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2014 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY RESEARCH AND EVALUATION REPORT
MEMORANDUM SERIES #ACS 14-RER-23

MEMORANDUM FOR ACS Research and Evaluation Advisory Group

From: James Treat (**signed 06/20/2014**)
Chief, American Community Survey Office

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American Community Survey Office

Subject: ACS Messaging Research: Cumulative Findings

Attached is the final American Community Survey Research and Evaluation report for ACS Messaging Research: Cumulative Findings. Between October 2013 and May 2014, Team Reingold supported the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey Office (ACSO) in conducting a series of qualitative and quantitative research studies aimed at identifying effective messages about the American Community Survey (ACS). This report consolidates the findings from each of these research studies.

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

Attachment

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ACS Messaging Research: Cumulative Findings

Report
June 16, 2014

DECISION PARTNERS



INTRODUCTION

Between October 2013 and May 2014, Team Reingold supported the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey Office (ACSO) in conducting a series of qualitative and quantitative research studies aimed at identifying effective messages about the American Community Survey (ACS).

Cumulative findings from this research are described in this report. These results will inform a second phase of testing to assess alternative messages and designs for ACS mail package materials. The results may also inform broader ACS messaging efforts, with the potential to be used in materials for outreach and field operations and to promote education and awareness about the ACS.

The goals of this research were:

- **Primary:** To develop and test messages to increase ACS self-response rates, thereby decreasing the expense of costly follow up with non-responders
- **Secondary:** To obtain insights from message testing to support general outreach, data dissemination, materials development, and call center and field operations

In support of these goals, Team Reingold conducted five iterative, mutually supportive research studies designed to triangulate attitudes and messages about the ACS:

- Mental Models interviews with individuals who work closely with ACS stakeholders (respondents and data users)
- Deliberative focus groups with stakeholders who are distrustful of the government
- Key informant interviews
- Comprehensive message testing: benchmark survey
- Comprehensive message testing: refinement survey

KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Following are key findings that emerged from the messaging research, as well as Team Reingold's analysis of the implications of these findings and recommendations for how they could be applied toward ultimate research goals.

- **America knows Census—but not ACS.**
People are largely unaware of ACS, but are highly aware of—and have favorable views toward—the Census Bureau and decennial census. More closely associating ACS with

the Census brand could help build awareness and credibility for ACS.

- **“Community” is key.**
Participants frequently evaluated ACS in terms of tangible, community-level benefits—like improvements to roads, schools, and hospitals. Messages that emphasize local impacts and concrete applications of ACS data may resonate with survey recipients.
- **“Why would they possibly need to know this?”**
Survey questions seen as “irrelevant” often provoke concerns about privacy and the survey’s motives. If respondents better understand the purpose behind objectionable questions, they may be more inclined to participate.
- **“They already have this information.”**
Participants often believed that the data ACS collect are already available from other sources, rendering ACS unnecessary. Demonstrating ACS’ unique value, including ways that ACS data are used by “existing” resources people value, could help dispel perceptions that ACS is redundant.
- **Distrust of government is pervasive.**
Distrust of the federal government can color attitudes toward the ACS, and recent events such as the NSA leaks have heightened concerns about privacy and data security. As much as possible, separate ACS from views on the federal government.
- **Census is viewed more favorably than the Department of Commerce.**
The Census Bureau saw higher favorability among research participants than did its parent department. Explore ways to associate the ACS with the Census brand, rather than the Commerce Department.
- **“No hablo Inglés.”**
Cultural and language challenges create significant barriers to stakeholder engagement and participation in ACS. Consider tailoring ACS materials to acknowledge cultural nuances and making response options readily apparent in Spanish and other languages.
- **Focus on personal milestones—not sensitive topics.**
Topics such as “disability status, income, and the age of children” used to describe the ACS triggered significantly less favorable perceptions than topics such as “school enrollment, occupation, and veteran status.”
- **Good tools and training are key in the field.**
Resources available to field personnel are often insufficient to the communications challenges they face. Arm staff with messages, materials, and training that enable them to underscore ACS’ relevance—particularly at the local community level—for respondents and other stakeholders.

- **Local influencers are trusted messengers.**
Leaders active with high-interest populations (low-income, minority, non-English, etc.) stressed the importance of communicating the value of ACS through trusted community channels. Partnering with community organizations to convey the legitimacy and value of ACS is likely to encourage trust and increase participation.

DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH

Following are brief descriptions of the research design and methodology for the ACS messaging studies, with links to access the full report on each study.

MENTAL MODELS INTERVIEWS

“Mental Models” are tacit webs of belief all people draw upon to make decisions about complex issues. These constructs, uncovered through empirical research, must be addressed through communications in order to change attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.

Team Reingold conducted Mental Models interviews (n=25) with both ACS data collectors and data disseminators to gather in-depth insights from those who most closely engage ACS stakeholders, including respondents, non-respondents, and data users.

Full report available at:

http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Downloads/library/2014/2014_Kovacs_01.pdf

DELIBERATIVE FOCUS GROUPS

Team Reingold conducted focus groups (n=7) in cities across the country with individuals identified to be distrustful of the government, with the goal to understand what messages or arguments would best motivate them to complete the ACS. The “jury-style” deliberative format, modeled on a courtroom trial, compelled individuals who may be naturally inclined to oppose the ACS to nevertheless develop and defend arguments in its favor. One of the focus groups was conducted in Spanish with participants who self-identified as being primarily Spanish speakers.

Full report available at:

http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Downloads/library/2014/2014_Orrison_01.pdf

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

Team Reingold conducted in-depth telephone interviews (n=109) with key stakeholders in five segments—business, academic/research, state and local government, tribal government, and advocacy and community associations—to inventory stakeholder knowledge of ACS, identify key gaps, discuss potential themes and messages, and assess the best communication and outreach channels to specific groups.

Full report available at:

http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Downloads/library/2014/2014_Hagedorn_02.pdf

MESSAGE TESTING: BENCHMARK SURVEY

This quantitative study involved conducting telephone interviews (n=1015) with a representative sample of the U.S. population, with the aim to gather key attitudinal data about ACS and identify the best messages surrounding ACS participation. Interviews were conducted with a sample of both landline and cell phone numbers, and landline interviews were stratified by ACS self-response rates. Results from this study were further explored in the second, refinement phase of message testing.

Full report available at:

http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Downloads/library/2014/2014_Hagedorn_01.pdf

MESSAGE TESTING: REFINEMENT SURVEY

Team Reingold conducted a second wave of telephone interviews (n=1005) with a broad sample of the American public to drill down on the most effective messages, words, or phrases tested in the benchmark survey.

Full report available at:

http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Downloads/library/2014/2014_Hagedorn_03.pdf