

## **American Community Survey 2006 Content Test**

### Overview

Data from year 2008 mark the first year that both three year and five year aggregated data estimates will overlap with the next decennial census (2010). Given the significance of the year 2008, the American Community Survey (ACS) has committed to a research program during 2006 that will result in final content determination in time for the 2008 ACS. This research is the 2006 ACS Content Test.

There are two primary objectives for the 2006 ACS Content Test:

1. Per specific content areas, can changes to the question wording, response categories and redefinition of underlying constructs improve the quality of collected data?
  - a. Modified question wording – e.g., labor force series
  - b. Response categories – e.g., value of property
  - c. Redefinition of underlying construct – e.g., disability
  
2. Do changes in layout of the mail form necessary to accommodate the modified content impact response at a unit or item level? What are the cost implications of a change in form design?
  - a. Short form changes and potential impact to the grid
  - b. Length (and potentially size) of the form

The 2006 ACS Content Test includes 4 stages: 1) identification of content eligible for testing, 2) content determination, 3) content test implementation, and 4) recommendations for final content in 2008. The first stage involves the joint efforts of multiple federal agencies that either sponsor or use data from the ACS as well as subject matter experts from within the Census Bureau. Together they have demonstrated problems with existing questions or content on the ACS, such as out-of-date response categories, or more consequential problems such as questions resulting in estimates that seem systematically lower or higher than expected based on comparisons to other sources. Additionally, recent or anticipated legislative action has resulted in identification of new content not currently included on the ACS for testing. In this phase, 11 of 25 existing housing questions, 15 of 43 existing socio-economic questions, and three new socio-economic questions were identified for inclusion in the second stage of the content test.

The second stage of the Content Test, content determination, includes cognitive laboratory pretesting, expert reviews and other pretesting methods for the purpose of developing alternate versions of question content identified as eligible

for testing. As with the previous stage, representatives from numerous federal agencies, as well as other data users, have contributed to these early pretesting efforts by providing their subject matter expertise in the development of alternatives.

Content Test implementation, the third stage, will include a national sample field test with approximately 50,000 residential addresses. About half of the sample will serve as the test panel for the content, and the other half will serve as the control panel and contain the current content of the 2005 ACS. The ACS Content Test will reflect almost all of the same data collection methodology as used with the current ACS, starting with mailing a prenotice letter and then an initial mailing package with an ACS questionnaire to residential addresses selected for participation. As with the current ACS, Census Bureau will mail a second questionnaire to the sampled address if no response is received after three weeks. Census Bureau staff will then follow-up households that do not respond by using computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) and computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI).

Operations for the 2006 ACS Content Test and the current ACS will differ in that the Content Test will not provide Telephone Questionnaire Assistance (TQA), nor will it include a Telephone Edit Follow-Up (TEFU) operation for mail respondents. The TQA operation provides direct assistance to respondents while answering the mail form, potentially influencing how they interpret and respond to questions. The TEFU operation follows-up with households that return a mail form to collect more complete data. The 2006 ACS Content Test excludes these two operations so that we can analyze data that most directly reflects the households response to the questions.

Additionally, the ACS Content Test will differ from the current ACS in that the Content Test will include a CATI Content Follow-up as a method to measure simple response variance and response bias. Both response variance and response bias will serve as critical indicators of the quality of the test question relative to the current versions of the ACS questions. Both English and Spanish languages will be available in the automated instruments used for this content test.

In the fourth and final stage, final content recommendations, an analysis of the data collected as part of the content test, including reinterview data, will guide the selection of the version of the questions that yield the highest quality data. Census Bureau analysts, subject matter experts, and experts from the other participating federal agencies will work together to determine the final question content based on the results of the test. The end product will reflect final content recommendation based on input from all participants. These recommendations are expected in the early part of January 2007 so that the Census Bureau can implement all the necessary changes to the existing ACS data collection materials (e.g., questionnaires, CATI/CAPI instruments, questionnaire instruction

booklet, interviewer training materials, etc.) to reflect the final recommended questions/content in time for implementation of the 2008 ACS.

### Data Quality Indicators

Despite the fact that the Content Test will include tests of changes to multiple questions in both the housing and detailed-person sections of the ACS form, across the different topic areas, test proposals show a great deal of consistency in the measures for evaluating changes.

The attached documents show some of the low-level research questions for a sub-set of the specific content area evaluations and the form design evaluation. They reflect a good representation of the types of 'research' questions included as part of the Content Test, as well as the proposed measures for addressing those questions.

### Questions for Committee

With the above background, we'd appreciate input from the committee on the following questions:

1. Given the objectives of the test, have we identified the most appropriate measures of data quality for the content specific questions? Are their other measures of data quality we should consider that might improve the content specific evaluations?
2. In terms of the form design evaluations, what other measures of data quality should we consider besides survey response rates and item level nonresponse?