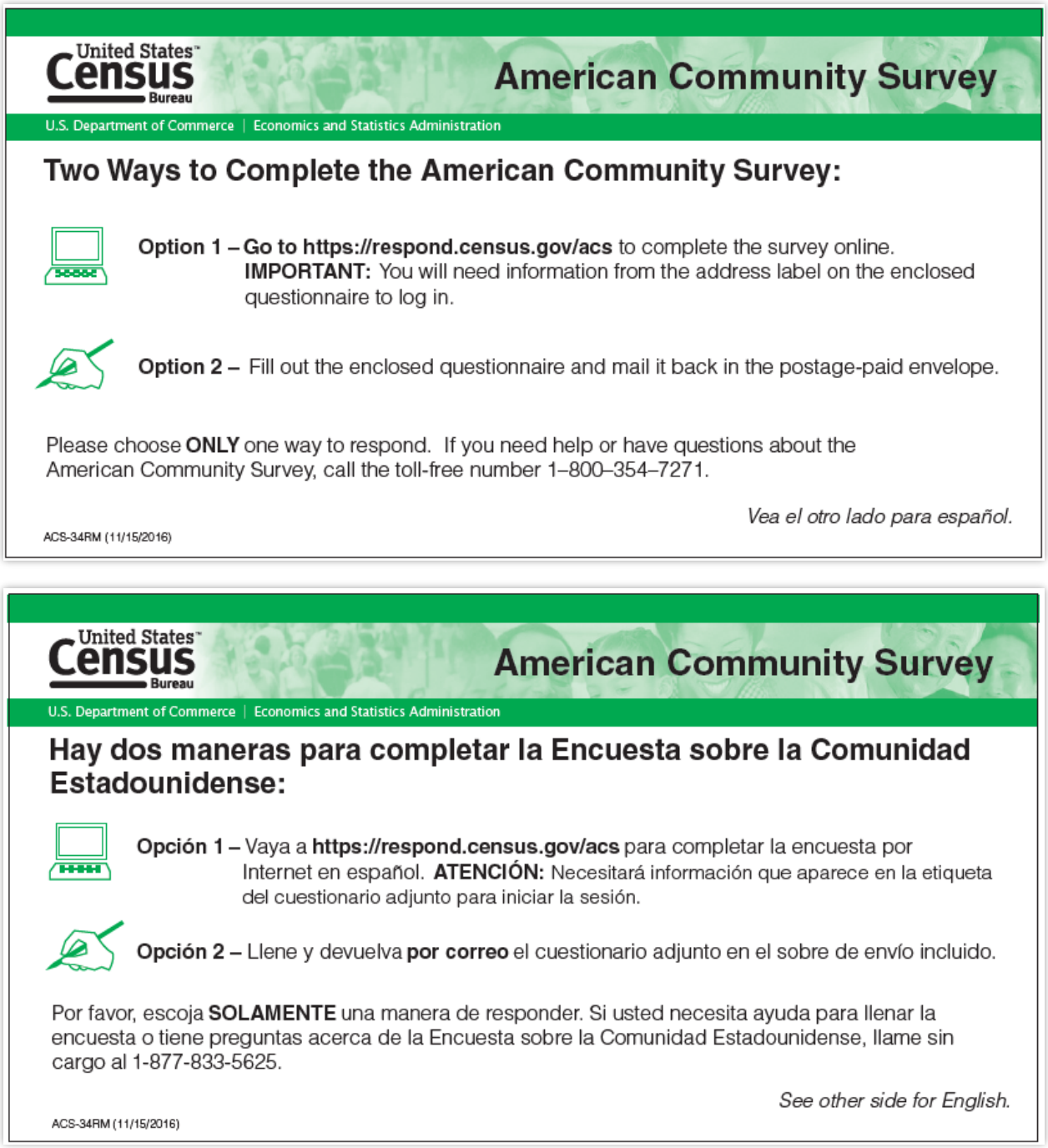
Thank you.

Enclosures

United States Census Bureau

census.gov

Figure 48. 2018 and 2019 ACS: Third Mailing—Internet Instruction Card in the Third Mailing



United States Census Bureau

American Community Survey

U.S. Department of Commerce | Economics and Statistics Administration

Two Ways to Complete the American Community Survey:

Option 1 – Go to https://respond.census.gov/acs to complete the survey online.
IMPORTANT: You will need information from the address label on the enclosed questionnaire to log in.

Option 2 – Fill out the enclosed questionnaire and mail it back in the postage-paid envelope.

Please choose **ONLY** one way to respond. If you need help or have questions about the American Community Survey, call the toll-free number 1–800–354–7271.

Vea el otro lado para español.

ACS-34RM (11/15/2016)

United States Census Bureau

American Community Survey

U.S. Department of Commerce | Economics and Statistics Administration

Hay dos maneras para completar la Encuesta sobre la Comunidad Estadounidense:

Opción 1 – Vaya a **https://respond.census.gov/acs** para completar la encuesta por Internet en español. **ATENCIÓN:** Necesitará información que aparece en la etiqueta del cuestionario adjunto para iniciar la sesión.

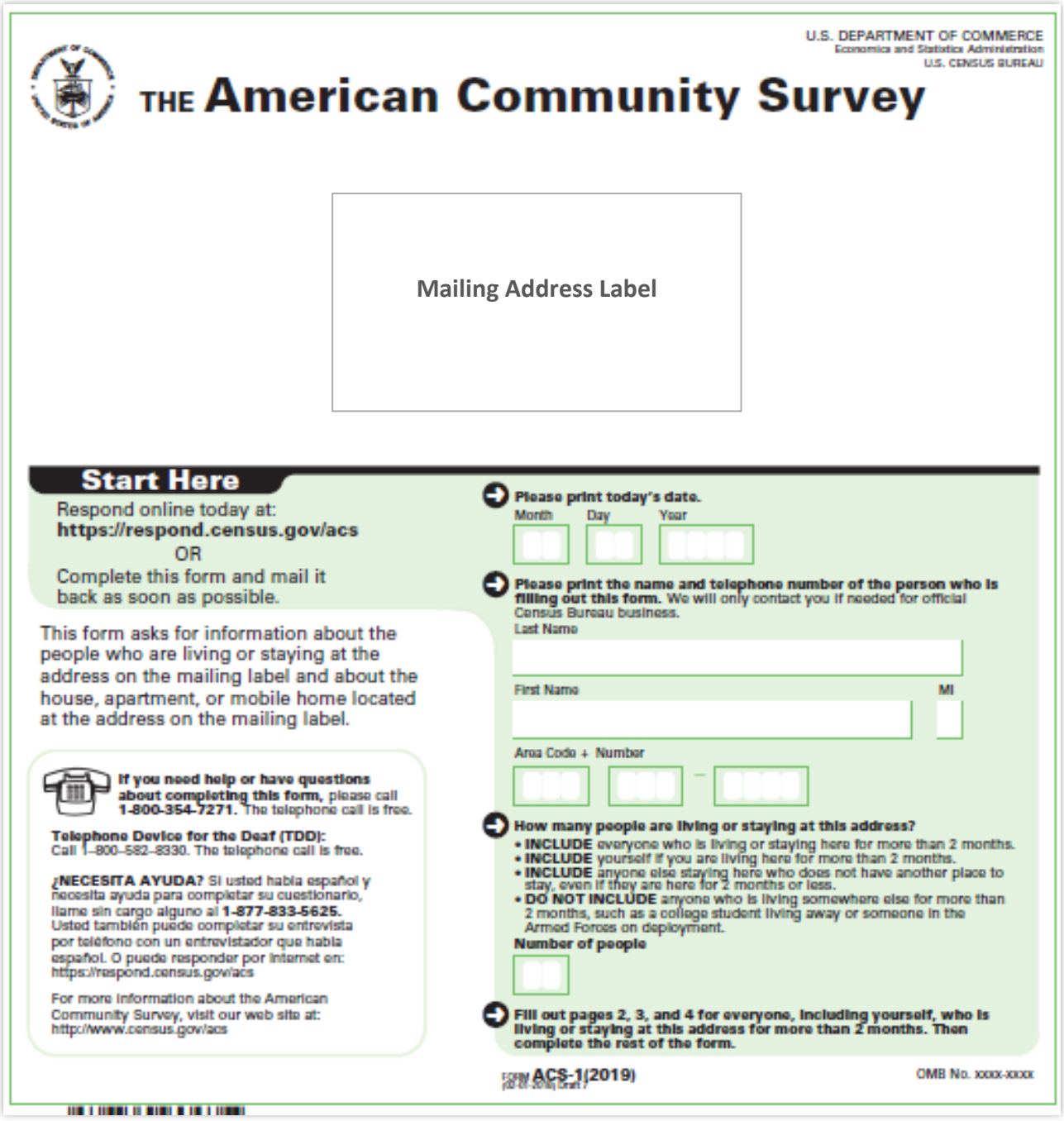
Opción 2 – Llene y devuelva **por correo** el cuestionario adjunto en el sobre de envío incluido.

Por favor, escoja **SOLAMENTE** una manera de responder. Si usted necesita ayuda para llenar la encuesta o tiene preguntas acerca de la Encuesta sobre la Comunidad Estadounidense, llame sin cargo al 1-877-833-5625.

See other side for English.

ACS-34RM (11/15/2016)

Figure 49. 2018 and 2019 ACS: Third Mailing—Front Page of the Paper Questionnaire



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
Economics and Statistics Administration
U.S. CENSUS BUREAU

THE American Community Survey

Mailing Address Label

Start Here

Respond online today at:
https://respond.census.gov/acs
OR
Complete this form and mail it back as soon as possible.

This form asks for information about the people who are living or staying at the address on the mailing label and about the house, apartment, or mobile home located at the address on the mailing label.

If you need help or have questions about completing this form, please call **1-800-354-7271.** The telephone call is free.

Telephone Device for the Deaf (TDD):
Call 1-800-582-8330. The telephone call is free.

¿NECESITA AYUDA? Si usted habla español y necesita ayuda para completar su cuestionario, llame sin cargo alguno al **1-877-833-5625.** Usted también puede completar su entrevista por teléfono con un entrevistador que habla español. O puede responder por Internet en: https://respond.census.gov/acs

For more information about the American Community Survey, visit our web site at: http://www.census.gov/acs

Please print today's date.
Month Day Year

Please print the name and telephone number of the person who is filling out this form. We will only contact you if needed for official Census Bureau business.
Last Name
First Name MI
Area Code + Number

How many people are living or staying at this address?
- **INCLUDE** everyone who is living or staying here for more than 2 months.
- **INCLUDE** yourself if you are living here for more than 2 months.
- **INCLUDE** anyone else staying here who does not have another place to stay, even if they are here for 2 months or less.
- **DO NOT INCLUDE** anyone who is living somewhere else for more than 2 months, such as a college student living away or someone in the Armed Forces on deployment.

Number of people

Fill out pages 2, 3, and 4 for everyone, including yourself, who is living or staying at this address for more than 2 months. Then complete the rest of the form.

FORM ACS-1(2019)
(02-01-2018) Draft 7

OMB No. xxxx-xxxx

Figure 50. 2018 and 2019 ACS: Fourth Mailing—Postcard

ACS-29(2017) (6-2017)

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
Economics and Statistics Administration
U.S. Census Bureau
Washington, DC 20233-0001
OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

A message from the Director, U.S. Census Bureau . . .

Within the last few weeks, the U.S. Census Bureau sent you several requests to complete the American Community Survey. **Now is the time to complete the survey if you have not already done so.** Please complete the questionnaire and return it now OR go to https://respond.census.gov/acs to respond online.

Your response to this survey is required by U.S. law. If you do not respond, a Census Bureau interviewer may contact you to complete the survey. Local and national leaders use the information from this survey for planning schools, hospitals, roads, and other community needs.

If you need help completing the survey or have questions, please call our toll-free number (1–800–354–7271).

Thank you.

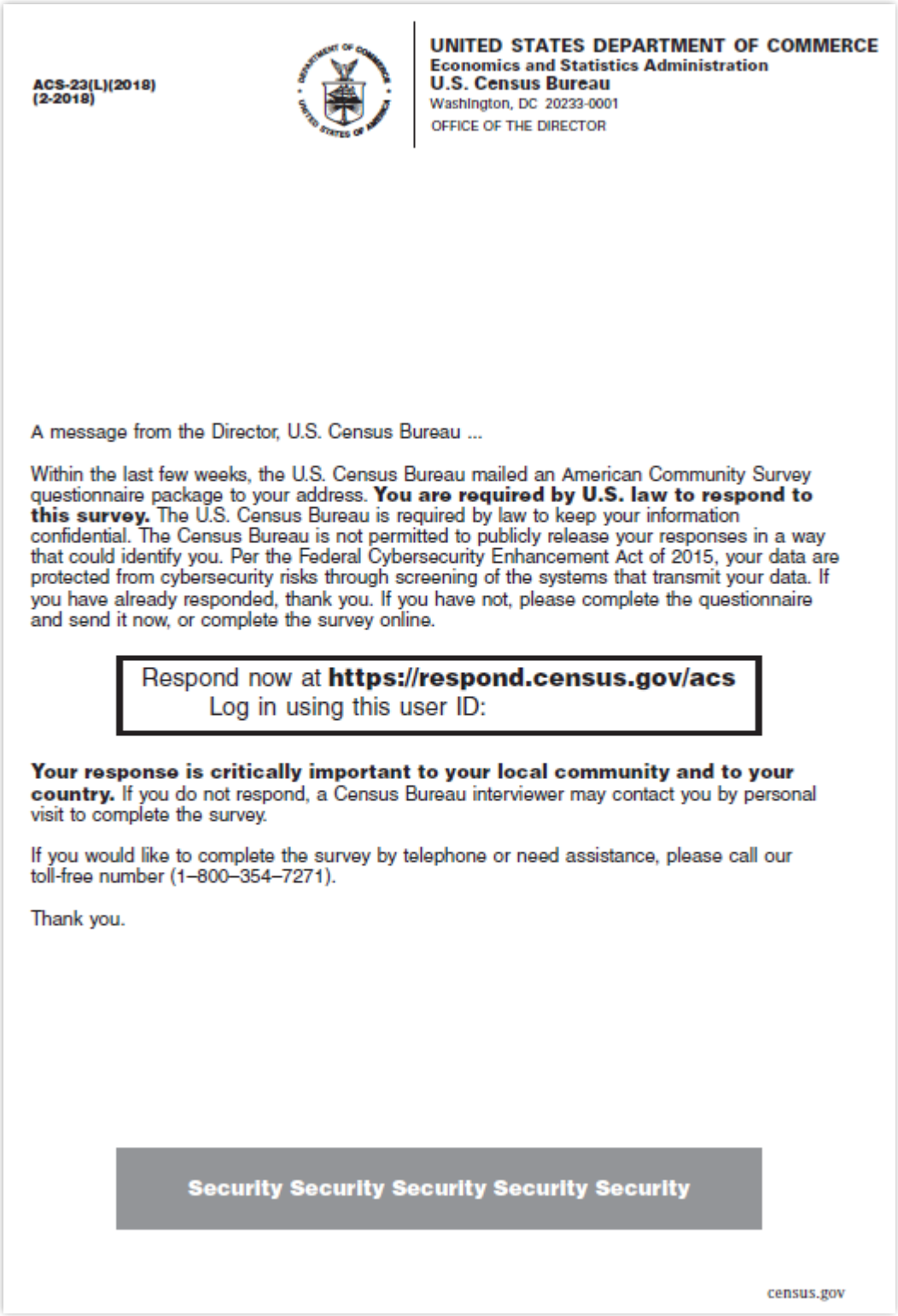
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
Economic and Statistics Administration
U.S. Census Bureau
1201 E 10th Street
Jeffersonville IN 47132-0001
ACS-29(2017) (6-2017)

OFFICIAL BUSINESS
Penalty for Private Use $300

PRESORTED
FIRST-CLASS MAIL
POSTAGE & FEES PAID
U.S. Census Bureau
Permit No. G-58

Mailing Address Label

Figure 51. 2018 and 2019 ACS: Fifth Mailing—Pressure Seal Letter (Inside)



ACS-23(L)(2018)
(2-2018)

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
Economics and Statistics Administration
U.S. Census Bureau
Washington, DC 20233-0001
OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

A message from the Director, U.S. Census Bureau ...

Within the last few weeks, the U.S. Census Bureau mailed an American Community Survey questionnaire package to your address. **You are required by U.S. law to respond to this survey.** The U.S. Census Bureau is required by law to keep your information confidential. The Census Bureau is not permitted to publicly release your responses in a way that could identify you. Per the Federal Cybersecurity Enhancement Act of 2015, your data are protected from cybersecurity risks through screening of the systems that transmit your data. If you have already responded, thank you. If you have not, please complete the questionnaire and send it now, or complete the survey online.

Respond now at **https://respond.census.gov/acs**
Log in using this user ID:

Your response is critically important to your local community and to your country. If you do not respond, a Census Bureau interviewer may contact you by personal visit to complete the survey.

If you would like to complete the survey by telephone or need assistance, please call our toll-free number (1–800–354–7271).

Thank you.

Security Security Security Security Security

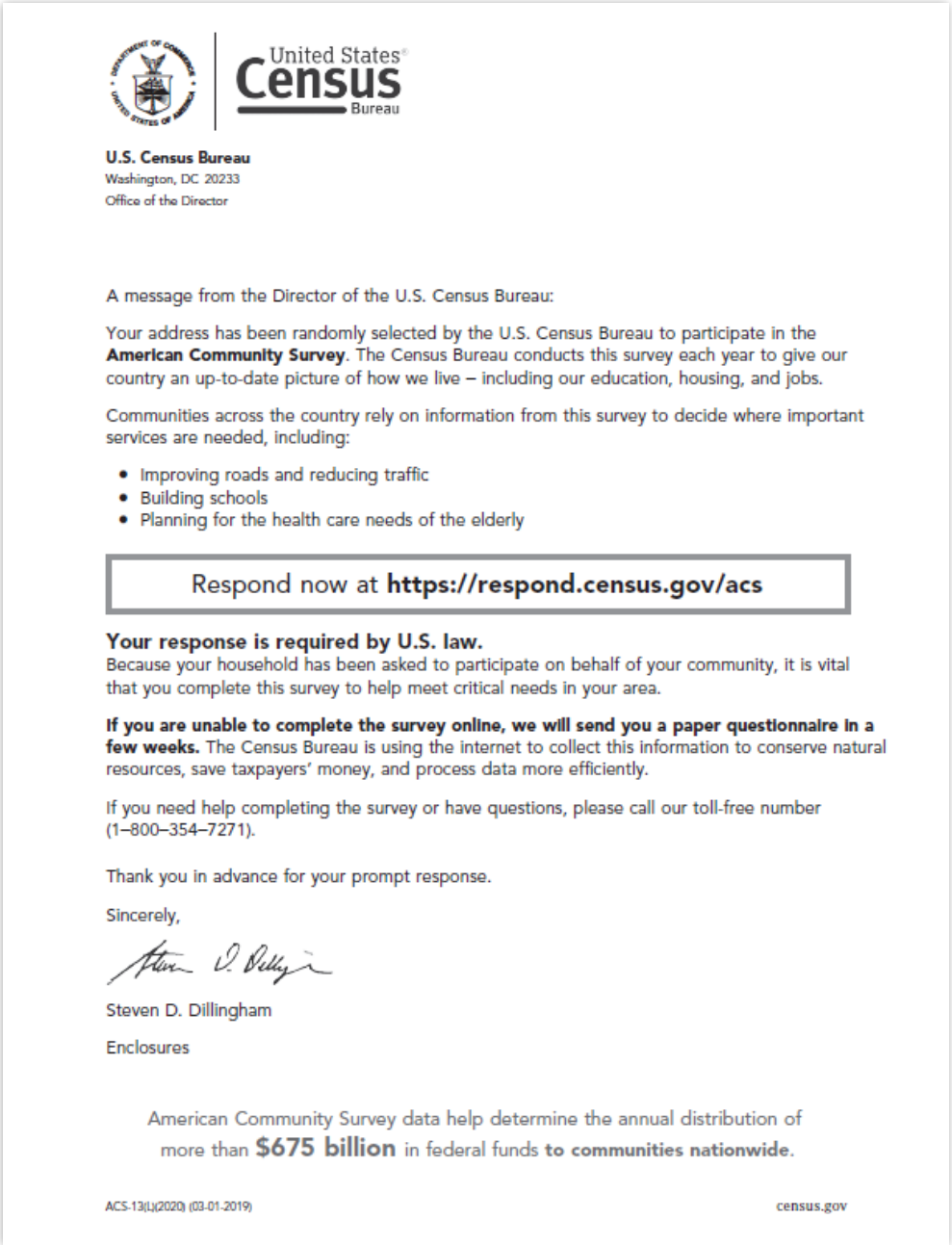
census.gov

Note: The user ID is printed on the letter and is unique to each address. The Security box at the bottom of the letter was included to prevent someone from reading the User ID while the letter was still folded.

Appendix E. 2020 and 2021 ACS Self-Response Contact Strategy Materials

This section shows only mail materials that changed in 2020, so the Internet Instruction Card and Multilingual Brochures are not included. Since 2020 was a complicated year, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the decennial census, the materials shown here reflect regular 2020 ACS production materials from October 2020 to January 2022.

Figure 52. 2020 and 2021 ACS: First Mailing (Regular Production)—Letter Front



United States Census Bureau

U.S. Census Bureau
Washington, DC 20233
Office of the Director

A message from the Director of the U.S. Census Bureau:

Your address has been randomly selected by the U.S. Census Bureau to participate in the **American Community Survey**. The Census Bureau conducts this survey each year to give our country an up-to-date picture of how we live – including our education, housing, and jobs.

Communities across the country rely on information from this survey to decide where important services are needed, including:

- Improving roads and reducing traffic
- Building schools
- Planning for the health care needs of the elderly

Respond now at **https://respond.census.gov/acs**

Your response is required by U.S. law.
Because your household has been asked to participate on behalf of your community, it is vital that you complete this survey to help meet critical needs in your area.

If you are unable to complete the survey online, we will send you a paper questionnaire in a few weeks. The Census Bureau is using the internet to collect this information to conserve natural resources, save taxpayers' money, and process data more efficiently.

If you need help completing the survey or have questions, please call our toll-free number (1–800–354–7271).

Thank you in advance for your prompt response.

Sincerely,

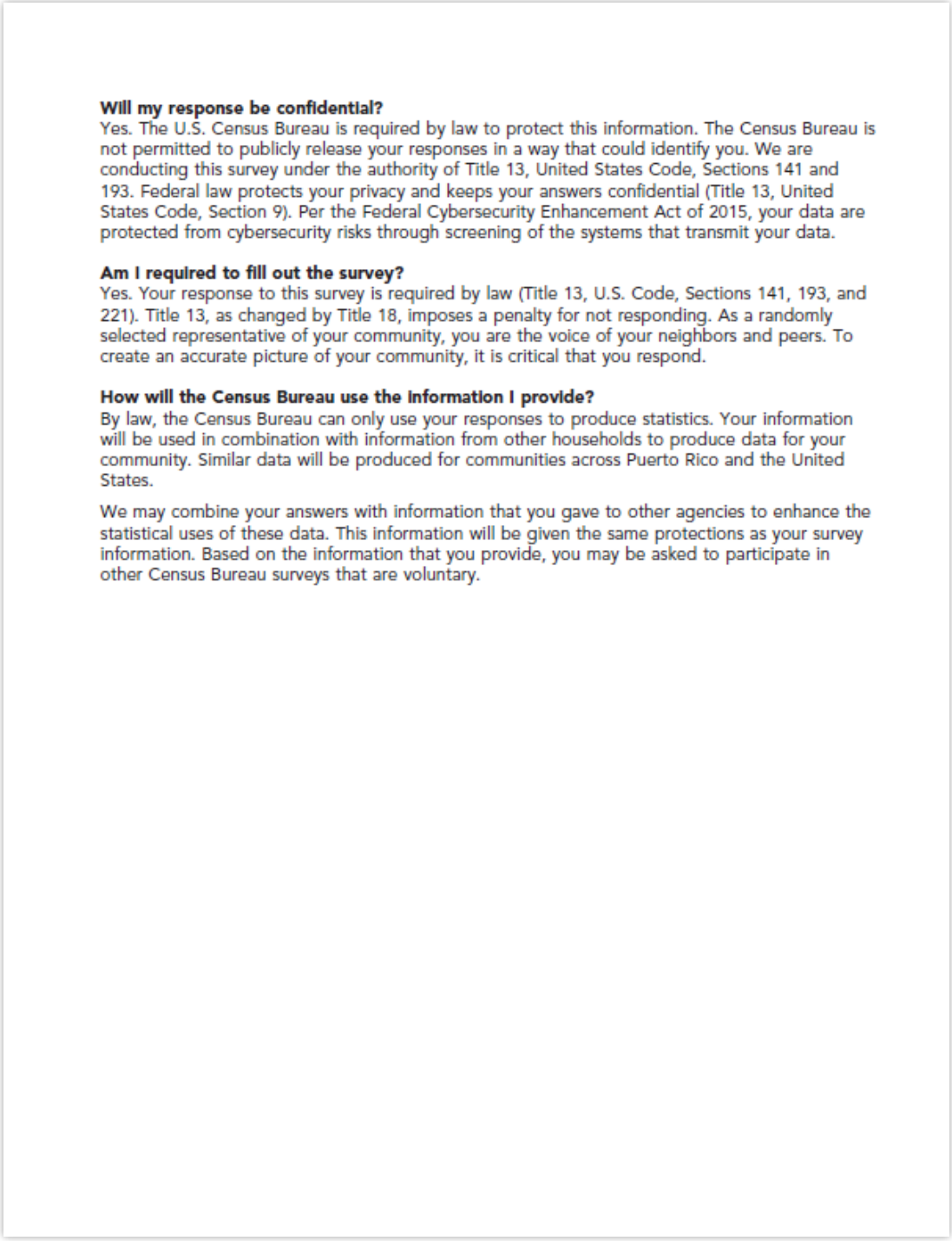
Steven D. Dillingham

Enclosures

American Community Survey data help determine the annual distribution of more than **$675 billion** in federal funds **to communities nationwide**.

ACS-13(L)(2020) (03-01-2019) census.gov

Figure 53. 2020 and 2021 ACS: First and Third Mailing (Regular Production)—Letter Back



Will my response be confidential?
Yes. The U.S. Census Bureau is required by law to protect this information. The Census Bureau is not permitted to publicly release your responses in a way that could identify you. We are conducting this survey under the authority of Title 13, United States Code, Sections 141 and 193. Federal law protects your privacy and keeps your answers confidential (Title 13, United States Code, Section 9). Per the Federal Cybersecurity Enhancement Act of 2015, your data are protected from cybersecurity risks through screening of the systems that transmit your data.

Am I required to fill out the survey?
Yes. Your response to this survey is required by law (Title 13, U.S. Code, Sections 141, 193, and 221). Title 13, as changed by Title 18, imposes a penalty for not responding. As a randomly selected representative of your community, you are the voice of your neighbors and peers. To create an accurate picture of your community, it is critical that you respond.

How will the Census Bureau use the information I provide?
By law, the Census Bureau can only use your responses to produce statistics. Your information will be used in combination with information from other households to produce data for your community. Similar data will be produced for communities across Puerto Rico and the United States.

We may combine your answers with information that you gave to other agencies to enhance the statistical uses of these data. This information will be given the same protections as your survey information. Based on the information that you provide, you may be asked to participate in other Census Bureau surveys that are voluntary.

Figure 54. 2020 and 2021 ACS: First Mailing—Envelope

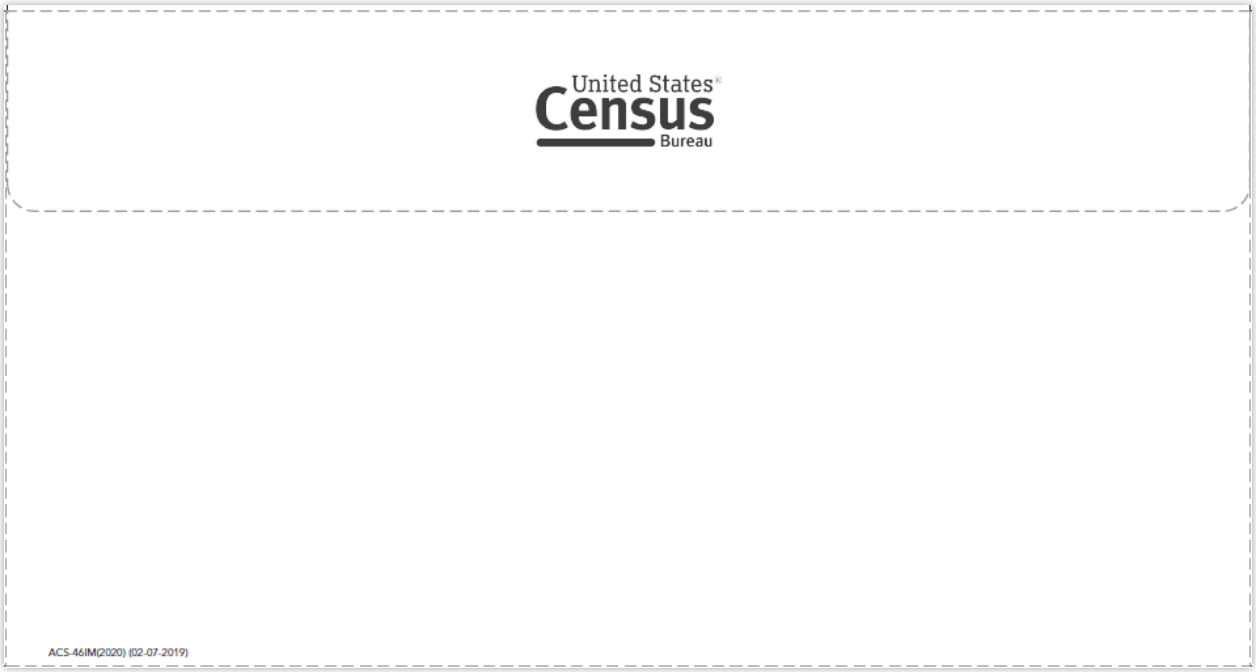
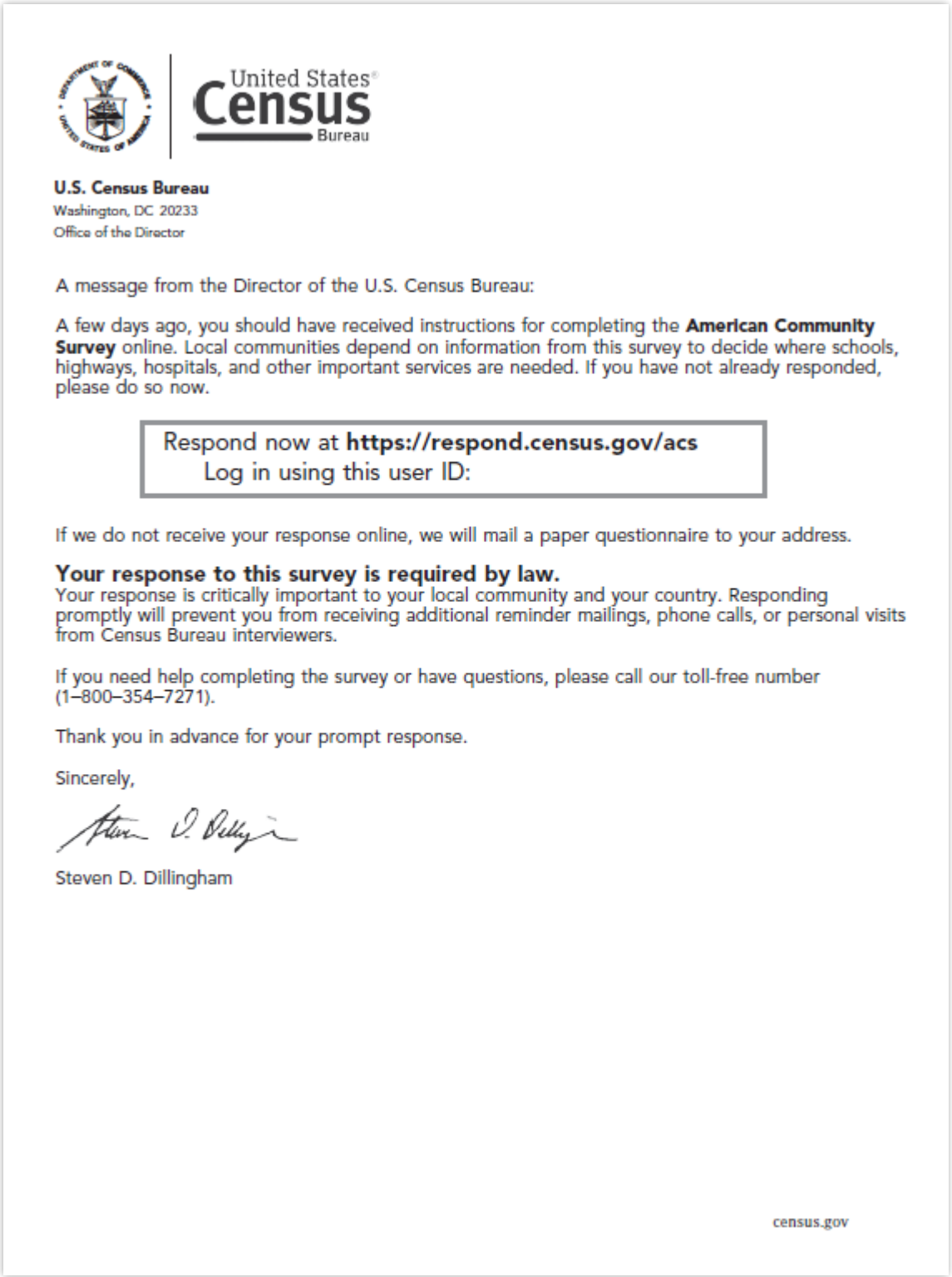


Figure 55. 2020 and 2021 ACS: Second Mailing—Bifold Pressure Seal Letter (Inside)



United States Census Bureau

U.S. Census Bureau
Washington, DC 20233
Office of the Director

A message from the Director of the U.S. Census Bureau:

A few days ago, you should have received instructions for completing the **American Community Survey** online. Local communities depend on information from this survey to decide where schools, highways, hospitals, and other important services are needed. If you have not already responded, please do so now.

Respond now at **https://respond.census.gov/acs**
Log in using this user ID:

If we do not receive your response online, we will mail a paper questionnaire to your address.

Your response to this survey is required by law.
Your response is critically important to your local community and your country. Responding promptly will prevent you from receiving additional reminder mailings, phone calls, or personal visits from Census Bureau interviewers.

If you need help completing the survey or have questions, please call our toll-free number (1–800–354–7271).

Thank you in advance for your prompt response.

Sincerely,

Steven D. Dillingham

census.gov

Note: The user ID is printed on the letter and is unique to each address.

Figure 56. 2020 and 2021 ACS: Second Mailing—Bifold Pressure Seal Letter (Outside)

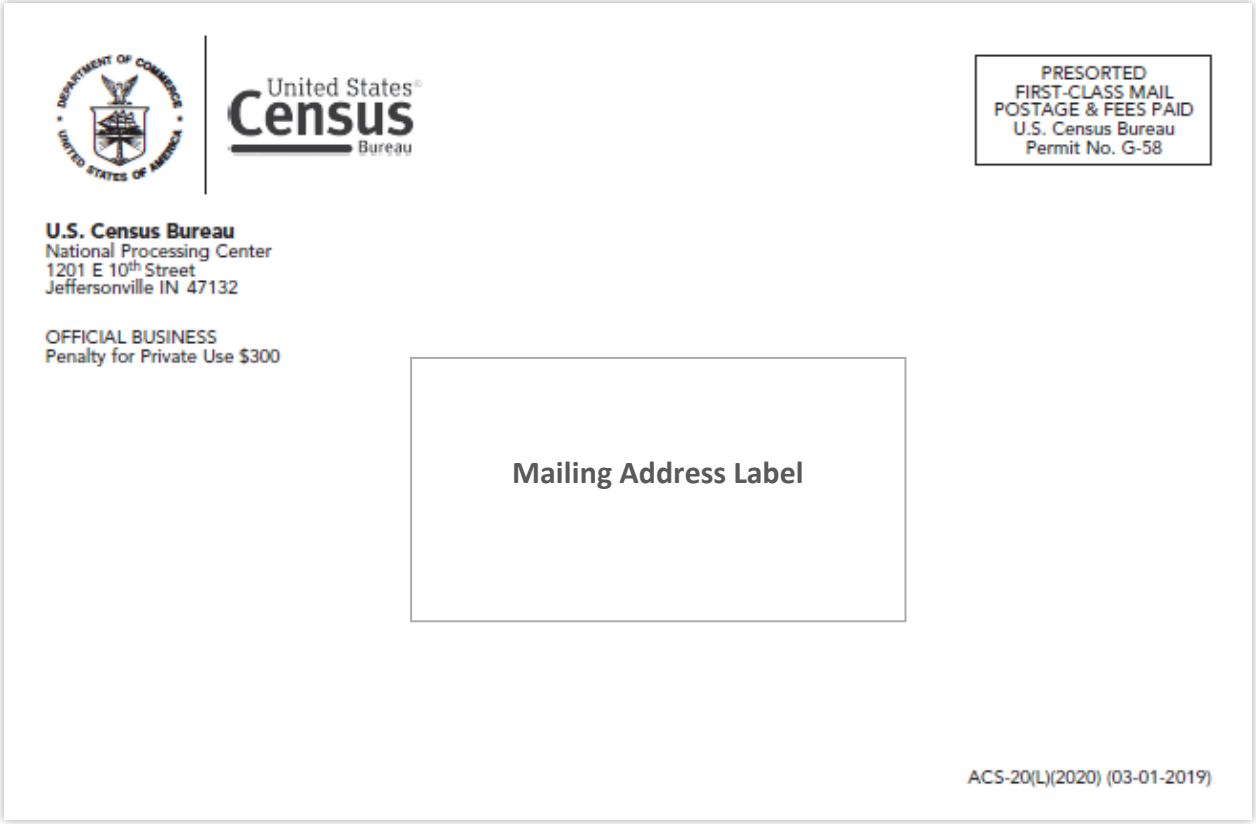
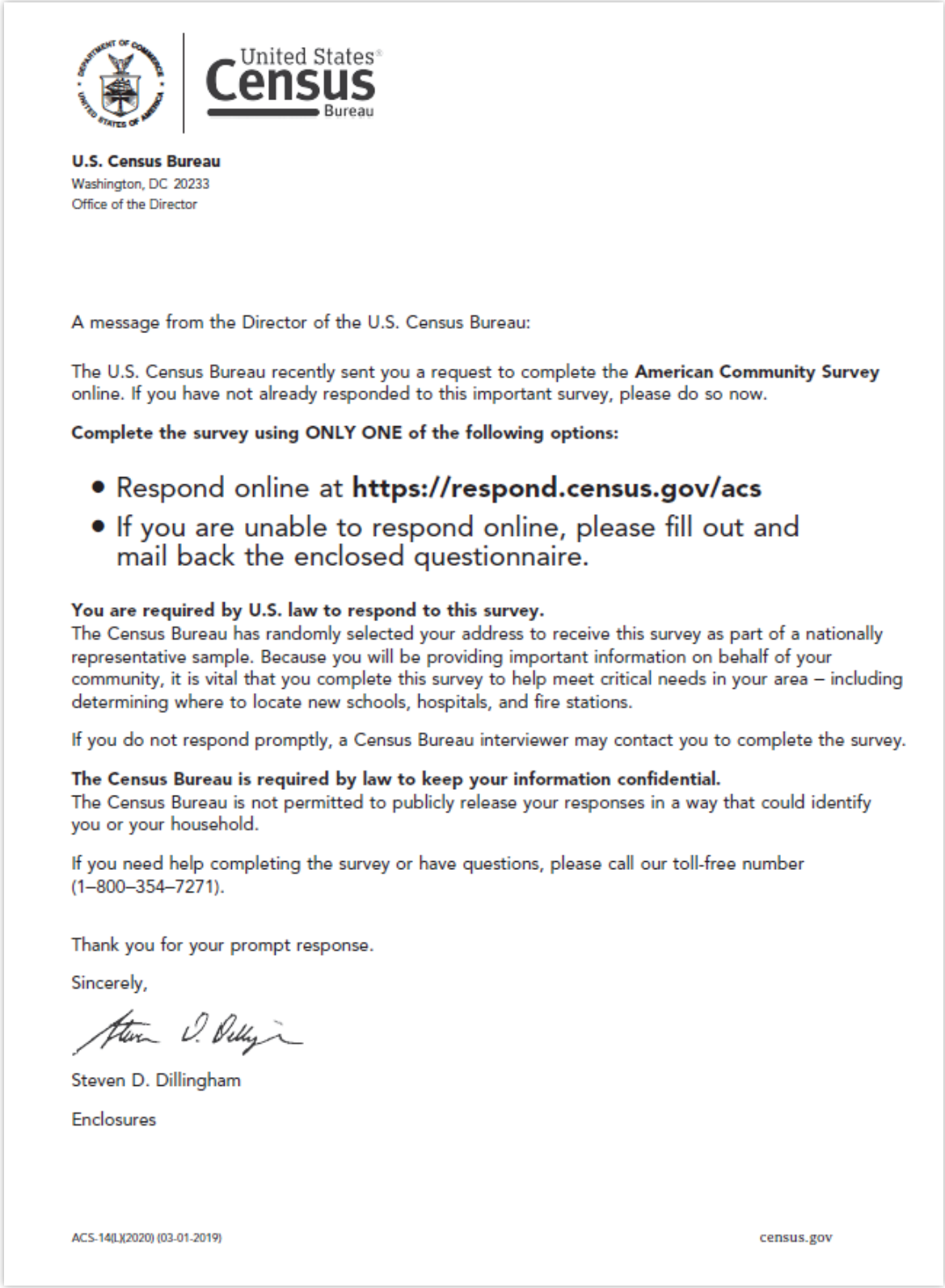


Figure 57. 2020 and 2021 ACS: Third Mailing—Letter (Front)



United States Census Bureau

U.S. Census Bureau
Washington, DC 20233
Office of the Director

A message from the Director of the U.S. Census Bureau:

The U.S. Census Bureau recently sent you a request to complete the **American Community Survey** online. If you have not already responded to this important survey, please do so now.

Complete the survey using ONLY ONE of the following options:

- Respond online at **https://respond.census.gov/acs**
- If you are unable to respond online, please fill out and mail back the enclosed questionnaire.

You are required by U.S. law to respond to this survey.
The Census Bureau has randomly selected your address to receive this survey as part of a nationally representative sample. Because you will be providing important information on behalf of your community, it is vital that you complete this survey to help meet critical needs in your area – including determining where to locate new schools, hospitals, and fire stations.

If you do not respond promptly, a Census Bureau interviewer may contact you to complete the survey.

The Census Bureau is required by law to keep your information confidential.
The Census Bureau is not permitted to publicly release your responses in a way that could identify you or your household.

If you need help completing the survey or have questions, please call our toll-free number (1–800–354–7271).

Thank you for your prompt response.

Sincerely,

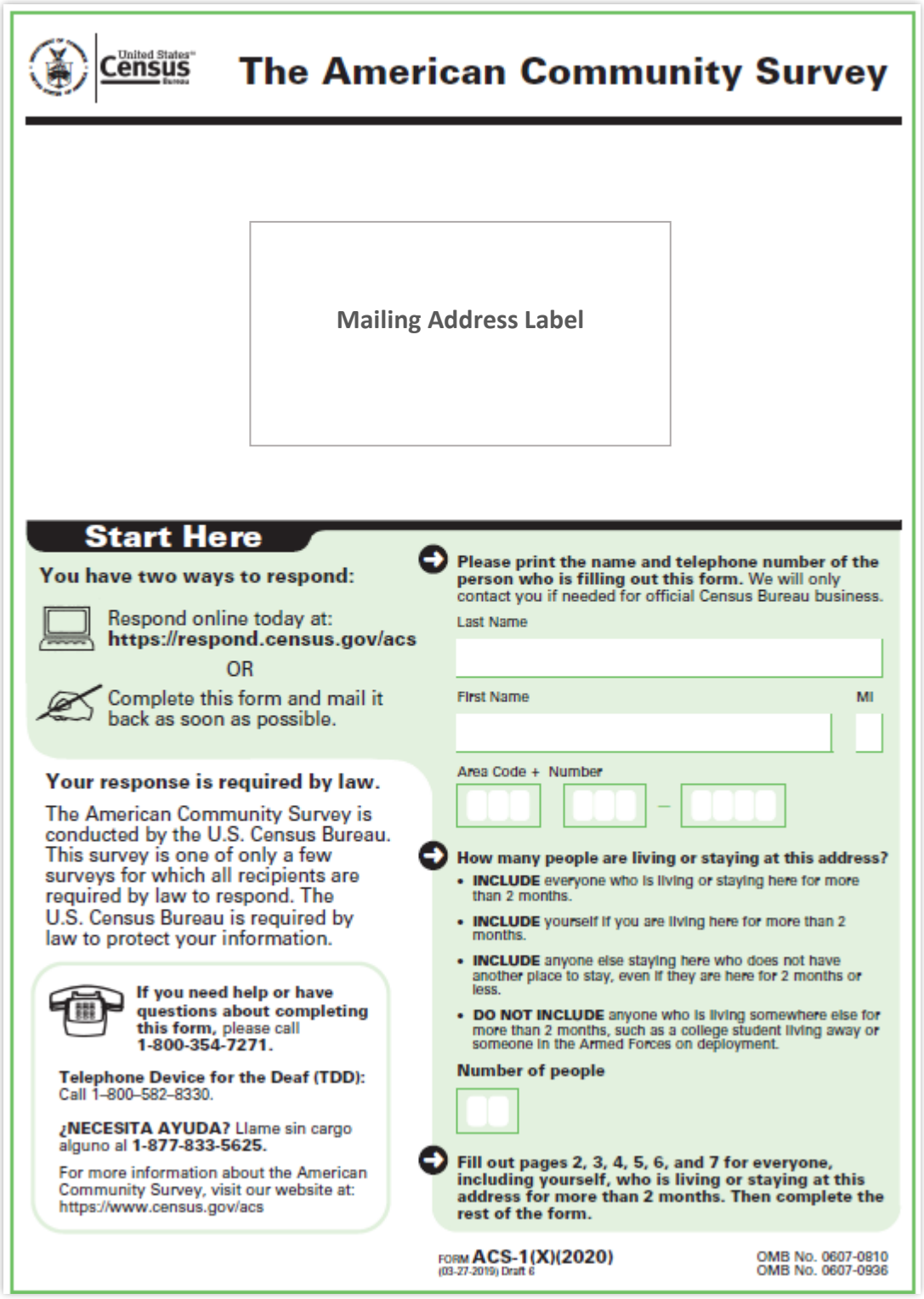
Steven D. Dillingham

Enclosures

ACS-14(L)(2020) (03-01-2019)

census.gov

Figure 58. 2020 to 2023 ACS: Third Mailing—Front Page of the Paper Questionnaire



United States Census

The American Community Survey

Mailing Address Label

Start Here

You have two ways to respond:

Respond online today at:
https://respond.census.gov/acs

OR

Complete this form and mail it back as soon as possible.

Your response is required by law.

The American Community Survey is conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. This survey is one of only a few surveys for which all recipients are required by law to respond. The U.S. Census Bureau is required by law to protect your information.

If you need help or have questions about completing this form, please call **1-800-354-7271.**

Telephone Device for the Deaf (TDD): Call 1–800–582–8330.

¿NECESITA AYUDA? Llame sin cargo alguno al **1-877-833-5625.**

For more information about the American Community Survey, visit our website at: https://www.census.gov/acs

Please print the name and telephone number of the person who is filling out this form. We will only contact you if needed for official Census Bureau business.

Last Name

First Name MI

Area Code + Number

How many people are living or staying at this address?

- **INCLUDE** everyone who is living or staying here for more than 2 months.
- **INCLUDE** yourself if you are living here for more than 2 months.
- **INCLUDE** anyone else staying here who does not have another place to stay, even if they are here for 2 months or less.
- **DO NOT INCLUDE** anyone who is living somewhere else for more than 2 months, such as a college student living away or someone in the Armed Forces on deployment.

Number of people

Fill out pages 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 for everyone, including yourself, who is living or staying at this address for more than 2 months. Then complete the rest of the form.

FORM **ACS-1(X)(2020)**
(03-27-2019) Draft 6

OMB No. 0607-0810
OMB No. 0607-0936

Figure 59. 2020 to 2023 ACS: Third Mailing—Envelope (Front)

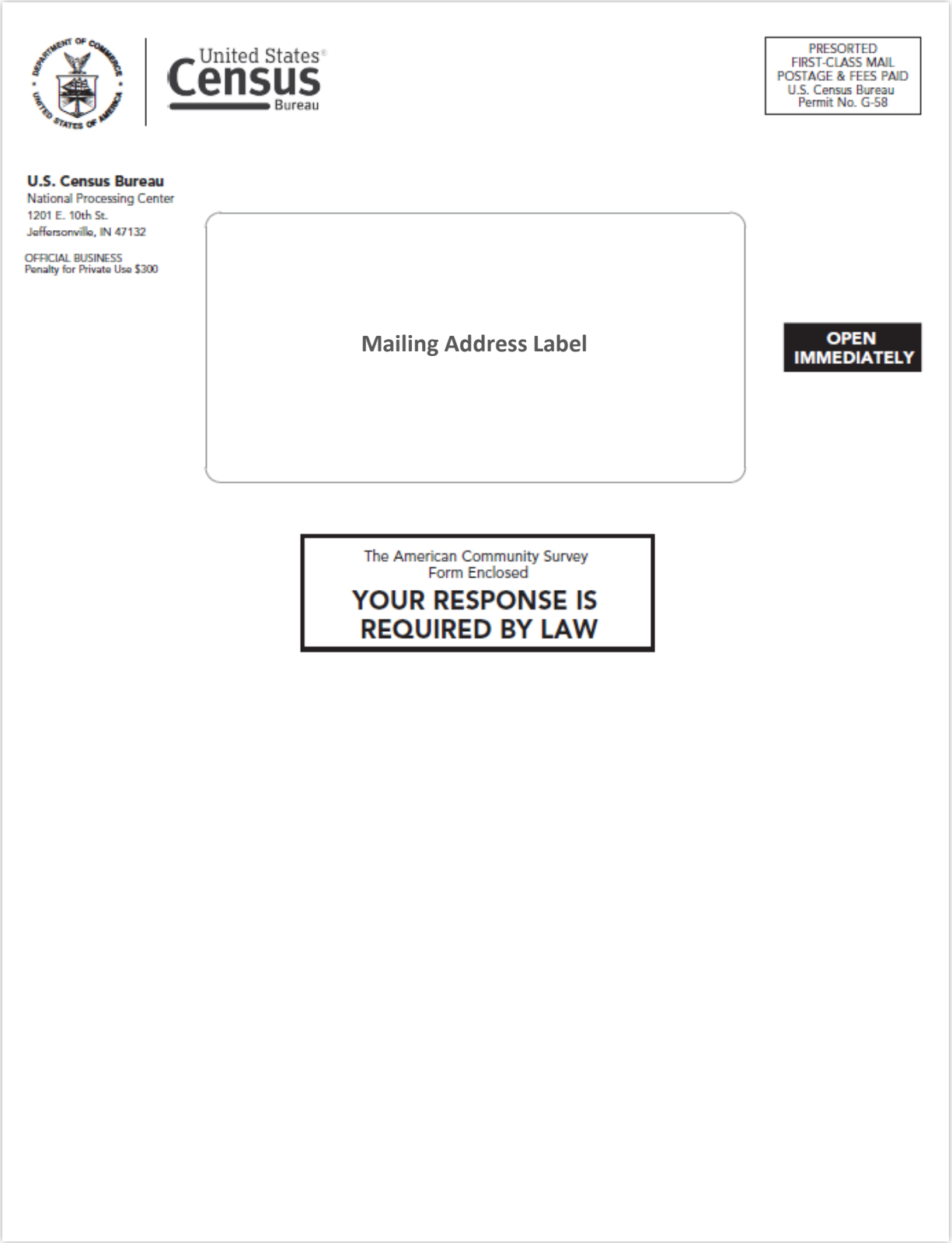
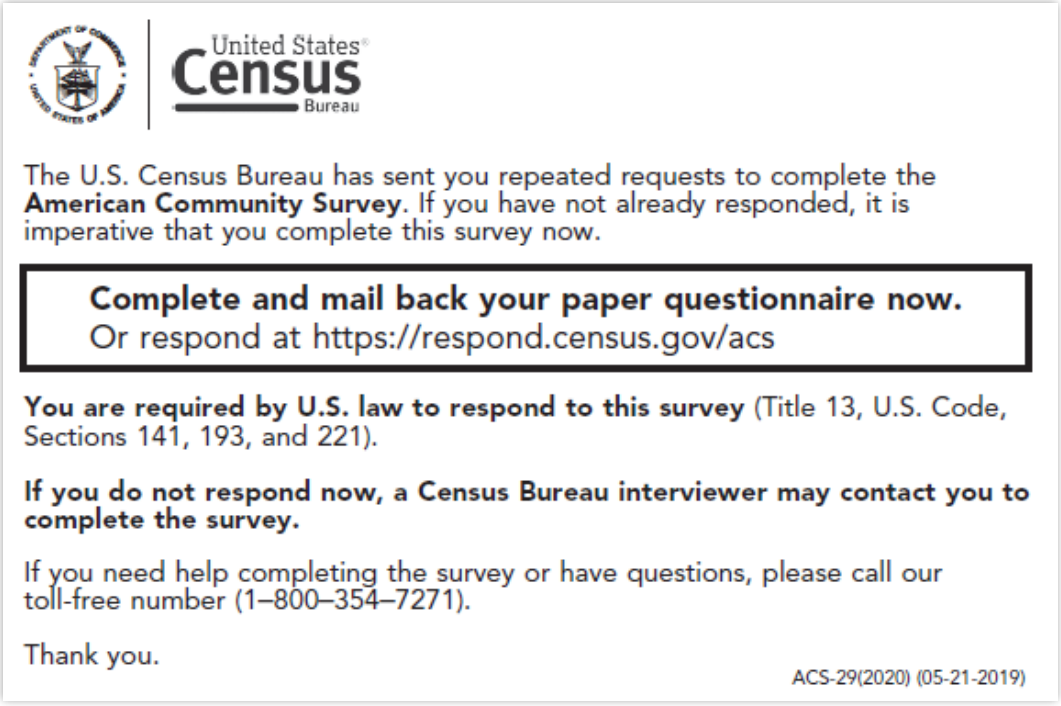


Figure 60. 2020 to 2023 ACS: Third Mailing—Envelope (Back)

Figure 61. 2020 to 2023: Fourth Mailing—Postcard



United States Census Bureau

The U.S. Census Bureau has sent you repeated requests to complete the **American Community Survey**. If you have not already responded, it is imperative that you complete this survey now.

Complete and mail back your paper questionnaire now.
Or respond at https://respond.census.gov/acs

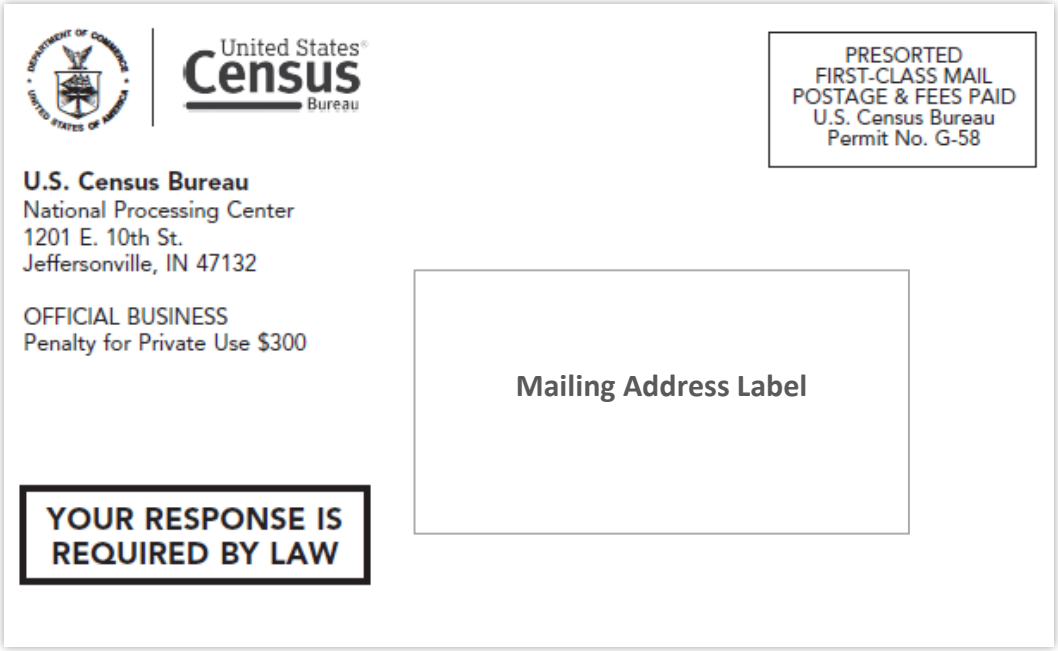
You are required by U.S. law to respond to this survey (Title 13, U.S. Code, Sections 141, 193, and 221).

If you do not respond now, a Census Bureau interviewer may contact you to complete the survey.

If you need help completing the survey or have questions, please call our toll-free number (1–800–354–7271).

Thank you.

ACS-29(2020) (05-21-2019)



United States Census Bureau

PRESORTED
FIRST-CLASS MAIL
POSTAGE & FEES PAID
U.S. Census Bureau
Permit No. G-58

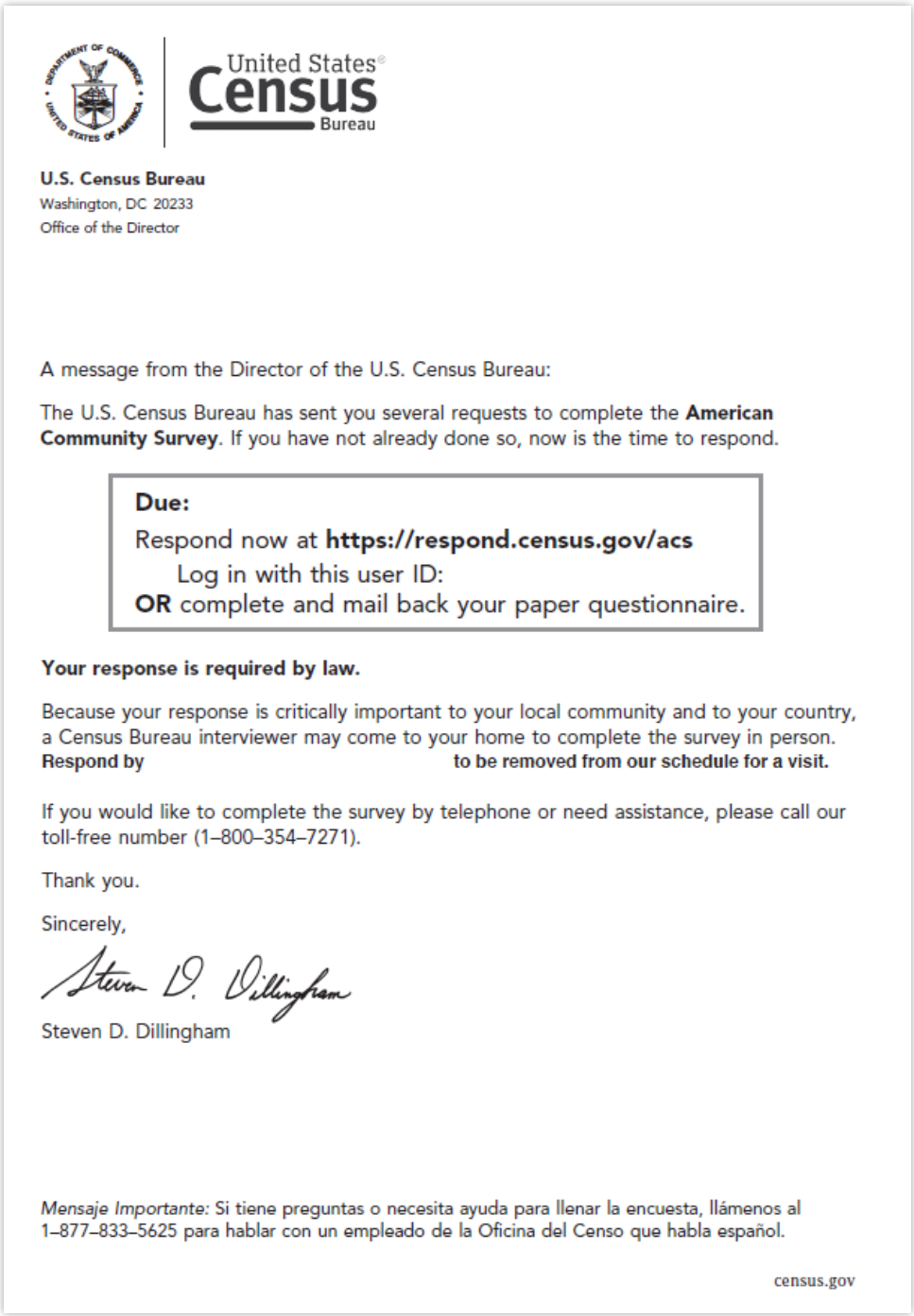
U.S. Census Bureau
National Processing Center
1201 E. 10th St.
Jeffersonville, IN 47132

OFFICIAL BUSINESS
Penalty for Private Use $300

Mailing Address Label

YOUR RESPONSE IS REQUIRED BY LAW

Figure 62. October 2020 to 2023: Fifth Mailing—Bifold Pressure Seal Mailer (Inside)



United States Census Bureau

U.S. Census Bureau
Washington, DC 20233
Office of the Director

A message from the Director of the U.S. Census Bureau:

The U.S. Census Bureau has sent you several requests to complete the **American Community Survey**. If you have not already done so, now is the time to respond.

Due:
Respond now at **https://respond.census.gov/acs**
Log in with this user ID:
OR complete and mail back your paper questionnaire.

Your response is required by law.

Because your response is critically important to your local community and to your country, a Census Bureau interviewer may come to your home to complete the survey in person.
Respond by **to be removed from our schedule for a visit.**

If you would like to complete the survey by telephone or need assistance, please call our toll-free number (1–800–354–7271).

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Steven D. Dillingham

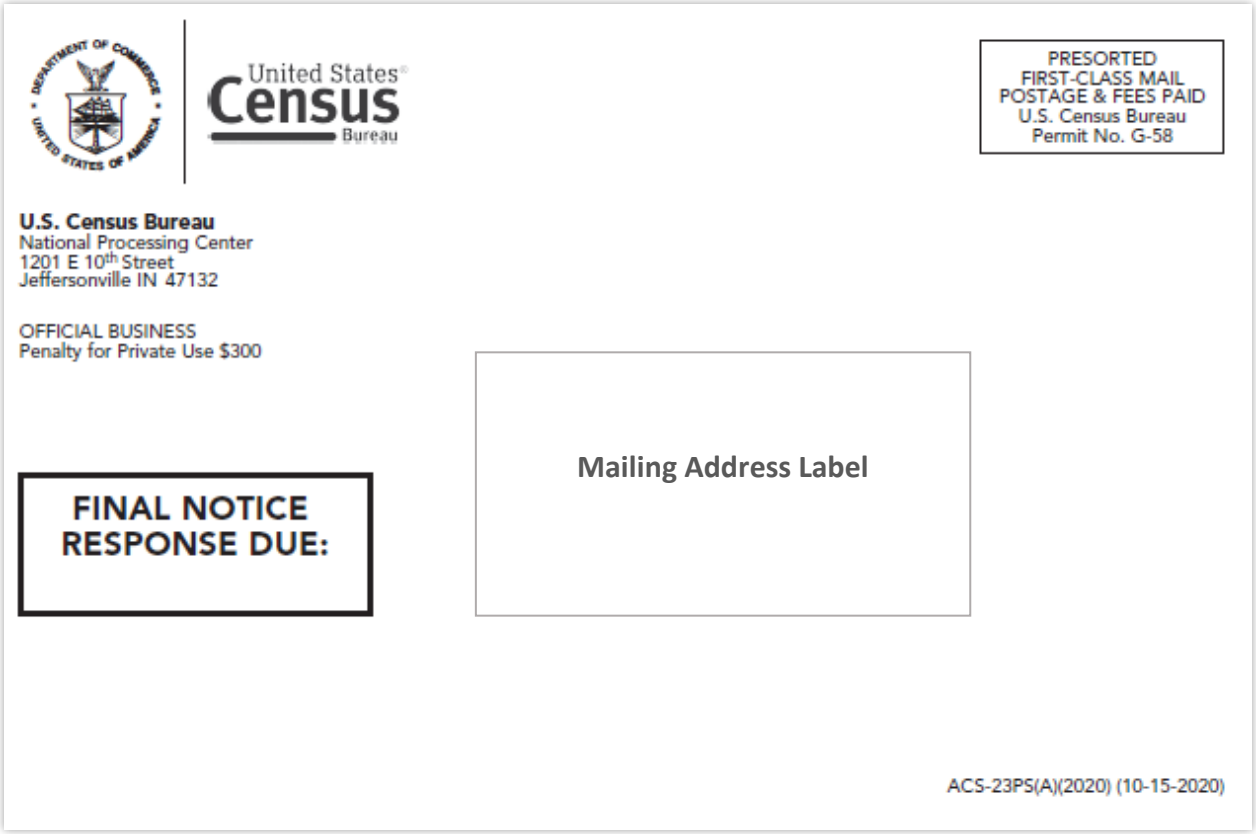
Steven D. Dillingham

Mensaje Importante: Si tiene preguntas o necesita ayuda para llenar la encuesta, llámenos al 1–877–833–5625 para hablar con un empleado de la Oficina del Censo que habla español.

census.gov

Note: The date is printed in the box after "Due:" and in the bold-font sentence, "Respond by …. to be from our schedule for a visit." The User ID is printed in the box.

Figure 63. October 2020 to 2025: Fifth Mailing—Bifold Pressure Seal Mailer (Inside)



Note: The due date is printed in the box on the left under "RESPONSE DUE."

Appendix F. ACS Data Collection During the COVID-19 Pandemic

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, Census Bureau operations were impacted beginning in March 2020. Printing, assembly, and mail-out operations were temporarily halted while NPC was closed. Once the NPC was allowed to reopen, staffing was reduced, and people were spaced farther apart, which affected processing speed. In addition, the telephone centers were closed from March through mid-June, and in-person interviews were stopped from mid-March to June 2020. Call center staff began making calls for Failed Edit Followup (FEFU) and receiving TQA calls from home in mid-June. In-person interviews started in July 2020 in select areas, based on local metrics related to the virus. In September, in-person interviews resumed in all areas of the country. Telephone interviews by Field Representatives continued throughout 2020. Table 9 provides an overview of the mailings by panel month in 2020. Table 10 provides an overview of the mailings by panel month in 2021, from January to May; normal mailout operations resumed in May 2021.

Table 9. 2020 ACS Production Mailings (Modified due to the COVID-19 Pandemic)

Panel Month	First Mailing	Second Mailing	Third Mailing	Fourth Mailing	Fifth Mailing
January 2020 (normal mailings)	Initial Package	Pressure Seal Letter	Paper Questionnaire Package	Postcard	Pressure Seal Letter
February 2020 (normal mailings)	Initial Package	Pressure Seal Letter	Paper Questionnaire Package	Postcard	Pressure Seal Letter
March 2020	Initial Package	Pressure Seal Letter	Paper Questionnaire Package Sent to ~52k addresses	Not sent	Not sent
April 2020	Not sent	Not sent	Not sent	Not sent	Not sent
May 2020	Not sent	Not sent	Not sent	Not sent	Not sent
June 2020	Not sent	Not sent	Not sent	Not sent	Not sent
July 2020	Initial Package	Not sent	Paper Questionnaire Package sent to ~150k addresses; remainder sent a pressure seal reminder	Not sent	Not sent
August 2020	Pressure Seal Letter	Not sent	Paper Questionnaire Package sent to ~175k addresses; remainder sent a pressure seal reminder	Not sent	Not sent
September 2020	Initial Package	Not sent	Paper Questionnaire Package sent to ~175k addresses; remainder sent a pressure seal reminder	Not sent	Not sent
October 2020	Initial Package	Not sent	Paper Questionnaire Package	Not sent	Pressure Seal with a Due Date
November 2020	Initial Package	Not sent	Paper Questionnaire Package	Not sent	Pressure Seal with a Due Date
December 2020	Initial Package	Not sent	Paper Questionnaire Package	Not sent	Pressure Seal with a Due Date

Table 10. 2021 ACS Production Mailings (Modified due to the COVID-19 Pandemic—January through April)

Panel Month	First Mailing	Second Mailing	Third Mailing	Fourth Mailing	Fifth Mailing
January 2021	Pressure Seal Letter	Not sent	Paper Questionnaire Package	Not sent	Pressure Seal with a Due Date
February 2021	Pressure Seal Letter	Not sent	Paper Questionnaire Package	Not sent	Pressure Seal with a Due Date
March 2021	Pressure Seal Letter	Not sent	Paper Questionnaire Package	Not sent	Pressure Seal with a Due Date
April 2021	Pressure Seal Letter	Not sent	Paper Questionnaire Package	Not sent	Pressure Seal with a Due Date
May 2021 (normal mailings resumed)	Pressure Seal Letter	Pressure Seal Letter	Paper Questionnaire Package	Postcard	Pressure Seal with a Due Date

For more information, see:

Reese, D., Scanniello, N., & Villa Ross, D. (2021). "Adapting the American Community Survey Amid COVID-19." U.S. Census Bureau. https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2021/05/adapting-the-acs-amid-covid-19.html

Asiala, M., Baumgardner, S., Galvin, S., Mykyta, L., Raglin, D., Renwick, T., Shin, H., Spader, J., Spence, M., & Stern, S. (2021). "An Assessment of the COVID-19 Pandemic's Impact on the 2020 ACS 1-Year Data." U.S. Census Bureau. https://www.census.gov/library/working-papers/2021/acs/2021_CensusBureau_01.html