

# Communicating the American Community Survey's Value to Respondents

Andrew Reamer, Research Professor  
George Washington Institute of Public Policy  
George Washington University

Workshop on Respondent Burden in the American  
Community Survey  
Washington, DC

March 8, 2016

# Notion of “Respondent Burden”

- A 1980s meme based on notion of “government as the problem” or government as “them”
- Issue: “Burden” is a non-neutral term
- Options for measuring “burden”
  - Paperwork Reduction Act: Time expended
  - This workshop: Difference between perceived costs and perceived value
- Proposal: When possible, use alternative neutral framing, while being sensitive to the issue of perceived costs

# Proposals for Communicating ACS's Value

- 1) Revise tag line
- 2) Include overarching framework of uses
- 3) Note ACS origins – Madison's proposal
- 4) Emphasize community fair share
- 5) Indicate community response rate
- 6) Redesign “Why We Ask” – broaden and highlight examples
- 7) Test use of Census Partnership Program with ACS

# Revise Tag Line

- Issue: “How Your Responses Help America” is too general
- Proposed: “How Your Responses Help Your Community, State, and Nation”

# Include Overarching Framework of Uses

- Issue: Breadth of uses is not described, only examples are given
- Proposed framework:
  - Democracy
  - Economy
  - More efficient and effective government

# Note Madison Origins of ACS

- Issue: Perception that the ACS is
  - unconstitutional
  - an invasion of privacy
  - an instrument of intrusive left-wing governments
- Proposal: Indicate that the ACS is the current iteration of Representative James Madison's effort in 1790 to add questions to the Decennial Census so that Congress might legislate on the basis of "the particular circumstances of the community"

# Congressman Madison

- [Congress] had now an opportunity of obtaining the most useful information for those who should hereafter be called upon to legislate for their country if this bill [Census Act of 1790] was extended so as to embrace some other objects besides the bare enumeration of the inhabitants;
- it would enable them to adapt the public measures to the particular circumstances of the community.

# Congressman Madison

- In order to know the various interests of the United States, it was necessary that the description of the several classes into which the community was divided, should be accurately known;
- on this knowledge the legislature might proceed to make a proper provision for the agricultural, commercial and manufacturing interests, but without it they could never make their provisions in due proportion.

# Congressman Madison

- This kind of information . . . all legislatures had wished for; but this kind of information had never been obtained in any country.
- He wished, therefore, to avail himself of the present opportunity of accomplishing so valuable a purpose.
- If the plan was pursued in taking every future census, it would give [Congress] an opportunity of marking the progress of the society, and distinguishing the growth of every interest. This would furnish ground for many useful calculations

.....

# Congressman Madison

- [I]n order to accommodate our laws to the real situation of our constituents, we ought to be acquainted with that situation.
- It may be impossible to ascertain it as far as I wish, but we may ascertain it so far as to be extremely useful, when we come to pass laws, affecting any particular description of people.

# Congressman Madison

- [Mr. Page (VA-7) thought this particular method of describing the people, would occasion an alarm among them; they would suppose the Government intended something . . . besides gratifying an idle curiosity . . . all their measures are suspected of policy.]
- Madison: [T]he people would suppose the information was required for its true object, namely to know in what proportion to distribute the benefits resulting from an efficient General Government.

# Emphasize Community Fair Share

- Issue: Material does not discuss that a substantial percentage of U.S. economic activity is allocated on the basis of the ACS
- Proposal: Emphasize that the ACS enables the community to get their fair share of public and private resources, including:
  - private sector goods and services
  - jobs
  - government grants and services

# Indicate Community Response Rate

- Issue: Materials do not sufficiently communicate that responding to the ACS is the social norm
- Proposal: Customize respondent letters to indicate response rate for the community, county, metro area, or state

# Redesign “Why We Ask”

- Issues:
  - Uses examples are buried in text, without highlight
  - Difficult to grasp breadth of uses
  - Role in drawing legislative boundaries not mentioned
- Proposal—Redesign insert to:
  - Highlight examples in a way that allows the reader to quickly grasp the breath and the specifics
  - Add use example for drawing legislative boundaries

# Test use of Census Partnership Program with ACS

- Issue: Options do not exist for respondents to learn about local uses of the ACS
- Proposal: Test the desirability and feasibility of expanding the Census Partnership Program to include the ACS

# **Communicating the American Community Survey's Value to Respondents**

Andrew Reamer, Research Professor  
George Washington Institute of Public Policy  
George Washington University

[reamer@gwu.edu](mailto:reamer@gwu.edu)

(202) 994-7866