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**Results and Recommendations from Cognitive Interviews
with Selected Materials Accompanying
the American Community Survey**

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FINAL REPORT

Results & Recommendations From Cognitive Interviews With Selected Materials Accompanying The American Community Survey



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PART I Research Purpose, Overview, & Limitations

A. RESEARCH PURPOSE

The purpose of this research was to cognitively pretest three separate versions of materials mailed to sample households, which precede or accompany a mail package containing the American Community Survey (ACS). Staff from the Center for Survey Methods Research (CSMR), in the Statistical Research Division (SRD), cognitively pretested these materials in the fall of 2002. The intent was to pretest these versions, or panels, before implementing them in a split-ballot experiment for the ACS, slated for early 2003, to assess the effect of a mandatory-to-voluntary survey conversion. Census Bureau staff assembled to design and oversee this experiment requested the cognitive research, to assure the content of the ACS materials posed no significant comprehension problems for respondents in the lab.¹

Each version of these materials contained two letters and an informational brochure, the content of which only differed in messages used to communicate whether the survey was voluntary or mandatory. An envelope displaying a motivational message was also pretested.

After preliminary findings and recommendations were presented and discussed in two meetings, held during the last two weeks of November 2002, this research was ultimately used by those in attendance as a guide for recrafting portions of the three panels of ACS materials.² Comments on, and suggestions for, these materials provided by Don Dillman were also considered and incorporated into the materials during these meetings. Time constraints prevented the final materials from being subjected to additional cognitive pretesting.

The following sections of this report will provide an overview of the panels involved in this research, present some limitations, describe the method used, list respondent characteristics, discuss the major findings, and present recommendations where applicable for optimal wording for these materials.

¹ Staff included Theresa Allen (DSMD), Nancy Bates (DSD), Barbara Diskin (DSD), Karen Field (FLD), Don Fischer (DSD), Deborah Griffin (DSMD), Gail Leithauser (DSMD), Theresa Leslie (DSMD), Lawrence McGinn (DSD), Pamela McGovern (DSMD), Elizabeth Martin (DIR), Grace Moe (DSD), Alfredo Navarro (DSMD), Sally Obenski (PRED), David Raglin (DSMD), Lydia Santos (DSD), Anthony Tersine (DSMD), Lynn Weidman (SRD), Dale Wood (DSD). Theresa DeMaio (SRD) and Ashley Landreth (SRD) attended meetings when the content of the ACS materials and the proposed cognitive pretesting design were discussed.

² Staff present for those meetings included Nancy Bates (DSD), Theresa DeMaio (SRD), Don Fischer (DSD), Deborah Griffin (DSMD), Ashley Landreth (SRD), Theresa Leslie (DSMD), Lawrence McGinn (DSD), Elizabeth Martin (DIR), Grace Moe (DSD), and David Raglin (DSMD).

B. RESEARCH OVERVIEW

B.1. Multiple-Mailing Strategy & Content Review

The mailing strategy for the ACS involves multiple phases to achieve the highest possible mail-return rate. Chart 1 below represents the materials mailed to households at each of the four stages:

Chart 1. American Community Survey's Mail Materials

MATERIALS	Order of Mailing			
	FIRST	SECOND	THIRD	FOURTH
<i>Prenotice Letter</i>	✓			
<i>Reminder Postcard</i>			✓	
<i>Survey Cover Letter</i> (1 st)		✓		
<i>Survey Cover Letter</i> (2 nd)				✓
<i>FAQ Brochure</i>		✓		✓
<i>Survey Guidebook</i>		✓		✓
<i>ACS Questionnaire</i>		✓		✓
<i>Return Envelope</i> (postage-paid)		✓		✓

B.2. Materials Included In Cognitive Pretesting

The original text for the ACS materials, used in mailings to previous test sites, was revised and reorganized in the summer of 2002. Nancy Torrieri (DSD) revised the original materials, and a formal review of this material was conducted and submitted in a written report (*Review of the American Community Survey's Revised Letters & Materials*, Landreth, 2002). Findings and recommendations from this report, along with comments from Nancy Bates (DSD), were used to revise these materials once more prior to pretesting.

Due to time constraints associated with this project, three panels containing the full list of materials presented above could not be cognitively pretested. Thus, only a few pieces of essential material per panel were selected for pretesting: 1) the prenotice letter; 2) the first survey cover letter; and 3) the "Frequently Asked Questions" (FAQ) brochure. In addition, a motivational message was also tested with respondents who received the voluntary materials, which appeared on the front of an envelope used to mail the survey cover letter, questionnaire, FAQ brochure, and guidebook. This message appeared within a text box and read:

<p>The American Community Survey Form Enclosed</p> <p>YOUR RESPONSE IS IMPORTANT TO YOUR COMMUNITY</p>

B.3. Cognitive Interview Panels & Content

The content across the three panels was essentially identical, except for statements indicating whether a household’s response to the survey was mandatory or voluntary. Embedded within one panel of materials were the “mandatory” messages, while the other two panels carried “voluntary” messages which differ slightly from one another. Chart 2 provides a roadmap of the various materials tested, which are included as attachments to this report. A check mark indicates that the material contained a mandatory or voluntary message. The general location of the message and a references to the appropriate attachment (Attachments A – H) are also included.³

Chart 2. Cognitive Interviewing Panels and Placement of Mandatory/Voluntary Messages

MATERIALS	COGNITIVE INTERVIEWING PANELS		
	Mandatory Message	Voluntary I Message (explicit)	Voluntary II Message (implicit)
<i>Prenotice Letter</i>	(See Attachment A)	✓ 1 st Paragraph (See Attachment D)	(See Attachment A)
<i>Survey Cover Letter (1st)</i>	✓ 3 rd Paragraph (See Attachment B)	✓ 1 st Paragraph (See Attachment E)	✓ 3 rd Paragraph (See Attachment G)
<i>FAQ Brochure</i>	✓ 4 th FAQ (See Attachment C)	✓ 2 nd & 4 th FAQ (See Attachment F)	✓ 2 nd FAQ (See Attachment H)
<i>Mailing Envelope (w/motivational message)</i>	N/A ^a	Text in box ^b	Text in box ^b -

^a In the actual split-ballot experiment, this panel will carry a mandatory message on the envelope, but it was not included in the pretesting materials for this project.

^b “The American Community Survey Form Enclosed. Your response is important to your community.”

A couple of things are noteworthy regarding these panels. First, both the Mandatory and Voluntary II Panels use identical prenotice letters. Materials for these panels were created prior to the Voluntary I Panel, and in the early stages of development the prenotice letter’s goal was to generate interest in the survey while providing a minimal amount of information (e.g., acknowledge a questionnaire will be sent by mail, provide general data uses statements which will be positively received). Thus, neither mentioned whether response to the survey was mandatory or voluntary, resulting in identical letters. Instead, these two panels placed mandatory/voluntary disclosure statements in the survey cover letter and the FAQ brochure, which accompany the questionnaire in the second mailing. It was thought this would avoid causing respondents any undue concern before receiving the actual questionnaire. The Voluntary II Panel employed a two-step voluntary disclosure strategy, where an “implicit” voluntary statement was inserted in the survey cover letter, and a more “explicit” voluntary

³ The prenotice and survey letters, as pretested, contained the director’s signature, which is absent from the attachments to this report (i.e., Attachment A, B, D, E, and G).

statement was placed in the FAQ Brochure.⁴

The second noteworthy aspect of these panels involves the Voluntary I Panel, which was created at a later date and employs a different approach in the strength of the expression and timing of the voluntary disclosure statement. Here, explicit statements using the word “voluntary” are implemented at the first contact (i.e., the prenotice letter) and carried throughout the materials. The messages in this panel are also located in more salient positions; they are prominently displayed in the first paragraphs of both letters. In contrast, the mandatory/voluntary disclosure statements for the Mandatory and Voluntary II Panels are placed farther down in the letters, as indicated by the checkmarks in Chart 2 above. For comparison purposes, Chart 3 below displays the exact text used for these messages across panels:

Chart 3. Mandatory/Voluntary Messages Across Panels

PANEL	MATERIAL	MESSAGE
Mandatory	<i>Prenotice</i>	Mandatory survey message not communicated
	<i>Survey Letter</i>	Contains “This survey is required by law”
	<i>Brochure</i>	Contains paragraph explaining response is required
Voluntary I (highly salient, explicit statements in all materials)	<i>Prenotice</i>	Contains explicit statement, “Although your participation in this survey is voluntary, your response is critically important to your country and especially to your community”
	<i>Survey Letter</i>	Contains explicit statement, “Your participation in this voluntary survey is very important to your country and to your community; however, you may decline to answer any or all questions”
	<i>Brochure</i>	Contains paragraph explaining the voluntary nature of the survey
Voluntary II (less salient, two-part statement; 1 st implicit/2 nd explicit)	<i>Prenotice</i>	Voluntary survey message not communicated
	<i>Survey Letter</i>	Contains implicit statement, “Your participation in this survey is important; however, you may decline to answer any or all questions”
	<i>Brochure</i>	Contains explicit statement, “Your voluntary participation is essential for ensuring that this survey’s results are complete and accurate”

⁴ Previous research with advance letters (SIPP) indicated survey cooperation was more difficult to gain if respondents attended to the word “voluntary” in the advance letter they received prior to the field representatives’ visit. This research finding generated the two-part implicit/explicit voluntary disclosure approach, which was pretested, then implemented in the advance letter for SIPP. Pretesting results suggest respondents understood the voluntary nature of the survey under this two-part disclosure condition (“Final Report on SIPP Advance Letter Research: Cognitive Interview Results, Implications, & Letter Recommendations,” Landreth, 2001).

C. LIMITATIONS

Several caveats should be noted, to put these research findings into context:

1. Due to the volume of materials used in pretesting, results are limited to respondents' general reactions to these materials. Detailed feedback about respondents' interpretation of particular passages or messages was difficult to obtain and limited to passages respondents mentioned or reacted to spontaneously;
2. Results are limited to the three pieces of material used in each panel for pretesting and, therefore, do not reflect respondents' reactions and interpretations within the context of an actual survey mailing package (e.g., multiple mailings spaced over a few days or weeks, envelopes, the questionnaire, and other materials normally accompanying these mailings);
3. Only 12 cognitive interviews were conducted per panel. Thus, data generated within panels was sparse; however, stronger conclusions can be made about materials that are similar across panels;
4. Generalizations to ethnic populations will be difficult, given the small number of interviews spread over a limited number of respondents representing a handful of ethnicities; and
5. Time constraints made revisions and iterative pretesting impossible. As a result, it will be difficult to gauge respondents' interpretations to the new material contained in the recommendations presented here.

PART II Method & Respondent Characteristics

A. METHOD

During the months of October and November of 2002, three separate panels of ACS materials were subjected to cognitive interviews with 12 respondents each, for a combined total of 36 interviews. Researchers conducting the interviews administered a structured cognitive interview protocol.⁵ The interview protocol was comprised of scripted general and specific probes designed to elicit information about respondents' general impressions, information retention, and comprehension of main messages. Probes were retrospective in nature, meaning they were administered after respondents had read each piece of material silently. Interviews were approximately 40 minutes to an hour in length.

⁵ Researchers conducting the cognitive interviews included Theresa DeMaio (SRD), Ashley Landreth (SRD), Eileen O'Brien (SRD), and David Raglin (DSMD), along with Census Bureau contractors Alis ú Schoua-Glusberg and Margaret Rappaport.

B. RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS

Respondent recruitment efforts primarily focused on education level, in an attempt to capture respondents who would approach these materials with varying levels of sophistication, reading skills, and comprehension abilities. Ethnicity/race was also a consideration, and though respondents were mainly African-American and Caucasian, some Hispanics and one Asian were recruited. An effort was made to recruit equal numbers of men and women; however, the total respondent pool is biased towards women and mainly affects the Mandatory Panel only. Respondents were recruited from the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area, Baltimore, Maryland, rural portions of northern Virginia, and Chicago, Illinois.⁶ Table 1 below presents respondents' characteristics for the three panels combined. Summary descriptions pertaining to each panel appear below the table.

Table 1. Respondent Characteristics

ETHNICITY/RACE	EDUCATION LEVEL				TOTAL
	High ^a		Low ^b		
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
African-American	2	5	3	6	16
Asian	0	1	0	0	1
Caucasian	4	4	1	3	12
Hispanic	2	2	1	1	6
Multi-Racial/Other	0	1	0	0	1
TOTAL	8	13	5	10	36

^a "High" represents some college, college degree or advanced degree

^b "Low" represents high school diploma/equivalent or less

Mandatory Panel: The respondent pool for this round of pretesting was heavily female (9 of 12). Respondents' ages were more evenly spread than gender, ages ranged from 18 to 70 years, with the mode comprised of people in their 40s. Respondents' ethnicities were varied, with the result that no more than five respondents belonged to any one group (i.e., 5 African-Americans, 1 Asian, 2 caucasians, 3 Hispanics, and 1 multi-racial respondent). The majority of respondents were fairly educated, as seven either had some college or a degree, while only five had a high school diploma or less.

Voluntary I Panel: The respondent pool in this round was almost evenly split across females and males (7 and 5, respectively). Respondents ranged in age from 22 to 60 years, with the greatest number of respondents falling in the 30-year and 50-to-60-year age range. A range of ethnicities was represented, and included African-Americans (5), caucasians (4), and Hispanics (3). The African-American and Hispanic participants obtained less education (i.e., high school diploma or less) than their caucasian counterparts (i.e., some college and beyond).

⁶ Lorraine Randall (SRD) recruited respondents for CSMR staff conducting the interviews and facilitated this process in the Baltimore area for one contractor. Recruiting in Chicago was the sole responsibility of the contractor conducting interviews in that area.

Voluntary II Panel: The respondent pool in this round was almost evenly split across females and males (7 and 5, respectively). Respondents ranged in age from 23 to 60 years, and were evenly represented within that range. Fewer ethnicities were represented in this round, only African-Americans (6) and caucasians (6) participated. This group of respondents was highly educated; they either had some college or held a degree, and one respondent had only a high school diploma (caucasian).

PART III General Observations

Since the content of the material for the three panels was virtually identical, except for statements relating to the mandatory or voluntary nature of the survey, many of the findings presented in this report are generalizable across panels. The findings and recommendations discussed in Sections A.1. and B.1. below are general observations that apply to all three panels. Discussion of individual panels' results is included in later sections where appropriate and mostly occurred around the mandatory/voluntary statements

A. RESPONDENT BEHAVIOR

A.1. Observations for ALL Panels (i.e., Mandatory, Voluntary I, & Voluntary II)

- Most respondents could recall minimal amounts of information without referring back to specific passages in the materials (e.g., partial data uses recall, most commonly “schools” and “hospitals”).
- Under optimal conditions (i.e., highly motivated lab respondents instructed to read material in the absence of distractions), respondents were not always careful readers; they tended to surmise meaning from their general impressions of the material (e.g., respondents thought the ACS was an opinion survey about community needs and conditions).
- Those with high and low education levels tended to skim repetitive text (i.e., data use statements in survey letter; confidentiality statements in FAQ brochure). Many respondents skimmed the brochure, especially after reading the first panel, due to perceived redundancy (i.e., similar data use paragraph on first panel, 2nd paragraph). New information presented after redundant information may be processed less carefully.
- Based on spontaneous respondent comments, the cognitive burden produced by the amount of material respondents were asked to read (i.e., two letters and one brochure) might be beyond that which they would sacrifice for this type of mail solicitation.

B. FIRST REACTIONS

B.1. Observations for ALL Panels (i.e., Mandatory, Voluntary I, & Voluntary II)

- The most salient content was the data uses statements. Respondents who were more critical or suspicious of “the government” found these statements less believable than other respondents.
- Very positive reactions were observed to the “community” concept used throughout the materials (e.g., survey name, survey purpose statements, etc.), in addition to some of the data use statements involving “schools” and “hospitals.”
- Some respondents were concerned over the inconsistency across materials regarding the data use statements (i.e., wondered why “job training” and “healthcare needs for the elderly” was absent after the prenotice letter), yet the consistency of the other data use statements caused other respondents to skim this material.
- Respondents did not think the survey questions would be personal questions (e.g., income, name), rather, they assumed this was a survey of opinion questions about what services their communities need.
- Overall, most respondents understood they would receive a survey and they were expected to mail it back. A few assumed they would receive a visit or telephone call from an interviewer.
- In an actual survey environment, there was strong evidence that the questionnaire itself would factor heavily into respondents’ decision to cooperate, as many respondents indicated they needed to see the types of data collected by the questionnaire before deciding to participate. This may suggest actual respondents may spend more time scrutinizing the questionnaire rather than the accompanying material.
- Most respondents agreed the brochure was the most helpful piece of material, because it seemed to include all aspects of the previous letters, and then some. Nevertheless, this material was least carefully read by respondents, and many admitted they might ignore a brochure’s contents if other material was provided simultaneously (i.e., a letter and questionnaire).
- Too few respondents understood that the ACS and decennial were different data collection efforts, and many were confused by the detailed explanation of the ACS in the first paragraph of the brochure.
- Respondents from ethnic minorities had extremely positive reactions to the graphics contained on the outer panels of the FAQ brochure, mainly because they were able to identify pictorial representations of positive scenarios depicting minority figures (e.g., African-American family gathered for a college graduation).

B.2. Observations Unique to Mandatory Panel

- Many respondents only noticed their response to the survey was required by law in the FAQ brochure; however, most still perceived the decision to participate as a personal one that was not tempered by the law and references to penalties for nonresponse. Respondents reported they would participate if they thought the survey benefited their community.

- Some respondents noted the brochure contained a vague reference to penalties for nonresponse, and wondered about the exact nature of such a penalty.

B.3. Observations Unique to Voluntary I & Voluntary II Panels

- Most respondents understood the survey was voluntary, that they could fill out all, some, or none of the questions. A few less careful readers did not notice this statement/message at all.
- A few respondents from each of the voluntary panels thought the survey was mandatory.
- For the most part, respondents interpreted the envelope’s boxed message correctly and positively (i.e., “survey enclosed and your answers are important to your community”).
- Envelopes from “the government” piqued respondents’ interest. Many respondents do not realize which organization/agency mailed the letter, due to the agency-rich return address, and may be confused or concerned about all of the government agencies seemingly involved in the survey effort.
- The two most salient aspects of envelope are “Department of Commerce” and the boxed text.
- Text and box format causes message to be salient, but may mimic “junk mail.”
- Reactions to other information on the envelope varied. For example, one respondent thought the phrase “Penalty for private use, \$300” gave the impression that the envelope was “official,” while another respondent was alarmed because they interpreted it as the fine for nonresponse.

Earlier research on survey letters (SIPP advance letter) suggests the presentation of ideas/messages matters, and was especially important in terms of timing the “voluntary survey” disclosure. So, although differences between the two versions of voluntary materials were not evident in the lab, placing the term “voluntary” early in the letter (and before the data use statements) may interfere with respondents’ ability or willingness to attend to the rest of the letter. These types of consequences are much more likely to reveal themselves in the field, as opposed to the cognitive lab setting where respondents are highly motivated to complete the tasks set before them.

C. RETENTION & INTERPRETATION OF MAIN MESSAGES

In addition to providing guidance on the placement and wording of critical messages, research with the SIPP advance letter found that survey requests generated certain questions and concerns among respondents. The most common questions, seemingly critical for making the decision to cooperate, were: 1) *What is this and what is it used for?*; 2) *Who is doing this?*; 3) *How will my information be handled*; and 4) *How was I picked?* The revised ACS alternative treatments for this research were organized such that answers to these main questions were integrated in a salient manner into the pretested materials (e.g., prominent locations such as the front page of letters and the first paragraph of the brochure). Other questions posed by respondents in the SIPP research, but detrimental to cooperation when respondents fixated on such information, included: 1) *How long will this take?*; and 2) *Is this voluntary?*

The current research set out to determine whether respondents grasped these and other main messages below, which address typical concerns likely to arise for respondents.

Mandatory & Voluntary Statements

- Regardless of the treatment materials respondents received, survey participation decisions were primarily based upon civic duty and risk assessment types of rationale (e.g., “you should do it if you care about your community” and “it’s an anonymous survey, so there’s no harm in it,” respectively), and overrode legal mandate arguments. Most assumed the survey was ultimately a voluntary endeavor.
- Most Mandatory Panel recipients stated they themselves made the ultimate decision to cooperate (e.g., “They [USCB] aren’t gonna come to your door and make you do it.”).
- When probed, many respondents were unable to provide examples of surveys that, by law, require people to respond, which may indicate these respondents perceive all survey requests as voluntary (although a few did mention the decennial as mandatory).
- A few respondents noted in the brochure that penalties for nonresponse were presented in a vague manner, and they wondered what the penalties might be (e.g., Is there a fine or jail term? How much would a fine be?).

Survey Purpose & Data Uses Statements

- The data use statements were the single-most salient message across the materials, and for the most part, reactions were positive.
- Lacking a questionnaire, many respondents interpreted the data use statements as the sole purpose for the data collection, the most salient of which were to build or fix “schools” and “hospitals.”
- Some respondents pointed out the materials stated their participation was very important to the country and community, but they did not feel the materials addressed WHY it was important. Why the survey is important perhaps has more to do with the ACS results being the sole data source upon which major decisions are based at the federal, state and local level. Although, these are complex relationships that are difficult to convey in a short letter, and may best be illustrated by extremely specific examples (e.g., data used to determine how many blocks are underwater in a flooded community so magnitude of relief can be assessed/delivered, etc.).

Confidentiality Statements

- Confidentiality statements in the FAQ brochure were perceived by some as overly bureaucratic and were not written so respondents could decipher how references to the law (i.e., Title 13) might pertain to them.

Selection Process Statements

- Respondents understood they were selected by address, although they were unclear about the actual process (i.e., randomly selected sample). This gave some respondents the impression that the survey would not request their names, and was therefore more “anonymous.” This also suggests to some respondents that only general questions would be asked, not detailed questions about income and so on.

Survey Sponsor

- Many respondents were able to identify the survey’s sponsor, due to the Census Bureau being mentioned in the letters and the phrase “Director, U. S. Census Bureau” beneath Kincannon’s signature. But some were not sure who would actually conduct the survey, or at what level of government (i.e., federal, state, local).

Respondent Burden Statements

- Very few respondents from each panel recalled the estimated response burden stated in the FAQ brochure, and therefore, respondents varied widely in how many questions they thought would be asked (e.g., from only a few questions to several pages of questions).

Miscellaneous

- Most people noticed the website and telephone number and realized they could obtain more information through these contacts, although the “www” at the end of the website seemed odd to some respondents (i.e., www.census.gov/acs/www).
- Some respondents did not understand the phrase “tribal governments.” Those who noticed this phrase either did not associate the term with Native Americans, or they did not believe such an entity existed.

These results suggest the Census Bureau should approach the explanation of data uses very carefully, given that so many respondents made a direct link between the survey and the illustrative “improvements” (i.e., survey participation will bring new schools and hospitals). These materials attempt, but ultimately do not convey, the complex process by which data are collected, disseminated, and used. Respondents often did not follow these ideas intuitively, and therefore assumed the survey was more directly responsible for the allocation of funds and resources at the local level. There is need for caution and thought about data use statements and the promises they might seem to make. Respondents living in, and acutely aware of, disparate conditions were sometimes critical of these statements and might eventually stop participating in a process that does not result in any tangible benefits for their surroundings/communities.

PART IV Issues & Recommendations

The first set of issues presented below is general, pertains to all three panels, and affects both the letters and brochure. Thereafter, the remaining general issues are segmented and presented as they impact each piece of material (i.e., prenotice, survey cover letter, or brochure) by panel.

A. ISSUES & RECOMMENDATIONS AFFECTING ALL PANELS (i.e., Mandatory, Voluntary I, Voluntary II)

A.1. General Issues Affecting ALL Materials (i.e., letters & brochure)

1. *Issue:* Respondents did not understand this was a national survey; contributing to this perception may be the survey’s name (misleading because term “community” is interpreted literally and narrowly—“certain communities”) and repetitious survey purpose statements mentioning benefits to “communities.” References to sampling in

the first paragraph of the FAQ brochure may add to this misconception.

Recommendation: Incorporate language early on in the letters to reinforce this concept (e.g., “The Census Bureau is conducting the ACS, an important survey that collects information from people across the nation”).

2. **Issue:** Several issues surfaced with the data uses statements: 1) this was the most salient aspect of the ACS materials but it was interpreted too narrowly—not as examples; 2) the statements caused respondents to perceive a direct connection between survey participation and services (i.e., schools and hospitals) implemented in their immediate community; and 3) respondents thought ACS was an opinion survey on community needs for their immediate area—they did not understand/think they would be asked any “personal” questions (e.g., income, name). These data use statements can be misleading ultimately, and received negatively by respondents such as these, many of whom stated their tax dollars did not seem to be invested in their communities.

Recommendation: Use introductory statements indicating these are examples (e.g., “The results are used to . . . For example, . . .”),

A.2. Prenotice Letter

1. **Issue/Recommendation:** Apply recommendations from the general list above in Part IV, Section A.1., pertaining to all materials—specifically A.1.1. and A.1.2.(i.e., making salient the “national” component of the ACS and clarifying data use statements as examples).

A.3. Survey Cover Letter

1. **Issue:** There were mixed reactions to the “emergency planning” statement—for one respondent it brought to mind that federal funds are not distributed fairly (e.g., no one in North/South Carolina received financial aid from floods last year, but many people in New York received money after September 11th). Certain types of respondents are more suspicious of the claim that funds are ever distributed “fairly.” Another respondent linked this statement to “terrorism” issues.

Recommendation: Consider dropping this statement. In addition to the varying reactions, it could shorten the overall length of the data uses paragraph.

2. **Issue:** The reference to “taxpayer dollars” elicited mixed reactions (some very positive, but some negative). Most respondents found this phrase very salient and linked this idea back to the data use statements (i.e., respondents thought the ACS was an opinion survey used to determine where taxes should be spent, and where funding has been insufficient), which gives the wrong impression about data uses.

Recommendation: Consider dropping this statement, since it is interpreted too literally and may cause negative reactions for people who do not perceive their tax dollars are spent productively or effectively.

3. **Issue:** References to “you” in first few statements (i.e., I mailed you a survey) are not consistent with references to the household used in the prenotice letter and could cause confusion regarding the appropriate/intended respondent.

Recommendation: Consider reorienting these statements by using phrases that refer to “your/this household.”

A.4. FAQ Brochure

1. *Issue:* Messages located in the first paragraph, labeled “What is the American Community Survey?,” were unclear even for highly educated respondents. In addition, it contains technical terms and statistical references incomprehensible to these respondents, which forced them to fabricate some sort of meaning (i.e., “long/short forms” and sampling references “one sixth” and “2.5 percent”). Only a handful of the more educated respondents seemed to understand that some information would be collected more often (yearly), but misconceptions persisted (e.g., “Do I have to answer these questions every year?” and they thought the ACS replaced the decennial). Respondents with less education couldn’t make sense of any part of this paragraph, and responses indicated no consistent interpretation.

Recommendation: Identify ESSENTIAL concepts/aspects of this paragraph that are most important to relay to laypersons, then rewrite those portions at a more general level. Although specific language is needed, the essential message should include: 1) the Census Bureau will continue to collect general information in a census every 10 years; 2) More detailed information will now be collected by the ACS on a yearly basis; and 3) This is the best way to keep information about our nation up-to-date.

2. *Issue:* Presentation of confidentiality language is confusing (e.g., “what’s Title 13?” “If employees take an oath, does that mean I’m under oath?”), and is not written in a respondent-friendly manner. This information focuses on the laws as they apply to the Census Bureau, and spends less time explaining how these laws apply to respondents—which tends not to reassure respondents (e.g., “[The Census Bureau] is just trying to cover themselves”). The “question header” also contains language actual respondents would not use to refer to these ideas.

Recommendation: Begin this “dialogue” with language known to communicate confidentiality concepts to respondents in the “question header” (e.g., “Will the Census Bureau keep my information confidential?”), and in the opening statement (e.g., “Yes...By law, the Census Bureau must protect your information and keep it confidential (Title 13, United States Code, Section 9)”). Placing US code in parenthetical statements allows the statement to communicate this is a law designed to protect respondents, without forcing them to negotiate technical references. Previous cognitive research indicates respondents are much less likely to react negatively to bureaucratic messages presented AFTER more respondent-friendly messages. Below is a paragraph adopted by SIPP, which could be adapted for the ACS:

All the information the Census Bureau collects for this survey about you and your household is confidential by law (Title 13, United States 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.

The “statistical purposes” statement can be added at the end of the paragraph above (e.g., “The Census Bureau will only use this information for statistical purposes.”).

3. *Issue:* There are some minor design issues that should be addressed to optimize respondents’ ability to more readily identify the purpose of the brochure and extract needed information. When folded, the brochure displays ACS contact information on the outer back panel, where respondents may not see it.

Recommendation: This information should be moved to the panel seen when the brochure’s front cover is unfolded. Also, consider putting the ACS logo on the front cover instead of the American flag, so respondents know at a glance that the brochure answers questions about the survey. The outer portion of the brochure appears below, with suggested changes appearing in bold:

Website 800 number [ACS Logo] Spanish statemnt 800 number		Frequently Asked Questions [ACS Logo] USCENSUSBUREAU
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4. **Issue:** Spanish statement, referring to 800 number, will not be seen by mono-lingual Spanish speakers if it is kept on the inside of the brochure’s last panel. These types of respondents will assume after opening the first panel that material is entirely in English and will not proceed any further, causing them to miss this statement. In addition, “completar” is misspelled.

Recommendation: Delete Spanish statement from inside text, and leave it at the bottom of the first outside panel (as illustrated in diagram above). This will ensure the statement/message will be seen after unfolding the first panel of the brochure.

5. **Issue:** The second paragraph of the “Are the data you collect confidential?” section complicated the earlier confidentiality message for respondents—especially the third statement, which mentions data from other government agencies will be gathered. Similar interpretations arose in the SIPP Advance Letter regarding the “one-way” data-sharing concept, which does not make intuitive sense to respondents. Respondents have the sense that other entities entrusted with their private information have also promised “confidentiality” (e.g., financial and medical records), and so they are perplexed and concerned by the idea that these data are shared among other government agencies.

Recommendation: From the Census Bureau’s perspective, it is understood this message must be conveyed for legal reasons; however, the true spirit of these statements are not understood by respondents and it is doubtful that editorial types of changes will alter their fundamental interpretation of this material.

B. MANDATORY PANEL ISSUES & RECOMMENDATIONS

B.1. General Issues Affecting ALL Materials (i.e., letters & brochure)

- 1. Issue/Recommendation:** Apply recommendations from general list in Part IV, Section A.1., pertaining to all materials.

B.2. Prenotice Letter

- 1. Issue/Recommendation:** Apply recommendations from general list in Part IV, Section A.2., pertaining to the prenotice letter.

B.3. Survey Cover Letter

- 1. Issue:** Mandatory statement in survey letter (i.e., “This survey is required by law”) was too vague and did not convey intended meaning. Respondents’ interpretation of this statement was, “The Census Bureau is required to conduct this survey.”
Recommendation: Replace existing statement with one that is more explicit and definitive (e.g., “By law, you are required to respond to this survey/ fill out this questionnaire”).

B.4. FAQ Brochure

- 1. Issue:** The order of presentation of the message indicating respondents may be selected for other voluntary surveys, just before the “mandatory disclosure” paragraph (i.e., “Do I have to answer the questions on the ACS?”), caused some respondents to think the ACS was voluntary.
Recommendation: To avoid this potential order affect, the “mandatory disclosure” paragraph could be relocated to a position preceding the “confidentiality disclosure” paragraph.
- 2. Issue:** It is not clear if respondents perceive “jury duty” as an activity required by law, or whether they recognize it merely as a voluntary civic duty (i.e., “you don’t have to, but you should”). Thus, it is also not clear whether or not the jury duty analogy works to reinforce the “required by law” message, or detracts from it.
Recommendation: Consider eliminating this reference. A simple communication may be more effective (e.g., “Yes, you are required by law to respond to the ACS (Title 13...)”).

C. VOLUNTARY I PANEL ISSUES & RECOMENDATIONS

C.1. General Issues Affecting ALL Materials (i.e., letters & brochure)

- 1. Issue:** References to “your country” may be awkward or confusing concept at first glance for bi-national people or recent immigrants
Recommendation: More specific language could be used to avoid confusion(e.g., “. . . the United States” or “. . . this country”).

C.2. Prenotice Letter

1. *Issue/Recommendation:* Apply recommendations from general list in Part IV, Section A.2., pertaining to the prenotice letter.

C.3. Survey Cover Letter

1. *Issue/Recommendation:* Apply recommendations from general list in Part IV, Section A.3., pertaining to the survey cover letter.

C.4. FAQ Brochure

1. *Issue/Recommendation:* Apply recommendations from general list in Part IV, Section A.4., pertaining to the brochure.

D. VOLUNTARY II PANEL ISSUES

D.1. General Issues Affecting Perception Across Pieces of Indirect Voluntary Material

1. *Issue/Recommendation:* Apply recommendations from general list in Part IV, Section A.1., pertaining to the all pieces of material.

D.2. Prenotice Letter

1. *Issue/Recommendation:* Apply recommendations from general list in Part IV, Section A.2., pertaining to the prenotice letter.

D.3. Survey Letter

1. *Issue/Recommendation:* Apply recommendations from general list in Part IV, Section A.3., pertaining to the survey cover letter.

D.4. FAQ Brochure

1. *Issue/Recommendation:* Apply recommendations from general list in Part IV, Section A.4., pertaining to the brochure.



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
Economics and Statistics Administration
U.S. Census Bureau
Washington, DC 20-233-0001
OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

Dear Resident:

The U.S. Census Bureau is conducting a very important survey, called the American Community Survey, and we need your help. In a few days your household will receive a questionnaire, along with more information about this important national survey. The Census Bureau chose your address, not you personally, as part of a randomly selected sample of addresses to participate in the survey.

The results from this survey are used by federal, state, local and tribal governments to manage and meet the needs of communities across America. For example, community leaders depend on this information to decide when and where schools, highways, hospitals, and other services are needed. In addition, results from the survey are used to develop programs to reduce traffic congestion, provide job training, and plan for the health care needs of the elderly.

A survey and some information will be mailed to your address soon. If you have access to the Internet, you can learn more about this survey even sooner by visiting our Web site: www.census.gov/acs/www.

Thank you for your help.

Sincerely,

Charles Louis Kincannon
Director, U.S. Census Bureau



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Dear Resident:

As you may recall, I sent a letter to your household recently about the American Community Survey. As promised, I have included the survey, and a guidebook to help you complete the survey. The U.S. Census Bureau chose your address, not you personally, as part of a randomly selected sample of addresses to participate in this survey.

This survey collects critical up-to-date information about communities across the United States. Federal, state, local and tribal leaders use this information to plan for America's future. For example, results from this survey are used to decide where new schools, hospitals, and fire stations are needed. These results also help communities plan for the kinds of emergency situations that might affect you and your neighbors, such as floods and other natural disasters. Your response helps assure that taxpayer dollars are spent more effectively.

This survey is required by law. I have enclosed a "Frequently Asked Questions" brochure that explains why the Census Bureau is conducting the American Community Survey. It also describes the federal laws designed to keep your information confidential.

Please complete your survey as soon as possible. Then, use the prepaid envelope to mail it back. If you need help filling out the form or if you have any questions about the survey, please call our toll-free number (1-800-354-7271).

Thank you for your time and assistance.

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What is the American Community Survey?

The U.S. Census Bureau is changing the way it takes a census. The next census in 2010 will ask only basic questions using a short form. The long form questions that are asked of one-sixth of the households at the time of the census will now be asked in the American Community Survey, from about 2.5 percent of the population each year.

Collecting basic and detailed information in two separate operations will improve census taking. Also, by collecting some census data more often the U.S. Census Bureau can provide current data about our rapidly changing country every year, instead of once every ten years. Federal, state, local and tribal governments need up-to-date information about our country to make sure funds are distributed fairly. These funds are used to run programs that affect everyone. For example, information from this survey is used to make decisions about where to build new facilities (such as hospitals and schools) and how to improve transportation problems. Having access to current information assures that community leaders and the government can make better decisions when planning for America's future.

The questions on the American Community Survey look like the same questions I answered for Census 2000. Why don't you just use the information I provided on my Census 2000 questionnaire?

We need your response even if you completed a Census 2000 questionnaire since the characteristics of your household may have changed since Census 2000 was conducted. Also, the questions on the American Community Survey are slightly different from the questions asked on the Census 2000 questionnaire. So, the responses you provide to questions on the American Community Survey may differ from the responses you provided on your Census 2000 questionnaire.

Are the data you collect confidential?

Yes. The information you provide is strictly confidential under Title 13, Section 9. Only people sworn to protect the confidentiality of your information can see your form. The U.S. Census Bureau can use the information you provide for statistical purposes only and cannot publish or release information that would identify you as an individual. Section 214 of Title 13 imposes severe criminal sanctions if any Census Bureau employee violates these provisions. Every Census Bureau employee takes an oath and is subject to a jail term, a substantial fine, or both if he or she discloses any information that would identify an individual.

The law authorizes the U.S. Census Bureau to collect information for the American Community Survey (Title 13, United States Code, Section 182). This survey is approved by the Office of Management and Budget. Information collected from your household may be used in combination with information from other households or information you provided to other government agencies to produce census data. These data are given the same protection as information collected by the American Community Survey. A few households that respond to the American Community Survey may be asked to participate in other surveys that are voluntary.

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

Yes. The duty to respond is similar to the responsibility of all citizens to serve on a jury if called to participate. The Census Bureau is conducting the American Community Survey under the authority of Title 13, United States Code, Sections 141 and 193. The survey is approved by the

Office of Management and Budget and is mandatory. Title 13, as changed by Title 18, imposes a penalty for not responding.

Where can I find more information or get assistance?

You may visit our website www.census.gov/acs/www, or call **1-888-456-7271** if you need assistance or more information. We estimate this survey will take about 38 minutes to complete.

Si necesita ayuda para completar su cuestionario, llame sin cargo alguno al: **1-877-833-5625**.

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The results from this survey are used by federal, state, local and tribal governments to manage and meet the needs of communities across America. For example, community leaders depend on this information to decide when and where schools, highways, hospitals, and other services are needed. In addition, results from the survey are used to develop programs to reduce traffic congestion, provide job training, and plan for the health care needs of the elderly.

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Am I required to participate in this survey?

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