How a Question Becomes Part of the American Community Survey
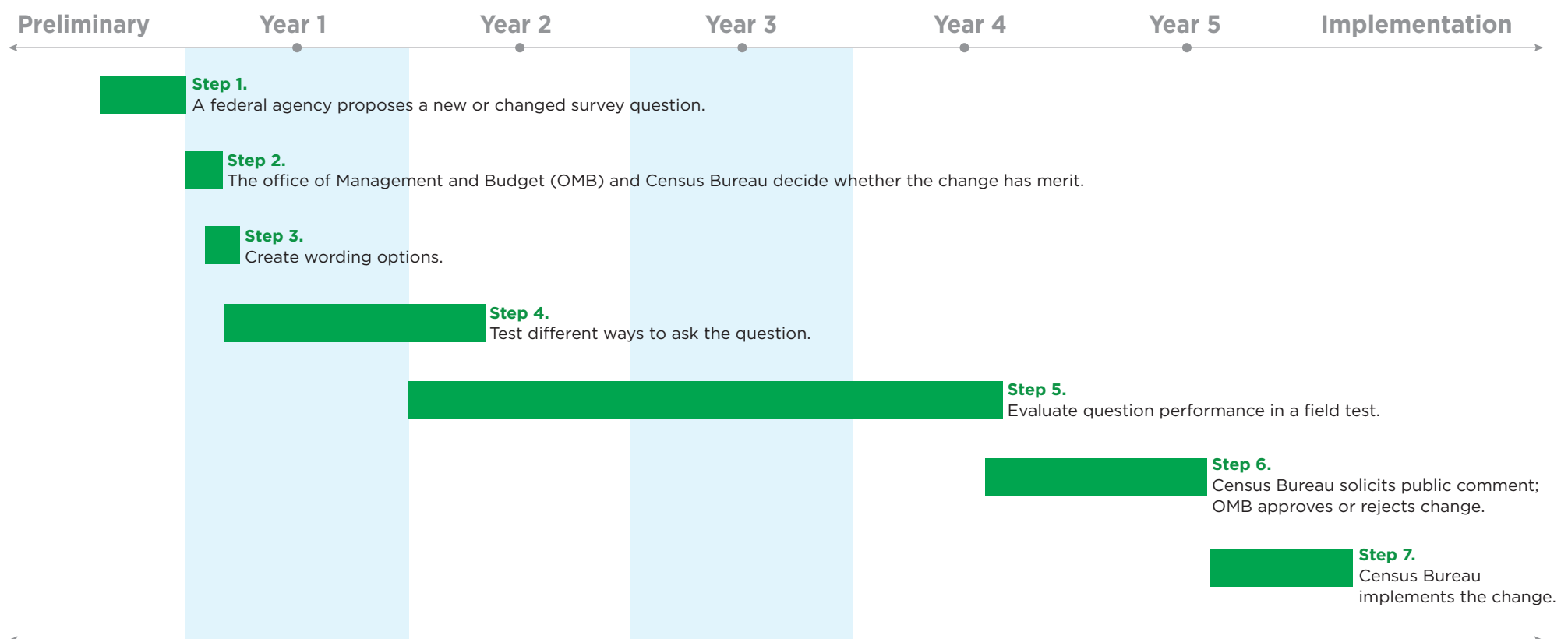
December 2023

The U.S. Census Bureau must balance the information needs of a growing, changing nation with respect for the privacy and time of the American public.

Adding a question or making a change to the American Community Survey (ACS) involves extensive testing, review, and evaluation over a 5-year period. This ensures the change is necessary and will produce quality, useful information for the nation.

Additionally in conjunction with the Department of Commerce's Office of Chief Counsel, the Census Bureau does a periodic validation of the uses of all questions to ensure there is a legal basis for them.

Though the timing may vary depending on improvements in testing methods, availability of resources, and urgency of the request, the process generally follows the evaluation and testing timeline below:

| Preliminary | Year 1 | Year 2 | Year 3 | Year 4 | Year 5 | Implementation |

Step 1.
A federal agency proposes a new or changed survey question.

Step 2.
The office of Management and Budget (OMB) and Census Bureau decide whether the change has merit.

Step 3.
Create wording options.

Step 4.
Test different ways to ask the question.

Step 5.
Evaluate question performance in a field test.

Step 6.
Census Bureau solicits public comment; OMB approves or rejects change.

Step 7.
Census Bureau implements the change.

1. **A federal agency proposes a new or changed survey question.**

   The requesting agency must show that it needs frequent data at small geographies, that no other sources of information are available, and that its mission would be compromised if the question was not added or changed.

2. **The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and Census Bureau decide whether the change has merit.**

   Legal staff review the proposal to determine if it meets the legislative requirements. The Census Bureau and OMB decide whether the request merits further consideration, in consultation with the Interagency Council on Statistical Policy Subcommitee on the ACS.

3. **Create wording options.**

   Subject matter experts identify ways to ask each question using different words and phrases.

4. **Test different ways to ask the question.**

   The Census Bureau conducts cognitive interviews to gauge which wording is best understood and produces the most accurate results.

   Subject matter experts review the cognitive testing results and recommend the version for field testing.

5. **Evaluate question performance in a field test.**

   The Census Bureau solicits public comment and OMB approval for the field test. Census Bureau staff finalize the wording for the test, create instruments to field the test, develop the systems to process the data collected, and conduct the test. Then, they tabulate and analyze the results and provide them to the federal agency that requested the change.

6. **Census Bureau solicits public comment; OMB approves or rejects change.**

   The Census Bureau and requesting federal agency review the research results and decide whether to recommend implementation of the new or changed survey question. The Census Bureau solicits public comment through a Federal Register Notice to inform a final decision in consultation with the OMB and the Interagency Council on Statistical Policy Subcommittee on the ACS.

   Note: The Paperwork Reduction Act requires OMB approval of data collections that would impose a burden on the American public. It also requires a public comment period via the Federal Register.

7. **Census Bureau implements the change.**

   If approved by the OMB, the Census Bureau prepares to implement the change by updating systems, questionnaires, and materials. Implementation takes effect at the start of a calendar year.