March 25, 2014

2014 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY RESEARCH AND EVALUATION REPORT
MEMORANDUM SERIES #ACS14-RER-09

MEMORANDUM FOR   ACS Research and Evaluation Advisory Group

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

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Subject: ACS Messaging Research: Mental Models Research Project
                            Interviews with Individuals Who Work Closely with ACS
                            Stakeholders – Respondents and Data Users

Attached is the final American Community Survey Research report for ACS Messaging Research: Mental Models Research Project Interviews with Individuals Who Work Closely with ACS Stakeholders – Respondents and Data Users. The research provides qualitative information that will produce recommendations to support regional communications and improve outreach to external audiences.

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

Attachment

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ACS Messaging Research: Mental Models Research Project

Interviews with Individuals Who Work Closely with ACS Stakeholders – Respondents and Data Users

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Section 1: Introduction

1.1 Project Background

The U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS), an ongoing survey of 3.5 million households each year, is one of our nation's most important information-gathering tools. Data collected through this survey provide a comprehensive picture of the residents in the United States, and the places and the economy in which they live. The ACS boasts an impressive 97.6 percent response rate and is one of the largest data collection efforts conducted by the Census Bureau (CB), and is the successor to the long form of the decennial census.

ACS data have a tremendous impact on our lives. These data inform and drive decisions about improvements to roads and public transportation systems, ways to support schools and hospitals, economic growth strategies to create jobs in a given city, areas where emergency services are needed, tactics for helping a community recovering from a disaster, and much more.

Despite the many practical uses of data collected through the ACS, many respondents are not aware of the survey or its value, and other respondents are opposed to completing the survey because they find the questions intrusive or burdensome. This lack of awareness of and resistance to the ACS presents challenges for conducting and maximizing its use and thus its impact and benefit to the nation. Many people who could use ACS data to improve their businesses and organizations may not know what is available to them and how to use it.

To overcome these challenges, the ACS needs an integrated messaging campaign and mail package assessment designed to:

- Increase public awareness, support, and use of ACS data;
- Link the value of ACS/census data to key areas of interest for various stakeholder groups; and
- Increase early response rates for participants.

The ACS faces three significant concerns that prompt consideration of a strategic approach to messaging and the mail package:

1. A general lack of awareness of the survey, its use, and the value it represents leaves few to defend it.
2. Negative perceptions among fringe audiences can lead to adverse events and negative publicity and threaten to lower response rates, causing the Census Bureau to incur significant extra expense.
3. Little incentive or motivation for members of some psychographic groups to respond in a timely fashion, or at all, causes the Census Bureau to incur significant extra expense.

The Mental Models Research presented here is one part of a multi-step project designed to assist the Census Bureau in the creation of a data-driven, customer-centric approach to message and material development. The Mental Models Research includes in-depth interviews with personnel in the regional offices, State Data Centers, and Census Information Centers to gain qualitative information from these individuals in order to produce recommendations to support regional communications and improve outreach to external audiences.

1.2 Research Opportunity

The following Research Opportunity Statement was developed in collaboration with the Census Bureau Team in a workshop conducted at the Census Bureau on November 20, 2013.

The Opportunity for the ACS Mental Models Research is to leverage Census Bureau knowledge and existing research, including the developmental research for the Census Bureau's Communications Research and Analytics Roadmap (CRAR), to develop a science-based, research-informed set of recommendations to improve the effectiveness of the Census Bureau's interactions and relationships with both American Community Survey (ACS) respondents and users of the ACS data.

1.3 Mental Models Research Approach

This research conducted followed the Mental Models Research Approach.[1] This method was developed by risk analysis and risk communications researchers from Carnegie Mellon University and has been adapted and applied by the researchers for more than 20 years, addressing a wide range of topics and opportunities. Mental models are tacit webs of belief that all people draw upon to interpret and make inferences about issues that come to their attention. These beliefs may be complete and correct, or they may have gaps that are consequential to decision making. Mental models cannot be determined without empirical research, and must be addressed through communications in order to change people's attitudes, beliefs and behaviors.

When done well, Mental Models Research enables discovery and characterization of:

- In-depth salient beliefs and the underlying rationale for those beliefs that could not be anticipated by researchers, i.e., what people believe and why they believe it;
- Possible tradeoffs individuals are prepared to address;
- Different modes of expression;
- Sources of information and influence; and
- Testable hypotheses concerning people's beliefs and behaviors.

Decision Partners, part of Team Reingold, is the leader in mental modeling – the premier approach for influencing judgment, decision-making and behavior through communication. We are the developer and provider of Mental Modeling Technology™ – the complete suite of procedures, instructions, methods, tools, and custom software needed to implement mental modeling. Over the past two decades, we have applied mental modeling to solving a wide range of challenges across multiple sectors, worldwide[2]. In August 2013, we filed for a patent for Mental Modeling Technology™.

The approach begins with the development of an *Expert Model,* which summarizes and integrates the knowledge of experts on a complex topic typically in a graphical format. The Draft Base Expert Model of *User Participation in the ACS and Use of ACS Data*, developed in

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[1] Morgan, M.G., Fischhoff, B., Bostrom, A., and Atman, C.J. 2002. Risk Communication – A Mental Models Approach. New York: Cambridge University Press.
[2] For more information, see www.decisionpartners.com.

coordination with a small group of key internal experts, served as the analytical framework for the design, implementation and structured analyses of in-depth mental models interviews conducted with a broader sample of key stakeholders – personnel in the regional offices, State Data Centers, and Census Information Centers who have direct contact with ACS respondents and ACS data users. The interview was designed to address key topics depicted in the Expert Model while allowing for other topics to emerge through free expression. Structured qualitative analysis of the interviews against the Expert Model enables identification of the key areas of alignment and critical gaps in the thinking of experts and the stakeholders. The insight generated by such research directly supports the development of targeted strategies, programs and communications.

1.4 The Base Expert Model of ACS Participation and ACS Data Use

The Expert Model: *Influences on Key Stakeholder Decision Making on ACS Data Collection and Dissemination – Base Expert Model of ACS Participation and ACS Data Use* (presented below), integrates, at the highest level, expert knowledge of influences on ACS respondents' and ACS data users' decision making on ACS data collection and dissemination. The Base Model was developed by Team Reingold partner Decision Partners, in collaboration with the Census Bureau Project Team.
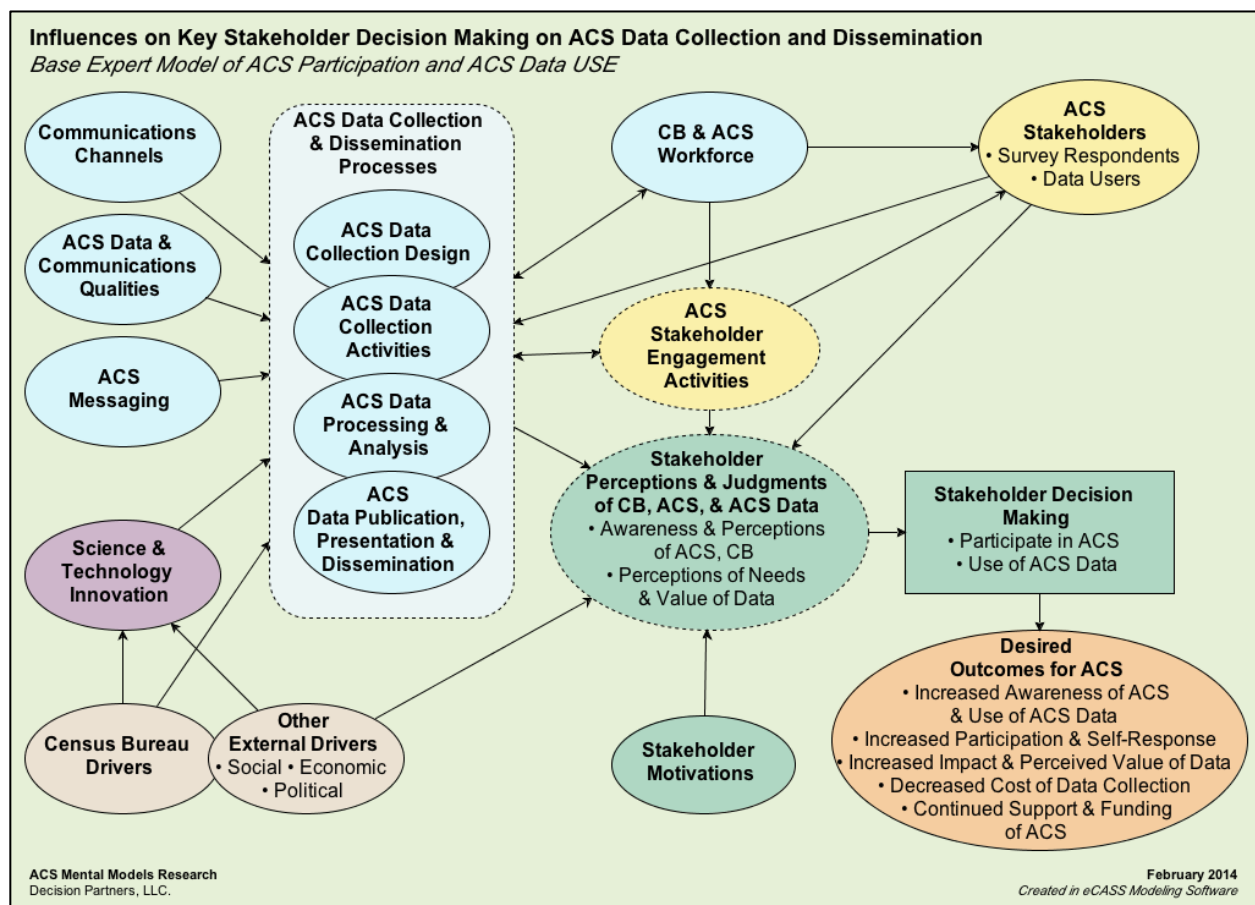
1.5 Mental Models Research Overview

Confidential one-on-one interviews were conducted between December 10 and December 23, 2013, with a total of 25 individuals, randomly selected by the Census Bureau, who work closely with ACS stakeholders (respondents, non-respondents, and data users), including:

- *FLD Regional Staff (12) – Includes Field Representatives, Field Supervisor, and Survey Statistician Field positions, from the following offices:*
  - *New York (2)*
  - *Philadelphia (2)*
  - *Chicago (2)*
  - *Atlanta (2)*
  - *Denver (2)*
  - *Los Angeles (2)*
- *Data Dissemination Specialists (7) – Includes Data Dissemination Specialist, Information Services Specialist, and PDS Manager positions, from the following offices:*
  - *Los Angeles (2)*
  - *New York*
  - *Philadelphia*
  - *Chicago*
  - *Atlanta*
  - *Denver*
- *CATI Interviewers (4), from the following Call Centers:*
  - *Tucson, AZ (2)*
  - *Hagerstown, MD*
  - *Jeffersonville, IN*
- *State Data Center Representative (1)*
- *Census Information Center Representative (1)*

Interviews averaged 52 minutes in length, ranging from 18 to 75 minutes.

Some Interviewees had experience with only one or the other of data collection and dissemination and were, therefore, unable to respond to both sets of questions in the interview protocol. As such, the "n" of the results has been reduced to n=22 for responses to questions on data collection and n=14 for responses to questions on data dissemination. Throughout this report, those who responded to data collection questions are referred to as "Data Collectors" and those who responded to data dissemination questions are referred to as "Data Disseminators". Those Interviewees who discussed both issues are included in the results for both the Data Collectors and Data Disseminators.

1.6 Interview Topics

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed to guide the research interviews. The interview protocol offered Interviewees an agenda of topics to discuss in a way that allowed for free expression. Interview topics included:

- Roles and Responsibilities

- o Interviewees' current responsibilities and personal experiences with ACS Stakeholders – respondents, non-respondents, and data users
- ACS Data Collection
  - o Characteristics of non-respondents and most challenging populations to engage
  - o What is working well when engaging non-respondents
  - o Barriers to increased self-response and opportunities for improvement
- ACS Data Dissemination
  - o ACS data users and their needs/uses for ACS data
  - o What is working well with ACS data dissemination
  - o Barriers to increased ACS data use and opportunities for improvement
  - o Potential new users of ACS data
- Interviewees' Final Advice
  - o Final advice for improving engagement of ACS non-respondents and data users

All interviews were conducted by telephone. Interviewees were encouraged to raise additional topics that they thought were relevant and to elaborate on their perspectives.

Section 2: Bottom Line Up Front

ACS Messages and Materials

Thinking about ACS messages and materials, Interviewees reported:

- *A lack of awareness and knowledge of ACS (despite familiarity with Census Bureau and the Decennial Census) negatively influencing ACS participation and use of ACS data.*

- *A lack of a clear line of site from some specific ACS questions to why those questions are asked to how the results are used. Value of responding to the ACS is not clear.*

- *Cultural and language challenges, in both the survey and in the recruiting and training of field personnel, create significant barriers to stakeholder engagement and participation in ACS.*

- *The technical complexity of materials and messages and high language level are barriers to participation in ACS and use of ACS data.*

- *The relevance of ACS to respondents and the importance of their participation is not clear: "What's in it for me?"*

- *ACS materials and messages used to explain and promote ACS do not focus on the respondent's community, making it hard to understand the relevance to them.*

- *ACS field personnel report they have inadequate communications resources that they can readily adapt to a respondent's local situation. They have to work hard – "on the fly" – to link the relevance of the ACS to the respondent and underscore the importance of the respondent's participation.*

Barriers to ACS Participation

Primary barriers to participation include:

- *Privacy and intrusiveness concerns with some ACS questions.*

- *Anti-government sentiments that affect support and participation of any government-sponsored activity, including ACS.*

- *Suspicions about the legitimacy of the ACS survey when it arrives in the mail and of CB personnel when they are conducting non-response follow-up.*

- *Language barriers (foreign languages and language level) that affect respondents' ability to answer the survey and effectively communicate with CB personnel.*

- *Lack of awareness and knowledge about ACS that affects respondents' perception of the legitimacy of the survey and CB personnel and their perception of value and importance of participation.*

Barriers to ACS Data Use

Primary barriers to data use include:

- *Difficulties in accessing ACS data, particularly challenges working with American FactFinder.*

- *Limitations of ACS data, in particular the lack of data and high margin of error at some geographical scales desired by users, such as neighborhoods or rural areas.*

- *Quality of ACS materials that are not specific to the users' community.*

- *Lack of personnel in CB field offices to effectively handle engagement of data users and potential data users in the large geographic areas and populations for which they are responsible.*

- *Lack of understanding of data users and their specific data needs.*

Section 3: Summary of Key Research Findings

Introduction

The detailed research findings are presented in four sections:
- Section 3.1 Interviewees' roles and responsibilities
- Section 3.2 Key findings on ACS data collection
- Section 3.3 Key findings on ACS data use
- Section 3.4 Interviewees' final advice and recommendations.

The report is organized around the structure of the interview protocol. Key findings in each section are presented, as much as possible, using the terms, concepts and language of the Interviewees.

Frequency of Response

To reflect the qualitative nature of the results, where reported, frequency of responses has been rounded to the nearest 5% and qualitative terms have been used to indicate the general frequency of response:

- "Nearly all" indicates a response by 80-100% of Interviewees;
- "Most" indicates a response by 60-79% of Interviewees;
- "Many" indicates a response by 40-59% of Interviewees;
- "Some" indicates a response by 20-39% of Interviewees; and
- "A few" indicates a response mentioned by fewer than 20% of Interviewees.

Specific findings are ordered based on decreasing frequency of mention and are supported with example quotes from Interviewees to illustrate the finding being presented.

3.1 Interviewees' Roles and Responsibilities

The interviews began with a brief discussion of Interviewees' roles and responsibilities which were varied by design of the sampling process:

- ***Data Collectors*** interact with ACS Respondents. The data collectors in this sample had a variety of responsibilities related to data collection, including: verifying and following up with contacts; administering the survey; following up with non-respondents; and supervising field representatives.

- ***Data Disseminators*** interact with current or potential ACS data users. The data disseminators in this sample had a variety of responsibilities related to disseminating data to users, including: creating data packages for specific users; creating print and website publications on ACS data use; and providing training and workshops to help current and potential data users understand what data are available and how to use them.

Interviewees' experiences often allowed them to speak to both data collection and data dissemination issues.

3.2 ACS Data Collection

3.2.1 Non-Respondents & Hard-to-Engage People

When asked to identify the type of people who, from their experience, are typical "non-respondents" and who are "difficult to engage", Data Collectors mentioned a variety of populations including: immigrants; affluent individuals; the elderly; "busy people;" individuals in remote areas and others. Note that these categories are not mutually exclusive.

Percent of Data Collectors (n=22)
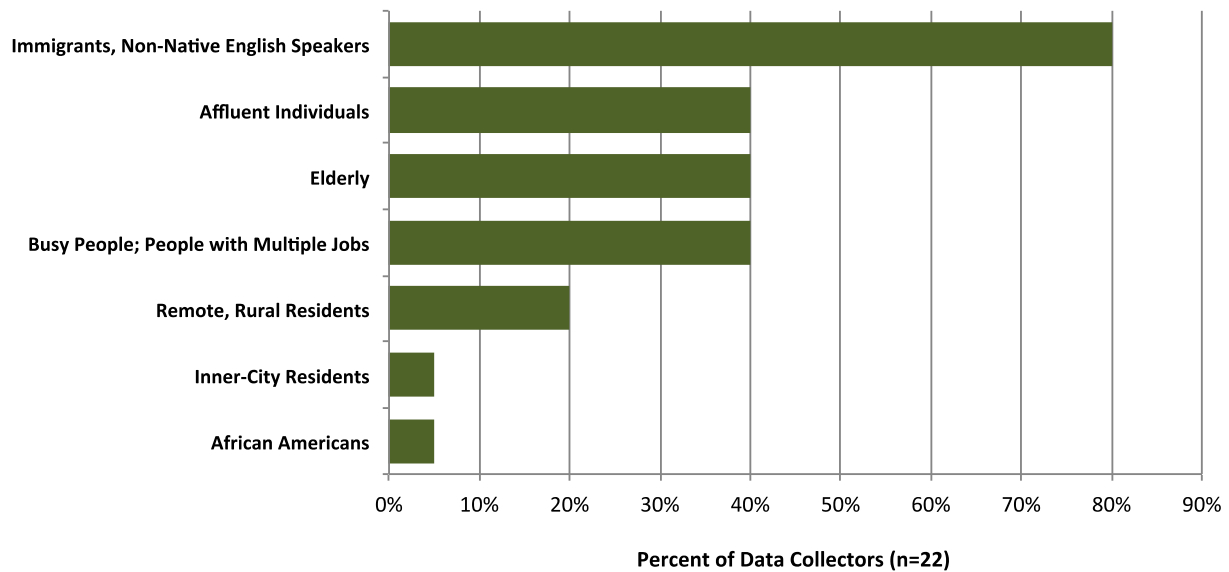
Nearly all Data Collectors (80%) mentioned immigrants as typical non-respondents or a hard-to-reach population. They often have trouble speaking English and are more difficult to contact due to cultural differences or fear being detected as illegal:

> "Europeans that just immigrated to this country just recently, they have very big privacy issues, like this is beneath them or this is something that they don't need to do."

> "Illegal immigrants. In my area where I supervise there is a high Asian community, mainly from China trying to rebuild their lives. Another part is Hispanic and many people from Mexico who come to visit their family and stay. They stay here for a long time without legal status and are afraid of contact because they're doing something against the law so they hide."

> "The main other problem is the non-English speakers – Spanish is the majority but there are plenty of others. I know they are working on developing letters, material in some other languages but there are so many. I think it would be a waste of money to send this form in five languages to each address but it would help to have enough people on staff to handle most languages."

> "I run into a lot of Spanish-speaking respondents. We can translate the questions into Spanish and I toggle back and forth between English and Spanish or I find a translator in the household. Usually, it is a kid in school who speaks English well,

who was born in this country. I would love for the Census Bureau to engage us in a course in Spanish."

Many Data Collectors (40%) mentioned wealthy people, noting that some more affluent people do not appear to see any personal benefit in responding. Some are harder to access because they live in gated communities or luxury high-rise buildings with security:

"Some of the homeowners where they are not as generous with their information may be because you cannot convince them that so many of the community-wide facilities, which are partially funded by the federal government, are of any use to them."

"The most difficult to get to respond are the wealthy people. If you go to a neighborhood with huge houses you are very likely to have a hard time, lots of refusals. We have big problems with gated communities. They have security systems that won't let you in. You have to figure out how to get in touch with the neighborhood association, deal with them, get them involved so you can attend the neighborhood."

Many Data Collectors (40%) commented that sometimes elderly people tend to be harder to engage and more likely to refuse to respond:

"Southwestern Pennsylvania has a large population of retirees. A lot of those people are afraid to open the door to a person they don't know, even if you tell them, 'I have identification I can show you.'"

"In New England, we had a very conservative, mostly elderly population. They were hard to persuade."

Many Data Collectors (40%) talked about "busy people" with time constraints—those who work long hours or multiple jobs—as being difficult to reach:

"It's a time factor. You're intruding upon their time. If they're doctors, lawyers, they're not going to be home a lot. When they do get home, they don't want to waste their time. When you can show them that this information is useful because it's going to benefit hospitals in the future … however it's going to impact bringing in more businesses to certain areas."

Some Data Collectors (20%) discussed problems engaging respondents living in rural areas:

"In my experience, the more rural areas have a very guarded mentality. A lot of the time it's lower income, lower educational attainment, statistically speaking, and they have this 'this is my stuff, get off my property' [attitude]."

"The rural areas are predominantly more anti-government. 'Leave us alone. We don't care if it's the Census Bureau, the IRS, NSA…we heard all those stories too. Don't get into my business.'"

Other hard-to-engage populations that were mentioned only by a few Data Collectors included residents in inner cities and African Americans:

> *"We have a lot more non-respondents in the inner city and I'm sure the data proves that. I think it's just out of leeriness. They don't know who we are. A lot of times they don't even open the door for us. Some people might talk behind the door and say, 'I'm not interested. I don't want to do this.' They're afraid."*

> *"African Americans that have a high school degree or below have, in my experience, very big trust issues and are very reluctant people."*

3.2.2. What Works Well with Data Collection

When asked to discuss what is working well when engaging hard-to-reach populations to participate in the ACS, Data Collectors suggested the following:

Percent of Data Collectors (n=22)
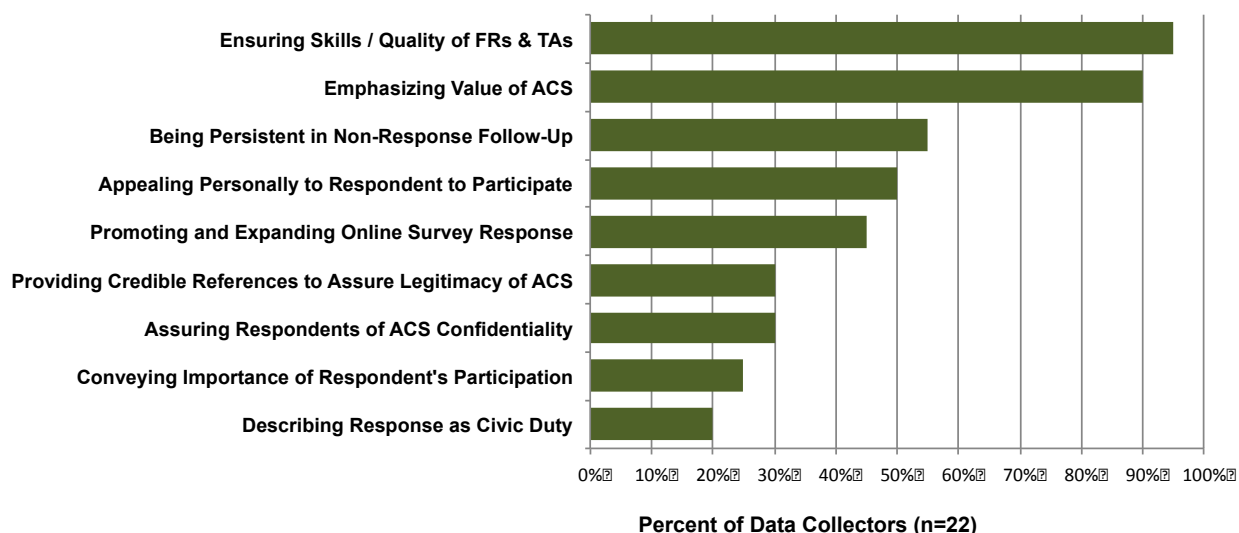
Ensuring Skills and Qualities of Field Representatives and Telephone Assistants

Nearly all Data Collectors (95%) talked about various skills and qualities of the Field Representatives or Telephone Assistants that aid data collection, particularly those skills that enable the FR/TA to adapt to respondents' backgrounds and cultural sensitivities:

> *"We have to first make sure that we have quality people working the survey, interacting with the public. We have to have people who are knowledgeable of the survey. We have to be more interactive with them and reach them on a level that they can relate to."*

> *"I try to be very polite and to listen and let them get it all out of their system, whatever it is, and then you can address the issues individually. I always try to think of it as, 'I don't know these people and I don't know what situation they're in,' so I try not to let them push my buttons."*

"Paraphrasing helps. My hard and fast rule is that if you can come up with something that will possibly put them in a humorous mood, it seems to go smoother. It also helps to establish a rhythm and have the interviewers copying the cadence of their speech and using some of the vocabulary so that with me paraphrasing the questions, we come back in a language that is as close as possible to their speech. This helps."

"They can all be, potentially, a very good sales person. Some of them turn out to be but it takes some time and I notice from my observations with field staff that they don't have a consistent message. They figure out a way to sell it and it's not consistent, so that part of the education and the training of the field staff and maybe the call centers are key."

"Being personable. Understand their situations, work with them. For example, I had a guy who worked shift work. He got off at midnight, and I said I'd work around his schedule so he called me at one o'clock a.m. to do the interview. He thought I was being funny, but I did the interview with him. Be willing to work with to their schedule."

Culturally Sensitive and Aligned with Respondent

"We try to see what the background of the person is and try to send someone of the same background. For example, if they are from Cuba, try to send a field rep who is from Cuba. We try to identify in some way with them. We try to send a field rep with the same background – this is one thing that has been successful."

"Those houses that are really rich, have wealthy people, I tell reps they have to go talk to them wearing a suit, try to explain very smoothly. When visiting really big houses, you have to go presenting yourself as a successful business person; in poor areas you do the opposite."

"For anti-government people we have to have very good communication skills and make them feel comfortable. So I sometimes go in and compliment them on their yard work. We have to persuade them with the specific skills of the interviewer."

"I've dealt a lot with migrant communities and you need to understand your audience but you'd be surprised how many people don't. They get scared and intimidated especially with all these issues of immigration which make immigrants a little more wary of people who look like government employees. You really have to go in and understand how you appear to other people and how you present yourself."

"Language is an issue sometimes, but most of the time we can get by assigning a field rep with that language. We pretty much have our language issues dealt with because we have field staff that speak all those languages."

"If it's related to illegal immigrants, we have people speak their language and learn their culture. So our staff have good interview skills as well and are very careful so they don't make them afraid."

"Make sure that the people knocking on their doors are people from within the community, that they're not looking at someone that doesn't even look like they belong over here."

Emphasizing Value of ACS

Nearly all Data Collectors (90%) mentioned that they often can convince reluctant respondents to participate by emphasizing the value ACS can bring to them individually, to their community and to society at large:

"The one thing that has traditionally worked best is when the question 'what's in it for me?' is answered."

"I explained to them the real need for this question is to establish commuting times which will eventually lead to the expansion of her road so you don't have to deal with congestion. We try to turn a complaint into an 'ah-ha' moment. This is something I enjoy, and I pride myself in being able to redirect people's anger."

"I say, 'Give me two minutes. I'm not going to give you the letter that I have in my hand. I'm going to explain to you what if your sidewalk was broken because of an overgrown tree or something and you needed to be fixing it and they looked at you and your Census and population numbers of your entire street were not accounted for? Do you think the money is going to come faster when nobody lives on that street or do you think the money is going to come faster when everybody responds as a people living on the street?'"

"From that point I explain that it's helpful to the community. It helps everyone to go at it that way. I try to turn it from that to say, 'This is the reason why. It's very helpful to the community.' Sometimes I can just get them and they'll do it. If they're elderly, I explain what it is. If they have younger kids, I explain to them about libraries and schools and things like that so they get a feel that they become vested in the survey because it's going to help their kids and the community."

"The biggest selling point I have is having been a volunteer firefighter. I play on the fact that this data helps us to show that we have more people, more buildings and, therefore, we should have a higher priority for new equipment."

"The motivation to respond is when you tell them what we've got trained at our classes. If you do this, then something is needed in regards of a repair of a sidewalk or repair of a street or having a new light system put in your street, anything that benefits them as a community."

"One of my wife's relatives works in job placement for veterans. He uses Census Bureau data to get jobs for veterans. I tell them the VA uses the survey to secure funding for jobs, for hospitals. That's why we ask questions about where you work and what kind of job you do."

"For rural, in my opinion, just broadening their understanding. Most rural communities are actually quite reasonable and receptive but just initially skeptical

so you need to be able to explain to them without hesitation the importance of the survey."

Being Persistent in Non-Response Follow-Up

Many Data Collectors (55%) mentioned the importance of Field Representatives and Telephone Assistants being persistent:

> *"The other thing that generally works with respondents is our persistence – we keep coming back even though they say no, so eventually they see it is more important than they realize."*

> *"If the house is occupied, my job is to go and make contact morning, noon, night, it does not matter, and to interview them because ACS wants the information. I see my job as the last resort and I must make contact."*

Appealing Personally to Respondent to Participate

Many Data Collectors (50%) talked about making a personal appeal to respondents who, for a variety of reasons, refuse to answer the survey until they are engaged directly and personally by a Field Representative or Telephone Assistant:

> *"If we can get face-to-face, we can likely convert them. Field operations play a very important role."*

Promoting and Expanding Online Survey Response

Many Data Collectors (45%) discussed the online survey option and potential for increased self-response:

> *"Internet. We have to concentrate on that. When we do a mailer, instead of putting the 1-800 number of the field rep's name or number, we should go ahead and put the Internet access with the code number that once they go to www.census.gov and something pops up and you give them a password number and it pops up their information and in 5 minutes they're done with us. I think that's exactly what we should do."*

> *"My experience is anybody that is from the age of 20 until 35 would love to complete the survey on the Internet. I think you would have a very, very high response rate."*

Providing Credible References to Assure Legitimacy of ACS

Some Data Collectors (30%) mentioned providing a credible reference to reassure respondents of the legitimacy of data collection activities:

> *"When you give them the phone number to the office and they can speak to our supervisor, when we send them to our website, they figure out it's not a scam."*

Assuring Respondents of ACS Confidentiality

Some (30%) talked about assuring respondents of the confidential nature of the ACS data collected:

> *"Confidentiality is also an issue and we always stress that this information is shared and it's only for statistical purposes. I say this in every call. I also let them know that I am sworn into confidentiality and I can't share this with anyone."*

Conveying Importance of Respondent's Participation

Some Data Collectors (25%) suggested conveying the importance of each respondent to the process:

> *"I think we need to emphasize the importance of their role in this process."*

Describing Response as a Civic Duty

Some Data Collectors (20%) suggested describing participation in the survey as a civic duty:

> *"I say that Congress considers it on par with being called for jury duty. It is a civic responsibility. Sometimes saying that helps."*

Other Successful Factors or Activities

Other factors or activities mentioned as working well by a few Data Collectors included increased promotional activities and changing how the survey is administered:

> *"It is a good idea to have ongoing promotional efforts of the survey in as many local jurisdictions as possible, but you have to have staff to do it and we never had staff, let alone funding from the American Community Survey office to do this promotion."*

> *"Social media I think can be a pivotal tool in the PR world."*

> *"It is in the paper occasionally about the Census Bureau and things like that, so maybe a bit more PR for the Census Bureau might be a good thing, make them a little bit more aware that we do other things here and how important the ACS is for each community."*

> *"Sometimes if I've been on the phone long enough that I know they will never answer a question, I'll say that while the survey is mandatory, each question is not, that they can refuse to answer a question, but I still have to ask it."*

> *"Have a series of targeted letters – not just a general letter that's supposed to apply to everything. We need one for gated communities, one for high rises, one for associations, another for lower-income areas. Do an analysis of the situations and target the communications."*

> *"I believe a lot of people receive that thick package, say this is too long, is too much to read, and don't bother trying. Maybe if they received something shorter*

or more summarized they would look at it. If we could reduce the part they have to read, maybe people would respond better – right now there is a lot to read."

"Developing flashcards in a variety of languages is an idea. If they can come out with flashcards with an introductory explanation in different languages, the field rep could show the flashcard to people and they can nod yes or no. The first flashcard would ask 'what language do you speak?' Then the field rep could choose the next flashcard in correct language that explains that we are conducting the ACS – and the respondent will often go get a family member or neighbor who speaks that language to help answer the questions."

"I think they should send out one package by registered mail. Make someone sign for it. Then you'd know someone is there and someone had picked it up. If they get it registered mail would give it more legitimacy. People throw out forms now – they often don't realize it is important if it is just addressed to current resident."

3.2.3 Barriers to Participation

When asked about barriers that may contribute to respondents deciding not to participate in the ACS, Data Collectors discussed a number of issues, with the most significant being privacy concerns with their personal information, anti-government sentiments, concerns about the legitimacy of the survey, and language barriers:
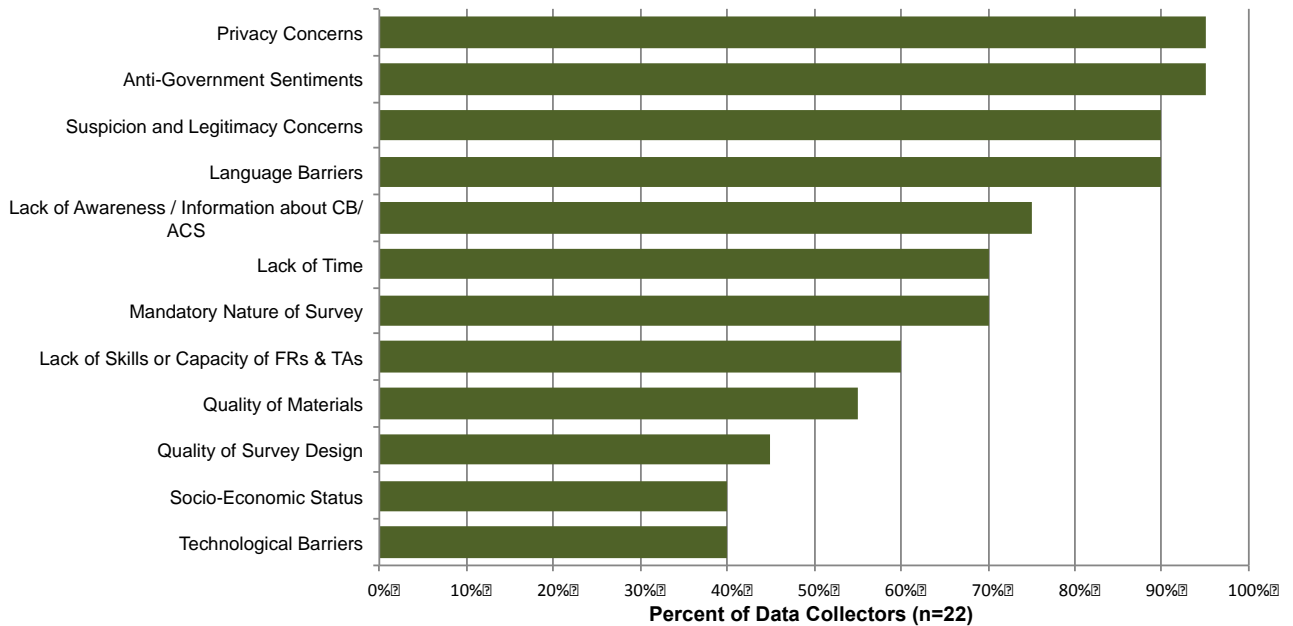
Privacy Concerns

Nearly all Data Collectors (95%) mentioned respondents being hesitant to share private information, noting that they often express concern about the confidentiality of the survey,

especially for some sensitive topics such as income, and many are concerned about falling victim to identity theft:

> *"Confidentiality is an issue and people worry about their information and their privacy. All the stuff with the NSA doesn't help our cause. We try our best to tell people they become a number and they're not recognizable, but it's hard."*

> *"The income. Americans are very paranoid about telling people how much they make. We're almost unique in that. Almost universally, in the 35 countries I've worked in, they're proud and they'll openly ask how much you make and tell you openly. But Americans, for some reason, are pretty much the only country I know that's paranoid about talking about their income."*

> *"Some read the questionnaire and just throw it away saying the questions are intruding on their privacy. When we come back to face-to-face, it is much easier for them to give us the information. They can skip some of the questions as well or give us a best estimate."*

> *"A lot of people talk about identify theft. I've had several people who have had that experience and they're just scared to death and so we just tell them we can do it anonymously with them and that's not a problem and verify that everything is confidential and there's no way anybody can get their information but people that have been in that situation are really extremely terrified about giving out any kind of information about themselves."*

> *"The people that have the most real concerns are the foreign-born because of immigration. They really feel that if anyone finds out there's multiple families in a house and not all of them are documented, that somehow this will lead to deportation."*

Anti-Government Sentiments

Nearly all Data Collectors (95%) discussed some respondents' negative perception of government and distrust of all government agencies. These respondents typically refuse to cooperate under any circumstances:

> *"There are some who are not going to answer a single thing no matter what you say the survey is about. You know, they're the hard core 'I don't want to help the government' type of people who refuse to do anything, so you do have that element."*

> *"Right now, with what is happening with a lot of other agencies, we are just another branch of government that can't be trusted."*

> *"With the majority of the people it seems like now there has been such a negative outlook on the government, many of them think that the government knows everything there is to know about them anyway. They're recording everything they're doing anyway, it's none of their business and, you know, so they've gotten so much more negative about the government since I've been working here. It's drastically changed in the last few years and that's a big issue with them."*

"The rural areas are predominantly more anti-government. 'Leave us alone. We don't care if it's the Census Bureau, the IRS, NSA…we heard all those stories too. Leave us alone. We don't want big government. Don't get into my business.'"

"I remember getting a call from a Congressional office recently with a letter from a respondent and at no point did she care about what it was exactly she was asked to do or what exactly it was all about, how it was going to affect her life. The entire letter she said 'I hate government. I hate the president. I hate this health insurance stuff and because of that I refuse to do anything with government.' It becomes almost irrational."

Suspicion and Legitimacy Concerns

Nearly all Data Collectors (90%) discussed respondents questioning the legitimacy of the ACS and generally being suspicious due to, for example, concerns about falling victim to a scam:

"Almost everybody believes that all we do is the decennial every ten years, so when we say we are from the Census Bureau, then one of the things they'll tell you is: 'We've already done the census and there's no time for it again.' And then they think it's a scam or something and because we call them weekends, especially on a Sunday, they think we're not the Census Bureau because government workers don't work on Sunday."

"Sometimes people feel it's a scam but then when you give them the phone number to the office and they can speak to our supervisor, we send them to our website, they figure out it's not a scam. So we can work through that as far as the person is willing to work with us."

"Elderly who live alone do not want to open a door to a stranger. We'll use our databases to search for phone numbers to try to contact them via phone. But that's getting more difficult now with all of the phone scams that are going on. If someone doesn't see your badge, they don't want to answer your questions but then when you go to their door, especially with the older population, they don't want to open the door for you."

"Some of them are sold on us getting that information for other reasons than population. They just say the government wants to know our business and they start adding sentences behind it, things that are like, 'they want to investigate us or we're in a law suit. They hired you guys to go and find out about us,' things like that."

Language Barriers

Nearly all Data Collectors (90%) mentioned language barriers. They noted this is often an issue for respondents whose first language is not English and who struggle with the survey, but also native speakers who have difficulties with the language level in the survey, the instructions, or the associated mailings:

"We have a large Portuguese speaking population, like it's the second most spoken language in this area. All of our materials in Portuguese were really bad

and we stopped using them because the translation was not appropriate, so I think the foreign-born populations are really hard."

"Until I moved to Arkansas, I didn't even know what a Martianese was. It's a group out of southern Columbia, I think, and there's a large population of them here. I have to call Headquarters and ask 'do we have anything on Martianese and can you give me any information on Martianese?' I don't know anything about them, so language is a problem."

"We're so technical. I mean, I understand that's the way the city planners, the engineers, heads of universities [communicate] but you send that to a household that's in a poverty area and you've got all this technical information in the letter that you are sending to them. They don't even know what you're talking about, ACS. So I think we have to be more in tune to the people that we are trying to reach. I think it's insulting to talk above a person's head and expect them, if they never made it out of high school or 8th grade to understand what you're talking about."

Lack of Awareness/Information about ACS

Most Data Collectors (75%) thought that a lack of information about the CB in general, and the ACS in particular, was a barrier to participation. They noted that people may not understand the personal and societal benefits of the survey data, or they may be misinformed about how the data are being used:

"They need to be informed so they can understand you're not trying to be intrusive. You're simply trying to help people to get a better quality of life. If they can understand that we can't pinpoint them from their information, once they understand it's all statistical, it helps."

"A lot of people don't know what the survey is, how it benefits them as an individual, as a family, or as a community."

"I had a gentleman who said, 'Yeah, I got the letter and stuff but I don't have a computer so I just wasn't going to do it.' Well, we're going to have to do it over the phone then,' but it seems like so many of the people that I talk to are elderly and the majority of them don't have a computer and all it does is terrify them. The wording has to be different. Maybe put that as an option towards the end instead of at the very beginning or something, I don't know. If they would read the whole entire letter, they would see, but they don't. They just think it has to be done on the computer and they just totally freak, you know?"

"We have to deal with that kind of thing but, generally, once we let them know what it's about and why it used to be part of the decennial and then we now have to do it on a monthly basis and all that, once you explain the things to them, then they're pretty agreeable and we just help them go through it."

Lack of Time

Most Data Collectors (70%) mentioned that people who are very busy because they work long hours or multiple jobs, for example, are often unwilling to participate in the survey:

> *"Households with dual income earners, wage earners, who don't have the time necessarily to participate."*

> *"I would say it's people who work two jobs and are overwhelmed and they just really, legitimately at times, can't spare the hour or half hour or even 15 minutes that we want to spend with them."*

> *"When you read the introduction to them and you tell them it's going to take you about 40 minutes, the time to fill out seems to be one of the issues. When you tell them it's going to take you 40 minutes you might as well just shut the door because they hear that and, 'I don't have that much time to give you.'"*

> *"It's a time factor. You're intruding upon their time. If they're doctors, lawyers, they're not going to be home a lot. When they do get home, they don't want to waste their time."*

> *"Everybody is so burdened with time constraints nowadays. The survey, having to read everything that's there, repeatedly, for every individual and all that, in such detail, makes them get really antsy and it's like, 'I only have 12 minutes, so let's get this thing done' and maybe if they could tweak something a little bit or address having to read everything verbatim. I had a household the other day that had 16 people in it and it just took forever, and so there are some things where maybe they can look at it as far as that because now everything is so much quicker."*

Mandatory Nature of the Survey

Most Data Collectors (70%) said the fact that participation is mandatory was a barrier for many respondents:

> *"Especially with the elderly and the anti-government people, we find that they don't want to be mandated to do that. I think this is the group I find we have most trouble with there, and we find that with the mandated term."*

> *"Dealing with someone angry and telling someone that it's mandatory is not going to go over well. As far as our use of language, I just see so many things that can come before mandatory: explaining all the benefits, what it's done for your community, and having tangible examples. People get mad when you tell them it's mandatory."*

> *"We try to stay away from using the word mandatory unless they come out and ask. But I tell my staff to stay away from that unless absolutely necessary because it gets into a shoving match. I would rather approach it differently."*

> *"The mandatory nature of the survey turns them off – the implied fine makes them angry. I don't even bring that up. I try to say, it's mandatory because it's*

part of the decennial survey. This used to be part of that survey. I try to stay away from the fine aspect. I emphasize that the state, local governments use the data, etc. We don't handle the fine. Our job is to try to get you to handle the survey. Once you say 'fine,' you're not helping yourself, it just turns people off."

"Usually each month I have one or two and I know they're home, but they're hiding out behind the closed doors. That's where I have that little personalized note saying, 'I sure hate to leave this but Congress has passed this law where you could be fined up to the $5,000.' Unfortunately, that's the most effective thing I've found to work."

Field Representatives' and Telephone Assistants' Skill or Capacity

Most Data Collectors (60%) talked about the CB's Field Representatives or Telephone Assistants lacking necessary skills or capabilities for their job, with several discussing the potential resulting lack of compatibility between FRs and respondents as a frequently encountered problem:

"It is generally a more difficult situation in urban areas, particularly minority communities, unless we have a field rep who is of that race."

"And you need people from the community. I'm sorry, you need people from the community to service the community. You can't send a person from Randolph County, Missouri and send them down to Webster, Missouri and think that they can relate to the people the same way that they can relate to the people within the area that they live. It's not going to happen."

"Our callers don't know the data well. They call and collect but I don't think they've ever seen what comes out of the ACS. They can't access it on the website either, or on any of our computers if they want it to pop up with a data table to show the respondent outside."

"There is a way to be casual but professional, so I'm thinking they've got to make sure that those people who go into the field are appropriately representing the agency. You've got to make sure that people are not afraid when they look out the door. If you come up to my door and you're got flip flops on and shorts and a T-shirt, I'm not telling you anything."

"There are some languages that we encounter every once in a while that we just don't have interpreters for. For example, right now I'm sitting on a couple of Type A cases that have Korean. We used to have some Korean field representatives, but they're no longer with us and it's just hard for us to get people who have the Korean background to cooperate with us."

Quality of Materials

Many Data Collectors (55%) mentioned the quality of the ACS package and informational and promotional materials:

> *"Using names is very important – if the person's name isn't on the letter, they won't open it. If it says current resident on the mailing, it just goes in the trash. The survey and the materials need to be more personalized."*

> *"There are others who say, 'No, I don't remember seeing that.' It's because it's probably been addressed to 'resident' and it goes right straight into the garbage."*

> *"I speak Portuguese and the term they used to translate survey means a criminal investigation in the Portuguese language. So why should they send it out? They translated the survey using the word 'inquerito' which is a term that means criminal investigation. So the Portuguese population, they don't want to do anything that they see as a criminal investigation."*

> *"Respondents often find the documentation difficult to deal with, either difficult to find or difficult to understand."*

> *"We could have better materials. They say it's important but they don't really say why. And not only that, but even when they say why, it's at the very broad national level. When you look at data users and respondents, they care about their own small communities and I think sometimes that's what we lack providing."*

> *"Have a series of targeted letters – not just a general letter that's supposed to apply to everything. We need one for gated communities; one for high rises; one for associations, another for lower-income areas. Do an analysis of the situations and target the communications."*

> *"I believe a lot of people receive that thick package, say this is too long, is too much to read, and don't bother trying. Maybe if they received something shorter or more summarized they would look at it. If we could reduce the part they have to read, maybe people would respond better – right now there is a lot to read."*

> *"[Develop flashcards.] If the Field Rep could choose the next flashcard in correct language that explains that we are conducting the ACS, the respondent could go get a family member or neighbor who speaks that language to help answer the questions [as they often do]."*

Quality of Survey Design

Many Data Collectors (45%) discussed problems with the survey design, including hard-to-understand questions, questions that seem redundant, sensitive questions such as those about race or income, and the length of the survey:

> *"Some of the questions seem to be really redundant to the respondents. They say 'well, you've already asked me that,.' Especially in the very beginning whenever you're asking for the roster and they've told you, well, there's only 2 of*

them that live there, and then the next thing is are there any roommates, foster children, boarders living there?"

"Some of the questions seem insulting – do you have running water; a refrigerator. I understand why they ask the question, but it is idiotic to many people. Income questions are always contentious. Some questions are repetitive."

"The survey is becoming too long. People get weary half-way through."

"I don't think the computer questions are very accurate and a lot of them are redundant. We shouldn't ask if they have children in the military if they told us earlier that they are still in school. They will call us and say that it's stupid to ask those kinds of questions."

"The problem with the online survey is that they must complete every question. If they don't complete it at all, it doesn't show that they completed it. They may have just not answered one question. They object to some questions online and in person. But with us, we can say 'Refuse' or 'Don't Know' and keep the survey moving."

"If you could just verify a fact instead of asking individual questions. For example if they've told you they've been married to the same person for 62 years and you say 'in the last 12 months did you get married?' 'No.' And then you say 'in the last 12 months did you become a widow or a widower?' 'No, I'm still married to this person for 62 years!' And then you say, 'In the last 12 months did you get divorced?' And they go: 'What did you not understand about what I just told you?'"

Socio-Economic Status

Many Data Collectors (40%) noted that the socio-economic status of respondents, both high and low, is a potential barrier to participation:

"The most reluctant people that I have associated with the last 10 plus years with the Census are the people that have a doctorate degree, lawyers and so forth."

"Gated communities, they are very difficult to get in. Sometimes they have their own associations and they do not let anyone in. We can only call and mail and wait. If they don't respond we keep trying and sending letters to the management. But even the management company sometimes doesn't care. These communities are really rich and they don't let anyone in."

Technology Barriers

Many Data Collectors (40%) mentioned technological barriers such as lack of Internet access, and the shift away from landlines and increased monitoring of incoming calls:

"The majority of the people that I wind up talking to are people who don't have a computer and so they have issues with that or, mainly, they just don't have one so they can't do it that way and then they think that they have to do it that way. And so that's been a big problem."

"People don't necessarily have land lines any more. People use their answering machines to screen calls and most of the time you can't even get people's cell phone numbers."

Hard to Reach Individuals

Another barrier mentioned by a few Data Collectors includes the difficulty in locating/reaching some individuals because they don't have a standard address. They may have a Post Office box, live at a location without an official street, or they live in multiple places and are not always at the address where the ACS is sent:

"The PO boxes are a big problem. Folks who have a PO box will never receive our mailings. The post office doesn't put it in the boxes. They don't put it in the boxes if it isn't just addressed to current resident."

"Some never get the mailings in the first place because they don't have a street address it can go to. You can't FedEx it to a farm-to-market road, which is the only address they have on the case. That farm-to-market road is 30 miles long and I have to go out and follow a spot on a map until I know I'm in front of the right gate."

"Many have multiple residences, staying with girlfriends, etc. Sometimes it's hard to know what a primary residence is – we're going to an address but is that where they actually live?"

3.2.4 Suggested Improvements

When asked what could be done to improve engagement with typical non-respondents, Data Collectors often referenced the barriers mentioned earlier and suggested addressing them. They also offered a few other specific recommendations for improving data collection through training, adapting interaction with Participants, and being better prepared to explain the importance of survey participation to Congressional staff in order to address complaints from their constituents:

"Training, training, training. When you hire someone, you have to tell them 'your job is not only to sell the survey to someone so you could get your job success ratio higher; you have to treat them like humans. You have to treat them like it's their time you're taking away from them. You have to accommodate them. When you leave to go to work, you have to be very positive and you have to be a sponge. As much as they can throw water at you, you're not going to leak. You're just going to take it in and just keep it.'"

"Some people will just NOT answer income questions. But I figure if you can get 90% of a survey completed it is better than 0%."

"Congressional offices have knee-jerk political responses. A constituent will call the offices and claim that they're being harassed and being asked a bunch of personal questions. Sadly, the Congressional office can't do much and they just call the Census Bureau and start griping and saying are you harassing my constituents? We have to explain to the congressional staffer why it's important,

which to me is sad since this is all civically based and ultimately the Census and data collection wouldn't happen unless Congress blessed it."

3.2.5 Community Snapshot

When Data Collectors were asked to discuss the effect that showing respondents a Community Snapshot (a summary of how ACS data are used in their community and may affect their lives) could have on non-respondents' awareness and beliefs about ACS, Data Collectors responded very positively, suggesting that it would be good promotional material and helpful in explaining the value of ACS:

> *"I think if people saw how important this is and how it does impact decision making in their communities, they would want to contribute to information to know that they can help out, not just for themselves but for their neighbors."*

> *"I believe this is very important. Once in a while you can see results in the newspaper based on Census information. But they don't say that the data is from the ACS but that the updated Census data comes from the ACS. Often when it's translated they didn't reference back to the original ACS. So we need to make sure there is a connection back to the survey so that people understand where the data comes from."*

Some suggested that being able to show the Community Snapshot before respondents start answering the survey could aid with data collection:

> *"I personally would rather do it first and capture their imagination and to allay fears in terms of the types of questions that I'm going to hear and how is my information going to be presented. This is our data collections for such and such city and here are the results for income, education, occupation and these are the kinds of questions that are going to be asked and this is how we are able to reflect accurately the various social, economic and housing characteristics."*

3.2.6 Future Research with Non-Respondents

When asked if there are any particular non-respondent populations that ACS should be sure to include in future research on the influences of non-response in data collection, some Interviewees (20%) said they thought that non-English speaking populations were particularly challenging to engage, and thus should be included:

> *"A big problem is the non-English speakers. I think it would be waste of money to send the form in five languages to each address but it would help to have enough people on staff to handle most languages… It seems they don't have people in the regional office who speak other languages. Almost everyone speaks only English. And in this day and age, I don't know how these people get in these positions. Every supervisor speaks English only."*

Other groups of non-respondents to include in research, each mentioned by one or two Data Collectors, include individuals with anti-government sentiments, young adults, and people in higher or lower socio-economic groups:

> *"Minorities have always been a sticky point with reluctance. Either they don't trust the government or you; they just don't trust people for some reason. If we could just get something across to them."*

> *"I believe people in college today, the young adults, will be heading households soon. So researching how they like to respond, what are the selling points, how much they know, especially the future heads of households, they read information all the time."*

3.3 ACS Data Dissemination

3.3.1 ACS Data Users

Interviewees with Data Dissemination experience (n=14) were asked to describe the ACS data users with whom they had the most experience. Nearly all mentioned non-Federal governments (States, Tribes and local communities) and non-profit or advocacy groups:

Percent of Data Disseminators (n=14)
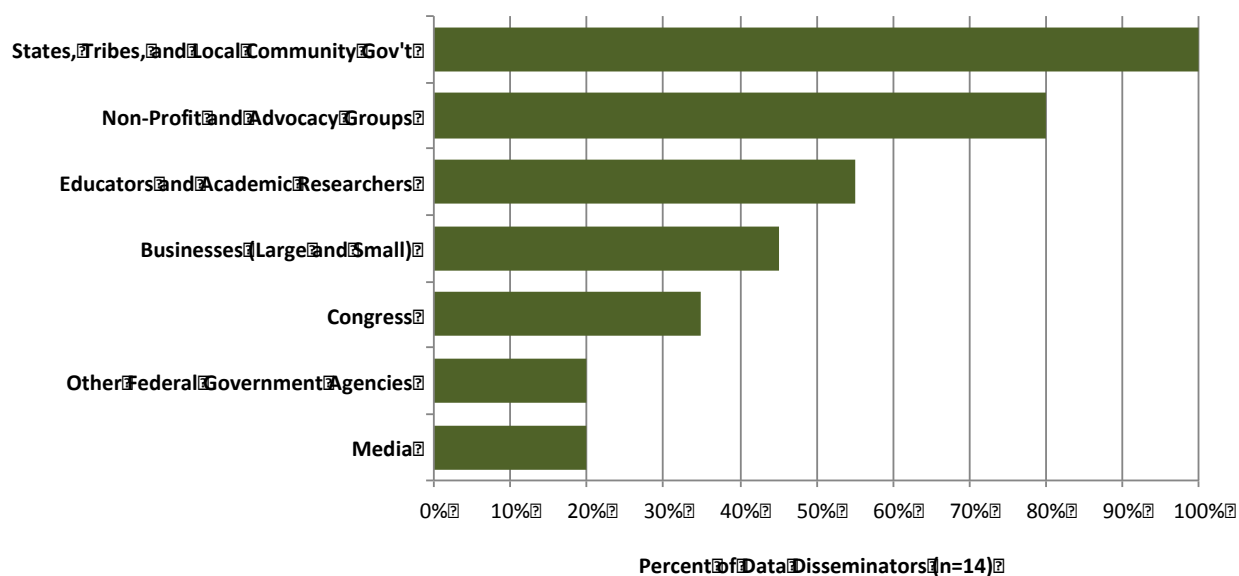
State, Tribal and Local Government

All the Data Disseminators (100%) mentioned non-Federal government entities such as State, Tribal and Community government, who use ACS for community planning and grant applications:

> *"I know ACS data is used by local planners to help make decisions on where to allocate resources such as playgrounds and schools. In Washington, D.C.*

they've used poverty data to add a school dinner program to the school breakfast program for the health of kids. They qualify for that using poverty data."

"Every [local government] planning department requires the latest socio-economic data for their respective geographic entities. A good number of my local government workshops are tied to councils with governments that are in every county. Say one council of government sets up a workshop and they in turn invite all their respective constituent cities. So I do my workshop in accessing data to that specific county and to a number of cities, to highlight and train people on how to access data at the county and city level."

"For Indians it is used for planning programs, writing grants, anticipating needs so that would be strategic planning and maybe for the whole tribe generally rather than just programs, and again writing grants."

"The Maryland State Data Center uses our data a lot with other data sources to create demographic and housing projections so they can provide guidance to county governments on resources or improvements that may be needed if a community or area is aging, or has a lot of growth and needs more schools. They use ACS data."

"We do a lot with grant proposals for city and county governments always needing data to justify what it is they may be using. It's also used to do things such as comprehensive plans, studies…anything…especially for elected governments where they're trying to do a study or justify what they're doing or looking to see how they should be guided."

Non-Profit and Community or Advocacy Groups

Nearly all mentioned (80%) non-profit, advocacy and community groups who use ACS data for grant applications in support of the communities or groups that they support:

"If they're applying for grants, we teach them how to prepare a profile for their respective target population which could be a city, a neighborhood within the city, or a specific racial community. It's dependent upon what they see as their stakeholders."

"For non-profits they really need the data; it's not a want."

"In Philadelphia there is a very active group called the Delaware Valley Bicycle Coalition who use ACS data to look at commuting to work patterns and to advocate, make business cases for putting more bicycle lanes in areas."

"The Center for Public Policy produces reports that are specific for counties and cities within Texas looking at children's well-being. As such, that they would be looking at educational attainment, educational enrolment, insurance information from the ACS. It directs public policy in the state of Texas and informs local governments and the state government as to need for assisting educational attainment in the state. They look at hunger by looking at the poverty indicators. It's just one of many items that they pull together to look at the well-being of children in the state."

Educators and Academic Researchers

Many (55%) mentioned educators, including K-12 and college teachers who use ACS data in their classes, academics who use the data in their research, and university leaders who use the data to better understand their students and the communities they serve:

> *"We often get school teachers who are not aware there is all this curriculum available – that there is all this data available to help teach kids about their community in civics lessons."*

> *"For librarians it's more for research and it's often train-the-trainer type work. Librarians tend to turn it around and pass it on and particularly the ones that rotate through the reference department, which in some libraries often happens and is quite comprehensive. They answer lots and lots of questions from the public needing data."*

> *"Universities have a research and development group and they use data to see where they could go to entice people or recruit people to attend the university for education. They look at it to see what the demographics of the community that they service are and how far out they need to reach. And they're also looking at the poverty rates to see if there's something that can help the enrolment numbers."*

> *"There's a nursing school here and I have a regular session with students. We go through exercises using ACS data and they can decide where outreach services are needed."*

Large and Small Business

Some (45%) mentioned businesses both large corporations and small, local business, such as realtors, who might use the data for locating their businesses (and understanding their customers):

> *"[Corporations] need to decide where to put their business, where they need to locate if they're trying to expand. They look at the survey to see if they need to re-evaluate places that they are [located in] and if their location is actually a viable location."*

> *"Our last internal employee newsletter had a thank-you from Nissan Corp. describing how they used our data for marketing, for where to put their plants, where to expand. We're talking about big economic development and people getting jobs because of ACS data – it was pretty exciting. So making sure that business leaders, economists are knowledgeable about our data and how to use it to make business decisions to expand, track, market new products, etc."*

> *"Local businesses could be using our data for their own marketing purposes."*

> *"And also with large corporations. Prior, I did a presentation that they also visit private companies and the feeling there is that they are not getting the*

information that they needed somehow in the private sector. And to find the information that we had available for them; it was more cost efficient for them."

Other ACS Data Users

Some (35%) mentioned Congress and Congressional District Offices who use ACS data to keep "up-to-date on the profile" of their districts:

"I also work with some Congressional district offices. There are 18 representatives from the four states that I cover. So I work with them and keep them up-to-date on the profile of their areas."

A few (20%) mentioned other Federal Government Agencies such as the CDC:

"CDC would be a major stakeholder who works with us at the federal level for some of these data products … they were looking at disability data which is in the ACS."

A few (20%) mentioned the Media:

"The media is the exponential qualities of who they can reach. If I reach one reporter, that then gets broadcast and then reaches hundreds of thousands of people. That's an easy way to get a broad message out. That's a no-brainer investment. You can reach more people through media and a lot of the time when people read papers or watch the news they trust the media. If they hear the media people going to bat for you, then the more likely they are to accept the information."

3.3.2 Value of ACS Data

When asked about the value of ACS data to users, Interviewees commented that ACS provides data that are essential to users' achievement of their responsibilities or objectives and in many cases are the only data that are: available; at the local level; updated on a frequent basis; comparable across geographies, and cost effective:

"It provides users with demographic and socio-economic and housing information they need. If you look at most grants, they require a lot of information that only the ACS would be able to provide specific to the local level.… So ACS becomes really crucial because we can provide data from our other surveys only down to the state level most times, and our users use local data. So the ACS is very valuable to all of them and it gives them this range, this large scope of topics and variables. That's why it's so important."

"There is no real good alternative. It would be more volatile because they can't match our sample size."

"For community-based organizations, community analysis is the bottom line for what they need to know. It may be for grant proposals. It may be for generating a consolidated strategic plan, documenting how they have used money and then applying for more money either for programs or services, which are usually required by some state agencies."

"It's essential that they have that data. As you're looking at a smaller area they certainly could do surveys and there are some programs where we end up having to do that as well. They're not very accurate. People don't want to answer them, which is probably the same issue the Census Bureau has, based on their response rates when they initially send things out. So there's other ways to get it. But it would be labor-intensive and you'd lose the comparability that you have, whether that be on a city level, county level, state level, National level. You wouldn't have comparable information so it wouldn't be as relevant by just surveying a smaller sample size."

"They may have to pay for a demographic data company that might have it, but in many cases, they probably could not afford it anyway. I mean, you're talking about a scenario [if ACS data were not available] that is kind of like a doomsday situation."

"Much of the data that goes into that is updated annually from the ACS and the value of that is that there aren't a lot of other sources where you can find annual information. I don't think they're doing so much of the cross-tab items that you can't get elsewhere. But you wouldn't be able to get them with frequent updates like the ACS provides. And also at a local level, for cities and counties."

3.3.3 What Works Well with ACS Data Dissemination

When asked what is working well with current data dissemination activities, Data Disseminators mentioned the following:

Percent of Data Disseminators (n=14)
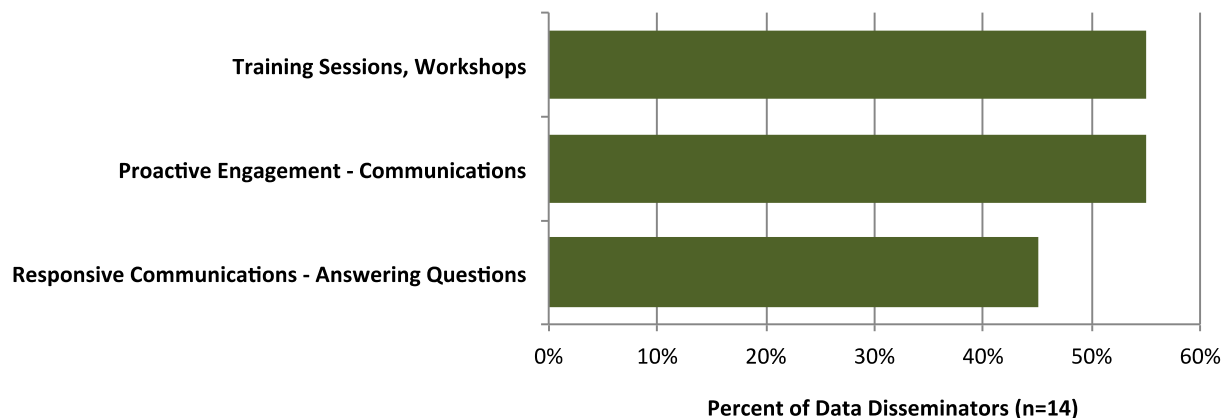
Workshops and Training

Many (55%) mentioned training or workshops given by the Census Bureau as an effective form of engagement as it gave representatives the opportunity to present the latest data available in ACS and demonstrate how to use ACS data such as for grant writing:

"If someone is calling constantly, who keeps coming back for information, we will teach them how to do it themselves. We will teach them to fish, rather than fish for them. This has been effective. If people are getting frustrated or have difficulty

using the system, we will feed that up the chain of command. Staff can set up customized one-on-one webinar with them. Remember we cover multi-state areas so all of this is done by phone or email or Internet. We work through the computer."

"There's always a need for training because the ACS, the one-, three-, and five-year changes every single year. So there's always a demand for me to come back and show people the latest data. Non-profits call us individually, whereupon I would probe to see if they wanted to sponsor a workshop where they and other organizations, other non-profits, would benefit from group training, hopefully in a computer lab or Wi-Fi area where people can bring computers. We have e-blasted many of our organizations in the regions notifying everyone that we do workshops on using Census data in grant writing. And that's generated lots and lots of interest."

"So we find that when you show how to use the data, it makes users want to use it more. So people who wanted to use it but didn't know how to navigate the website, they're like 'Oh, I'll never use it because I find it too hard.' But once they learn to use it, then you can see them go off on it and they start calling you all the time. They know it helps. So easy access is what will make them data users."

Proactive Communication & Engagement

Many (55%) described proactive communication and promotion of ACS data as an effective approach. Users are engaged through direct outreach, networking at workshops and conferences where data users are in attendance, following up with community groups, such as those with whom the Census Bureau partners during the Decennial Census, and social media:

"I try to start with the chairman or president of a corporation but of course the gatekeeper always sends me to over to public relations or their lawyers. Then I have to explain it to them and eventually I get up to their corporate divisions that identify where the locations are and their marketing people. Every now and then I can catch a president or a CEO. They're pretty well insulated."

"I go to conferences and presentations and I work one-on-one with grassroots community groups. The way I look at it is that I don't discriminate with data users. I don't know what working with a grassroots organization might do. Their sphere of influence might seem small but who knows who they know? We take all comers. I just don't want to discount the ability to reach some of these groups through different ways and means."

"Sometimes I go to a workshop and I talk to one of the constituents there and they ask 'what are you doing' and they reach out. So we have our partners out there promoting what we do and that is really the key. I think it's the best we have right now. It's doing well and helps us promote what we do and then we get data users that way."

"Social media has worked well for us and so have e-blasts and word of mouth. One organization hears about our ad for our workshop and tells the other and the other one calls us.... For the number of decades that I've been with the Bureau,

in the data dissemination part of the process, we always follow up with groups that we've worked with in the previous Census. It's something that we've done for years."

"I would say that one thing that helps us out a lot and that helps our job a lot is the fact that we do have a database with all our data users. If someone is new and is calling us and is going to become a permanent data user with us on our system – who is going to be getting information all the time so having that on a program file that we can access – is great, it helps a lot. We have systems to do e-blasts and we will send the information using that, especially when we want to promote webinars and they have worked for us as well."

Responsive Communications

Many (45%) described responding to data users' questions and needs as an effective way of engaging users and disseminating ACS data:

"If it's someone who just needs basic information for a project they're doing and it's not too much effort, we'll look up the data for them and send it to them on a one-and-done basis."

"Quite often we get cold calls from community organizations who want data and that leads us to doing either a presentation and/or a workshop. A detailed workshop for that organization, and training their members in how to access ACS and other Census data, 2010 Decennial Census data."

"Just providing them the information they're looking for; explaining what might be available; finding out if there's something else that they need. It may not even be Census data. It may be through the Department of Labor or somebody else in terms of statistics that they're looking for."

One individual mentioned that certain tools to support disseminating ACS data, such as the "data wheel," are very effective:

"There are one or two tools that we have right now that people are really interested in, like the data wheel. Everywhere I go, they love the data wheel. When I was with the survey provider, I wish I could have had the data wheel to hand to every respondent when we sent them letters because our data wheels are fantastic. Another handout that we have, that I even suggested they send to respondents, is a handout showing how ACS works. It's just images like from the time it's collected to the time it becomes data and it's used by the community. I think that's a really good way of showing the ACS because you don't have to really sit down and read. It's great, it's colorful, it tells a lot about it."

3.3.4 Barriers to Effective ACS Data Dissemination

When asked what isn't working well with current data dissemination activities, Data Disseminators highlighted difficulties that users have in accessing ACS data, the limitations of ACS data, and the poor quality of ACS materials:

Percent of Data Disseminators (n=14)
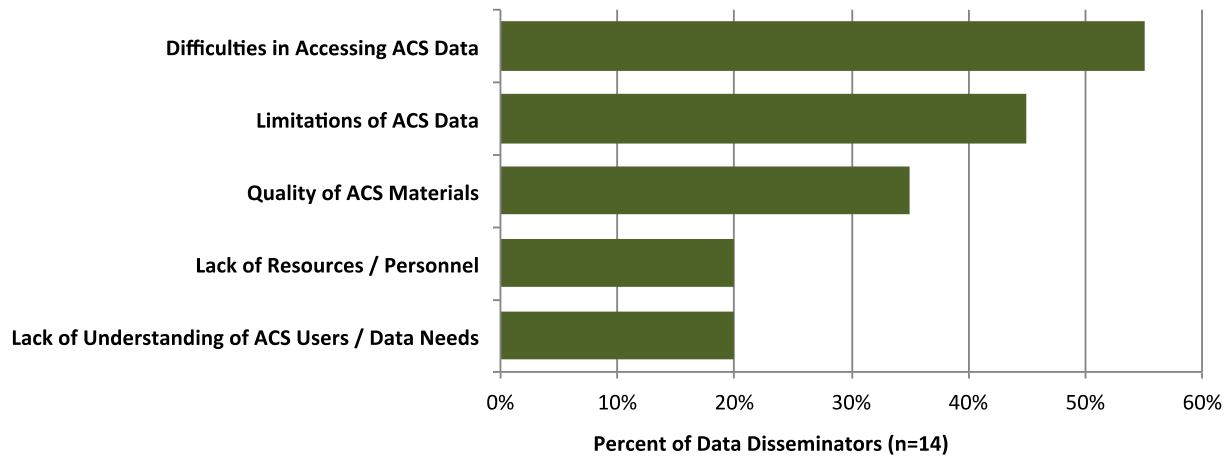
American FactFinder

When asked what isn't working well with current data dissemination activities, many Data Disseminators (55%) spoke of the difficulties users have accessing ACS data, specifically mentioning challenges with the American FactFinder:

> "Having access is a function of the tools and our main tool is American FactFinder. Despite all the money that has gone into this tool, there is no direct link from our homepage to American FactFinder. You either have to type in the URL or go to the data tab and select it. For the life of me I don't understand this. They have heard from us on this but I don't know the reason for this complicated process."[3]

> "The website in general – American FactFinder – can frustrate people. It's not necessarily a problem with the Census Bureau site. It's more that if you're not familiar with downloading or FTP-ing a file down off a server, putting it into an Excel spreadsheet – those kinds of software issues."

> "Most of the information on the Census website is not for Tribal governments and many people have asked why the Census website doesn't have a webpage related to Tribal data that you can click on that's Tribal related. Quick facts. You have quick facts for cities and states but nothing for Tribal governments."

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[3] There is a link to American FactFinder at the bottom of the Census Bureau homepage, but it is in small print.

Limitations of ACS Data

Many (45%) focused on the limitations of ACS data associated with the Survey's sample size and selection, noting that the results aren't grouped by neighborhoods in urban areas and with small sample sizes in rural and Tribal areas there are significant margins of error:

> *"We will often get requests for neighborhood data, particularly for city folks. And of course there is no neighborhood data because neighborhoods are not a legal definition. They don't have boundaries. In the past the Census Bureau offered what we called a user-defined area. At one point the City of Baltimore gave us a boundary file that they called by neighborhood, and they defined them. We did a customized or specialized tabulation of the boundaries. I think that service is still available but I think it is a fee service, and it hasn't been used much."*

> *"The problems that all of us have with ACS data is the margin of error when you get to small-area data. It's a misnomer to even say small-area data because in Texas we have a county that's less than 100 in population. So whenever you get to the small population numbers, the data available for that population is going to have a high rate of error. ACS data works very well for our population centers but there are a lot of rural areas in our state where it's problematic to use the ACS data just because of the small population."*

> *"The numbers on Tribal lands is very small. They question the data if the samples are so small. How accurate is the data that's being collected? Can they use it for proposal writing, grant writing, that kind of thing? That's one of their main concerns.... All we can do is keep telling them is that as time goes on the samples will increase. Most of these are small communities. They have to wait for the five-year timeframe for the data to be somewhat reliable. We only have a handful of tribes that qualify for the one-year or three-year ACS estimates. But even then, those tribes question the reliability of the data."*

Quality of ACS Materials

Some (35%) focused on the quality of ACS materials, noting that they can be difficult to read, unappealing and not targeted to the needs of data users:

> *"What's most difficult is in regards to materials. I find our materials can sometimes be very bureaucratic, a lot of text. It's not really audience driven. A lot of our stuff comes in forms and confidentiality which is great but it's not really meaningful. They say it's important but not really why. And not only that, but even when they say why, it's at the very broad national level. When you look at data users and respondents, they care about their own small communities, like what's there for me. And I think sometimes that's what we lack providing."*

> *"If they could provide us with ammunition – informational factsheets that we could offer – because the information we get is not Tribal specific. It generates interest from Tribal members if you can offer some information about Tribal affairs and not just something about the City of Los Angeles or Chicago or another non-Tribal region."*

Lack of Resources and Personnel

Some (20%) discussed resource issues, including the number of people available to support data dissemination:

> *"It's not tied to the ACS, it's the manpower. For many years it was just me and maybe one other person and now that we have a different program, I have 5 other people helping, or rather doing my type of work. You can imagine if you are one of two people covering the state of California. There are 35 million people, on top of Hawaii, and now we have 5 other states, but we do have more staff so, if anything, it's the ability and tied into resources in disseminating Census data, let alone ACS data."*

Lack of Understanding of ACS Data Users

Some (20%) mentioned lack of understanding of ACS data users and their data needs:

> *"We need to know better what type of requests are out there that are really major, are key, so we can customize our presentations or our data access workshops to make sure we provide exactly what we should be doing to fulfill the requirements of such grant."*

> *"Maybe that's an area we can look into to try to assess if there is a need or demand for custom data projects like that."*

3.3.5 Opportunities to Engage New ACS Data Users

When asked about the greatest opportunities to engage new users in using ACS data, many (45%) focused on raising the awareness among potential data users of the availability of ACS data:

> *"Even in grad school you will find people who have no idea we are out there and can help them with data. Teaching students, working with professors so we can teach their classes is very helpful for new users. These are all people who are going to be coming to the professional world or maybe even the academic world and who will start using our stuff. I leverage a lot; I work with a lot of great colleges and universities so I do leverage the opportunity."*

> *"Reaching out to the community. I try to put some emphasis when dealing with community organizations when I'm dealing with the Minister because they're the ones that have the voices, when I'm dealing with the trusted voices in the community. It would be great if we had more tools to help initiate them into the American Community Survey."*

A few Data Disseminators suggested engaging government users and community leaders at all levels:

> *"We need to do a better job of integrating government at all levels. During my visit with the CDC this week I could see their eyes being wide open about the kinds of things they can do with the data."*

3.3.6 Community Snapshot

When Data Disseminators were asked to discuss the effect of showing a Community Snapshot on potential data users' awareness and beliefs about ACS, they responded very positively, suggesting that it would help data users understand the uses and value of ACS:

> *"I think it would spark a great deal of interest, because people are very visual. I can talk about it, but it's not until I get on the computer and I can show them the information that it really starts to sink in that this information is out there. It's visual and interactive. There's a whole ton of information out there that they actually need."*

> *"That's probably the one way you're going to have some kind of impact…. They can see what these numbers mean to them and what it says, rather than just a bunch of numbers on the table. They can see the tables are really telling us a story – for example, if a community has a very young median age, what are you doing to prepare for that when these people grow up? Are you going to have services to accommodate them or are you going to have some sort of plan in place so these people have the opportunity to do something?"*

> *"Everybody will be on board with that. Every person that we associate with or interview with, the first thing they'll say is 'How can we see the results? How can we see what we did or what's benefitting us?' It's more info out there for us, more info for people to get their hands on."*

One suggested that it would help data users present accurate information about a community:

> *"I had an issue yesterday where a graduate student on a particular reservation had done some kind of survey where he said that only 9% of one particular class year of students who lived on the reservation had graduated from high school. Our data showed that graduation rate for at least 25-year-olds was in the mid-80s. The young woman writing the grant said using his number will support our cause better than your number but those people reviewing grants know how to use American FactFinder so it's a good check."*

One suggested that the effect would depends on the size of the community:

> *"I think it would be helpful, though it depends on the size of the community you're talking about. I think it's much more helpful for a town of 26,000 versus a town that has 100 people in it. I'm not certain the impact for them is all that great. Margins of errors are all over the place so I think it depends on the level of entity you're working with."*

3.3.7 Future Research with ACS Data Users

When asked whether there are any particular ACS data users that should be included in future research into influences on data use, Interviewees offered a variety of responses each mentioned by a few, including: elected officials, media reporters, teachers, university research organizations, the health industry, and business leaders:

> *"I think we need to educate the elected officials and other people, other potential end users that this data is out there and how to access it and why it's important and why people should be willing to provide personal data to make up these statistics. A lot of times people who don't want to do the surveys complain to their elected officials. And then the elected officials say 'Ah, okay, I guess Census is not that important. Leave these people alone,' rather than educating trying to encourage people's participation. Don't fight us; we're helping you do your job and you're giving people a free pass without saying, 'yes, I've checked it out and this is a real person from the Census Bureau,' and also encouraging them that 'this is data I use, this is how I use the data so I would appreciate your participation in the survey.'"*

> *"One group I find very challenging to work with, but I think we should engage with more, is media reporters. They have the power to promote and should be potential users of data because they can feel what's going on in their community and relate to the data very well. So creating material that will help them know where the data is and how they can use it to make their reporting better would be a very good. I think that can help us a lot I promoting ACS and give a more positive story on the ACS."*

Section 4: Final Advice

4.1 Final Advice on Data Collection

Explain Value of Responding to ACS

When asked to offer one piece of advice to improve engagement with ACS respondents, some Data Collectors (35%) emphasized explaining the value of responding to the ACS data to survey respondents. Suggestions focused on helping respondents understand why completing the survey was important to them individually and to their community:

> *"I always tell them it doesn't do anything for us but this is important for you and that's the main thing. And if we just have the opportunity to be able to explain it to you, I think you'll understand it. A lot of people do tell me that they appreciate it and they do appreciate what it's all about and they're glad that I called. And some get really upset whenever it's passed and they can't do it… Being able to have the opportunity to tell them what we do and why we're doing it for them and most people will have no problem with it and will tell you anything that you want to know."*

> *"They need to do a better job of teaching the public about the ACS -- marketing. A lot of people don't know what ACS is… Maybe involve more partnerships,*

neighborhood associations. They should go to association meetings to explain what the ACS is about – that 2010 is over but data is still being collected."

"What we should do is tell them that as much as we are doing our job, it's also helping their community and themselves. It's not a one-way street where we come and knock on their door. It's two-way. We benefit from their information and they benefit from us doing the statistic for the future users. They need anything, they can go out and go there and look it up and get whatever they could get out of it."

Foster Trust in the Legitimacy of the ACS Survey

Some Data Collectors (20%) said that it was important to foster trust in the legitimacy of the ACS survey materials. Suggestions included making it clear that the materials were from the Census Bureau and informing respondents about the purpose of questions that might be seen as personal or intrusive:

"I think the words on the envelope they have should make it very easy to identify that it's from the Census. People might open it if it was very clear who was from and that it was important… Some people don't answer the questions because they fear some information is very personal, like income details. But maybe we need some explanation about why and make the categories more general."

"The fact that some of these questions are so specific upsets people. For instance, once you find out they have a job, you have to ask them what time they leave for work. People want to know why, get upset, and think you're going to come rob their house. Sometimes they get so upset after that one that they question the legitimacy of the whole thing. There might be some need to change it to make it more general – do you work first shift, second shift, third shift – rather than pinning it down that they leave at 8:15. They hate that and I understand – 'I've already told you I live by myself, now you know when I leave for work at 8:15, now you want to know how much money I make.' I understand that people are afraid we're trying to rob them."

Recommended Improvements

Other advice for improving engagement with ACS respondents, each mentioned by only a few Data Collectors, included: improving the convenience of the survey for respondents by making it shorter or giving advance notice; ensuring that field workers are culturally compatible with respondents; and ensuring that data collectors are persistent:

"Just keeping it as short as possible. I think for a lot of respondents it's just too long, especially when you do it on paper. On the computer it doesn't skip patterns for you. Why don't they just keep it short and simple? One question that we have to ask about schooling and you have to ask them about kindergarten. We're talking to an adult and that's just silly. It says have you attended school or college in the last three months? I usually stop there but we're supposed to keep reading. There are a lot of questions that you just have to read at the end. The one I hate the most are the ones about the computer. A lot of the time they'll ask, 'why is that important?'"

"Well, I mean there are things in place that work very well. For example, before a household is contacted the regional office will send out letters to the specific address that's going to be contacted. So they should be aware of our presence and our impending visit prior to our getting there, if not be prepared with letters and brochures so that when you do meet up with these people that you can give them this and show and explain to them exactly what's going on. People appreciate that."

4.2 Final Advice on Data Dissemination

Communicate the Value of ACS Data to Users

When asked to offer one piece of advice about how to improve engagement with ACS data users, some Data Disseminators (30%) suggested explaining the value of ACS data to potential data users. Themes discussed including measuring how data users actually use data and generating new ways to promote awareness of the data to data users:

"The community profile would be a good thing, but I think even better would be to document case studies on how users are actually using the data – the pragmatic uses of the data we collect. How does the data benefit the community? How does it benefit the economy? That's outside the Census Bureau but I think it would be helpful for the Census to do because there is a good untold story here."

"Well it is the Bureau's ability to communicate the importance of data and much of the social, economic and housing data available of relevance is from the American Community Survey. So it's just us being out there, whether it be through press releases about our latest trend identified by ACS, reports, or whether our field staff in data dissemination have the resources, travel, size of staff in promoting the ACS as we do in all of our presentations and all of our workshops. I would put that above all."

Improve Access to Data

Some Interviewees (30%) suggested making the data easier to access, use, and understand. Suggestions included increasing data visualization capabilities and expanding into mobile platforms and apps:

"Make using the Internet easy for everybody to use, just get them to find the information as quickly as possible and give them the choices on every one they've done. I had a phone call yesterday from a woman who asked, 'I wish I knew about this single school.' Well, I can't give it to you by single schools, I can give it to you by school district.' That was an 'ah-ha' moment for her. So to get the data users to understand, and that's where my job comes in."

"People are turned off by having to read a lot. Data visualization is a big initiative at the Census Bureau now. It came along with big data which we are responsible for. But we certainly have a lot of the big data and the watchword for data visualization is that it reduces cognitive load. People don't have to think. People look at a graph and they understand the data. People look at data and they fall asleep."

"Visuals and technologies especially on the mobile platform, and its availability to groups that you wouldn't think would have access. Social media can be a pivotal tool in the PR world. You can get a lot out to a lot of people and you never know what might go might go viral. It doesn't have to be a high cost thing, but done at Census studio and involving the cute factor. We need to involve kids, parks, students starting in middle school and appearing in more curriculums, which are a way of influencing parents, and technology in general. We need to be looking at how to package things and make them more visual. I would like to see a Census app that field personnel can carry with them to show people more quickly."

Clearly Communicate Data Limitations

One Interviewee advised that the Census Bureau should be upfront about the limitations of the data:

"The most difficult thing we have to discuss with the user who calls and they're trying to utilize the information is that margin of error. We get a lot of training on that from the Census Bureau as well but it just never gets any easier. It's always difficult to tell them whether to use a certain data item if it just doesn't look reliable. You get calls from the media and the press frequently and they want to write a story about a small area but the numbers don't look useful. The error is too high. You can steer them to the next larger geography where the information might be more reliable but that's not what they want. Until they can get more funding for the survey there's just no way for us to improve upon that. There's no way to make it better without a larger sample."

For more information

For more information about this research, please contact Dan Kovacs or Sarah Thorne at Decision Partners at 877-588-9106 or via email at dkovacs@decisionpartners.com or sthorne@decisionpartners.com; or contact Kiera McCaffrey at Reingold at 202.333.0400 or by email at kmccaffrey@reingold.com.