



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
Economics and Statistics Administration
U.S. Census Bureau
Washington, DC 20233-0001

March 25, 2014

2014 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY RESEARCH AND EVALUATION REPORT
MEMORANDUM SERIES #ACS 14-RER-08

MEMORANDUM FOR ACS Research and Evaluation Advisory Group

From: James Treat (**signed 04/08/2014**)
Chief, American Community Survey Office

Prepared by: Shelley Walker
American Community Survey Office

Subject: ACS Messaging Research: Deliberative Focus Groups
With Stakeholders Who Are Distrustful of the Government

Attached is the final American Community Survey Research report for ACS Messaging Research: Deliberative Focus Groups With Stakeholders Who Are Distrustful of the Government. This research examines what messages or arguments could help motivate individuals who are distrustful of government to self-respond to the ACS, and gathered respondent perspectives on the strongest arguments for and against the value of the ACS.

If you have any questions about this report, please contact Shelley Walker on (301) 763-4045.

Attachment

cc:
ACS Research and Evaluation Work Group
ACSO PMGB
COM PMGB
ACS Integrated Communications Steering Committee
Ian O'Brien CNMP
Steven Jost DIR
Jennifer Smits PIO
Michael Cook
Seth Amgott

Messaging and Mail Package Assessment Research Subteam:

Agnes Kee	ACSO
Cheryl Chambers	
Dameka Reese	
Gary Chappell	
Tasha Boone	
Todd Hughes	
Shelley Walker	
Nancy Bates	ADRM
Laura Sewell	CNMP
Monica Wroblewski	
Jennifer Hunter Childs	CSM
Eric Charles Newburger	DIR
Stephen Buckner	
Timothy Olson	
Jennifer Guarino Tancreto	DSSD
Thomas Chesnut	
Anthony Tersine, Jr	
Justin Keller	EPCD
Michele Hedrick	PIO
Stacy Vidal	
W Neil Tillman	
Catherine Rosol	ERIMAX
Gabriella Nicaastro	MITRE

ACS Messaging Research: Deliberative Focus Groups With Stakeholders Who Are Distrustful of the Government

**FINAL Report
March 12, 2014**

Gregory Orrison, Joseph Ney



Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Key Findings and Implications	3
Key Findings	3
Implications of Findings	4
Recommendations for Future Research	5
Project Overview	6
Description of Research	6
Detailed Research Findings	8
Key Arguments in Support of ACS	8
Key Arguments in Opposition to ACS	12
Additional Insights	18
Appendix A: Jury Group Vote Tallies	24
Appendix B: Recruitment Screener	26
Appendix C: Moderator’s Guides	30
Appendix D: Small Group Discussion Materials	35
Appendix E: Participant Details	37

INTRODUCTION

Despite the many practical uses of data collected through the American Community Survey (ACS), many respondents and members of the public are actively opposed to completing the survey. This resistance to the ACS presents challenges for conducting the survey and eliciting responses—particularly early self-responses—causing the Census Bureau to incur significant extra expense.

To help to overcome these challenges, Team Reingold conducted Deliberative Focus Groups in seven cities across the country—Albuquerque, Atlanta, Dallas, Los Angeles, Richmond, St. Louis, and Washington, D.C.—with individuals who were identified to have cynical, suspicious, or ambivalent attitudes toward the federal government. The design of these focus groups, modeled after a courtroom trial with a jury, compelled individuals who were inclined to distrust the government to nevertheless find the best arguments in support of the ACS.

Our goal was to understand what messages or arguments could help motivate such individuals to self-respond to the survey, and to gather their perspectives on the strongest arguments for and against the value of the ACS generally.

The focus group in Los Angeles was conducted in Spanish with participants who self-identified as being primarily Spanish speakers.

This study is one component of a larger research effort designed to comprehensively assess and refine ACS messaging and mail package design. We have proposed to use these findings—in conjunction with findings from parallel Mental Models Interviews with Census Field Personnel, Key Informant Interviews, and Benchmark Message Testing—to inform messages and designs that function to increase self-response rates of individuals who may resist the survey, thereby reducing the cost of repeated outreach.

In a coming phase of research—including a Messaging Refinement Study, Mail Package Focus Groups and Cognitive Interviews, and Mail Package Online Visual Testing—we aim to refine and test the hypotheses emerging from these initial studies.

It should be noted that this was qualitative research, involving a limited number of participants. Results cannot be used to make nationally representative statements or to generalize the data beyond the scope of the sample.

KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Following are key findings that emerged from this research, integrating representative concerns witnessed across focus group sessions, as well as Team Reingold’s analysis of the implications of these findings, and recommendations as to how they could be applied in further message testing.

Key Findings

- **“ACS? Never heard of it.”**

The overwhelming majority of focus group participants were unaware of or had misunderstandings about the ACS. Even individuals who had actually received the survey or used the data did not necessarily connect it to ACS. However, participants did have a strong

awareness of—and more positive inclination toward—Census and the decennial survey.

- **“Why would you possibly need to know this?”**
Participants frequently objected to ACS questions that they viewed as irrelevant or for which they did not understand the purpose. Concerns about “privacy” often became an issue in proportion to participants’ inability to see the practical value of such questions. In addition to questions about topics participants viewed as opaque or absurd, they frequently could not understand why it was necessary to collect respondents’ names or other personally identifying information, when response is purportedly confidential.
- **“They already have this information.”**
Participants often believed that the information ACS collects is already available from other sources, and were unaware that some of the sources they cited rely on ACS data. This belief often led to a paradoxical line of argument, whereby participants claimed to value their privacy, yet preferred that government extract personal information from an array of public and private sources than to ask for it directly.
- **“What have you done for me?”**
Participants frequently evaluated the benefits of the ACS in terms of perceivable, concrete benefits to their local communities. Participants were often more interested in potential benefits for their own neighborhoods than for the nation, their states, or even their cities. Similarly, participants were often more appreciative of ACS’s benefits to local small businesses than to large national corporations.
- **“No habla Ingles.”**
Participants in some groups, including the Spanish-language group, felt that non-English speakers are at a further disadvantage when it comes to awareness or understanding of ACS, as information about ACS and response options may not be readily available in their language. In particular, participants cited this as a barrier to self-response for Spanish-speaking populations.

Implications of Findings

- **How can ACS be framed to inspire trust?**
If lack of awareness of the ACS contributes to questions of its credibility and consequently decreased likelihood of self-response, creating increased awareness about and context for the ACS among recipients could lead to improved response rates. More closely associating ACS with Census, with which people are readily familiar, could more positively dispose people to ACS.
- **How should ACS justify off-putting questions?**
If individuals better understood the purposes or direct applications of seemingly irrelevant ACS questions, they may be less defensive and more inclined to self-respond.
- **How to demonstrate that ACS is an unparalleled source of data?**
Demonstrating the ACS’s unique value or pointing to ways that the data it collects are in fact used by “existing” sources of information could help dispel perceptions that ACS is redundant and unwarranted.

- **How can ACS communicate local value?**
Pointing to tangible results—like improvements to roads, schools, or hospitals—realized to benefit local communities or small businesses thanks to ACS data could positively dispose respondents toward ACS’s practical utility, thereby increasing likelihood of self-response.
- **How can ACS get through to non-English speakers?**
Greater awareness, availability, and targeted dissemination of Spanish- and other foreign-language materials could help improve response rates among hard-to-reach communities.

Recommendations for Future Research

- **Leverage the Census brand.**
Test messages and materials that more clearly associate ACS with Census and the decennial survey, with the goal of leveraging the greater public awareness of and goodwill toward Census. More closely associating ACS with the Census brand could create a ready point of reference for respondents, helping reassure them as to ACS’s origin, purpose, and credibility.
- **“Here’s why we’re asking.”**
Test messages and materials that demonstrate the practical applicability of objectionable ACS questions, tying them directly to their use by some meaningful government program or service.
- **“Brought to you by ACS.”**
Test messages that demonstrate the important role ACS data play in our daily lives, and how ACS is actually used by “existing” resources that individuals, small businesses, or community nonprofits value. Messages could indicate how such resources as Zillow, Pew Research Surveys, etc., are “powered by” ACS.
- **Go local.**
Test messages that emphasize local benefits and identify concrete applications of ACS data for neighborhoods or small businesses. Messages could even be targeted to specific geographic locations, pinpointing infrastructural or other improvements that have made a difference in the quality of life of local communities.

Given that developing “hyper-local” examples for every community will be infeasible to operationalize, Reingold suggests 1), testing localized messages among a small number of priority “pilot” communities of low self-response, and 2), testing national-level messages using representative examples from particular communities that may resonate with other communities.

- **Se habla Español.**
Test alternative or additional outreach materials geared toward non-English speakers, particularly in districts where it is known that there are large populations of foreign-language speakers. Advance mailing materials intended for respondents should make clear how they can access the survey in their own language.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Many Americans distrustful of the federal government are resistant to completing the American Community Survey, or to completing it in a timely manner, causing the Census Bureau to incur significant extra expense in follow-up efforts.

Increasing self-response can potentially save millions of taxpayer dollars by cutting down on telephone and in-person follow-up contacts. These follow-up contacts are not only costly, they are also an additional burden on the respondents who are required by law to complete the survey—whether early via Internet or mail, or later over the telephone or in person.

The value of increasing self-response rates is therefore substantial. Accordingly, ACSO is interested in determining whether different messaging or materials might increase self-response rates, increase public awareness and support of ACS, and link the value of ACS data to key areas of interest for respondents.

This research lays the groundwork for creating these associations, with the goal of discovering key messages and arguments that can be used in the creation of appealing and targeted communications.

The ultimate goal of Team Reingold's work with ACSO is to increase the likelihood that sample households respond in a timely fashion during the self-response phase, and secondly to increase visibility and awareness of ACS generally. Our initial hypothesis is that by encouraging understanding of the important role ACS data play in the decisions that affect our daily lives, individuals will become more willing to participate in ACS data collection activities.

We have used a qualitative methodology to discover stakeholder perceptions, values, interests, and priorities. The results of this research will later be used to refine specific hypotheses that can be tested using quantitative research methodologies, including those that directly measure specific stakeholder behaviors.

Information collected during these focus groups will aid in developing alternative options for the ACS mail response package. Pending additional research, it could be determined that an alternative to the existing package would better catch recipients' attention, address their questions and concerns, and lead to higher self-response rates. In addition, the findings from these focus groups can be incorporated into general messaging about ACS. Such messaging may be used in educational and promotional materials, scripts and talking points for call center and field representatives, and explanatory information shared with survey recipients, policymakers, journalists, and other key stakeholders.

DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH

Team Reingold conducted seven Deliberative Focus Groups in a variety of U.S. cities with individuals who were identified to have cynical, suspicious, or ambivalent attitudes toward the government. Individuals with attitudes of these types have historically lower-than-average ACS self-response rates; thus, it is important to understand what arguments and messages are strong motivators of their behavior and likelihood to respond.

The deliberative “jury group” format is a bottom-up, organic approach to identifying which messages resonate with everyday people, with minimal moderator intervention. The format enabled us to see how participants’ thinking changed in response to new information or collective insight.

The focus groups occurred in two stages. In stage one, small groups of participants were assigned to review a selection of existing messages and materials to develop and discuss arguments either for or against self-responding to the ACS. This way, individuals who were inclined to distrust the government were nevertheless incentivized to find the best arguments in support of the ACS.

The most engaged or articulate participants from these small groups were then asked to argue their respective cases in front of a larger group of “jurors.” In this second stage, the opposing teams of advocates cross-examined each other, and the moderator led the jury in deliberating on which arguments were most persuasive.

Objectives of the Deliberative Focus Groups were to:

- Gauge the thinking of distrustful individuals with regard to the American Community Survey
- Understand the messages and arguments most likely to motivate distrustful individuals to self-respond

Analysis of these discussions provides insights on:

- Distrustful stakeholders’ perspectives on the best reasons to self-respond to the survey
- Distrustful stakeholders’ perspectives on the strongest arguments for or against the value of the ACS

Focus group locations were selected on the basis of geographic and racial/ethnic diversity, and diversity of ACS self-response rates.

Focus Group Location	2012 Self Response Rate	Percent Hispanic Pop.	Percent Black Pop.	Percent White Pop.	Percent Asian Pop.	Percent AI/AN Pop.	Percent Pacific Islander Pop.
Albuquerque, NM	.44–.54	45.9%	2.8%	42.8%	2.5%	3.9%	.1%
Atlanta, GA	.45–.54	5.0%	53.6%	36.3%	3.3%	.2%	0%
Dallas, TX	.30–.54	41.9%	24.4%	29.5%	2.8%	.2%	0%
Los Angeles, CA	.30–.61	48.1%	9.3%	28.9%	11.3%	.2%	.2%
Richmond, VA	.54–.61	5.9%	50.1%	38.9%	3.5%	.2%	0%
St. Louis, MO	.54–.67	3.4%	49.1%	42.2%	2.6%	.2%	0%
Washington, DC	.61–.67	9.0%	51.3%	34.0%	3.5%	.2%	.1%

Source: American Fact Finder; ACS Self-Response Rates (2012) by Congressional District

The Los Angeles focus group was conducted in Spanish with participants who self-identified as being primarily Spanish speakers.

There were roughly 24 to 28 participants in each of the seven groups, for a total of n=186 participants.

Participants were recruited according to their attitudes toward the federal government with regard to trustworthiness, privacy, and intrusiveness. Screening questions were sourced from relevant sections of CBAMS II¹. The screening guide is provided in Appendix B.

Screening questions were used to determine respondents' trust of the federal government to use their information responsibly, keep the public's best interests in mind, and keep personal information private. Additional demographic questions about race, education level attained, marital status, income, age, homeownership, etc., were asked so that a diversity of backgrounds could be represented in the focus groups when possible.

Individuals who demonstrated the requisite attitudes toward the government in a majority of questions posed were accepted for participation.

Transcripts from the sessions have been used to identify recurring concerns and arguments in favor of ACS that particularly resonated with participants.

DETAILED RESEARCH FINDINGS

The primary goal of the Deliberative Focus Groups research was to determine which arguments and messages, both for and against completing the ACS, most resonated with participants identified to be distrustful of the government. The set of arguments that participants consistently identified as convincing are detailed here.

Key Arguments in Support of ACS

- 1. ACS is used to benefit local communities:** *ACS data are used to target beneficial programs, services, and infrastructure to the local communities that need them most.*

Participants consistently argued that among the best reasons for filling out the ACS are the direct benefits that communities and individuals see as a result. Participants reasoned that government uses this information to target services and aid to those communities that need it most, resulting in material improvements to those communities.

- 2. ACS provides data for planning and development:** *ACS provides valuable information to government for the purposes of informed civic planning and infrastructure development.*

Participants consistently cited new construction of and improvements to things like roads, schools, hospitals, and fire stations as beneficial to the quality of life in their communities.

Other community benefits that participants cited from personal experience were facilities for the care of veterans, special needs populations, and the elderly.

¹ Prior to the 2010 Census, the Census Bureau conducted the Census Barriers, Attitudes and Motivators Survey II (CBAMS II). CBAMS II identified a "cynical" mindset, members of which have a low affinity for Census and a low level of trust for government and business. This population can be expected to have a similar hesitance to complete the ACS.

There was frequent agreement that informed civic decision-making, on the basis of hard data, was preferable to “guessing” or planning based on anecdotal evidence.

“The ACS form that’s sitting there on your desk, you can think of as your doctor. Your doctor needs... information about you before he can make a decision about you. If your doctor has a blank slate, he doesn’t know what ails you, what your needs are. He doesn’t know anything. He would have to go and guess. Who wants a doctor guessing what kind of glasses you need, what kind of medication you need?” – Participant, St. Louis

Even skeptics agreed that it is far better to have this data—and to make informed decisions based on it—than to not have it at all.

3. ACS allows for smart allocation of federal funding: *ACS provides a valuable index for how federal money should be allocated.*

In line with messages 1 and 2, participants frequently acknowledged government’s function in appropriating and allocating money, and agreed that government should do so responsibly, deliberately, and equitably, on the basis of good information about where the money is needed most.

Several participants acknowledged that the money in question has already been set aside, in the form of taxes, and that government will spend it in any case; ACS, then, provides a blueprint for how it should be allocated in a way that is not arbitrary or partisan.

“The government is going to spend our tax money regardless. That’s a guarantee. So why not give the government a blueprint as to where this money needs to go, and when?” – Participant, Atlanta

To note, ACSO should be sensitive to messaging concerning money and allocation of tax dollars, as this could “raise the hackles” of individuals already concerned with levels of federal spending, the national debt, or over-taxation. Some participants believed that the amount of federal taxation and spending is already too great, and that the ACS may only enable further spending.

One counterargument that emerged in response to such claims was that ACS could be used to responsibly decide where to *cut* government programs or spending.

“Without that survey, they’ll spend more. It’s like shooting darts in the dark.” –Participant,

Messaging having to do with money may automatically play into existing attitudes about fiscal responsibility, and could place undue emphasis on the means (money) rather than the ends of material community benefit. In particular, citing exact figures (e.g., \$450 billion distributed on the

basis of ACS data) could play into ideological prejudices about the size of the federal budget.

“The mention of the [\$450 billion] then starts...some people might start thinking in a different direction.... Like, one of his arguments is about...“Well, we need less tax money.” But this isn’t—[ACS] is just collection of data.” – Participant, Richmond

- 4. ACS’ benefits outweigh the costs to administer it:** *The small expense of administering ACS is outweighed by the value it provides to the country.*

In line with message 3, many participants argued that the relatively small expense to administer the survey is worth the value it brings to allocating far greater amounts of money back into communities each year. Many participants viewed this in terms of an “investment” in the efficient allocation of taxpayer dollars.

“In the grand scheme of things, if this little money is not invested to determine where all of the money will go, we’re going to end up pretty much losing the purpose [of our tax dollars].”– Participant, Atlanta

Again, however, ACS should be sensitive to concerns that the amount of government spending is already too great, and that such an “investment” in ACS may only enable further spending.

- 5. ACS allows individuals to “make their voices heard”:** *Like voting, the ACS represents an opportunity for individuals to communicate meaningfully with their government.*

Several participants saw the ACS as a way to “make your voice heard” on behalf of your community, communicating vital information and community needs to decision makers.

“Just like voting is your voice, this is a voice. It’s a voice for your economy, your community. It lets the government know what you have and what you need.” – Participant, Atlanta

The 2012 presidential election, with its attendant long voting lines, was a touchstone for one group as a worthwhile sacrifice of time and convenience to a greater civic purpose.

While drawing an analogy to voting was frequently an effective argument, some participants found holes in the analogy—pointing out, for instance, that voting is not compulsory.

- 6. ACS provides valuable data to businesses:** *In addition to providing data to the government, ACS provides beneficial information for private-sector businesses and even individuals to make decisions.*

Certain individuals wary of government were more amenable to the argument that ACS is used by businesses to determine where to locate and how to target relevant products and services to

consumer demographics. Some participants cited this benefit of ACS to businesses as a driver of job creation and economic growth in their communities.

“Businesses, the private sector has access to this information as well. And they’ll know whether to sell baby buggies or tractors, and if we want more baby buggies, not as many tractors. Twenty years ago, tractors were probably a good thing in the Short Pump [Va.] area.” – Participant, Richmond

Among participants, individuals who were small business owners or users of ACS data (for instance, realtors or real estate developers) were frequently convincing in defense of the value of ACS data for commercial interests.

“When I’m looking to open up a business or when I’m looking to move to another state...there’s no way I’m going to find the information about the local economy and...what the costs of living are...from banks or anything like that. The Census Bureau has been doing this...to help people out so that they can make educated decisions.” – Participant, Albuquerque

To note, often times during discussion participants lost sight of the fact that ACS data are available to non-governmental users like businesses and individuals. It could be valuable to test messages to this effect to cut off the suggestion that there is a “closed loop” between government information collecting and decision-making.

Moreover, it could be valuable to reinforce that ACS data are already “out there” and are relied upon by businesses and services we value (e.g., Zillow), even if it is not apparent that ACS is the source.

- 7. Completing the ACS is a civic duty:** *Like responding for jury duty, respondents should accept the small burdens the survey imposes in the greater interest of benefiting society.*

“It can be compared to jury duty. It’s not fun, but you still do it, because we have a right to do it and we have a responsibility to do it.” – Participant, Albuquerque

One participant was very compelling in drawing a parallel between the small commitment of time and energy the ACS requires and the sacrifices that prior generations have made for our country, for example, in volunteering for war. This argument led some participants who had been skeptical of ACS to reconsider their positions.

“Fifty years ago they would have asked you to go to war and die for the country. So filling that survey...pales in comparison.... I don't think we should be losing our faith in the idea of this country that people died for.... This is just a simple survey for us to fill out and we're acting like they're pulling our teeth out.” – Participant, Albuquerque

- 8. The ACS is preferable to its alternatives:** *Granting that collecting information on the population is necessary, the ACS is a more efficient and secure instrument than many alternatives, including other government sources of information.*

While it is not advisable that ACSO adapt this negative argument for messaging outreach, certain individuals who were grudging in acknowledging arguments in support of ACS did grant that the ACS is preferable to many potential alternatives.

In response to the argument that the information ACS collects is already available from other federal, local, or even corporate databases—including tax records, school enrollment records, or even Facebook accounts—certain individuals argued that the type and extent of information ACS collects would not be available elsewhere, or that such an alliance of organizations as would be needed represents a more threatening overreach of privacy than ACS poses, or that building such a network would be cost-prohibitive.

Some participants argued that it is in fact a courtesy that Census directly asks for the information, rather than taking it from “behind the backs” of respondents from existing sources of information.

“I think that's out of respect to go to citizens directly....Let's not try to use other means through technology that we know may be a little bit of a questionable practice. Let's get the regular citizens involved. Let's see what everybody has to say and let's gather this information.” –Participant, Atlanta

In addition, many participants acknowledged the need to collect this information more frequently than the decennial census would, given the rapid rates of change in many communities and populations.

Key Arguments in Opposition to ACS

- 1. ACS questions seem irrelevant:** *It is not clear how several seemingly abstruse ACS questions are relevant, necessary, or useful to government or other decision makers.*

One of the most frequent arguments in opposition to filling out the ACS was that many of its questions seem irrelevant, opaque as to their purpose, or of doubtful utility. When coupled with the perception that many of these questions are intrusive of personal privacy (see message 2, below), these questions have the effect of provoking anger or aversion, casting doubt on ACS’s utility, and disinclining respondents to fill out the survey accurately, if at all.

“The first question is how is the information going to be used? And when they start asking private questions about emotions and income and your facilities, you will tend to withdraw from that sort of questioning.” –Participant, Washington, D.C.

Questions such as “Do you have difficulty dressing or bathing?” and “Does this house have a flush toilet?” as well as questions about racial classification and number of times individuals have been married, were common touchstones for cynicism.

“Why do they want to know this information, which is quite detailed? Why do they want to know what my race is? Race has nothing to do with things.” –Participant, Los Angeles

To counteract such attitudes, it is advisable that ACSO be prepared to justify and more readily publicize how each question is directly related to some purpose or program. Within sessions, it was frequently effective, for example, when participants simply observed that a question related to flush toilets could have a meaningful bearing on planning for sewage systems and public water flow.

To note, it will be important to evaluate precisely when in the sequence of mailings it will be most effective to address concerns about off-putting questions: We do not want to turn off respondents from starting the survey, but neither do we want them to stop when they encounter questions they object to. Reingold recommends further testing of different approaches to the timing of these messages.

- 2. ACS questions are too intrusive:** *It is offensive that the ACS should ask questions that infringe on my sense of personal privacy.*

Many participants objected to the fact that several ACS questions ask about topics—such as income, property value, mental and physical health, and marital history—that feel overly personal in nature, or feel like an intrusion on commonly held standards of privacy.

Many of these questions have the effect of provoking anger or aversion and disinclining respondents to fill out the survey accurately, if at all.

- 3. ACS seems redundant of existing sources of data:** *Given the myriad existing government and private sources of information about individuals, it seems unnecessary and wasteful that ACS should have to collect this information “again.”*

Considering the numerous ways individuals already provide personal information—including via tax records, school enrollment documentation, and even via social media and Google Earth—many participants believed that the information ACS requests is already available to the government. They reasoned that the federal government should be able to—or is able to—assimilate the information they require from these various sources, and that the ACS is therefore an unnecessary, burdensome, and inefficient means of gathering existing information.

“You have the local data, they know the schools, they know the population of their counties. They have this information. So we're doing a redundant collection of information upon information upon information. How much information do we need to make the decisions on where our money is going to be spent?” –Participant, Atlanta

This line of reasoning seems to imply that individuals believe their personal information is already widely available to government, retailers, or online networks, and that the federal government has the means and the will to collect it from these diverse sources—and moreover, that this would be preferable to asking for the information directly.

4. ACS offers no visible benefit to my community: *If the ACS is intended to be used to benefit communities, it is not working, because those benefits are not apparent.*

In opposition to the claim that ACS data are used to target beneficial programs or services to communities that need them, many participants expressed personal doubts about these benefits after reflecting on the state of their own communities.

“Unfortunately, we don't see the improvements, we don't see what they use that money for, and you don't really see any improvements.” –Participant, Los Angeles

In particular, this seemed a sore spot for participants who identified themselves as coming from underserved communities: they interpreted a lack of improvements in their own neighborhoods or inequitable distribution of resources between neighborhoods as a failure of ACS's ostensive promise.

“If this is supposed to be so helpful, and it's supposed to give us a fair shake, equally.... If his house or my house are the exact same, but he lives on a different side of town, then why is it his side of town keeps getting the good stuff, and my side of town keeps getting the bad stuff?” –Participant, Atlanta

Even when it was pointed out that the ACS only provides information, and that it is the job of local leaders or community representative to use this information for the good, many participants doubted the utility of filling out the ACS given the long histories of stagnation in their communities or a general mistrust of government leaders.

To note, this argument presents a risk to Census' adopting positive messaging about ACS's benefits to communities. If Census were to use such messages, they open ACS to counterclaims that these benefits are not being realized, or worse, that the data are being used discriminatorily, to the neglect of traditionally underserved or minority communities. Pointing to tangible results realized in specific communities may “backfire” in cases of perceived inequality in distribution of benefits

across communities.

- 5. Lack of awareness about ACS casts doubt on its credibility:** *Lack of prior awareness of ACS raises concerns about who's asking for this information, whether it will be kept secure, and to what ends it will be put.*

A large majority of focus group participants had never heard of ACS prior to their introductory briefing at the start of the focus group session. Accordingly, several people expressed reservations about responding to a survey of which they have never heard, which asks highly personal questions, which takes considerable time and effort to complete, and of which they are not sure how or by whom their responses will be used.

"I think it would help if there was more education—because none of us have ever heard of it.... And especially with everything going on, Snowden and...the spying.... I think the more educated you are that it's a positive thing... would help tremendously with keeping people warm and fuzzy about filling this out."—Participant, Atlanta

To address this lack of awareness, some participants suggested that ACS undertake a public education and awareness initiative or that civic leaders be involved in speaking out on its behalf.

However, given the national climate in the wake of the NSA breach and other events arousing concerns around privacy and government intrusion, it may not be useful to open a large-scale public conversation around ACS, lest negative voices drown out the positive.

- 6. It is unreasonable that completing the ACS is mandatory and punishable by fine:** *It feels unreasonable and even unconstitutional that respondents should be compelled by law and threat of fine to give up personal information.*

Several participants were put off by the fact that response to the ACS is mandatory and that failure to respond is punishable by a steep fine. Considering also that many of the questions are perceived to be irrelevant or intrusive (see messages 2 and 3, above), many participants suggested it felt "unconstitutional" or "un-American" that respondents should be compelled by the federal government to forfeit personal information they perceive as sensitive or private.

"I don't like the mandatory part at all. To me that just takes away my rights, and I'd like to see in the Constitution or whatever where if people hadn't filled it out, they're going to be fined money or go to prison or whatever, because I don't believe that."—Participant, Atlanta

Some participants said they would complete the ACS strictly because response is mandatory, rather than out of any positive intent—and that this would increase the likelihood that they would fill it out inaccurately.

When it was clarified that the fine is rarely or never enforced, this did not have a strong effect in swaying individuals who objected to the fine on principal.

There was also a sentiment among some participants that it is particularly unfair to levy a fine against respondents from underserved communities, who are precisely those people intended to benefit from the community improvements ACS promises and who are least able to pay the fine.

Some participants felt it was better to offer a “carrot” for completing the survey than to threaten a “stick.” Several participants suggested that the survey should be voluntary, rather than mandatory, or that it should allow respondents to selectively respond to the questions they feel comfortable answering.

“If I could leave a few questions blank, that would make me more comfortable.” –Participant, Richmond

It is advisable that ACS be able to explicitly justify for respondents why it is necessary that the survey be mandatory—whether that is to ensure a representative sample, statistical accuracy, etc.

- 7. ACS cannot keep personal information secure:** *There is no guarantee that ACS can secure sensitive personal information against hackers or others who would seek to use it with malicious intent.*

Especially in light of recent high-profile data breaches (Target, NSA), many participants felt that sensitive personal information disclosed on ACS was susceptible to be stolen or misused, whether in transit in the mail, as submitted online, or in the Census Bureau’s records.

“You’re sending it off to God knows where. Who knows who is sifting through the mail. This is a lot of personal information that you’re giving out with your telephone number right on the front of it....And your children’s names and how old they are. You just don’t know who’s going to get access to the information.” –Participant, St. Louis

- 8. ACS cannot guarantee confidentiality:** *Personal information collected by ACS could be reattributed to individuals and used by the government or outside interests to injurious purposes.*

In line with concerns about data security (see message 7, above), several participants expressed a belief that personally identifying information—like names and addresses—could be traced back to individuals and used by the government for surveillance or persecutory purposes, or by malicious third parties for exploitative or other harmful ends.

“They come to inspect, and come and get your documents or something.” –Participant, Los Angeles

In particular, several participants wondered why it was necessary to provide the names of members of the household, and felt the risk to providing this type of information outweighed the apparent benefits. As some participants came to the realization of the scope of personal information collected by the ACS, having to provide names was often a decisive factor—crossing a personal threshold of privacy—that directly influenced their willingness to participate.

The idea that ACS responses concerning children’s identities and whereabouts could be used by predators struck a chord with participants in some groups.

Even when assured about penalties for Census employees who would disclose confidential information, participants were not convinced that this information could not be acquired by other means.

9. The federal government cannot be trusted to administer ACS data: *The federal government cannot be trusted to administer the survey efficiently, gather the data disinterestedly, or protect personal data from malicious third parties.*

Perceived failures of federal government initiatives—for example, in the rollout of online health exchanges under Obamacare—and perceptions of government data insecurity, domestic spying, or a “surveillance state”—for example, stemming from the breach of National Security Agency data by Edward Snowden—exacerbated concerns that the government is not competent to efficiently collect or protect ACS data, or that it could deliberately use ACS data for surveillance purposes.

Several participants who entered with a strong distrust of government defaulted to this position with regard to ACS: because government cannot be trusted, and ACS is administered by a government agency, ACS cannot be trusted. The opinions of such individuals were particularly intractable.

This mindset also contributed to a mistaken conflation of the information *producers* (Census) and information *users* (legislators and decision makers) in an overarching conception of “the government”—often referred to indiscriminately as “they” (e.g., “They already have all of this information...”).

10. ACS’s method of sampling seems unreliable: *Relying on a random sample of a small percentage of households would seem to produce results that are unrepresentative or inaccurate.*

Some participants questioned the validity of ACS’s sampling methods, suggesting that randomly sampling a relatively small number of households may not provide a truly representative picture of the needs of individuals in a given community. Some participants seemed to think that their neighbors’ needs as indicated in their ACS response would not be in line with their own—for example, they could envision large disparities in income even within narrowly defined communities.

“Since it’s only a fraction of the population, a very small fraction, you can’t actually get a good survey...really, since it is random.”—Participant, Washington, D.C.

There was also a persistent concern that, especially in the face of perplexing or intrusive questions,

respondents could lie, guess, or otherwise misrepresent their households, which—given the small sample size—could lead to inaccurate or skewed aggregate results.

Drawing analogies to electoral polling was sometimes effective in countering such arguments.

11. Filling out the ACS takes too long: *Completing the ACS is an undue burden on the time and energy of respondents.*

Some participants viewed the length of the questionnaire and the estimated time to complete it as unfairly burdensome—especially for individuals who work multiple jobs, have children to care for, or who otherwise have commitments on their time.

This perception of burden was compounded for participants who believed the questions were too detailed or intrusive.

12. ACS is too expensive: *The costs to distribute and process the survey are prohibitively expensive, especially in light of federal overspending and the current national debt.*

Some participants believed that the ACS is unjustifiably expensive in terms of the cost-per-survey and the federal workforce required to administer it.

“Instead of spending 2.4 billion dollars on the American Community Survey, we could actually use that money for education, jobs, and other things like that we need.” –Participant, Dallas

These concerns were typically heightened by fears about the present national debt and beliefs that government levels of spending and taxation are too high.

13. ACS is an inefficient means of gathering information: *The format of the ACS is an inefficient means of gathering this information, and there are better alternatives.*

Some participants objected to the paper format as outdated or inconvenient (relative to common forms of online data collection), or objected to the types and level of effort required for follow-up telephone reminders or in-person visits.

“We have the Internet, why are we still using the mail? I think it’s a waste of money for that reason. So we’re getting inaccurate information and we’re paying money for this inaccurate information, when I feel like there could be other databases that they could use.” – Participant, St. Louis

Some participants believed that *asking* people to respond—for example, about commute times—opened the resulting data to inaccuracy or subjective biases, as opposed to more objective third-party methods such as traffic studies.

To note, some participants reacted positively when it was suggested that, by responding earlier in the process, respondents could save the government money on follow-up outreach.

- 14. ACS would be better administered at the state or local level:** *As state and local governments are more closely attuned to the unique needs of their citizens, the information the ACS gathers would be better collected there than at the federal level.*

Some participants felt that the federal government is too remote from local communities to be able to efficiently capture and understand their needs.

“Local areas know what their needs are more than the federal government, and in fact there may be regional differences.” –Participant, Washington, D.C.

This line of argument frequently involved implicit partisan or ideological beliefs about the role of the federal government, and often led to some confusion about how tax dollars were collected and reallocated between the state and federal levels.

One counterargument was that, if states collected the information individually, then there would not be adequate standards for comparison, for example, to determine if one state was more in need than another.

Additional Insights

- **Participants had limited prior awareness of ACS, but strong awareness of Census and the decennial survey.** Of 186 total participants in all focus group sessions, only 17 (9 percent) had previously heard of the American Community Survey, while 181 (97 percent) had heard of Census.

Accordingly, it will be valuable for messages and materials to associate the ACS with Census. However, we should be careful to differentiate ACS from the decennial survey to build credibility for the ACS in its own right, eliminate concerns that respondents may have filled out the census twice, and ensure that the association of the two does not harm response to either effort.

- **Jurors most often came down in opposition to completing the ACS.** Of 67 total jury group participants, in a baseline vote after receiving basic factual information about the ACS, 41 voted in support of and 26 in opposition to the ACS; however, following argumentation from both sides and jury deliberation, 26 jurors voted in support of and 41 in opposition to completing the ACS in their final verdict.

Jury Group Vote Tallies: Initial vs. Final Votes

All Jurors	Initial Vote	Final Vote
Supportive	41	26
Opposed	26	41

This represents a migration of the majority of jurors being supportive at the time of the baseline vote to being opposed by the time of the final verdict, suggesting that the intervening arguments had a meaningful effect on participants' views. See Appendix A for details of voting.

To note, the goal of the sessions was not to shift opinion; rather, to see how attitudes changed in response to new information and group dynamics, and to understand which arguments were most influential in shaping participants' views.

- **Individuals ambivalent toward government more often came down in opposition to the ACS.** Jury group participants who demonstrated relative ambivalence in their attitudes toward the government on the basis of their screener responses more often voted to oppose rather than to support completing the ACS after being exposed to arguments for both sides.

Of 23 total jury group members classified as ambivalent², 20 identified themselves as supportive and 3 opposed in a baseline vote; in their final verdict, after hearing arguments for both sides and deliberating, 10 of these individuals identified themselves as supportive and 13 as opposed. See Appendix A for additional details.

- **Small group participants were likely to be swayed by the point of view they were assigned to argue, whether in support of or opposition to the ACS.** Individuals placed in small groups were assigned to develop arguments for one side of the issue, whether in support of or against ACS, regardless of their prior attitudes toward government. In these groups, they were exposed to numerous arguments for their side and asked to “inhabit” the assigned point of view.

Of the 56 total participants assigned to participate in “pro” groups, 39 (70 percent) ended up with a positive view toward completing the ACS. Of the 60 individuals assigned to “con” groups, 30 (50 percent) ended up with negative attitudes toward ACS. See Appendix A.

It could be that in the current national climate, with widespread concerns over government intrusion and privacy violations, a large-scale conversation about ACS could open the door to negative voices that drown out the benefits of the survey, especially among individuals already distrustful of the government.

However, as was seen in the strong support for ACS among those assigned to the “pro” groups, providing positive information to shape survey recipients views of ACS may be beneficial. One implication of this finding is that early messaging interventions for those who are unaware of or are unknowledgeable about the ACS could have an effect in swaying their views toward the positive. This possibility will be considered in other research that is part of Team Reingold's work with ACS.

- **Participants frequently conflated Census (information producers) with government decision makers (information users).** In the course of argument, participants often failed to distinguish

² Participants were classified as “ambivalent,” “somewhat distrustful,” or “strongly distrustful” on the basis of their screener responses. Responses were given a numerical value (-2, -1, 0, 1, or 2) according to the degree of distrust of government they indicated. Attitudinal categories were divided evenly from within the range of scores, from 2 to -16. “Ambivalent” individuals were those with a score of 2 to -3. See Appendix B for screener questions.

between ACS and the larger government entities that make decisions affecting our communities—often in an expression of general frustration with “the government.”

This was often a form of “shooting the messenger,” under the perception that Census was somehow responsible for deciding how federal funds should be allocated or which communities were to receive infrastructural improvements.

It will be valuable in messages to emphasize that the job of the ACS is, first and foremost, to produce useful information—and it is then the job of legislators and decision makers to use it; if citizens are not seeing the results they expect, that does not necessarily represent a failure of the ACS as a vehicle for producing information, rather a failure of someone along the line to use that information.

- **Recent data breaches at Target and the NSA were persistent points of reference.** The recent spate of high-profile security breaches at the NSA, Target, and other retailers were a common point of reference for participants.

Many participants reasoned that if these supposedly secure institutions could be breached, Census could be breached, and that therefore ACS respondents’ personal information was potentially at risk.

“Edward Snowden demonstrates that government has insidious things going on that we don’t know about. I don’t trust that government is going to keep info safe.” –Participant, Washington, D.C.

Additionally, the revelations by Edward Snowden about the NSA’s domestic surveillance programs contributed significantly to the perception that the federal government has information on individuals and could potentially use it for malign purposes.

- **An expectation of a lack of privacy led participants to believe that their information was already available to the government, obviating the need for ACS.** Participants frequently exhibited a perception that the government already has unlimited access to citizens’ personal information.

Several participants expressed the belief that the federal government has a “Big Brother”-like ability to acquire personal information from various sources, or that this information was already in the government’s hands.

“Everything comes up on the Internet, all of a sudden you get ads from whatever you looked at from everywhere, so they obviously are keeping up with everything that you do and can compile information that way on what you’re interested in or what you’re thinking about.” – Participant, Atlanta

This often led participants to suggest that ACS was unnecessary, as the government already has the

information it needs.

- **Ironically, participants were largely concerned about privacy—though seemed to prefer over ACS a pervasive government collaborative that gathers individuals’ information without asking for it directly.** Despite vocal concerns for protecting personal privacy, participants were often unreflectively open to—and expectant of—various government entities collaborating to aggregate personal information about individuals. The thought was that such a network would constitute less of a burden on respondents than ACS and would be more efficient and cost-effective than re-collecting this information via a paper survey.

The Atlanta group, for example, discussed whether an individual survey was more protective of an individual’s privacy than a large networked exchange of information between federal, state, and local governments, and even corporations.

This irony constitutes a flaw in the logic of this line of argumentation, and represents an opportunity to suggest that ACS is in fact less invasive, more courteous, and more “human” than technological alternatives.

- **Participants frequently conflated government and commercial sources of information.** In line with the prior point, participants often expressed a belief that government could acquire personal information both from distributed sources of federal or state records—like the IRS or DMV—and from private or commercial sources of data—like health insurance policies, Facebook accounts, or Google search histories.
- **Some participants said they would complete the ACS only because response is required by law and subject to fine, rather than from any positive intent.**

“‘Would you or would you not complete it?’ Of course I’d complete it. I’m not paying five grand.” – Participant, Richmond

This thinking took hold in one Richmond group, for example, resulting in several “qualified” responses in support of ACS.

- **Some participants were amenable to the argument that earlier response would save taxpayer dollars.** Such participants recognized that responding early would remove the possibility of intrusive telephone or in-person follow up contacts, resulting in savings to the government.

“You let them know up front: ‘Hey, this is gonna be mandatory.... If you don’t do it, we’re gonna follow up with another mail and another mail and another mail. The sooner you do it...the less money we’re wasting by following up. At some point they’re gonna knock on your door and nobody wants that.’ You know, that might just sound moving sooner.” – Participant, Dallas

When asked what could be done to encourage earlier response, some participants requested including a deadline for completion. While specifying deadlines may be difficult to operationalize given printing considerations, Reingold recommends evaluating options and costs of customizing deadlines relative to the potential benefits for response rates. Census could also test generic deadlines such as “Please respond within two weeks.”

- **Spanish-speaking participants in the Los Angeles focus group placed relatively greater emphasis on certain arguments.**

While it is difficult to generalize on the basis of one regional focus group, participants in Los Angeles placed a particular emphasis on the following issues.

Los Angeles participants placed a uniquely strong emphasis on ACS’ potential benefits to their communities—especially in so far as they could see those benefits “with their own eyes.” Improvements to things like roads, public transportation, and schools were common points of reference.

But while availability of personal evidence was a convincing factor in support of ACS, other participants saw lack of evidence of improvement in their communities as a sign that ACS has not delivered on a promise—and moreover as a sign of government corruption, misuse of funds, or discriminatory underserving of their communities. What is the point of completing the survey, they reasoned, when it is not providing any apparent benefit—especially in consideration of the large expense to administer it?

Similarly, the general lack of awareness of ACS often raised questions about how funding is allocated as a result, prompting concerns about the potential for misuse of funds.

Some participants viewed seemingly irrelevant ACS questions as particularly “scary” for Hispanic communities, leading them to suspect that the federal government has an ulterior motive in collecting this information. A frequent view was that the information collected could be used to harm individuals or could be “used against one.” In particular, some participants suggested the information could be used to identify illegal immigrants.

“The thing is that if I don’t have hot water, maybe I didn’t pay my bill. But they are asking a lot of unnecessary questions. They should be...going straight to the point. And this is scary especially to the Hispanic community.” – Participant, Los Angeles

These individuals often saw the tradeoff of their personal information as not worth the survey’s potential returns.

In addition, some participants took offense at the lack of “Latino” as a racial classification.

Appendix A: Jury Group Vote Tallies

Jury Group Vote Tallies: Initial vs. Final Votes, by Location

Support for or opposition to completing the ACS

Albuquerque	Initial Vote	Final Vote
Supportive	5	4
Opposed	3	4

Richmond	Initial Vote	Final Vote
Supportive	6	2
Opposed	5	9

Atlanta	Initial Vote	Final Vote
Supportive	4	3
Opposed	4	5

St. Louis	Initial Vote	Final Vote
Supportive	1	0
Opposed	8	9

Dallas	Initial Vote	Final Vote
Supportive	9	9
Opposed	1	1

Washington, DC	Initial Vote	Final Vote
Supportive	6	2
Opposed	4	8

Los Angeles	Initial Vote	Final Vote
Supportive	10	6
Opposed	1	5

TOTAL	Initial Vote	Final Vote
Supportive	41	26
Opposed	26	41

Jury Group Vote Tallies: Initial vs. Final Votes, by Degree of Distrust of Government

Support for or opposition to completing the ACS

Ambivalent	Initial Vote	Final Vote
Supportive	20	10
Opposed	3	13

Strongly Distrustful	Initial Vote	Final Vote
Supportive	4	3
Opposed	9	10

Somewhat Distrustful	Initial Vote	Final Vote
Supportive	17	13
Opposed	15	19

Small Group Survey Results: Entry vs. Exit Surveys, by Group Assignment (Pro/Con)

Support for or opposition to completing the ACS

Pro Group	Pre-Survey	Exit Survey
Supportive	5	39
Neutral	50	5
Opposed	1	10

Con Group	Pre-Survey	Exit Survey
Supportive	2	13
Neutral	56	17
Opposed	2	30

Appendix B: Recruitment Screener

American Community Survey, US Census Bureau
Deliberative Focus Group Screener
Final Version

November 21, 2013

Candidates will be screened to ensure that all participants fall into categories that indicate they are ambivalent, distrustful, cynical, or suspicious with regard to data collection by the federal government. Questions about socio-economic backgrounds are also included in the screener to achieve representation across diverse groups when possible.

Introduction

/* DISPLAY */ Hello, my name is _____ and I'm calling from XXXXX, a focus group facility working with Reingold. Reingold is a firm working on behalf of the U.S. Census Bureau to help improve communications and program outreach. We are conducting a focus group with individuals in the area, and you have previously indicated a desire to participate in focus groups. If you are still interested in participating in a focus group, and if you are available the evening of XX/XX/XX, I will ask you a few questions to see if you qualify for this focus group. This focus group will take between thirty minutes and four hours, and you will be compensated for your time. The questions I will ask on this call will take approximately five to ten minutes.

Before we start, I want to tell you a few things about the focus group and the questions I will be asking you. Your participation in this focus group and this telephone call is voluntary, but your responses are important. You can choose not to answer any or all questions.

The questions I am about to ask you and this focus group have been approved by US Office of Management and Budget, approval number XXX, expiring on XXX. If you have any questions or comments about this survey you may send them to kmccaffrey@reingold.com.

If you are willing to participate, I would like to start off with a few questions to see if you qualify for this study.

/* QParticipate */ Are you willing to participate in this study?

- 1) Yes
- 2) No
- 3) Don't know (**DO NOT READ**)

/* TERMINATE */
/* TERMINATE */

Screening questions

Attitudinal questions:

Please indicate your level of agreement to the statements I will read to you shortly. You may respond:

-- Strongly agree

-- Somewhat agree

-- Neither agree nor disagree

-- Somewhat disagree

-- Strongly disagree

1. The federal government can be trusted to use my information responsibly.
2. I trust the federal government to keep my best interests in mind.
3. When I give information to the federal government, I know it will be kept safe.
4. The government should collect information about the population so that it can make the right decisions.
5. I don't think public officials care much what people like me think.
6. The government knows more about me than it needs to.
7. People have lost all control over how personal information about them is used.
8. People's rights to privacy are well protected.

Background questions

Into which of these age categories do you belong?

- 1) 17 and under **/* TERMINATE */**
- 2) 18-24
- 3) 25-34
- 4) 35-44
- 5) 45-54
- 6) 55-64
- 7) 65 and over

(Ask or verify) Are you male or female?

- 1) Male
- 2) Female

What is your marital status?

- 1) Now married
- 2) Widowed
- 3) Divorced
- 4) Separated
- 5) Never married

What is the highest grade or year of regular school you completed?

- 1) Less than grade school
- 2) Less than high school graduate
- 3) High school graduate
- 4) Some college
- 5) College graduate
- 6) Post-graduate

Do you rent or own your own house or apartment?

- 1) Rent
- 2) Own
- 3) Other

Were you born in the United States?

- 1) Yes
- 2) No

Are you Hispanic or Latino?

- 1) Yes
- 2) No

Which of these categories describes your race? Please select one or more.

/* MULTIPLE RESPONSES PERMITTED */

- 1) American Indian or Alaskan Native
- 2) Asian
- 3) Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- 4) Black or African-American
- 5) White
- 6) Other **/* SPECIFY */** (DO NOT READ ANSWER CHOICE #6)

What language is spoken most often in your household? (DO NOT READ ANSWER CHOICES)

- 1) English
- 2) Spanish

- 3) An Asian or Pacific Islander language such as Chinese, Japanese, Tagalog, or Vietnamese
- 4) Other /* **SPECIFY** */

What is your total household income?

- 1) Less than \$25,000
- 2) Between \$25,000 and \$50,000
- 3) Between \$50,000 and \$75,000
- 4) Between \$75,000 and \$100,000
- 5) Between \$100,000 and \$150,000
- 6) More than \$150,000

Appendix C: Moderator's Guides

Small Group Session Moderator's Guide

0 to 5 minutes in

1. *Intro Language:*

I want to thank you all for taking the time to be with us today. Before we get started, I want to first mention a few **guidelines for our discussion**.

- This is not your typical focus group. It's more like the debate team in high school, where you'll take up an argument for a point of view that is assigned to you. It should be a mix of a little hard work, and a little fun.
- I am an independent market researcher. I am not here to sell you anything or lend a particular point of view. I'm open to both positive and critical views.
- We are recording this discussion. We will only use the recording as a reference point as we write our report, and your contributions will be completely confidential.

2. *About ACS:*

The session we are about to begin is actually a discussion about the **American Community Survey (ACS)**.

- How many of you have heard of the ACS before?
- *[Speak to ACS Fact Sheet]*

5 to 15 minutes in

3. *Small Group Session Intro:*

The group of you have been assigned to **take a side {in support of/against} the ACS**. You will place yourself in the roles of either advocates or opponents of ACS.

- The goal of the discussion is to develop arguments to convince me why you *{should/should not}* complete the survey if you were asked to take it. You must make a strong case for your assigned side to convince me.
- I may ask you to originally argue one side, and then switch to another.
- We may ask some participants to stay on for an additional session. If you're asked to stay, you will receive additional compensation.

Primary Research Questions:

You will need to convince me:

- Based on the materials you reviewed or anything else, which arguments most strongly motivated you to {complete/not complete} the survey?
- What are the best arguments {for/against} the value of the American Community Survey?

4. Participants review materials and form arguments.

15 to 25 minutes in

5. Groups present arguments/challenges

25 to 30 minutes in

6. Group discussion on the presentations:

- Which of the arguments you heard “hit home” most for you? Why?
- Which of the arguments you heard were least convincing?
- Can you think of any good arguments about the ACS that you haven’t heard tonight?

30 minutes in

Closing and thank you

Jury Group Session Moderator's Guide

0 to 10 minutes in

1. *Intro Language:*

I want to thank you all for taking the time to be with us today. Before we get started, I want to first mention a few **guidelines for our discussion**.

- This is not your typical focus group. It's more like a courtroom trial, where you are the jury. You will listen to two sides of an argument, and decide who makes the strongest case.
- I am an independent market researcher. I am not here to sell you anything or lend a particular point of view. I'm open to both positive and critical views.
- We are recording this discussion. We will only use the recording as a reference point as we write our report, and your contributions will be completely confidential.

2. *About ACS:*

The session we are about to begin is actually a debate about the **American Community Survey (ACS)**.

- How many of you have heard of the ACS before?
- *[Speak to ACS fact sheet]*

10 to 15 minutes in

3. *First Vote (Handout)*

15 to 45 minutes in

4. *Jury Session Intro:*

In a moment, you will hear arguments from two opposing teams of “lawyers” who will try to convince you that people who receive the ACS either should or should not complete it.

- Your job is to listen to the arguments that each side makes and the attacks they make on the other side, then **judge who makes the strongest case** for their point of view.
- After the lawyers present their arguments and cross examine each other, you will each have a chance to pose them any additional questions or **challenges of your own**.

- After the arguments and cross examinations are complete, you will need to deliberate and then **vote** on which side you've come down on.

Primary Research Questions:

You will need to evaluate the lawyers' arguments based on the following questions.

- Which arguments most strongly motivated you to {complete/not complete} the survey?
- What are the best arguments you heard {for/against} the value of the American Community Survey?

5. Lawyers present arguments & cross-examinations

45 minutes to 1 hour in

6. Jury poses questions

1 hour to 1 hour and 5 minutes in

7. Introduction of ACS Mailing Package:

Before we vote on which side made the most convincing case, I'd like to show you the actual package that respondents receive in the mail when they're selected to take the ACS. Respondents receive this series of pieces at different times—including an invitation to take the survey online, a paper copy of the survey itself, and reminders to complete the survey if they haven't already.

- Would you respond to the survey if you received this in the mail?
- If not, is there anything that would make you more likely to respond?
- What about the pieces/which elements would most convince you to respond?
- Do the pieces look like they come from a credible organization?
- What would make these pieces catch your attention if you received them in a cluttered mailbox?

1 hour and 5 minutes in to 1 hour and 20 minutes in

8. Jury Group Discussion:

Now is our chance to deliberate as a jury on which team of presenters made the most convincing case—whether to complete or not complete the ACS.

- Which team do you think made the most convincing case for their side? Why?
- Which of the arguments you heard “hit home” most for you? Why?
- Which of the arguments you heard were least convincing?
- Can you think of any good arguments about the ACS that you haven’t heard tonight?

[If certain key points have not come up, please steer the discussion to any of the following topics yet to be addressed. Also, probe on any interesting topics that may have come up but warrant additional discussion.]

- ACS benefits to local communities—funding for schools, hospitals, roads, etc.
- ACS benefits to businesses
- Data security and confidentiality
- Patriotism/civic duty to complete survey

1 hour and 20 minutes in

9. Final Jury Vote

Moderator instructs jury to complete paper forms.

Take show of hands on who voted for which side.

Congratulate the team of presenters that receives the most votes.

Then, inquire about who switched positions since the initial vote.

- What was it that swayed you to change sides?
- For those of you who didn’t switch, were there any arguments that made you reevaluate your own position?
- Finally, if your neighbor was asked to take the ACS, what is **the one thing** you would say to convince him or her to complete it/not complete it?

1 hour and 30 minutes in

Closing and thank you

The Washington Post

The American Community Survey is a count worth keeping

By Editorial Board, Published: May 15, 2012

According to Rep. Daniel Webster (R-Fla.), it is “intrusive,” “an inappropriate use of taxpayer dollars,” “unconstitutional,” and “the very picture of what’s wrong in D.C.”

What manner of predatory government prompted Mr. Webster — supported by nearly all House Republicans — to issue such categorical condemnation? That intolerable federal boondoggle known as...the American Community Survey (ACS).

If you are confused, you are not alone. Every year, the Census Bureau asks 3 million American households to answer questions on age, race, housing and health to produce timely information about localities, states and the country at large. This arrangement began as a bipartisan improvement on the decennial census. Yet last week the Republican-led House voted to kill the ACS. This is among the most shortsighted measures we have seen in this Congress, which is saying a lot.

As James Madison argued around the time of the first census, collecting information on the socio-economic status of the population is one of those basic things that government is uniquely suited to do, and it benefits everyone. Businesses deciding whether to sell tractors or tricycles want to know how many people live in a given area, whether they mostly live in apartments or houses, with how many children, and how far they travel to work. Consumers then get access to goods and services they desire. Municipal planners determining whether to build a new senior center need to know where the elderly live in their town, and if they have family around to care for them. Government agencies targeting \$400 billion in annual anti-poverty, health-care or highway spending require granular data on things such as local incomes. Lawmakers debating health-care policy should have up-to-date information on how many people are uninsured, and where they are concentrated. Even extreme fiscal conservatives should want the Census Bureau’s information, so they know what is most sensible to cut. Those submitting information into the census database, meanwhile, do not see identifying details released to any of these parties.

The Constitution explicitly allows Congress to collect demographic data on the American public “in such a manner as they shall by law direct.” As for the expense, eliminating the ACS is like declining to buy stethoscopes in order to reduce health-care expenses: The up-front savings would be relatively tiny in exchange for untold billions in costs to the economy down the line.

The inconvenience of being required to fill out some census forms is not a distressing infringement on personal liberty, and government spending to collect that information is easily defensible. The Senate should protect the Census Bureau against the House’s attacks.



Opposing view: Census survey intrusive and expensive

By Daniel Webster, Updated: July 15, 2012

How well do you speak English? Do you have difficulty dressing yourself? Or bathing? How many times have you been married? Does your house have a toilet that flushes? What is your emotional condition?

Most Americans would be offended if someone they did not know, or maybe even did know, approached them and demanded answers to questions like the ones above.

In fact, many Americans who are asked these questions do take offense, especially when the person asking is an agent of the federal government. Each and every month, the U.S. Census Bureau mails more than 250,000 households the American Community Survey, which pries into the lives of ordinary Americans with these types of questions.

The fines can be up to \$5,000.

Is this freedom? Is this the proper role of government? The Census Bureau will spend at least \$2.4 billion over the next decade on the American Community Survey. Not only is it intrusive, mandatory and expensive, it is also worth asking whether this is a proper use of taxpayer dollars. Higher spending results in higher debt, higher taxes or both. If we can't come up with savings as our \$15 trillion debt mounts, then European-style austerity measures will loom or the government will be forced to take more from your hard-earned paycheck.

At a per unit cost of approximately \$70 per questionnaire, and with more than 5,000 federal employees required to administer and implement the survey, surely this government intrusion should be considered a serious contender to eliminate for deficit savings.

As with so much of our enormous government, the American Community Survey is well intentioned. But for the sake of reducing government spending and limiting further government intrusion on our personal freedoms, I am left with a serious question: Isn't there a better way to run our government?

Appendix E: Participant Demographics and Screener Responses

See attached file.