

# American Community Survey Mail Contact Strategy and Research

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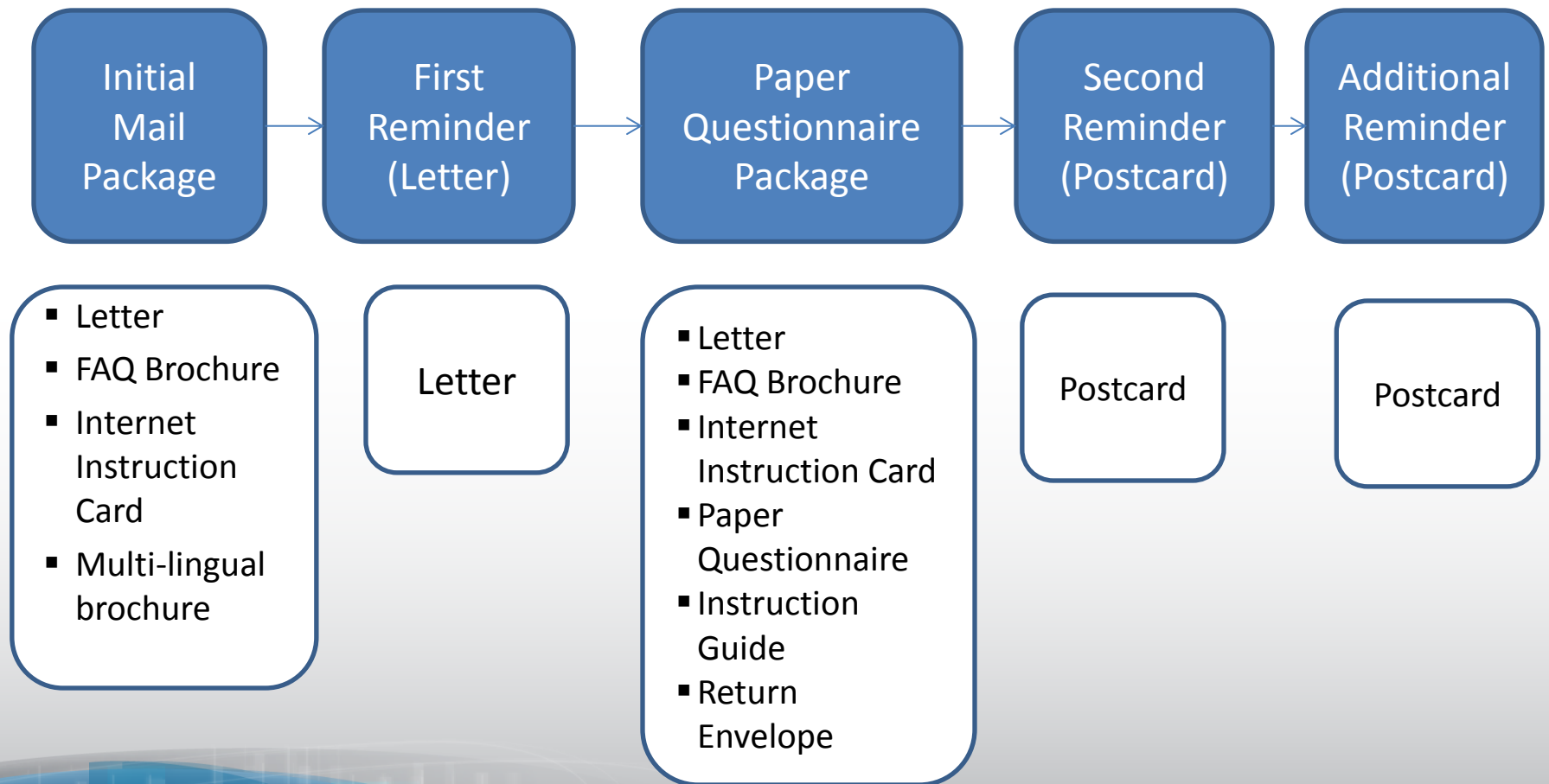
Workshop on Respondent Burden in the  
American Community Survey

March 8, 2016

# American Community Survey (ACS) Background

- Monthly survey sent to 3.5 million addresses per year to collect population and housing data
- Mandatory survey
- 3-month multi-mode sequential data collection for each monthly panel
  - Month 1: Self-response (Internet and Mail)
  - Month 2: Telephone interviews with non-respondents (CATI)
  - Month 3: In-person interviews with a sample of non-respondents (CAPI)

# 2016 ACS Mail Strategy



# Recognizing Respondent Reactions to the ACS Mail Strategy

- May question the legitimacy of the survey
- May perceive the number of mailings as intrusive
- May perceive tone of the materials negatively
  - Mandatory
  - Unable to respond (Internet)
- Mail contact is less intrusive than a telephone call or a personal visit

# Mail Contact Research Focus

- Address respondent burden
- Improve self-response rates through streamlined materials
- Address respondents' and stakeholders' concerns about the prominent nature of mandatory messages on the mail materials

# Messaging and Mail Package Assessment Research

- Research to develop and test messages and mail package designs to increase self-response
- Focus groups and one-on-one interviews
- 5 Recommendations:
  - Visual design changes
  - Deadline-related messaging on envelopes
  - Eliminate pre-notice
  - Test additional mailings
  - Tailor materials for non-English speaking respondents

# Field Testing of Mail Materials

- Paper Questionnaire Package Test (March)
- Mail Strategy Modification Test (April)
- Envelope Mandatory Messaging Test (May)
- 2015 Summer Mandatory Messaging Test (September)
- ‘Why We Ask’ Insert Test (November)

# Paper Questionnaire Package Test (March 2015)

- Goal: Reduce complexity of the paper questionnaire package
- Experimental Design
  - Control: Includes Instruction Guide and Choice Card, No change to messaging
  - Treatment 1: Remove Instruction Guide and Choice Card, No change to messaging
  - Treatment 2: Remove Instruction Guide and Choice Card, Modify messaging
  - Treatment 3: Remove Instruction Guide Only, No change to messaging
  - Treatment 4: Remove Choice Card, Modify messaging



# Paper Questionnaire Package Test Results

- No significant differences ( $\alpha=.10$ ) between treatments in return rates were detected
- No significant differences in item nonresponse rates, form completion rates, and response distributions were detected. However, item nonresponse rates were nominally higher for treatments without the instruction guide.
- Removing the instruction guide and/or choice card would result in cost savings.

# Paper Questionnaire Package Test Recommendations

- Remove instruction guide
  - This change will be implemented this spring
- Retain choice card
  - There was less cost savings associated with removing the choice card so it was not removed.
- Don't modify the Letter

# Mail Contact Strategy Modification Test (April 2015)

- Goal: Improve self-response rates by streamlining mail materials
  - Remove prenotice letter and send initial mailing earlier
  - Replace reminder postcard with a letter highlighting the user ID
  - Send additional reminder postcard to additional addresses

# Mail Contact Strategy Modification Test

## Experimental Design

	Prenotice	No Prenotice; Reminder Letter	No Prenotice; Reminder Postcard
Additional postcard to addresses without phone numbers (control universe)	<u>Control</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prenotice Letter</li> <li>• Reminder Postcard</li> <li>• Additional postcard to control universe</li> </ul>	<u>Treatment 1</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No Prenotice Letter</li> <li>• Reminder Letter</li> <li>• Additional postcard to control universe</li> </ul>	<u>Treatment 2</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No Prenotice</li> <li>• Reminder Postcard</li> <li>• Additional postcard to control universe</li> </ul>
Additional postcard to ALL nonresponding addresses	<u>Treatment 3</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prenotice letter</li> <li>• Reminder Postcard</li> <li>• Additional postcard to ALL nonresponse</li> </ul>	<u>Treatment 4</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No Prenotice letter</li> <li>• Reminder Letter</li> <li>• Additional postcard to ALL nonresponse</li> </ul>	<u>Treatment 5</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No Prenotice letter</li> <li>• Reminder Postcard</li> <li>• Additional postcard to ALL nonresponse</li> </ul>

# Mail Contact Strategy Modification Test Results

- Eliminating the prenotice and sending the initial mailing earlier decreased total self-response return rate by 1.4 percentage points prior to paper questionnaire mailing.
- Prior to CATI there was no measurable difference in the self-response return rates.
- Using a reminder letter (User ID highlighted, includes mandatory language) increased total self-response return rates prior to CATI by 3.8 percentage points.

# Mail Contact Strategy Modification Test Results

- Using a reminder letter, eliminating the prenotice, and sending the initial mailing earlier increased total self-response return rates prior to CATI by 3.5 percentage points.
- Sending an additional reminder postcard to addresses in CATI increased total self-response return rates. No noticeable change in CATI response rates. However, two approaches to estimating cost savings resulted in conflicting findings.

# Mail Contact Strategy Modification Test Recommendations

- Eliminate the PreNotice Letter and send the Initial Mailing Earlier
  - Change implemented in August, 2015
- Change the First Reminder from a Postcard to a Letter
  - Change implemented in August, 2015
- Do not change the Additional Postcard Mailing
  - Additional testing recommended

# Envelope Mandatory Messaging Test (May 2015)

- Goal: Study impact of removing mandatory message from envelopes
- Control: Control Materials with Mandatory Message on Envelopes
- Test Treatment: Mandatory Message Removed from Envelopes



# Envelope Mandatory Messaging Test Results

- The Test Treatment had return rates 5.4 percentage points lower than the Control, when mailings ended and CATI started. The difference was statistically significant.
- After all modes of data collection, the Test Treatment had a lower overall response rate by 0.7 percentage points, which was statistically significant.

# Envelope Mandatory Messaging Test Results

- Lower self-response in the test treatment led to:
  - Additional paper questionnaires mailed
  - Higher CATI and CAPI workload
- Eliminating mandatory messages from the envelopes is estimated to cost an additional \$9.5 million

# 2015 Summer Mandatory Messaging Test (September 2015)

- Goal: Study impact of removing or modifying mandatory message from a broader set of mail materials
- 5 Treatments tested softening or removing mandatory messaging and tested a revised design

# 2015 Summer Mandatory Messaging Test Treatments

- Control
  - No change to materials
- Softened Control
  - Mandatory messages removed from initial letter, mail package letter, postcards, and envelopes
  - Mandatory messages kept in FAQ brochure, reminder letter, instruction guide

# 2015 Summer Mandatory Messaging Test Treatments (Con't)

- Revised Design
  - Redesigned envelopes, use of bold lettering, highlight boxes, “Open Immediately”
  - Strong mandatory language
- Softened Revised Design
  - Revised design used
  - Mandatory messages removed from postcards and envelopes
  - Mandatory messages softened in letters (plain text)
- Minimal Revised Design
  - Revised design used
  - Mandatory messages removed in all materials except initial letter
  - Mandatory messages in initial letter on back of page, in small font

# Control Initial Envelope

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE**  
**Economics and Statistics Administration**  
**U.S. CENSUS BUREAU**  
1201 East 10th Street  
Jeffersonville IN 47132-0001

OFFICIAL BUSINESS  
Penalty for Private Use \$300

ACS-46IM(2013) (12-2012)

AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY EMPLOYER

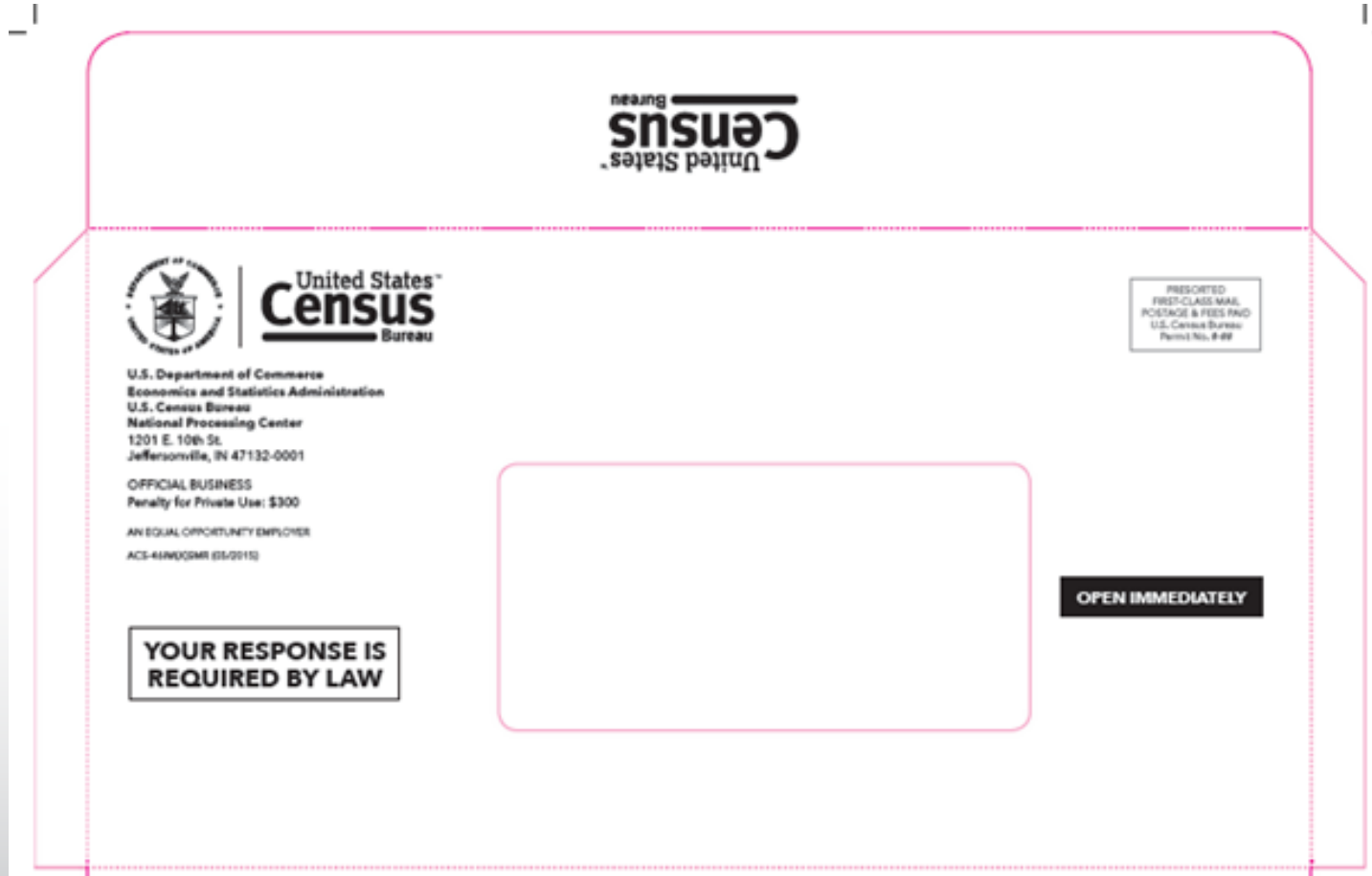
PRESORTED  
FIRST-CLASS MAIL  
POSTAGE & FEES PAID  
U.S. Census Bureau  
Permit No. G-58

The American Community Survey

**YOUR RESPONSE IS  
REQUIRED BY LAW**



# Redesigned Initial Envelope



# Control Initial Letter

ACS-13(L)(2015)  
(5-2015)



**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 Census Bureau is required by U.S. law to keep your answers confidential. 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.

Sincerely,

John H. Thompson  
Director, U.S. Census Bureau

Enclosures

census.gov



# Revised Design Initial Letter



United States™  
**Census**  
Bureau

U.S. Census Bureau  
Washington, DC 20233

A Message From John H. Thompson, 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 1-800-354-7271.

Thank you in advance for your prompt response.

Sincerely,

John H. Thompson  
Director, U.S. Census Bureau

Enclosures

American Community Survey data help determine the annual distribution of more than **\$400 billion** in federal funds to communities nationwide.

ACS-13(L)5MR (5-2015)

[census.gov](https://census.gov)

# Softened Revised Design Initial Letter



United States™  
**Census**  
Bureau

U.S. Census Bureau  
Washington, DC 20233

A Message From John H. Thompson, 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>

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. Your response is required by U.S. law.

**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 1-800-354-7271.

Thank you in advance for your prompt response.

Sincerely,

John H. Thompson  
Director, U.S. Census Bureau

Enclosures

American Community Survey data help determine the annual distribution of more than **\$400 billion** in federal funds to communities nationwide.

ACS-13(LX05MS (5-2015)

census.gov

# 2015 Summer Mandatory Messaging Results

Treatment	Self-Response Return Rate Before CATI	Difference Between Experimental Treatment and Control	Final Response Rate	Difference Between Experimental Treatment and Control
Control	47.2 (0.4)	---	95.4 (0.3)	---
Softened Control	<b>33.7 (0.3)</b>	<b>-13.6 (0.5)</b>	<b>93.8 (0.3)</b>	<b>-1.7 (0.4)</b>
Revised Design	<b>50.8 (0.4)</b>	<b>3.5 (0.6)</b>	96.0 (0.3)	0.6 (0.4)
Softened Revised Design	<b>39.4 (0.4)</b>	<b>-7.8 (0.5)</b>	95.1 (0.3)	-0.3 (0.4)
Minimal Revised Design	<b>34.6 (0.4)</b>	<b>-12.7 (0.5)</b>	94.7 (0.3)	-0.8 (0.4)

Comparisons to Control Treatment at  $\alpha = 0.1$  (significant results in bold)

# **‘Why We Ask’ Insert Test (November 2015)**

- Goal: Study impact of including a flyer in the paper questionnaire mailing explaining why questions are asked in the ACS
- Treatments
  - Control
  - Treatment 1 – Include ‘Why We Ask’ insert
  - Treatment 2 – Include ‘Why We Ask’ insert, remove the Instruction Guide

# Future Research

- Targeted Digital Advertising Campaign Test
  - Deliver video and static-image advertisements to sampled addresses
  - Create positive associations with the Census Bureau's work generally and the importance of completing a survey
  - Will not directly link to or mention the ACS
- Social and Behavioral Sciences Team Testing

# Acknowledgements

The following Census Bureau staff worked to develop, implement, and analyze the research discussed in this presentation:

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# Contact Information

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