

Request for Non-Substantive Change to 2016 American Community Survey (ACS)
OMB Control No. 0607-0810
U.S. Department of Commerce
U.S. Census Bureau

Purpose

This request concerns the Census Bureau's 2016 ACS and Puerto Rico Community Survey (PRCS) questionnaires, introductory letters, and other supporting materials under OMB clearance 0607-0810. Specifically, based on the results of the 2015 Replacement Mail Questionnaire Package Test, the Census Bureau is requesting approval to discontinue the use of the ACS-30 and ACS-30 PR(SP) instruction guides, which provide additional information on how to complete the paper form.

Background

To increase self-administered response to the American Community Survey (ACS), the Census Bureau worked with Dr. Don Dillman (an expert in the survey methodology field) to develop ideas for improving the materials mailed to respondents. He suggested some modifications to the materials in the paper questionnaire package mailing of the ACS. This is the largest of the mail-outs (in terms of the size and bulk of the package), and the one sent to respondents who do not respond through the Internet mode after receiving the initial mailing and a reminder postcard asking for their participation. The modifications tested in this experiment included:

- Reducing the complexity of the paper questionnaire package by removing some of the inserts.
- Downplaying the response mode choice (paper or Internet) in the paper questionnaire mailing and instead, presenting the mode options so that respondents understand that the Internet is the preferred mode, but the paper form is available, if the respondent cannot or does not want to complete the ACS on the Internet.

To test these ideas, we conducted the 2015 Replacement Mail Questionnaire Package Test. The experiment used roughly 48,000 addresses in the March 2015 ACS sample panel to construct four test treatments. We used the remaining addresses (approximately 238,000) in the March 2015 sample panel as our control. For the experiment, we removed the question instruction guide (which provides help for answering specific survey items) and the choice card (an insert that explicitly tells respondents that they can respond by either the Internet or mail). We also modified the messaging used in the letter included in the paper questionnaire package to de-emphasize a choice of response mode.

We compared return rates, section completion rates, item nonresponse rates, and response distributions to assess the impact of the changes on respondent behavior. Our key findings are:

- Removing both the choice card and instruction guide simultaneously appeared to have no significant effect on self-response return rates.

- Removing just the instruction guide, with or without the modification to the messaging in the letter, appeared to have no significant impact on self-response return rates.
- Revising the language in the letter to de-emphasize the choice of response mode appeared to have no significant impact on self-response return rates.
- Removing only the choice card appeared to have no significant effect on self-response return rates.
- Removing the instruction guide did not appear to have a significant impact on section completion rates, item nonresponse rates, or item response distributions. However, we did find a pattern in the item nonresponse rates for the mail mode. For most items, the rates were nominally higher for the treatment without the instruction guide.
- We did not find evidence showing that removing the instruction guide would impact the number of calls to the Telephone Questionnaire Assistance line.

Given that removing the instruction guide would result in substantial cost savings, we are proposing to begin removing this item from the paper questionnaire package mailing of the ACS and PRCS as soon as possible in early 2016. Respondents that are seeking assistance in completing the paper questionnaire will continue to be able to obtain help by calling the toll-free number displayed on the cover of the survey questionnaire, or by visiting the web site www.census.gov/acs.

Burden

There is no change to the burden to the public associated with this change.

Attachments

ACS-30(2016) ACS Instruction Guide

ACS-30(2016)PR(SP) PRCS Instruction Guide