U.S. Census Bureau Policy on New Content for the American Community Survey

I. TITLE

U.S. Census Bureau (Census Bureau) Policy on New Content for the American Community Survey (ACS)

II. PURPOSE AND SCOPE

To define the Census Bureau policy for adding new content to the ACS, including the Puerto Rico Community Survey.[1] This policy statement does not apply to any other Census Bureau surveys.

III. LEGAL AUTHORITIES

Title 13, United States Code (U.S.C.), Section 141, authorizes the Census Bureau to conduct a decennial census of population every 10 years for the purpose of reapportioning the U.S. House of Representatives. In addition, the Secretary of Commerce is authorized to obtain such other census information as necessary. Section 193 [further] specifies that, "in conjunction with, or after the taking of each census...the Secretary may make surveys and collect such preliminary and supplementary statistics related to the main topic of the census..."

The Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995 (PRA) (44 U.S.C. 3501), requires federal agencies to obtain approval from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to collect information from the public prior to conducting the information collection. The 1995 PRA and its implementing regulations (5 CFR Part 1320) provide a formal basis for OMB review of these agency information collection requests. Pursuant to these statutory and regulatory requirements, the Census Bureau must submit the ACS, as well as all other surveys it conducts, to OMB for approval.

IV. BACKGROUND

The ACS is part of the 2010 Decennial Census Program and replaces the "Long Form" questionnaire used in the last five censuses. The "Long Form" historically collected detailed population and housing characteristics only once a decade through questions asked of a sample of the population.[2] Beginning in 2005, the ACS is collecting this detailed information from a

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[1] Throughout this policy, the American Community Survey and the Puerto Rico Community Survey will collectively be referred to as the American Community Survey.

[2] Sampling began in the 1940 census, when a few "long form" questions were asked of a small sample of people. A separate long-form questionnaire was not implemented until 1960.

sample of the Nation's population on an annual basis, thereby providing more accurate and timely data than was possible using the once-a-decade census "Long Form." Starting in 2010, the decennial census will no longer include long form data collection, but will include only a short form that collects basic information for a total count of the Nation's population.[3]

Historically, the content of the "Long Form" was constrained by only including questions for which:

1. There was a current federal law that explicitly called for the use of decennial census data for a particular federal program (mandatory).

2. It was unequivocally clear that a federal law (or implementing regulation) required the use of specific data and the decennial census was the historical or only source of data (required).

3. The data were necessary for Census Bureau operational needs (programmatic).

Constraining the content of the ACS is just as critical as it had been for the "Long Form" in the past. The Census Bureau's goal is to limit the size of the ACS so that data quality, measured by survey and item response rates, remains at or above the current levels.

V. POLICY STATEMENT

Any new ACS content will be determined by the OMB, in consultation with the Census Bureau.

The Census Bureau will only incorporate new questions on the ACS based upon guidance received from the OMB. In making content determinations, the OMB, in consultation with the Census Bureau, will consider issues such as frequency of data collection; the level of geography needed to meet the required need; and whether any other source of data would meet the requestor's need in lieu of collection on the ACS. The Census Bureau recognizes and appreciates the interests of federal partners and stakeholders in the collection of data on the ACS. The fact that respondents' participation in the ACS is mandatory requires that the OMB will only approve, and the Census Bureau will only ask, necessary questions. On a periodic basis, the Census Bureau will reassess the questions contained on the ACS to ensure that this survey remains the appropriate vehicle for collection of these data. The OMB's responsibility under the PRA requires that practical utility of the data be demonstrated and that the respondent burden be kept to a minimum. As such, the Census Bureau will refer all agency requests for new content to the OMB.

[3] In addition to counting each person in every household, the "basic" information planned for the 2010 Census short form will include a very small select set of key demographic information needed for Voting Rights and other legislative requirements. Currently, data on gender, age, relationship, race, and ethnicity are planned.

VI. IMPLEMENTATION AND RESPONSIBILITIES

In accordance with the PRA, the OMB, in consultation with the Census Bureau, is responsible for approving new content for the ACS.

VII. DATE POLICY BECOMES EFFECTIVE

This policy becomes effective upon signature.

VIII. SIGNATURE

Charles Louis Kincannon
Director

March 31, 2006
Date