Improving Response to the American Community Survey (ACS)

For
National Academies
Workshop on Respondent Burden in the American Community Survey
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By
Don A. Dillman, Regents Professor
Department of Sociology and the Social and Economic Sciences Research Center
Washington State University, Pullman, WA  99164-4014
dillman@wsu.edu
https://sesrc.wsu.edu/our-team/dr-don-dillman/

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Some background

• I want to congratulate the Census Bureau on the multiple 2015 tests that I learned about last week; they are well done.

• I also believe more can be done to improve ACS self-administered response rates, and this is the focus of my comments.

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Important Background: Why do people respond to Census self-administered surveys
(Dillman, 2000, Mail and Internet Surveys, pp.298-313)

• In the 1990’s 16 factors were tested experimentally in an effort to improve mail-back response rates to Decennial Census forms.
• Only five of these factors significantly improved response rates.
  1. Respondent-friendly visual design
  2. Pre-notice letter
  3. Postcard thank-you reminder
  4. Replacement questionnaire
  5. Prominent disclosure on envelope (U.S. Census Form Enclosed: Your Response is required by law)

• Findings on the first four techniques were consistent with non-Census research. The “required by law” effect was Census-specific (and came from business survey research).
• Multiple contacts produced biggest effect, ~58%. The mandatory response notice added only modestly ( 9 percentage points) to this amount in non-census year tests.
Where the “response process” breaks down

• A 1991 survey showed some people did not respond to 1990 Decennial Census because:
  – They did not remember receiving the Census form.
  – They received it, but did not open it.
  – They opened it, but did not start to fill it out.
  – They started to fill it out but did not finish.
  – They completed the form, but did not send it back.

• The strength of multiple contacts is that each is an opportunity to get people to start and/or finish responding, but each contact needs to 1) be seen, 2) be processed and 3) add value.
Sponsorship and the “web-push” challenge

• Census Bureau “government” sponsorship is probably the most desirable sponsorship possible for obtaining high response rates. Census Bureau has credibility that other organizations and agencies lack.

• Obtaining response to a web-push methodology (request web response, and offer mail later) is more difficult than getting responses to only a mail-out mail-back procedure.
  – Research evidence: Ten University sponsored tests in multiple states produced mean response rates of 43% for a web-push methodology vs. 53% for a mail-out, mail-back approach.
  – The reason for lower response is that switching from one medium of communication (mail contact) to web response requires special effort.
Response rates for 10 statewide web-push (mean, 43%, with 62% over the web) vs. mail out/mail back (mean, 53%) surveys, 2007-2012 (Dillman, Smyth and Christian, 2014, Chapter 11).
What makes a communication sequence effective?

• Designing all visible aspects of mail contacts in mutually supportive ways.
  – Outside appearance of envelope or card—size, shape, print.
  – The message (letter) requesting a response.
  – Enclosures.
  – The Census form cover pages.
  – The actual questions.

• Factors that work against individual effectiveness of contacts
  - Keeping the same outside appearance of most mailings.
  - Repeating the same content over and over so new information and appeals cannot be added.
  - Gratuitous enclosures that are not relevant to most people who will respond.
  - Failure to convey the importance of each household’s response.
  - Failure to utilize new opportunities/places for effective persuasion in later contacts.

• Goal is to avoid sameness of arguments and letting each contact become unfocused (too many disparate enclosures).
The current implementation package has five contacts

1  a. envelope, b. frequently asked questions, c. instruction card for logging in, d. multi-language brochure, e. message from the director.
2  a. envelope, b. message from the director.
3  a. envelope, b. frequently asked questions (repeat), c. 16 page Instruction booklet, d. card for log-in, e. message from the director, f. paper questionnaire, g. return envelope.
4. Reminder postcard (small).
5. Large postcard
I propose removing or change certain these elements in the five Census contacts

1. a. envelope, b. frequently asked questions, c. instruction card for logging in, d. multi-language brochure, e. message from the director. ADD: How your responses help America.

2. a. envelope, b. message from the director.

3. a. envelope, b. frequently asked questions (repeat), c. 16 page Instruction booklet, d. card for log-in, e. message from the director, f. paper questionnaire, g. return envelope. ADD: How your responses help America

4. Small reminder postcard.

5. Large postcard Replace with letter
Contact 1. Remove elements that interfere with focus and add “How Your Responses Help America”

- Change, “American Community Survey” to “U.S. Census Form is Enclosed” to get envelope opened.
- Remove language enclosure from mailing. English and Spanish sections are wrong ( “In a few days you will receive an American Community Survey...”) and this efforts needs to be integrated into letter.)
- Remove Frequently Asked Questions brochure. It’s partially redundant and points can be better conveyed in letter. Also, some parts, “ e.g. helping your community to establish goals...” is probably not credible to most people.
- Replace the two enclosures with “How Your Responses Help America”. It gives concrete examples of why the ACS is important.
- Eliminate web card and put log-in information into the letter
- Rewrite letter to make it culturally consistent with being a request to which the recipient is required to respond.
Envelope Less likely to be opened because ACS not well known; previously tested as U.S. Census form enclosed; Census Bureau deemphasized to lesser known entity, and seems to be located in Jeffersonville
Frequently asked questions does not add much value; Graphics inconsistent with multi-language brochure.
Also Delete multi-language brochure. Can this be explained in the letter? Some wording now seems inaccurate.
Replace with this much needed explanation for why the ACS is an important and mandatory survey.
Back side of How your responses help America

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commuting</th>
<th>Never estimate distances and travel times can be used to identify areas with high concentrations of rush hour travel. The ACS includes questions about daily commuting patterns, such as the mode of transportation used, the time it takes to travel to and from work, and the distance traveled. This information can be used to plan and prioritize transportation investments to improve traffic flow and reduce congestion.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disability and Health Insurance</td>
<td>Communities are those areas that have a high demand for services such as transportation, employment programs, and public service accessibility for people with disabilities. Business leaders who serve these populations may also seek areas that have a high demand for their services. From these statistics, we learn which groups are at risk of experiencing limited health care access, poor health, and poor health outcomes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing Characteristics</td>
<td>Through your ACS responses, we learn about communities where affordable housing assistance, rehabilitation loans, and other programs that help people afford decent, safe, and sanitary housing. These data are vital in responding to natural disasters. In places where disaster strikes, these data are used to plan recovery response to natural disasters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owners and Renters</td>
<td>These statistics are used to analyze whether housing is affordable, present ownership and renters, and allocate and fund assistance programs. Government can use these statistics to understand changes in local housing markets, monitor affordability, identify areas, and reduce tax revenue from vacant or abandoned properties. Renters use these data to design and market homes, and home goods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People and Relationships</td>
<td>This information, along with other statistics, is used to monitor wellbeing, discrimination, and socioeconomic conditions. Federal agencies use this information to administer programs providing funds and services for groups such as single parents, low-income families, older people living alone, etc. USA.gov use these estimates to evaluate market demand for products and services.</td>
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Pump-up Relevance and Content of the **cover letter**, so it no longer appears mass-produced

- Replace the salutation “A message from the Director, U.S. Census Bureau”. With inside address (replacement for online card insert).
- Put date on the letter (culturally, targeted communications have dates).
- Add any essential information from removed brochures using backside of the letter if needed.
- Explain why people are required to respond and that the response applies to all persons living at this address.
- Tie justification of request to, **How your responses help America.**
Contact 2: Replace postcard with letter reminder (already done)

• This letter was tested and replaced pre-notice letter and reminder postcard after August 2015. (Reminder Postcard was a carryover from mail-only request. It could not provide name of survey and login information, so respondent was “pushed back” to first mail-out, thus increasing the “burden” of figuring out how to respond online.

• This change illustrates how web-push methods need different contacts than did a mail-only approach.

• **Internet response improved ~5 %, total Internet + mail response ~3.5%.**
Further Improvements?

• The new letter needs a number of text changes, but I could not develop those within today’s time constraints.
• Replacing pre-notice and reminder card with a follow-up letter has potential cost savings is $5-9 million.
Third Contact: Eliminate three of current enclosures

• Currently includes 7 pieces of paper.
  – a. envelope, b. frequently asked questions,
    c. 16 page Instruction booklet, d. log-in card,
    e. message from the director, f. paper questionnaire, g. return envelope.

• Results of Census experiment. Removal of instruction booklet and choice card had no significant effect on item or unit response rate or calls for assistance.

• Cost savings for excluding both is ~2.7% of total cost.
Eliminate the 18 page instruction guide from Contact 3

- It is a holdover from 1990 Census that has changed little except for question specifics.
- It’s inclusion does not improve response.
- A non significant improvement in item response could be helped by new form cover page.
- This guide is not used with the online version of the ACS.

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Web card can also be removed without negatively affecting response rates; shift content to the letter

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.
Other changes for Contact 3 are needed

• Add: “How Your Responses Help America.”
  – Normally, repetition should be avoided. But, when changing modes of response, it is warranted if value is added.

• Redesign first page of the paper form to make it appealing, and communicate survey purpose.

• This mailing more likely than previous ones to be shared with other people in household; questionnaire cover gives more space for articulating why a response is important, in location that will do the most good.
Use as supporting enclosure for the newly drafted paper cover page
First page of the current paper ACS provides no reason for responding.
Proposed new first page for the ACS designed to engage recipients. Note secondary title, connection to “How Your Response Helps America”, and additional explanation of reasons to respond.

(thanks to Thom Allen, Washington State University, for graciously drafting this concept)
Give cover letter greater importance, and link to people living at this address

- Focus on getting people to respond by mail, but convey how having a copy of paper questionnaire may help in knowing questions to be asked.
- Eliminate paragraph on additional follow-up—save for next contact.
- Three paragraphs are virtually the same as an earlier letter, use them to provide new arguments.
- Add date and address at top of letter to personalize this mandatory request.
My goal is to get synergy among fewer, but stronger design elements
Contacts 4 and 5; Need to rethink these postcards, turning the 5\textsuperscript{th} contact into a letter.

• The postcards are different sizes, but redundant visually and with regard to content.
• Similarity decreases likelihood of impact.
• Keep Contact 4 as postcard, but change Contact 5 to a letter.
The current 4th contact: Reminder Postcard

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.

John H. Thompson
The current 5\textsuperscript{th} Contact is also a postcard

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. \textbf{You are required by U.S. law to respond to this survey.} The Census Bureau is required by U.S. law to keep your answers confidential. If you have already responded, thank you. If you have not, please complete the questionnaire and send it now, or complete the survey online now at https://respond.census.gov/acs.

\textbf{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.

John H. Thompson

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4\textsuperscript{th} contact stays as postcard, but appeal is refocused

• This is the first use of postcard in implementation sequence, so contrast is desirable.

• Research shows that one postcard helps bring in mail-back response, so make that the focus. Appeal of this postcard is towards those who kept paper questionnaire and have “predisposition” to return it.

• Leave out the emphasis on required by law, and “an enumerator will visit”.

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Change 5\textsuperscript{th} contact to \textbf{letter}

- Use letter format to get contrast with 4\textsuperscript{th} contact.
- Put mandatory requirement on outside of letter.
- Focus letter on why response is required, and this being last contact prior to efforts to call by telephone or in-person.
- Emphasize online response (paper questionnaire less likely to still be available in household); letter format allows more detail about online response.
In summary

- I applaud the major tests the Census Bureau has made in the last year that have already improved their mail out strategy.
- However, I believe the five contacts now in use can be strengthened significantly to improve combined web/mail response rates (and reduce amount of telephone/in-person follow-up).
- These steps aimed at overcoming the “lower” response that seems inevitable when using a “web-push” instead of “mail-back only” methodology.
- A major effort needs to be invested in rewriting all of the letters so they become more persuasive, more likely to command attention, and mutually supportive with each other.
References


