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Subject:	Strategic Framework for Messaging in the American Community Survey Mail Materials

Attached is the American Community Survey Research and Evaluation report, "Strategic Framework for Messaging in the American Community Survey Mail Materials." This report recommends and provides a strategic framework for messaging in the American Community Survey mail materials.

Please contact Elizabeth Poehler at 301-763-9305 or Broderick Oliver at 301-763-9350 if you have questions about this report.

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Strategic Framework for Messaging in the American Community Survey Mail Materials

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Executive Summary

This report presents a strategic framework for messaging in the American Community Survey (ACS) mail materials to increase self-response through a sequence of complementary mailings. This framework presents guidance for strategic messaging in the first four mailings. We drew from cross-disciplinary research to establish a baseline understanding of what constitutes effective communication to aid the development of this framework.

The recommended messages are designed to resonate with the cynical and distrusting segments of the population, as an increase in their self-response has the most potential to increase overall self-response. Messages that resonate with this population have broad appeal in the general population:

- The first mailing should focus on building trust with the respondent through messages that legitimize the survey and connect the survey to the U.S. Census Bureau, a known and trusted organization.

- The second mailing should focus on communicating how the data produced from individual responses has tangible benefits to one's community.

- The third mailing should contain messages that reduce the sense of burden associated with ACS response by providing a choice in response mode, explaining that response to the ACS is a normal activity regularly completed by others in the community, and linking ACS response to civic duty.

- The fourth mailing should summarize previous messages from the first three mailings by restating the appeals to trust, benefits, and reducing burden in a new way. This mailing should also prominently include a "thank you" statement to those who have already responded.

We recommend that ACS staff evaluate the messaging in the current mail materials in context of this framework, propose revisions, and test them (i.e., cognitive testing and controlled survey experiments). We view the strategic framework as a living document. As new research emerges and is tested, the framework may be updated accordingly.

1 INTRODUCTION

The American Community Survey (ACS) is an ongoing, nationwide survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau to collect detailed social, economic, housing, and demographic information from the population living in housing units and group quarters. The ACS uses a mail contact strategy to encourage residents in sampled addresses to self-respond.

The Census Bureau has conducted considerable research to improve its mail materials and messaging to address declining response rates and concerns from the public about the legitimacy of the survey, its legal mandate, purpose, and burden on respondents.[1] Strategic messaging can help in this endeavor. Communication with prospective respondents across multiple mailings should feel like a single conversation, similar to face-to-face communication between two people. This extended conversation should be strategic in nature—focused, non-repetitive, and integrated (Dillman and Greenberg, 2017).

This report presents a strategic framework for messaging in the ACS mail to increase self-response through a sequence of complementary mail communications. This framework provides an overall mail messaging strategy by establishing the specific objective and audience for each mailing sent to respondents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). This framework presents guidance for strategic messaging in broad terms and themes. It does not provide specific wording or address details of the mail materials themselves such as whether to send a letter, postcard, or brochure. Recommendations for strategic messaging for mail materials for Puerto Rico and the non-English speaking populations were out of scope for this report.

Section 2 describes the current mailing strategy. In Section 3, we draw on cross-disciplinary research to establish a baseline understanding of what constitutes effective communication. In Section 4, we present findings from research on messaging that was conducted specifically on the ACS and the decennial census, including feedback from external experts on messaging. We use salient findings and recommendations from this research to develop primary and secondary messages for the ACS mailings, presented in Section 5.

2 ACS MAILING STRATEGY

To encourage self-response, the ACS sends up to five mailings to a mailable sampled address.[2] The list of mailable sampled addresses is updated (i.e., cut) two times during this process to remove households that have already responded, minimizing the number of mail contacts received by those who have already responded.

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[1] Recent research includes Barth et al., 2015; Clark, 2015a; Clark, 2015b; Oliver, Risley, and Roberts, 2016; Heimel, Barth, and Rabe, 2016. See Tancreto and Poehler (2015) for an evolution of the mail materials.
[2] The requirement for a ''mailable'' address in the United States is met if there is either a complete city-style or rural-route address. A complete city-style address includes a house number, street name, and ZIP Code. A complete rural-route address includes a rural-route number, box number, and ZIP Code.
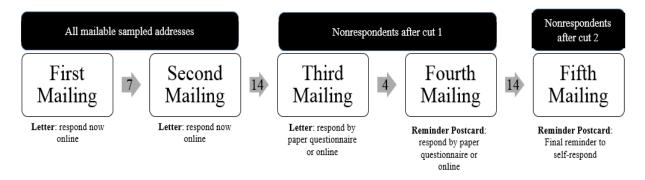
The first mailing is sent to all mailable addresses in the sample. The mail package includes an invitation to participate in the ACS online and information that a paper questionnaire will be sent in a few weeks to those unable to respond online.[3] About seven days later, these addresses receive a follow-up reminder letter (second mailing), which repeats the instructions to respond online or wait for a paper questionnaire.

About two weeks later, the nonresponding addresses receive a third mailing—a package that includes a paper questionnaire (a new response mode option) and instructions for responding online.[4] These addresses receive a reminder postcard about four days later (fourth mailing).

About two weeks later, the remaining nonresponding addresses receive a reminder postcard as a last attempt to collect a self-response (fifth mailing).[5] All addresses that have not responded (online, by mail, or via the Telephone Questionnaire Assistance Center) are eligible for the nonresponse follow-up operations.

The timing, mailing universe, and response mode offered during each mailing is illustrated in Figure 1. The arrows between the boxes indicate the approximate number of days between the mailings.

Figure 1. Overview of the 2017 ACS Mail Contact Strategy

Days between mailings (approximate) are noted with the number on the arrow between mailings

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[3] Although not offered as a response option, prospective respondents can complete the survey by telephone via the Telephone Questionnaire Assistance Center (TQA) during any of the ACS mailings.
[4] The universe for the third mailing is created after the second mailing (cut 1).
[5] The universe for the fifth mailing is created after the fourth mailing (cut 2).

3 THEORIES AND RESEARCH RELATED TO MESSAGING

In this section of the report, we draw on cross-disciplinary research to establish a baseline understanding of what constitutes effective communication. The objective of ACS communications is to obtain a survey response. We extracted the salient parts of the theories presented in Sections 3.1 through 3.5 to develop the strategic framework presented in Section 5.

- Section 3.1 discusses general communication theories.

- Section 3.2 introduces theories on how behaviors change.

- Section 3.3 identifies key principles that are effective in persuading others to agree or comply with requests.

- Section 3.4 introduces two prominent theories on survey methodology that relate to messaging.

- Section 3.5 provides a summary of all the information discussed in the section.

3.1 Communications Theory

Effective communication is important in messaging. Communication is the process of exchanging information. A message is the information the sender wants to communicate to the receiver. Effective communication occurs when the recipient understands the message as intended by the sender. Messages can be communicated in several ways, including writing, speaking, movement, and symbols. Communication is challenging. People filter messages through their own beliefs and opinions (Munodawafa, 2008).

Communication through mail messages is not the same as face-to-face, two-way conversations where the sender and receiver can interact and respond to each other in real time. It is hard, if not impossible, to craft messages that resonate with all recipients. Effective written communication requires that the writer (Koehler, 2001; King, 2006):

- *Know the audience*: Consider the background of the target audience (e.g., educational attainment, mindset) when constructing messages.

- *Establish credibility*: Convey messages that are believable.

- *Speak directly to the reader*: Personalize the request by speaking directly to the reader.

- *Anticipate questions*: Anticipate questions that the reader will have and address them.

- *Use professional language and tone*: Communicate in a clear, compelling, courteous, and concise manner.

Communication with the public must be clear. About 14 percent of U.S. adults read at a "below basic" literacy level (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).[6] Using *plain language* can increase the chances that people understand our message.[7]

Writing that is clear and to the point saves time and money. In 1991, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs tested plain language form letters and found that they reduced support calls from 1.5 calls per letter to 0.3 calls per letter. Changes in one letter alone saved the Department approximately $40,000 per year (Dubay, 2008). Some principles of plain language are delineated below (Federal Plain Language Guidelines, 2011):

- *Consider who your readers are*: Write at the reading level appropriate for your target audience.

- *Consider what your readers need to know*: Think through the questions your audience is likely to ask and organize the content logically to answer their questions.

- *Write in an active voice*: Use an active voice to make it clear who is supposed to do what.

- *State your major point(s) before going into details*: Tell your readers what they are going to read about before going into the details.

- *Write short paragraphs*: Write short paragraphs (150 words or fewer) and limit each paragraph to one idea.

- *Use short, simple words*: Use the familiar or frequently used word over the unusual or obscure. Omit unnecessary words.

- *Use lists*: Use vertical lists to highlight a series of requirements or other information in a visually clear way.

- *Use tables*: Use tables to help the reader discern relationships that are often difficult to decipher in dense text.

3.2 Theories of Behavior Change

Theorists in many fields are interested in why individuals decide to take a particular action or modify a series of behaviors. The World Bank's Communication for Governance and Accountability Program compiled the key elements common in behavior change models and identified strategies to elicit a change in behavior based on each variable, shown in the table below (Communication for Governance and Accountability Program, 2017).

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[6] Adults with "below basic" reading skills cannot for example read stories to their children or fill out an application for work.
[7] See the Plain Writing Act of 2010 (H.R. 946/Public Law 111-274) for more details.

Table 1. Elements and Strategies of Behavior Change

Element	Definition	Strategies for Behavior Change
Barriers	Something that would prevent an individual from carrying out a recommended response.	Be aware of physical or cultural barriers that might exist; attempt to remove barriers.
Benefits	Positive consequences of performing recommended response.	Communicate the benefits of performing the recommended response.
Subjective Norms	What an individual thinks other people think they should do.	Understand with whom individuals are likely to comply.
Attitudes	An individual's evaluation or beliefs about a recommended response.	Measure existing attitudes before attempting to change them.
Intentions	An individual's plans to carry out the recommended response.	Determine if intentions are genuine or proxies for actual behavior.
Cues to Action	External or internal factors that help individuals make decisions about a response.	Provide communication that might trigger individuals to make decisions.
Threat	A danger or a harmful event of which people may or may not be aware.	Raise awareness that the threat exists, focusing on severity and susceptibility.
Fear	Emotional arousal caused by perceiving a significant and personally relevant threat.	Fear can powerfully influence behavior and, if it is channeled in the appropriate way, can motivate people to seek information, but it can also cause people to deny they are at-risk.
Response Efficacy	Perception that a recommended response will prevent the threat from happening.	Provide evidence of examples that the recommended response will avert the threat.
Self-efficacy	An individual's perception of or confidence in their ability to perform a recommended response.	Raise individuals' confidence that they can perform response and help ensure they can avert the threat.
Reactance	When an individual reacts against a recommended response.	Ensure individuals do not feel they have been manipulated or are unable to avert the threat.

Source: World Bank, Communication for Governance and Accountability Program, 2017

One theory of behavior change is the *Reasoned Action Approach*, which states that three types of beliefs determine people's intentions, and people's intentions predict their behaviors (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2011).[8] The three classes of beliefs identified in the Reasoned Action Approach are:

- *Behavioral beliefs*: These are beliefs about the positive or negative consequences a person might experience if they perform the behavior.

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[8] The Reasoned Action Approach is an updated version of the Theory of Planned Behavior, which Ajzen first proposed in 1985.

- *Normative beliefs*: These are beliefs about whether important individuals or groups in a person's life would perform the behavior and whether those individuals or groups would approve of them performing the behavior.

- *Control beliefs*: These are beliefs about personal and environmental factors that can help or impede an individual's attempts to carry out the behavior.

Behavior change theories have been used in a variety of areas including health, education, and government. Examples of relevant research addressing specific beliefs in order to influence behavior include:

- *Increasing tax compliance using a message about social norms*: Letters highlighting the social norm of paying taxes were sent to delinquent taxpayers in the United Kingdom, stating, "nine out of ten people in the United Kingdom pay their tax on time." The letter also stated the recipient was among a small fraction of people who had not yet paid. This resulted in a 5.0 percentage point increase in payments of overdue taxes over a three-week period (Hallsworth et al., 2014). This study used normative beliefs to influence behavior.

- *Increasing flu shot recipiency by asking for a commitment*: Recipients of a flu vaccine mailer were asked to write down the date, time, and location at which they planned to be vaccinated. Vaccination rates increased by 4.2 percentage points. Forming a plan links intended behaviors with a concrete future moment and course of action, which reduces forgetfulness and procrastination (Milkman et al., 2011). This study used control beliefs to influence behavior.

Beyond the broad classes of the Reasoned Action Approach, there are specific strategies that can influence behavior. The design studio Artefact curated a list of effective strategies to move people toward positive behavioral outcomes. They present the strategies as Behavior Change Strategy Cards (Artefact, 2017). Below we present the strategies most salient to ACS messaging.

- *Make it personal*: Give people choices so they feel in control. When people feel ownership over a decision, they tend to attribute more value to it. People generally behave in ways that reinforce their personal identities, and behave in accordance with real or perceived social norms. People are also more likely to respond to emotional stories that highlight a specific person's experience, rather than stories focused on facts.

- *Craft the journey*: Help the user make a commitment to the desired behavior. Establish positive expectations about an event to influence the way people experience it.

- *Set up the options*: Call attention to the desired outcome. Focus on the desired behavior and de-emphasize undesired options. Minimize the ambiguity and uncertainty about the desired outcome.

- *Keep it simple*: When facing an overwhelming amount of information, people may shut down and stop paying attention. Minimize the number of decisions to reduce decision fatigue.

3.3 Theory of Influence

Psychologist Robert Cialdini (1984, 2009, 2016) identifies seven key principles that are effective in persuading others to agree or comply with requests:[9]

- *Reciprocity*: People have a desire to give back to those who have given to them. For example, when customers at a grocery store are given free food samples they feel a sense of reciprocity to make a purchase.

- *Scarcity*: People desire items and opportunities more if the item or opportunity is scarce (or perceived to be scarce). This occurs because people are scared to "miss out." When an item or opportunity is only available for a limited time, people feel an obligation to acquire the item or participate in an opportunity while it is available. Providing a price or opportunity, "For a Limited-Time Only," is an effective marketing message.

- *Commitment and Consistency*: People are more comfortable when they act consistently with their values and previous actions. For example, prior to an election, phone calls to registered voters that ask the voter if they will vote during this election have been shown to increase voter turnout. The voter is reminded of voting in the past, which motivates them to take action to be consistent with their previous actions.

- *Consensus and Social Proof*: Conformity and societal norms have a powerful influence on people. People tend to follow the lead of others similar to themselves. For example, hotels encourage guests to reuse bed linens and towels through appeals about environmental benefits. Cialdini showed that telling hotel guests that the majority of guests reuse their sheets and towels was more effective than merely pointing out environmental benefits.

- *Authority*: People are more likely to follow the lead of credible experts. Communicating or projecting expertise is a powerful way to gain compliance to a request. For example, doctors hang their diplomas in their medical office to establish their credentials for their patients.

- *Liking*: People are more likely to comply with requests from people they like. For example, celebrity endorsements, regardless of the celebrity's actual authority on the product they are selling, can be effective.

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[9] The first six principles, Reciprocity, Scarcity, Commitment and Consistency, Consensus and Social Proof, Authority, and Liking, have been the core of Cialdini's theory of influence since 1984. Cialdini added Unity, the seventh principle of influence, to his theory in 2016.

- *Unity*: People agree and comply with others when they feel they share an identity. For example, Cialdini surveyed potential patrons of a new restaurant. Some were asked to provide their "advice," others their "opinion," and others their "expectations." Patrons who were asked for their advice were more likely to report a desire to visit the restaurant when it opened because they felt like part of the team rather than an outsider. Messages that make the potential respondent feel a sense of unity with the requestor may increase compliance with a request.

To make requests more effective, requestors should incorporate these persuasion principles into "pre-suasion" messages (Cialdini, 2016). Pre-suasion involves establishing a connection with the potential respondent prior to formally making any request, which can make potential respondents more amenable to future requests. For example, establishing yourself as an authority, or building unity with a potential respondent prior to making a request, can make compliance with a later request more likely. Pre-suasion tactics build trust and create a sense of mystery around the forthcoming request. Cialdini calls these "privileged moments" that create a powerful reason to comply with the request prior to the potential respondent needing to respond (Cialdini, 2016). Subsequent messages that come after pre-suasion messages can transition a potential respondent's attention from these privileged moments to the request itself.

3.4 Survey Methodology

Survey designers have long been concerned about the impact of messaging on response rates and response bias. Decades of research have led to the development of a multi-disciplinary field of survey methodology that directly studies the methodology of survey science. As some survey methodologists have noted, "research has been successful in identifying specific design features that tend to have larger versus smaller effects [on response rates], but generally leaves unanswered how all elements of a design fit together" (Dillman, Smyth, and Christian, 2014). At present, there is no single, comprehensive theory on strategic survey messaging across multiple contacts.

Two prominent theories on survey methodology that come from the field of sociology, *Leverage-Saliency* and *Social Exchange*, provide valuable insights to help build the strategic framework for ACS mail messaging. Each draws upon a diverse body of communication and psychological research and survey experiment testing. While each theory or perspective is distinct, they share common ground and complement more than contradict each other.

3.4.1 Leverage-Saliency Theory

Leverage-Saliency theory (Groves, Singer, and Corning, 2000) presents hypotheses about how survey methodologies can influence potential respondents to cooperate. Each survey request has multiple attributes. The topic of the survey is an attribute of the survey, as is the length of time it takes a respondent to complete the survey request. These attributes are not neutral features of the

survey. Each attribute represents a "leverage" on the potential respondent's decision to participate in the survey.

Some survey attributes or leverages, such as lengthy surveys with difficult and sensitive questions, exert a negative impact on a respondent's willingness to participate. Other leverages, such as cash incentives and surveys sponsored by known and trusted organizations, can have a positive influence on a potential respondent's willingness to participate. The goal of survey messaging is to convince potential respondents that the positives of responding outweigh the negatives.

The problem for survey communication is that each recipient does not experience each leverage as equally positive or negative. For example, some potential respondents may find a request to complete a 20-minute survey arduous or burdensome, while others may be happy to comply with the same request.[10] Similarly, recipients do not experience potentially positive survey attributes in the same way. A survey from a known and trusted sponsor might increase response rates of some individuals, but not others (Groves et al., 2012).

The power of a positive leverage is heightened by the "salience" the survey communications placed on that leverage. For example, a potential respondent might be more likely to complete a 20-minute survey if the survey's messaging materials make the desired social or personal benefits gained by completing the survey salient to the participant. A positive leverage can become more powerful in promoting a survey response when it is made salient to the respondent though messaging. Conversely, while messaging should meet requirements to inform research subjects of the potential negative outcomes of survey participation, it should avoid overemphasizing (or not making salient) potentially negative aspects of survey participation.

Because potential respondents weigh the benefits of survey participation against the direct costs or burden of participating, survey designers should make all potentially positive leverages of the survey salient to increase the likelihood of respondent participation. Research has shown that the most powerful leverages that increase response rates are the use of incentives.

- *Provide a monetary incentive*: Monetary incentives are a way to pay respondents for their survey response and increase response rates by convincing likely and unlikely potential responders to complete a survey request[11] (Groves, Singer, and Corning, 2000). Monetary incentives also reduce nonresponse bias because they produce larger response increases

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[10] While research suggests longer survey requests are generally more burdensome, not all people may consider a 20-minute survey to be long (Heberlein and Baumgartner, 1978).

[11] There are two underlying theories that explain why monetary incentives work. The first, "economic exchange," views the cash incentive as payment to balance the burdens that come with survey participation. The second theory, based on the concept of reciprocity, argues that incentives do not pay people directly for their time because cash payments for survey participation tend to be small. This logic argues that the cash payments serve a purpose by stimulating feelings of obligation to comply with the survey request by generating good will and trust (Dillman, Smyth, and Christian, 2014). Leverage-saliency theory utilizes logic from both of these theories.

among potential respondents who are uninterested in the survey topic than among potential respondents who are interested in the survey topic (Groves, et al., 2006).

- *Cash monetary incentives work better than non-cash monetary incentives*: Monetary incentives can take many forms. Cash incentives produce higher response rates than non-cash monetary incentives, such as gift cards or certificates (Birnholtz et al., 2004).

While incentives are powerful, they do not guarantee response, even as monetary compensation increases (Singer et al., 1999). Making nonmonetary, positive leverages salient is also necessary. These include, but are not limited to (see Groves, Cialdini, and Couper, 1992; Groves, Singer, and Corning, 2000; Groves, Presser, and Dipko, 2004; Groves et al., 2006):

- *Appealing to potential respondents' sense of civic responsibility.*

- *Highlighting the connection of a survey to a popular or respected sponsor organization.*

- *Writing surveys with interesting questions to entertain or pique interest of potential respondents.*

- *Highlighting interesting survey topics to build intrigue.*

Each of these leverages can have a different level of positive or negative influence on a potential respondent's decision to participate. Feelings a potential respondent has toward a survey sponsor are separate from the feelings they may have toward a survey topic (Groves, Presser, and Dipko, 2004). No single formula exists for determining which leverages are most important to make salient. To increase response rates, Leverage-Saliency theory suggests making all potentially positive leverages salient to the respondent through survey communication, which would allow more respondents to be influenced by the variety of different leverages (Groves, Singer, and Corning, 2000).

Recruiting participants through a mail contact strategy provides multiple opportunities to make a variety of leverages salient (Groves et al., 2006). Research shows multiple contacts, particularly reminder notifications, are one of the most powerful tools to increase survey response rates (Lesser et al., 2001; Roose, Lievens, and Waege, 2007). While specific research does not exist on how to effectively communicate multiple leverages, a contact strategy with multiple contacts may be effective because it allows additional opportunities to make numerous leverages salient (Groves et al., 2006; Dillman, Smyth, and Christian, 2014).

3.4.2 Social Exchange Theory

While Leverage-Saliency theory provides useful recommendations to increase response rates, some survey methodologists view this theory as incomplete (Dillman, Smyth, and Christian, 2014). Leverage-Saliency theory recommends making all positive survey attributes that could potentially increase response rates salient. While this may increase response rates, making

certain leverages salient can also introduce nonresponse bias if the increase in response comes only from responders who are motivated by specific leverages connected to the survey content.[12]

For example, a research organization may want to field an opinion survey on environmental issues. To make the topic of the survey more salient, a survey design might use images of nature on their mail materials. Connecting the survey to a well-known and trusted national environmental organization may increase response rates, but may also introduce bias by attracting potential respondents with a predisposition for environmental causes (Dillman, Smyth, and Christian, 2014).

Over the past four decades, Dillman and colleagues (Dillman 1978; Dillman, Smyth, and Christian, 2009; Dillman, Smyth, and Christian, 2014) have refined a theory of survey messaging based on the *Social Exchange theory* of communication in an attempt to increase response rates and reduce nonresponse bias. Their theory derives from a general theory of human behavior (see Thibaut and Kelley, 1959; Homans, 1961; Blau, 1964), which argues that people are more likely to comply with any request if they "believe and trust the rewards for complying with that request will eventually exceed the costs of complying" (Dillman, Smyth, and Christian, 2014).

Similar to Leverage-Saliency theory, Social Exchange theory notes that respondents will balance the costs and benefits of survey participation. However, they will do so only if they first trust the survey request. In Social Exchange theory, building trust is the most important aspect of survey messaging. Going back to the previous example of an opinion survey on environmental issues, rather than leveraging the ideological mission or topic of the survey (which may induce bias), Social Exchange theory might recommend connecting the survey to an issue-neutral survey sponsor (e.g., a respected university) to increase trust and credibility without adding bias.[13]

Survey communication is not limited to words in letters. Communication also occurs on the outside of envelopes, through the format of messages, and on the questionnaire itself. A holistic communication design should apply social exchange principles to build trust through the use of mutually supportive components that improve response rates for the entire sample, not just a subset (Dillman, Smyth, and Christian, 2014; Dillman, 2016).[14]

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[12] Leverage-Saliency theory stresses the importance of monetary incentives because they increase response rates while reducing nonresponse bias. Some leverages, such as survey sponsorship, increase response rates from certain types of respondents who have favorable views of the survey organization. Monetary incentives have been shown to diminish the impact of these leverages by inducing other types of potential respondents to participate, and particularly those not influenced by sponsorship and topical leverages (Groves, Singer, and Corning, 2000; Trussell and Lavrakas, 2004; Groves et al., 2006).

[13] Proponents of Leverage-Saliency theory promote the use of survey sponsorship to increase response rates and acknowledge that neutral sponsors, like research universities produce less bias than sponsors who are linked to the topic of the survey (see Groves et al., 2012). Rather than focusing on tactics to make additional leverages more salient, Social Exchange Theory focuses on bias-neutral tactics in survey messaging that build trust.

[14] Research comparing holistic designs strategies is limited. A recent study by Dillman and Greenberg (2017) directly compared two holistic designs, one following Social Exchange principles (Dillman, Smyth, and Christian, 2014), and the other following Influence Theory principles (Cialdini 1984, 2009). In the difficult to survey region

When a survey request is trusted, messaging can now accomplish two goals. First, messaging can now more effectively communicate the *rewards* or *benefits* a respondent can gain from responding to the survey. With increased trust, statements regarding the benefits of survey participation are more likely to be believed. Second, messaging that reduces perceptions of *burden* associated with the task of completing the survey request can be more effective. We discuss these three components (building trust, communicating benefits, and reducing perceptions of burden) of social exchange separately in the sections below.

3.4.2.1 Trust

While topical leverages might promote certain types of people to respond, Social Exchange theory argues that building trust and legitimacy will increase response rates from all types of people—not just those who agree with the mission of the survey sponsor. Social Exchange theory suggests many tactics to increase trust, including:

- *Attach survey to a known and trusted sponsor*: Research has shown that surveys from known, respected, and trusted sponsors receive higher response rates than non-sponsored surveys. Surveys sponsored by research universities receive higher response rates than surveys conducted by private companies; while government-sponsored survey requests receive even higher response rates (Presser, Blair, and Triplett, 1992). The use of logos, official letterhead, or simply referencing the name of the sponsor organization are effective ways to build a connection between survey and a survey sponsor. Schwede (2013) found that the ACS mail materials appeared more legitimate when attached to the U.S. Census Bureau, a well-known and trusted government research agency, was added to contact materials.

- *The design of survey mail materials should match public expectations of the survey sponsor organization*: For government surveys, the public expects clean, official, and generally plain envelopes, rather than flashy envelopes with heavy use of graphics. Letters can include the use of color on agency names and logos, but should not use flashy graphic designs or full-color themes. Flashy mailings may resemble marketing materials and "junk mail" from a private corporation, which are less well received compared to "official" government-looking mailings. Some graphic elements can be used to catch the eye, but they must strike a balance to also communicate clearly that they are official and important (Leslie, 1997; Dillman et al., 1996; Whitcomb and Porter, 2004; Reingold, 2014a; Hagedorn, Panek, and Green, 2014).

- *Send multiple mail contacts that have unique content and consistent design*: Prenotice and reminder contacts are effective at increasing response rates (Dillman, Clark, and Sinclair, 1995; Dillman et al., 1996; Roose, Lievens, and Waege, 2007; Millar and

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of rural West Virginia, the study found the Social Exchange holistic design produced response rates of 24.2 percent compared to 18.8 percent response rates from an Influence Theory holistic design.

Dillman, 2011). Multiple mail contacts do more than remind potential respondents to participate in a survey. Letterhead, envelopes, and other materials sent across multiple mail contacts that look and feel as if they came from the same place build trust and legitimacy. Inconsistencies in design within and across mail contacts should be avoided. The content of each mail piece should be unique, as identical content within mail pieces can feel like "spam" messaging (Dillman, Smyth, and Christian, 2014). For example, varying the size of envelopes across mailings helps make each mail contact stand out as unique while using the same design theme in each mailing can build a connection, and trust, between mail contacts (Tarnai et al., 2012).

- *Make the request personal*: Survey requests should come from a real person with authority within the requesting organization (e.g., Director of the Census Bureau), not from a building or an organization (e.g., the U.S. Census Bureau). The authority figure's signature should accompany the correspondence. A hand-written signature makes the request more personal and communicates to the respondent they are valued (Dillman et al., 2007). Compared to mass-copied letters, personalized materials were shown in one test to increase response rates by 3 to 12 percentage points (Dillman et al., 2007).

- *Hold a single, person-to-person, conversation with respondents*: To establish a sense of unity between the survey organization and the potential respondent, requests should be written in plain language using the voice of one person asking another person for help, and not in the language of a bureaucratic organization requesting compliance (Cialdini, 2009; Dillman, Smyth, and Christian, 2014; Cialdini, 2016). Multiple mail materials should feel like part of a single, two-way conversation between two people.

  The language should be consistent; phrasing should avoid changes in tone. The specific content in each letter or postcard should vary to match how people communicate in one-on-one conversations. In real conversations, people rarely repeat themselves verbatim, yet survey letters and reminders often follow this practice. Restating, not repeating, a message can be useful if stated in the same tone, but in a different way, so as not to feel repetitive (Dillman, Smyth, and Christian, 2014).

- *Follow rules of etiquette and plain language*: The request for help should include phrases like, "please" and "thank you" and should be communicated in a respectful and noncommanding, tone. Survey requests should incorporate language that indicates deference for the respondent's time and effort (Dillman, Smyth, and Christian, 2014). Adults asking for help from other adults should not make demands (Comley, 2006). Simple, straightforward, and noncomplex phrasing is best practice to reach a broad audience (McCormack, 2014). See Section 4.1 for information on plain language.

- *Assure, but do not overstate, confidentiality and privacy*: In today's world of security breaches and privacy concerns, we are often taught the safest option to a survey request might be to not respond (Dillman, Smyth, and Christian, 2014). Many people delete

emails from unknown senders and refuse to answer phone calls from unknown numbers. Confidentiality statements are important and often mandated by survey organizations.

However, "going to great lengths and detail to explain how confidentiality works or will be assured (when the survey isn't terribly sensitive) is more likely to raise concerns than alleviate them" (Singer, Hippler, and Schwartz, 1992). Absolute words, like "never" and "always," are often seen as overstatements and are not believed when communicating risks and privacy concerns (Fobia and Childs, 2017). It is important (if not mandatory) to communicate information about the protections in place to assure confidentiality and privacy of survey responses, but too strong of a statement may be off-putting to respondents (Singer, von Thurn, and Miller, 1995). Simple, straightforward, clear and nonalarming confidentiality statements are often enough (Fobia and Childs, 2017). See Section 4.2 for results from Census Bureau research on confidentiality messages.

- *Provide multiple ways to verify the authenticity of the survey request*: It is common today for people to use the internet to verify authenticity of suspicious emails, phone calls, and letters. Survey requests should come from a person attached to the sponsoring organization. The sponsoring agency should be easy to find on the internet. The return address should be searchable and linked to a physical location, not a P.O. Box. Email addresses and web links should be from the same organization as the mail contact materials. A phone number should be provided for respondents to call, to ask questions, or to verify authenticity (Dillman, Smyth, and Christian, 2014).

- *Use pre-incentives to encourage, but not require, reciprocity*: The inclusion of a pre-incentive builds trust because it is given before the response is completed, and is given even when a respondent does not complete or return the survey (Church, 1993). Numerous studies have shown including a small token cash incentive upfront (even as low as one dollar) induces a sense of obligation to respond from all types of potential respondents, and particularly those who are usually less likely to respond (Singer and Ye, 2013; Millar and Dillman, 2011; Messer and Dillman, 2011).[15] While monetary pre-incentives have been shown to work best, charitable organizations often use a similar tactic sending nonmonetary tokens, such as calendars, magnets, return address stickers,

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[15] It is the presence of the token incentive, not the amount which matters most, as increases in token incentives only produce a marginal and diminishing increase in response (Trussel and Lavrakas, 2004). Avdeyeva and Matland (2013) found that a pre-incentive sent with a survey request was more effective than a promised amount six times larger and given only when the survey was complete. Some studies have found entering participants into lotteries to be ineffective (Warriner et al., 1996). One study found lotteries to be less effective than pre-incentives, as a $2 pre-incentive increased response rates by nearly 20 percent, while entering participants into a lottery for $300 increased response rates by only five percent (Lesser et al., 2001).

pens or other items, along with the initial donation request (rather than as a promised reward for donating) (Singer and Ye, 2013).[16]

- *Spend money on mail materials*: Survey contact materials that look and feel professional, rather than cheap, signal to the potential respondent that the survey organization values respondents' time, the survey request is real, and the survey organization can be trusted (Dillman, Smyth, and Christian, 2014). Using first-class mail, large envelopes, official letterhead, full-sized letters, return envelopes with pre-paid postage, and real stamps may increase response rates by conveying the importance of the survey request and building trust (Armstrong and Luske, 1987; Dillman, Clark, and Sinclair, 1995; Dillman et al., 1996; Hembroff et al., 2005; Brick et al., 2012; Tarnai et al., 2012; Dillman, Smyth, and Christian, 2014).

3.4.2.2 Benefits

The most direct way to provide a benefit for completing a survey is through monetary compensation. Most benefits of participating in a survey are nonpersonal and nonverifiable. Stafford (2008) argues that Social Exchange theory relies on trust to convey *social* benefits of survey participation. For example, one benefit of participating in the ACS is that one's community can better plan to meet the needs of its residents by using ACS data. However, a respondent cannot easily prove that their response was actually part of any decision that affects their community. In order for a respondent to feel that their response helped provide a social benefit, the respondent must first trust the survey organization will make these data available, and community planners will use this information to provide the benefit.

Focusing on collective goods that result from survey participation is a useful tactic to highlight a reward, even if trivial, of survey participation. To communicate this, survey requests should:

- *Stress the importance of the survey response to the respondent's community*: A prospective respondent is more interested in potential benefits for his or her own neighborhood than for the nation, or even their state, or city (Reingold, 2014b).

- *Emphasize that responding directly helps other people*: Some people feel a sense of accomplishment when completing a task for someone else and generally feel a sense of reward when they feel they have helped others. For some, this sense of accomplishment is heightened when the action provides no personal benefit aside from helping someone else (Homans, 1961; Blau, 1964; Dillman, Smyth, and Christian, 2014).

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[16] Some research suggests that providing large incentives for larger donations (for example, a tote bag and mug for a $100 donation) decreases donations because it induces a sense of selfishness and reduces feelings of altruism (Newman and Shen, 2012).

- *Appeal to civic responsibility and civic duty*: Some feel a sense of pride as they fulfill their civic obligations and a sense of reward when fulfilling a patriotic duty to help their country (Groves, Singer, and Corning, 2000; Reingold, 2014b). Responding to a survey request can often be framed as a civic responsibility or duty.

Other messages to communicate nonmonetary benefits of responding to the ACS include:

- *Make the survey sound interesting*: People enjoy engaging in activities they find interesting. Starting a survey with an interesting question that respondents find engaging can spur respondents, particularly reluctant ones, to at least examine and possibly complete the remaining survey questions (Dillman, Smyth, and Christian, 2014; Dillman, 2016). Messages in letters can accomplish the same goal by communicating content of a survey that respondents may find interesting (Groves, Singer, and Corning, 2000; Dillman, Smyth, and Christian, 2014).

- *Stress that opportunities to respond are limited*: People view a task as more important when they believe it is an opportunity only offered to a few people (Cialdini, 1984). Framing the survey request as an opportunity only provided to a few people can instill a sense of benefit to the respondent. The uniqueness of a survey request can be framed to make the respondent feel special and privileged to be in a position to shape the direction of their community and country (Dillman, Smyth, and Christian, 2014).

3.4.2.3 Burden

The burden potential respondents may associate with participation in household surveys includes, but is not limited to:

- Time spent to complete the survey.

- Additional hassle finding answers to questions respondents cannot immediately answer.

- Stress or aggravation experienced trying to respond for multiple household members.

- Stress from having to answer questions perceived as sensitive or personal in nature about themselves or other household members.

- Not being able to respond to the survey in the preferred mode (e.g., a respondent responds online but would have preferred a paper form to fill out and mail back).

- Negative feelings when a survey request is not perceived as valuing or respecting the potential respondent's time.

The most common ways to reduce burden are to make changes to the survey form. Shorter, less complex, graphically simple, and straightforward surveys are seen as less burdensome (Dillman, Smyth, and Christian, 2014). There are also ways survey messaging can reduce the perception of burden a respondent associates with the survey request.

- *Ask the respondent for help without subordinating language*: A survey request can be thought of as one person asking another person for help. Messages should ask for help and make it clear that in this relationship the sponsor is dependent on the respondent.[17] Requests should ask respondents for their help and emphasize how participation can result in benefits to their community. They should not include statements that suggest benefits would be withheld if they do not respond (Dillman, Smyth, and Christian, 2014). Furthermore, respondents should not feel pressured to respond with the promise of a benefit. Rather, survey messaging should communicate that the sponsor is grateful for when the respondent agrees to our request for help (Comley, 2006).

- *Offer multiple response modes*: Some respondents are not able or prefer not to respond online, preferring to respond using a physical, paper form or with a person via telephone or in-person interview. Others prefer to respond online. Offering respondents a choice of response mode can have a positive effect on response (Gentry and Good, 2008; Smyth et al., 2010; Millar and Dillman, 2011; Olson, Smyth, and Wood, 2012).

- *Provide a deadline or due date*: Providing a deadline or a due date reduces burden on the respondent through clear instructions on when a task is due, which fits into a respondent's mail prioritization process. It respects their time and conveys a clear expectation (Dillman, 2016). In a recent mail package focus group conducted for the Census Bureau by Reingold, Inc., participants volunteered that "a stated deadline or due date would be a strong motivator for them to respond in a timely fashion" (Reingold, 2014a).

- *Convey that others have responded*: Many people feel more comfortable when they conform to norms of the society around them and feel anxiety and stress when breaking social norms. Messages should convey that participation in surveys is a normal activity.[18] Knowing others have responded may help make it more comfortable to respond for those who are hesitant to respond to the survey (Cialdini, 1984; Hallsworth et al., 2014). Misra, Stokols, and Marino (2012) found conference participants were more likely to complete post-conference surveys if the survey contained a norm-based appeal. In this case, the

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[17] An example from Dillman, Smyth, and Christian highlights the problem using subordinating language: "For us to solve the school problems in your community, it is necessary for you to complete this survey" (2014, p. 34). This sentence communicates that the respondent is dependent upon the survey organization to make a change. This subordinating message is, "You need us… to fix your schools. You need our help. Please respond, or else we cannot help you!" Instead, the request would be better phrased as, "Will you please be part of helping to solve the school problems in your community? Your response can assist this community in understanding the issues facing schools" (Dillman, Smyth, and Christian, 2014, p. 35). This request notes that if a survey response is voluntarily offered, the respondent is helping, but not required, to solve a problem. This empowers the respondent and may reduce their perception of burden.

[18] In the previous section it was mentioned that highlighting the "unique" nature of a survey request can make the survey request, and sample member, feel special. If this message is used, it may also be helpful to remind the potential respondent that while few are asked to complete surveys, it is also normal to respond when asked.

survey indicated typical response rates among attendees of prior similar conferences to illustrate it was a normal behavior to complete this survey.

- *Frame survey participation as a normal civic duty consistent with previous actions*: Potential respondents are more likely to comply with a request if they feel it is consistent with their previous behavior in similar situations (Cialdini, 1984; Groves, Cialdini, and Couper, 1992). Potential respondents have completed other surveys and regularly comply with civic duty requests, for example, serving on a jury (Reingold, 2014b). Framing survey participation as a civic obligation consistent with their own previous behaviors may reduce stress of participation for some potential respondents.

- *Use mandatory messaging*: Mail materials with mandatory messages significantly boost self-response (Dillman, et al., 1996). Research at the Census Bureau found this to be the case specifically for the ACS (Barth et al., 2016; Oliver, Risley, and Roberts, 2016). When respondents are informed they are legally required to complete a survey, it takes away the burden of contemplation (Dillman, Smyth, and Christian, 2014).

- *Limit number of messages in each contact*: Each mail contact should be simple and straightforward. Groves argues that the use of multiple mail contacts may increase response rates because added contacts make it possible to make additional leverages salient (2006). Multiple contacts also allow for multiple messages to be communicated sequentially, rather than concurrently. Marketing research suggests that presenting three messages within a single communication is best practice for better retention and understanding (McCormack, 2014; Poldre, 2017).

3.5   Insights from Theories and Research Related to Messaging

While a single theory on holistic survey messaging does not exist, many fields provide insight into how specific elements of survey messaging can be used to increase survey response rates (Dillman and Greenberg, 2017). Messaging recommendations were often supported by multiple theories. Our multi-disciplinary theory review yielded several insights that we considered when building the strategic framework, presented in Section 5:

- *Credibility and Trust*: Establishing the trust and credibility of the survey is the most important task of survey messaging. Respondents may not feel comfortable responding if they do not find a survey request credible. They also will be hesitant to believe any subsequent messages if they do not first trust that the survey request is real. Establishing trust also helps later messages build a sense of reciprocity that compels potential respondents to comply with the survey request. One of the most effective ways to build trust and feelings of reciprocity is with a token cash incentive. Confidentiality and data security statements are also useful to build trust, but they should be stated simply to avoid raising fears.

- *Two-Way Communication*: Multiple survey mail contacts should feel like a continuous conversation between the survey organizer and the potential respondent. Potential respondents weigh all of the perceived benefits of survey participation against the perceived burden of participating. Each message or attribute in a survey request is an opportunity to convince a potential respondent to complete a survey request. Rather than repeating messages verbatim, multiple contacts should highlight and communicate different reasons to participate in the survey.

- *Audience-Based Messaging*: Survey requests should be written with knowledge of the potential audience and consider what that audience needs to know. Materials sent to the general population should use plain language understood by someone with a basic reading level. Each mail contact should contain a limited number of messages so the reader does not feel overwhelmed by information. Respondents also have expectations for how a piece of mail from the government should look and read. While each mail contact piece should be unique to grab a potential respondent's attention, contact materials should share a simple, official, and consistent design and tone to build a connection across mail contacts and to meet expectations.

- *Communicate Benefits*: Messaging should communicate the positive social benefits of survey participation, particularly benefits to one's community. Survey communication can also highlight internal benefits to participation in surveys, such as the pride a potential respondent may feel when fulfilling a civic duty or helping others, or the enjoyment someone feels when completing an interesting or important task.

- *Personalization*: Survey requests should be sent from a real person within an organization and include that person's signature. When asking a potential respondent to complete a survey request, communication should be written in the voice of one person asking another person for a favor. Messaging should follow basic rules of etiquette, avoid the use of subordinating language, and be communicated in a single, consistent voice and style. Potential respondents should also be able to verify the authenticity of the person and organization making the survey request. The use of personal stories can effectively highlight real experiences people have with the survey request or with uses of survey data.

- *Communicate Norms*: Framing survey participation as a normal activity increases a sense of self-efficacy and raises a potential respondent's confidence that they can easily comply with the survey request. Messaging should reinforce that responding to a survey request is a normal activity similar to routine civic duties because people feel comfortable and less burdened when acting consistently with their own previous behavior and with the behaviors of others in their community.

4   CENSUS BUREAU RESEARCH ON MAIL MESSAGING

The insights listed in Section 3 discuss best practices for communication and survey messaging. The Census Bureau has unique challenges and benefits as they seek survey responses. Results and insights from messaging specific to the Census Bureau are presented here in Section 4, specifically on the ACS and the decennial census, which have similar messaging themes. We considered these results when developing the strategic framework presented in Section 5.

- Section 4.1 discusses the different mindsets of people in the country regarding either the decennial census or the ACS.

- Section 4.2 presents the reactions of individuals to specific messages intended to encourage survey participation.

- Section 4.3 discusses feedback provided by external experts on Census Bureau mail materials and procedures.

- Section 4.4 provides a summary of the information discussed in this section.

4.1   Census Bureau Respondent Research

As discussed in Section 3.1, a messenger must know their audience in order for messages to be most effective. Understanding the audience for the ACS means understanding the variety of people in the country. To this end, the Census Bureau has conducted research on the different mindsets that individuals have about the government, the Census Bureau, and surveys.

4.1.1   Segmentation and Mindsets for the 2010 Census

After Census 2000, the Census Bureau determined a population segmentation was necessary to more effectively develop and target messaging for the 2010 Census. This research used demographic, housing, and socio-economic characteristics at the tract-level as well as Census 2000 mail response rates to cluster census tracts with similar characteristics.[19] This research yielded the following eight types of housing unit clusters, with the percent of housing units in each (Bates and Mulry, 2007):

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[19] The Census Bureau defines tracts as small, relatively permanent statistical subdivisions of a county or equivalent entity. Census tracts generally have a population size between 1,200 and 8,000 people, with an optimum size of 4,000 people. A census tract usually covers a contiguous area. However, the spatial size of census tracts varies widely depending on the density of settlement. For more information on census tracts, see <https://www.census.gov/geo/reference/gtc/gtc_ct.html>.

- *Advantaged Homeowners*: 26 percent of all housing units.

- *Single Unattached Mobiles*: 8 percent.

- *All Around Average I* (homeowner-skewed)[20]: 35 percent.

- *All Around Average II* (renter-skewed): 16 percent.

- *Economically Disadvantaged I* (homeowner-skewed): 6 percent.

- *Economically Disadvantaged II* (renter-skewed): 3 percent.

- *Ethnic Enclaves I* (homeowner-skewed): 3 percent.

- *Ethnic Enclaves II* (renter-skewed): 2 percent.

This population segmentation served as the framework for the 2010 Census communication plan, allowing for targeted messages and appropriate media placements based on the size, location, and characteristics of each segment. However, the segmentation did not fully explain the mindset behind why a person might not participate in the census, so the Census Bureau commissioned a study, the *Census Barriers Attitudes and Motivators Survey* (CBAMS), to fill this gap.

The Census Bureau conducted the CBAMS to help in planning a communication strategy for the 2010 Census. The study measured:

- Previous census participation.

- Attitudes toward the census.

- Knowledge about the purpose of the census.

- Potential motivators and barriers to census participation.

- Reactions to messages the Census Bureau was considering using.

Two CBAMS studies were conducted, one in the spring of 2008 (CBAMS I) to plan for the 2010 Census and one in 2011 (CBAMS II) to assess how attitudes had changed after the communications campaign for the census, if at all.

The CBAMS I surveyed over 4,000 respondents either by telephone or in a personal interview and statistically segmented the respondents based on their survey answers.[21] Five mindset categories emerged (ICF Macro, 2009; Bates et al., 2009):[22]

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[20] "Homeowner-skewed" means that the tracts in these clusters have a higher than average rate of homeownership. Conversely, "renter-skewed" clusters have a higher than average rate of renting.
[21] This was the first study to estimate the size of each mindset in relation to the decennial census.
[22] Due to rounding, the distribution of the population into five mindsets sums to 99 percent instead of 100 percent.

- *The Head Nodders* (41 percent of the population)
  - Positive about the census.
  - Not well informed about the purpose of the census, but believed they were (e.g., 76 percent believed the census determines the unemployment rate).
  - Viewed it as a responsibility to participate in the census.
  - Saw the census as having positive community and individual benefits.
  - Trusted the Census Bureau to protect their responses.
  - Demographics of income levels, educational attainment, and race resembled the general population.

- *The Leading Edge* (26 percent)
  - Positive about the census.
  - Informed about the census.
  - High degree of civic involvement.
  - Highest level of voting among the segments.
  - Tended to be affluent with high homeownership rates and long tenures.
  - Saw the census as a benefit to their community.
  - Trusted the Census Bureau to protect their responses.
  - Had high educational attainment.
  - Were typically non-Hispanic White.

- *The Cynical Fifth* (19 percent)
  - Not positive about the census and skeptical about the purpose (despite high knowledge of uses of census data).
  - Recognized the census is better if everyone is counted.
  - Concerned the census is an invasion of privacy.
  - Believed the census information would be misused.
  - Demographics closely resembled the general population.

- *The Unacquainted* (7 percent)
  - Had never heard of the census.
  - Low levels of civic engagement and voting.
  - High rate of foreign-born persons.
  - Many households that speak a language other than English at home.
  - Lower than average educational attainment and income levels.

- *The Insulated* (6 percent)
  - Heard of the census but did not know its purpose and intent.
  - Questioned the impact of the census since they did not feel they had seen results in their neighborhoods.
  - Tended to have long tenures in their neighborhoods.
  - Many (40 percent) said they did not trust the Census Bureau to keep their responses confidential.
  - Lower than average income levels and educational attainment.

The CBAMS research supported the 2010 Census communications campaign by identifying which messages about the census might be effective with a given audience.

4.1.2 Mindset Categories after the 2010 Census

The primary purpose of the CBAMS II study, conducted in 2011, was to determine the degree to which mindsets had changed after 2010 Census communications and to develop new mindset classifications, if necessary. The variables used in the CBAMS II were the same as in the CBAMS I. The respondents were not the same as the respondents in the CBAMS I, so a direct shift of mindset for an individual from a CBAMS I group to a CBAMS II group is not available. As with the CBAMS I, the CBAMS II surveyed about 4,000 respondents and used statistical methods to segment the respondents. However, the CBAMS II segmentation identified more nuances in mindsets and census knowledge, which resulted in seven classifications, compared to the five found in the CBAMS I (Conrey, ZuWallack, and Locke, 2012):

- *Government-Minded* (19 percent of the population)
  - Had positive attitudes towards the census and its purpose.
  - Place a high priority on political representation and government administrative functions.
  - Tend to be more educated.

- *Uninformed* (16 percent)
  - Generally unaware of the purpose of the census.
  - Think that they will never see the results of the census.
  - Have a low affinity for the government.
  - Put a priority on health care and care for the elderly.
  - Not very concerned about their personal information.
  - Relatively lower educational attainment and income.

- *Compliant and Caring* (15 percent)
  - Have positive attitudes toward the census and its purpose.
  - Do not place a high priority on the census or political representation.
  - Do prioritize social programs like those in schools and for elder care.
  - Tend to complete paperwork dutifully.
  - Tend to demographically resemble the U.S. population, but with more females and individuals with higher educational attainment.

- *Suspicious* (14 percent)
  - Lowest intent to respond to the census and the lowest self-reported census awareness.
  - Think that the census could harm them in some way and are concerned that their information could be misused.
  - No particular political funding priorities.
  - Relatively higher proportions of minorities, renters, and those with lower educational attainment.

- *Dutiful* (14 percent)
  - Have a sense of duty to complete the census and feel it is their responsibility to be counted.
  - Have strong trust in federal government and believe in the importance of political representation.
  - Know what the census is for; also think it has functions that it actually does not.
  - Fairly diverse—demographic profile closely resembles the U.S. population.

- *Local-Minded* (12 percent)
  - Tend to be ambivalent toward government — tend to trust local governments more than the federal government.
  - Think that refusing to complete the census is a good way to show dissatisfaction.
  - Relatively higher proportions of minorities, females, and renters and those with lower educational attainment.

- *Cynical* (10 percent)
  - Lowest affinity for the census.
  - Aware of the census and its purpose, but highly suspicious of it and the government.
  - High proportion of males.

Since the CBAMS II mindsets were different in size and characteristic from the CBAMS I mindsets, it can be inferred that some of the change resulted from the 2010 Census communications (Conrey, ZuWallack, and Locke, 2012).

4.1.3 Attitudes toward the ACS and the Government

In 2013, the Census Bureau contracted with Reingold, Inc., to conduct messaging and mail package assessment research. This research informed the development and testing of revisions to mail materials in order to (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013):

- Increase public awareness, support, and use of ACS data.

- Link the value of ACS or census data to key areas of interest for various stakeholder groups.

- Increase early response rates for participants.

Reingold, Inc., conducted five research projects on ACS messaging and two research projects on the ACS mail packages; the research lasted from the fall of 2013 through 2014.[23] Three of the seven projects pertaining to ACS messaging included:

- The *Benchmark Messaging Survey*.

- The subsequent *Refinement Messaging Survey*.

- A deliberative focus group with persons who were distrustful of the government.

Findings about ACS messaging from these reports are discussed in Section 4.2.2. Regarding the audience for the ACS, the reports confirmed what was already known: there is a lack of awareness of the ACS among the public and a low level of trust in the government. For instance, the *Benchmark Messaging Survey* found that only 11 percent of respondents had previously heard of the ACS (Hagedorn, Green, and Rosenblatt, 2014).[24] Conversely, they found in the same study that 90 percent of respondents had heard of the census of the United States (the decennial census). Additionally, when asked about views towards the federal government, the *Benchmark Messaging Survey* found:

> A slight majority of respondents we interviewed had an unfavorable view of the federal government (52% unfavorable, 47% favorable). Less than one in four (23%) of the mail-handling adults we interviewed said they can "just about always" or "most of the time" trust the government in Washington to do what is right (Hagedorn, Green, and Rosenblatt, 2014).

The prevalence of negative attitudes towards the federal government is an important audience characteristic to keep in mind when developing ACS mail materials.

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[23] A complete summary of all research projects can be found at https://www.census.gov/library/working-papers/2014/acs/2014_Walker_02.html.
[24] Similar results were also obtained in the *Refinement Messaging Survey* (Hagedorn and Green, 2014).

4.2 Census Bureau Messaging Research

The Census Bureau has conducted or contracted several studies around messaging for the decennial census and the ACS. Initial decennial messaging studies were conducted in conjunction with the 1980 and 1990 censuses. More recent messaging research, in conjunction with the 2010 Census, is presented in Section 4.2.1. The decennial messaging research provided a baseline for the ACS-specific messaging research presented in Sections 4.2.2 and 4.2.3.

Studies in this section present hypothetical scenarios to respondents, asking them to assess if they feel more likely or less likely to participate in the survey as a result of hearing a given statement. This self-assessment might differ from what would happen in practice and might not always be truthful. However, intention is a necessary precursor to action (see Section 3.2) and is therefore used as a proxy metric when direct action is not measurable. These studies allow the Census Bureau to monitor attitudes and awareness to guide decision-making.

4.2.1 Messaging about the Census from the CBAMS I

The CBAMS I study (ICF Macro, 2009), introduced in Section 4.1, first asked about an individual's knowledge of the decennial census, likelihood of their participation, and their baseline attitudes towards the census. Next, respondents listened to a series of statements, or messages, and were asked after each one if they were more likely or less likely to participate in the census as a result of each message. Note that since the messages used in the CBAMS I were developed specifically in regards to the decennial census, not all pertain to the ACS. The CBAMS I completed over 4,000 interviews: 3,001 by telephone and 1,063 in person. The messages tested in CBAMS I were:

1. *Information from the census helps the government plan for the future improvements to schools, roads, fire, and police stations.*

2. *Filling out the census provides opportunity to help people in your local community get certain benefits such as health care, school programs, day care, and job training.*

3. *The census is more accurate if everyone participates.*

4. *Census counts decide a community's share of $300 billion in federal funds for schools and other programs.[25]*

5. *If you don't fill out your census form, your family and local community might not get their fair share of benefits.*

6. *Mailing your census form early helps the government save millions in taxpayer dollars that would otherwise go toward following up with you if you don't mail it back.*

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[25] Subsequent messaging presented in this report use similar statements but with differing amounts of money, which reflects inflation and changing laws related to the distribution of funds.

7. *The census determines the number of representatives in Congress each state gets.*

8. *To see what changes have taken place in the size, location, and characteristics of the people in the U.S. [26]*

9. *The law requires everyone to participate in the census.*

10. *Census employees are subject to a jail term, a fine, or both for disclosing personal information.*

11. *The Census doesn't ask for sensitive information; it only asks a few questions such as name, sex, age, date of birth, how people are related, race, and origin.[27]*

Respondents were asked to rank each message on a three-point scale: did the message make them more likely to participate in the decennial census, less likely to participate, or would the message not affect their participation.

The results in Table 2 first show the overall percentage of respondents who said they were more likely to participate in the 2010 Census after hearing a given message. Messages are sorted by the success of the message with the overall population of respondents. Table 2 also shows the percentage of *Head Nodders* and the percentage of the *Cynical Fifth* who said they were more likely to participate in the 2010 Census (see Section 4.1 for more information on the mindsets). These two mindsets were chosen to represent the range of attitudes seen in the population.

Table 2. Results of the Messages in the CBAMS I Study

Message Theme	Percent of *All Respondents* Identifying as More Likely to Participate	Percent of *Head Nodders* Identifying as More Likely to Participate	Percent of *Cynical Fifth* Identifying as More Likely to Participate
1. Improvements to schools, roads, etc.	82	88	70
2. Benefits like health care & school programs	80	88	69
3. More accurate if everyone participates	80	86	72
4. Distribute federal funds	79	85	68
5. Might not get their fair share of benefits	77	81	68
6. Mailing form early to save taxpayer dollars	75	80	66
7. Number of representatives	67	70	56
8. What changes have taken place	64	74	48
9. Required by law	62	67	57
10. No disclosing personal information	62	67	55
11. No sensitive information	56	60	53

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census Barriers Attitudes and Motivators Survey I, 2008

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[26] We note that this message seems incomplete, but is the entirety of what was used in the study.

[27] While this text was used in the research, some participants might disagree with the assertion that the census questions are not sensitive information.

The "local benefits" messages (Messages 1 and 2) resonated more than other messages with the *Head Nodders*; 88 percent said they were more likely to participate after hearing Message 1 or Message 2. The *Cynical Fifth* were most favorable to the message, "The census is more accurate if everyone participates" (72 percent), followed by the "local benefits" messages (70 percent were favorable to Message 5 and 69 percent were favorable to Message 4). "The census is more accurate if everyone participates" was the third most favorable message among *Head Nodders*, after the local benefits messages.

Messages that were the least favorable across mindsets were Messages 9, 10, and 11—stating that the law requires participation, that the census does not ask for sensitive information, and that Census Bureau employees cannot legally disclose personal information. For the *Cynical Fifth* however, the least successful message was the one advocating for the census as the way to see what changes have taken place in the country.

4.2.2   Messaging about ACS from Reingold, Inc.

As introduced in Section 4.1.3, Reingold, Inc., conducted five research projects on ACS messaging and two research projects on the ACS mail package.

The *Benchmark Messaging Survey* was conducted in early 2014. The *Refinement Messaging Survey* was conducted two months later. Each survey consisted of approximately 1,000 telephone interviews with adults who typically handle the mail for their households. The respondents were different in each survey. Each telephone survey focused on identifying the best message themes to encourage participation in the ACS (e.g., civic duty, importance for governance, community benefit).

4.2.2.1   ACS Messaging: Benchmark Survey

In the *Benchmark Messaging Survey*, respondents heard a random selection of 6 out of 11 messages, with questions asked to measure their assessment of each message heard. Two metrics were used to assess each statement: Metric A was the believability of the message and Metric B was the stated likelihood to respond. Metric A was measured on a four-point scale from "very believable" to "very unbelievable" while Metric B was measured on a five-point scale from "much more likely to respond" to "much less likely to respond," including a midpoint of "neither more nor less likely." Believability of a message is a useful metric to assess how much survey recipients trust the survey sponsor and find their message credible (see Section 3.1).

The 11 messages were (Hagedorn, Green, and Rosenblatt, 2014):

1. *There are many ways to respond to the American Community Survey. It can be completed by mail, by phone, online, or in person.*

2. *State and local leaders use data from the American Community Survey to determine where to build new roads, schools, and hospitals.*

3. *The American Community Survey is used to produce key economic indicators. Businesses use the ACS to create jobs, plan for the future, and grow the economy.*

4. *The American Community Survey helps determine the annual distribution of more than $450 billion dollars in federal funds that go to communities nationwide.*

5. *The census has operated continually since Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and the other Founders established it in 1790. Participating in the American Community Survey is an expression of patriotism and civic duty.*

6. *Nothing in the private sector compares to the American Community Survey. It is a leading source of information Americans use to learn about their neighborhoods, communities, cities, and states.*

7. *Even though all households participate in the census every ten years, only a small number of households are selected to participate in the American Community Survey each year.*

8. *The American Community Survey is required by law to be completely nonpartisan and nonpolitical. This ensures that the statistics the Census Bureau gathers and produce are both reliable and trustworthy.*

9. *The American Community Survey is often the most reliable source of accurate and timely statistical information essential for decision-making.*

10. *Filling out the American Community Survey is required by law, just like filling out the census once every ten years.*

11. *All individual information collected as part of the American Community Survey is kept strictly confidential. The answers from individual respondents cannot be shared with anyone—not even other government agencies.*

Respondents who said they were either "much more likely to respond" or "somewhat more likely to respond" after hearing a given message were combined to describe all persons who were more likely to respond; this resulted in a metric that was compatible with the CBAMS metric. Similarly, respondents who said the statement was either "very believable" or "somewhat believable" were combined to describe all persons who found the message believable. The results are shown in Table 3, ranked by the percent of people who were more likely to complete the ACS after hearing the message (Hagedorn, Green, and Rosenblatt, 2014).

Table 3. Results of the Messages in the Benchmark Messaging Survey

Message Theme	Percent who were more likely to complete the ACS	Percent who found the message believable
1. There are many ways to respond	52	86
2. Local leaders use data to build new roads, schools, etc.	51	69
3. Businesses use the ACS to grow the economy	50	70
4. Distribute federal funds	49	66
5. History, patriotism and civic duty	48	72
6. A leading source of information Americans use	47	74
7. Small number of households in ACS	46	82
8. Statistics are nonpartisan, reliable and trustworthy	46	70
9. Most reliable source of statistical information	46	66
10. Required by law	46	55
11. All individual information is kept confidential	38	56

Source: Benchmark Messaging Survey, 2014

The top testing message from the *Benchmark Messaging Survey* was the message "There are many ways to respond to the American Community Survey. It can be completed by mail, by phone, online, or in person." This message was the most believable of the messages (86 percent found it believable) and a majority (52 percent) of respondents said the statement made them more likely to complete the ACS.

There were small differences among the 11 messages in the likelihood of respondents completing the ACS after hearing the messages; 10 of the 11 messages ranged from 46 percent to 52 percent likelihood of responding. There was a wider range in the believability metric. Two messages in the top half of likelihood of completing the ACS (Message 2 and Message 4) were in the bottom half of messages on believability.

Among the least successful by both metrics were the messages about keeping information confidential (Message 11) and that the law requires participation (Message 10).

A second component of the *Benchmark Messaging Survey* asked additional questions of people who were flagged as being distrustful of the government. This subset was read an additional five statements related to privacy and confidentiality; the statements are shown in Table 4. Respondents were asked about whether each statement made them trust the Census Bureau either "much more," "somewhat more," "neither more nor less," "somewhat less," or "much less." Respondents who said a statement made them trust the Census Bureau neither more nor less are not included in the table.

Table 4. Results of the Messages in the Benchmark Messaging Survey - Distrustful Drilldown

Message	Percent who trust Census more	Percent who trust Census less
1. By law, Census Bureau employees cannot publically release any information that could identify an individual. The penalties for unlawful disclosure can be up to two hundred and fifty thousand dollars or up to five years in prison.	45	16
2. Millions of Americans participate in the American Community Survey every year. However, the ACS does not release any information that can identify any individual who participates.	36	17
3. The Census Bureau is different than many other parts of the federal government. They are solely a research organization.	35	17
4. Participating in the American Community Survey is safe. All individual responses are protected by law and are not shared with anyone–not even other government agencies.	34	20
5. The U.S. Census has been in existence since the 1790s and the American Community Survey has been conducted in some form or another since the 1850s.	30	15

Source: Benchmark Messaging Survey, 2014

Statement 1, mentioning the penalties for unlawful disclosure, elicited the most trust from this group of generally distrustful respondents. This is noteworthy given the importance of establishing trust in survey methodology theories (see Section 3.4). However, roughly half of the distrustful population were unmoved by each statement.

4.2.2.2   ACS Messaging: Refinement Messaging Survey

The *Refinement Messaging Survey* used the same methodology as the baseline *Benchmark Messaging Survey*, but revised the questions and messages, building from lessons learned in the *Benchmark Messaging Survey*. Each respondent heard one of two variations for each of seven themes. The themes and messages are shown in Table 5, along with the percentage of respondents who said they were much more likely or somewhat more likely to participate after hearing the message, and the percentage saying the message was either very or somewhat believable (Hagedorn and Green, 2014).

Table 5. Results of the Messages in the Reingold, Inc., Refinement Messaging Survey

Theme	Message	Percentage likely to participate	Percentage found believable
Community	State and local leaders in [respondent's state] can use American Community Survey data to determine where to build roads, schools, and hospitals.	61	74
	State and local leaders across the nation can use American Community Survey data to determine where to build roads, schools, and hospitals.	59	77
Impact/benefits	American Community Survey data help determine the annual distribution of more than $400 billion in federal funds to communities nationwide.	57	64
	American Community Survey data are used to distribute funds that build and maintain nearly one million miles of highways and fund over four thousand hospitals in communities nationwide.	55	66
Decennial Census	Even though all households participate in the census every ten years, only a small number of households participate in the American Community Survey every year. The American Community Survey provides a more up-to-date picture of our communities.	54	77
	The American Community Survey and the census show us not only the number of people who live in the country, but also how we live as a nation including our education, housing, jobs, and more.	58	83
Non-governmental uses	Local charities and non-profit organizations use American Community Survey data to better understand and meet community needs. This detailed, local information is not available from other sources.	54	68
	Small businesses use American Community Survey data to better understand and meet community needs. This detailed, local information is not available from other sources.	49	68
Safeguard for Privacy	Census Bureau employees are prohibited by law from releasing any information that can identify any individual who fills out the American Community Survey. Millions of people securely participate in the American Community Survey every year.	55	78
	By law, Census Bureau employees cannot publically release any American Community Survey information that could identify an individual. The penalties for unlawful disclosure can be up to two hundred and fifty thousand dollars and/or up to five years in prison.	55	74
Local snapshot	The American Community Survey is a leading source of information people use to learn about their neighborhoods, communities, cities, and states.	50	71
	The American Community Survey is the most reliable source for accurate data about every community in the country from the smallest rural communities to the largest cities.	54	69
Convenience	Filling out the American Community Survey online is the quickest and easiest way to complete the survey. A paper survey is sent to people who do not complete the survey online.	52	78
	Filling out the American Community Survey online conserves natural resources and saves taxpayers' money. A paper questionnaire is sent to people who do not complete the survey online.	49	76

Source: Refinement Messaging Survey, 2014

The message variation most likely to increase respondents' likelihood of participation in the ACS was the first option under the theme of Community, specifically naming a respondent's state while conveying that state and local leaders can use ACS data to determine where to build roads, schools, and hospitals. The message least likely to increase respondents' likelihood of participation in the ACS was the second option under the theme of Non-Governmental Uses, which stated that small businesses use ACS data and that this information is not available from other sources. The single most believable message (83 percent "somewhat" or "very" believable)

was the second option under the theme of the Decennial Census, that "the American Community Survey and the census show us not only the number of people who live in the country, but also how we live as a nation, including our education, housing, jobs, and more." The messages under the theme of Impact/Benefits were the least believable, followed by the Local Snapshot messages and the Non-governmental Uses messages.

4.2.2.3   ACS Messaging for Stakeholders who are Distrustful of Government

In 2013, Reingold, Inc., conducted focus groups in seven cities across the country—Albuquerque, NM; Atlanta, GA; Dallas, TX; Los Angeles, CA; Richmond, VA; St. Louis, MO; and Washington, D.C.—with individuals who were identified as having cynical, suspicious, or ambivalent attitudes toward the federal government. The goal of the focus groups was to understand what messages resonated the most with distrustful individuals. Each focus group consisted of 24 to 28 participants for a total of 186 participants, and consisted of two stages.

> In stage one, small groups of participants were assigned to review a selection of existing messages and materials to develop and discuss arguments either for or against self-responding to the ACS. This way, individuals who were inclined to distrust the government were nevertheless incentivized to find the best arguments in support of the ACS. The most engaged or articulate participants from these small groups were then asked to argue their respective cases in front of a larger group of "jurors." In this second stage, the opposing teams of advocates cross-examined each other, and the moderator led the jury in deliberating on which arguments were most persuasive (Orrison and Ney, 2014).

From these focus groups, the most common compelling arguments that were used for not supporting the ACS are listed below. Given the nature of the research, no rank ordering is available.

- ACS questions seemed irrelevant.

- ACS questions seemed too intrusive.

- ACS data seemed redundant with existing sources of data.

- ACS offered no visible benefit to a respondent's community.

- The lack of awareness about the ACS casts doubt on its credibility.

- That completing the ACS was mandatory and punishable by fine was unreasonable.

- ACS cannot actually keep personal information secure.

- ACS cannot actually guarantee confidentiality.

The most compelling arguments from the focus groups for supporting the ACS are listed below. They are again not in a rank order, though the authors do mention that the benefit provided to

local communities by ACS data was most consistently used by participants to argue for supporting the ACS (Orrison and Ney, 2014).

- ACS benefits local communities.

- ACS provides data for planning and development.

- ACS allows for smart allocation of federal funding.

- ACS benefits outweigh the costs to administer it.

- ACS allows individuals to "make their voices heard."

- ACS provides valuable data to businesses.

- Completing the ACS is a civic duty.

- ACS is preferable to its alternatives, such as other government sources of information.

One recommendation made from this research was to "test messages that emphasize local benefits and identify concrete applications of ACS data for neighborhoods or small businesses" (Orrison and Ney, 2014). The authors continue:

> Messages could even be targeted to specific geographic locations, pinpointing infrastructural or other improvements that have made a difference in the quality of life of local communities. Given that developing "hyper-local" examples for every community will be infeasible to operationalize, Reingold suggests 1), testing localized messages among a small number of priority "pilot" communities of low self-response, and 2), testing national-level messages using representative examples from particular communities that may resonate with other communities (Orrison and Ney, 2014).

Reasons for responding such as local community benefits, when tangible, can convince even skeptical persons that responding to the ACS has merit.

4.2.3 Messaging about ACS from Gallup

Since February 2012, the Census Bureau has contracted with Gallup to ask questions developed by the Census Bureau on one track of their nightly poll, the Gallup Daily Tracking Survey.[28] The question series has ranged from asking 5 questions to 25 questions about federal statistics; the number of questions has varied due to budget constraints over the years. The question series has asked about the respondents' familiarity with federal statistics as well as their attitude towards trust, privacy, and confidentiality in regards to federal statistics.

The series of questions used in the spring of 2014 asked specifically about messaging for the ACS, in light of the work conducted under the messaging contract with Reingold, Inc. For the

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[28] Beginning in August of 2017, Gallup only includes Census Bureau questions in their calls during one week of each month.

ACS messaging question series, a Gallup survey respondent was read a paragraph of introductory text about the ACS, followed by a series of four messages about the ACS. The four messages were randomly selected from a bank of ten possible messages, which were almost all an exact match to the messages used in the Benchmark Messaging Survey (see Section 4.2.2.1) (Fulton, Morales, and Childs, 2016).

1. *State and local leaders use data from the American Community Survey to determine where to build new roads, schools, and hospitals.*

2. *There are many ways to respond to the American Community Survey. It can be completed by mail, by phone, online, or in person.*

3. *The American Community Survey helps determine the annual distribution of more than $450 billion dollars in federal funds that go to communities nationwide.*

4. *All individual information collected as part of the American Community Survey is kept strictly confidential. The answers individual respondents provide cannot be shared with anyone—not even other government agencies.*

5. *The American Community Survey is used to produce key economic indicators. Businesses use the American Community Survey to create jobs, plan for the future, and grow the economy.*

6. *The American Community Survey is required by law to be completely nonpartisan and nonpolitical. This ensures that the statistics the Census Bureau gathers and produce are both reliable and trustworthy.*

7. *The census has operated continually since Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and the other Founders established it in 1790. Participating in the American Community Survey is an expression of patriotism and civic duty.*

8. *No other data collection compares to the level of detail collected in the American Community Survey. It is a leading source of local information Americans use to learn about their neighborhoods, communities, cities, and states.*

9. *The American Community Survey is often the most reliable source of accurate and timely statistical information essential for decision-making.*

10. *Even though all households participate in the census every ten years, only a small number of households are selected to participate in the American Community Survey each year.*

As with the Reingold, Inc., studies, respondents were asked to assess their likelihood of responding to the ACS after hearing each message, based on a five-point scale ("much more likely to respond," "somewhat more likely," "neither more nor less likely," "somewhat less likely," and "much less likely to respond"). Respondents who said they were either "much more likely to respond" or "somewhat more likely to respond" after hearing a given message were combined to describe all persons who were more likely to respond. The results are shown in

Table 6. A total of 4,310 respondents were analyzed. Sample sizes per item ranged from 1,685 to 1,790 respondents (Fulton, Morales, and Childs, 2016).

Table 6. Results of the Messages in the Gallup Daily Tracking Survey

Message Theme	Percentage who were more likely to complete the ACS
1. Local leaders use data to build new roads, schools, etc.	78
2. There are many ways to respond	75
3. Distribute federal funds	73
4. All individual information is kept confidential	72
5. Businesses use the ACS to grow the economy	71
6. Statistics are nonpartisan, reliable, and trustworthy	69
7. History, patriotism, and civic duty	68
8. A leading source of information Americans use	66
9. Most reliable source of statistical information	64
10. Small number of households in ACS	57

Source: Gallup Daily Tracking Survey, 2014

The results from the Gallup survey reversed the order of the top two messages as seen in the Benchmark Messaging Survey results but both were again well-received. The message that all data are confidential (Message 4) was ranked higher in the Gallup results than it had been in previous studies. All messages received a higher percent of respondents expressing a likelihood to complete the ACS than was seen in the Benchmark Messaging Survey. These outcomes could be a reflection of the population who are willing to complete a Gallup telephone survey and not indicative of a less cooperative population.

4.3   Expert Review of Existing Census Practices

It is standard practice for the Census Bureau to solicit input from outside experts, whether through contracts, academic workshops, or advisory committees. Following the completion of the Reingold, Inc., contract, the Census Bureau sought additional recommendations for improving ACS mail messaging from experts in the fields of survey research and communications. The following sections document feedback received in 2015 and 2016.

4.3.1   Social and Behavioral Science Team

The Social and Behavioral Sciences Team (SBST) was established in 2015 to help federal agencies integrate behavioral insights into their policies and programs (Executive Order No.13707, 2015). In a letter from the SBST to the Census Bureau in 2015, a list of initial behavioral insights was provided for consideration in improving response rates to the ACS and decennial census (Feygina, Foster, and Hopkins, 2015).

The behavioral insights referenced were (Feygina, Foster, and Hopkins, 2015):

- *Social norms*

- *Procedural justice[29]*

- *Patriotism*

- *Commitment to completion[30]*

- *Information about benefits of the survey*

- *Personalization*

- *Preventing confusion*

In 2016, the SBST reviewed a proposed revision to the ACS mail materials and offered specific suggestions for future revisions.[31] The SBST presented three different variations as their initial response to the ACS mail materials (Shephard and Bowers, 2016).

- The first variation increased the use of plain language, increased salience of benefits by making them local, and put a stronger reliance on prompted and active choices.

- The second variation kept the recommendations from the first variation and highlighted the increased cost that results from a recipient either delaying their response or choosing a more costly response method.

- The third variation again kept the recommendations from the first variation and added prompts intended to create a psychological commitment to respond to the survey.

4.3.2   Review of ACS Messaging by the Committee on National Statistics

In 2016, the Census Bureau contracted with the National Academies of Science (NAS) Committee on National Statistics (CNSTAT) to conduct a two-day public workshop on ways of reducing respondent burden in the ACS. In addition to the public workshop, CNSTAT also held four one-day closed meetings with the Census Bureau and experts from a variety of fields who provided recommendations for improving ACS communications.[32] The recommendations are summarized below (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016):

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[29] According to the SBST, "Research demonstrates that people are more likely to comply with requests from authorities when they believe that those authorities treated them fairly and with respect. Procedurally just treatment includes having a voice–the ability to express one's needs, concerns, and feedback; being treated equally to other people; being included in the process; and being treated with respect." (Feygina, Foster, and Hopkins, 2015).

[30] Commitment devices could include adding a commitment checkbox to the letter, including a calendar in the mailing, and generally helping respondents to visualize their schedule and pick a date by which to respond.

[31] The proposed revision that SBST reviewed was the *Softened Revised* design, used in the 2015 Summer Mandatory Messaging Test (Oliver, Risley, and Roberts, 2016).

[32] The external experts who participated in the CNSTAT meetings on the ACS mail materials were: Don Dillman, Washington State University; Nancy Mathiowetz, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (emeritus); Andy Peytchev, University of Michigan; Andrew Reamer, George Washington University; and Sandra Bauman, Bauman Research and Consulting.

- Focus on the purpose of each contact and how information can be added to each subsequent message.

- Raise the perception of the value of the ACS.

- Communicate the role of the ACS in improving the economy, ensuring efficient government, and sustaining democracy.

- Specify the benefits of the ACS to individuals within their communities.

- Equate ACS sample selection to winning the lottery.

- Emphasize culturally relevant messages of empowerment.

- Make the messages consistent within and across mailings.

- Attach the ACS to the Census Bureau brand since it is familiar to many people.

- Avoid repetitive, unfocused communication.

- Reduce the interview length to show appreciation for the respondents' time and effort.

4.3.3 Expert Review of ACS Messaging

In 2016, at the Census Bureau's invitation, Don Dillman of Washington State University gave a series of talks and workshops on how to improve ACS messaging as part of the *Summer at Census* program.[33] Dillman recommended a communications strategy that (Dillman, 2016):

- Places greater emphasis on the benefits to respondents.

- Makes the messaging between mailings more distinct, but mutually supportive.

- Attaches the response request to the Census Bureau.

4.4 Insights from Census Bureau Messaging Research

Census Bureau messaging research yielded several insights that were considered when building the strategic framework:

- *Awareness*: America knows about the census and the Census Bureau, but not about the ACS. The ACS should be associated with the Census Bureau brand.

- *Audience*: The general population consists of people who trust the government, people who distrust the government, and those who are generally unaware of the role of government. Messaging will be most effective if an effort is made to understand the audience and how the demographic audience of responders changes throughout the response period.

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[33] Don Dillman is Regents Professor of the Department of Sociology and Deputy Director for the Social and Economic Sciences Research Center (SESRC) at Washington State University. He previously served as the senior survey methodologist in the Office of the Director at the U.S. Census Bureau.

- *Trust and Confidentiality*: Distrust of government is pervasive. Recent events such as data breaches and leaks have heightened concerns about privacy and data security. As much as possible, separate the ACS and the Census Bureau from the federal government. Confidentiality was among the least favorable themes tested, particularly among distrustful respondents.

- *Community Benefits*: Participants frequently evaluated the ACS in terms of tangible, community-level benefits. Messages that emphasize local impacts and concrete applications of ACS data resonate with survey recipients, including those who are distrustful. However, individuals who see a lack of improvements around their neighborhood or an inequitable distribution of resources between neighborhoods are not as moved by this message.

- *Response Options*: The message that there were multiple ways to respond to the ACS was a consistently well-received message, with both high believability and high response likelihood results. However, cultural and linguistic challenges create barriers to engagement and participation in the ACS. ACS materials should continue to make different response options readily available, while also being tailored to acknowledge cultural nuances and making it easy to access materials in Spanish and other languages.

- *Mandatory Participation*: Messaging about mandatory participation was among the least successful in the messaging studies, but in practice and in other research efforts, the Census Bureau has found that the mandatory message does significantly increase self-response. Respondents might not feel favorably towards stern messaging, but do seem to be influenced to act because of it.

- *Additional Messaging*: Messages that were not tested in ACS-specific research could also resonate with respondents, while additional messages that received mixed reactions from respondents could be worth testing more. For instance, the CBAMS I respondents found the statement "The census is more accurate if everyone participates" to be a top message and distrustful respondents in Reingold, Inc., focus groups preferred the argument that the benefits outweighed the costs. These messages show signs of potentially encouraging response to the ACS, along with messages about patriotism, civic duty, and the social norms of responding.

5 FRAMEWORK

This section presents a strategic framework for messaging in the ACS mail materials. This framework draws on the cross-disciplinary research presented in Sections 3 and 4. We present a framework for a sequence of four mailings, with options for subsequent mailings.

Strategic messaging is focused messaging aimed at a specific audience. Because the segment of the population defined as cynical has a lower response propensity, an increase in their self-response could yield the largest increase in the overall self-response rate. Therefore, the

framework recommends messages that resonate with the cynical population. These messages also resonate with the general ACS population. The strategic messages that we recommend are themes to focus on in each mailing, expressed in broad terms—not specific wording. We developed the themes in the individual mailings to be distinct, but mutually supportive components of a conversation that takes place over a number of mailings.

The strategic framework recommends a primary and secondary message for each mailing. The primary message is the overarching message that we recommend the ACS convey to the prospective respondents in the mailing. The secondary messages support and enrich the primary message. A detailed discussion of the recommended messaging in each mailing, as well as the rationale for the recommendations, follows the framework summarized in Table 7 below.

Table 7. Overview of Recommended Strategic Framework for Mail Messaging

Mailing	Primary Message	Secondary Message	Rationale
First Mailing	The ACS is a legitimate survey	The ACS is conducted by the Census Bureau, a trusted and known sponsor	Trust increases survey response Trust allows for future messages to be believed
Second Mailing	Your response has tangible benefits to your community	*No secondary message**	Communicating the benefits of survey participation increases response Messages that emphasize the benefits to one's community are consistently well received
Third Mailing	You have a choice in how you respond to the ACS	Responding to the ACS is normal Members of your community have responded to the ACS It is your civic duty to respond to the ACS	A choice in how to respond reduces burden People feel less burden when they follow social norms
Fourth Mailing	*Summarize previous trust, benefits, and burden messages*	Thank you for your response If you haven't responded, please do so	Restating information leads to greater retention of the information Reminder and thank-you messages increase response
Subsequent Mailing(s)	*No recommendation*	*No recommendation*	*Messaging for subsequent mailings needs further research*

* See Section 5.2 for an explanation.

5.1 Messaging in the First Mailing

Social Exchange theory supports beginning communications with ACS recipients by establishing trust. The recipient of a survey solicitation must believe that the survey sponsor is legitimate (see Section 3.4.2.1 and that the messages conveyed are truthful (see Section 3.1).

Most Americans have not heard of the ACS (see Section 4.1.3). Lack of familiarity with the ACS is a barrier to cooperation (see Section 3.2). Conveying that the ACS is from the Census Bureau, a well-known and generally respected federal agency, will help establish legitimacy of the ACS (see Sections 3.3, 3.4.1, 3.4.2.1, and 4.1.3).

We recommend that the primary message in the first mailing focus on the legitimacy of the ACS by associating it with the Census Bureau, a widely-known and trusted agency (secondary message).

5.2 Messaging in the Second Mailing

Research has documented that individuals are more likely to react favorably and perform a desired behavior when there is some benefit to them, whether tangible or perceived. Perceiving that there are social or community benefits to survey participation will be a sufficient leverage to motivate some individuals to respond (see Sections 3.2 and 3.4).

Several Census Bureau studies have shown that hearing a message about the tangible benefits that ACS data have on one's local community is likely to increase survey response. Respondents in the CBAMS I, Reingold, and Gallup studies were more likely to respond after hearing this message than most other messages. The message can also resonate with distrustful persons, as demonstrated in the CBAMS I and the Reingold focus groups, but it needs to be believable. Survey recipients who see a lack of improvements around their neighborhood or an inequitable distribution of resources between neighborhoods are not compelled by this message (see Section 4.2).

Our messaging recommendation for the second mailing is to make salient the social and local benefits that ACS provides to individual communities. As this message will require a significant amount of space in the mailings, especially to make the message believable to skeptics, we do not recommend a secondary message in this mailing.

5.3 Messaging in the Third Mailing

Since the first two mailings in this framework focused on trust and benefits, we recommend the third mailing address the third branch of Social Exchange theory—relieving the sense of burden experienced by respondents (see Section 3.4). Messaging can address the actual or perceived burden of those asked to complete the survey in a non-desired response mode (e.g., someone without internet access is asked to respond to the mandatory survey online). Besides addressing the burden of responding, this also gives the respondent a feeling of control, which is a pillar to eliciting a desired behavior according to the Reasoned Action Approach (see Section 3.2).

Behavior change theories specify that normative beliefs are crucial to a decision to perform or not perform a behavior. Knowing others have responded may help convert those who are slow or hesitant to respond, as seen in the tax compliance study done in the United Kingdom (see Section 3.2). Influence theory also notes the importance of appealing to external norms (i.e., people want to fit in with others around them) and internal norms (i.e., people want to be consistent with their own past behavior) to gain compliance with a request (see Section 3.3).

Appealing to respondents' sense of civic responsibility has been shown to be a successful, nonmonetary leverage in census research and external survey methodology research (see Sections 3.4.1, 3.4.2.2, 3.4.2.3, and 4.2.2.3). Because civic duty can be framed as a normal and expected behavior that fits a respondent's previous behavior, we believe civic responsibility could be a leverage that works well in conjunction with messages about social norms.

We recommend the primary messaging for the third mailing to ACS recipients convey a choice in how to respond to the ACS. The secondary message consists of three complementary themes that build on each other: "Responding to the ACS is normal," "Members of your community have responded to the ACS," and "It is your civic duty to respond to the ACS."

5.4   Messaging in the Fourth Mailing

Leverage-Saliency theory suggests that it might take repeated messages to make a leverage salient to a potential respondent, particularly someone who is cynical or distrustful of the government (see Section 3.4.1). Restating the same information, but in a different way, can increase trust in the survey request (see Section 3.4.2.1).

Limiting the number of strategic messages aligns with one of the keys to effective communication: "keep it simple." This approach is also endorsed by Artefact, plain language guidelines, and Social Exchange theory (see Sections 3.1, 3.2, and 3.4). We recommend that the primary messages in the fourth mailing reiterate the messaging from the first three mailings. The messaging should continue the conversation to make salient the chosen leverages.

Survey requests should incorporate language that indicates deference for the respondent's time and effort (see Section 3.4.2.1). We recommend that the secondary messaging remind people to complete the ACS and thank them for their participation. When potential respondents who have not yet responded to the survey request read a "thank you" statement to those who completed the request, they may feel compelled to respond to fit within the norm (see Sections 3.3 and 3.4).

5.5   Subsequent Mailings and Potential Additional Messages

At this point, our recommended messaging can take numerous paths. While we have a sense that those who do not respond after repeated contact attempts tend to be cynical, distrustful, or unable to respond in the mode(s) offered, it may also be the case that some have simply forgotten about the invitations they have received and never got around to responding. We recommend that

additional research be conducted to better understand our target audience at this late phase in the contact process.

Additionally, the ACS program is pursuing possible changes in the nonresponse follow-up operations. Those changes could have an impact on the number and timing of mailings, which will likely influence the recommended messaging in later mailings.

The literature and expert opinions have identified numerous messages that could be considered for use in subsequent mailings to ACS nonresponders. These include, but are not limited to the following considerations (see Section 3.4.2.3 and Section 4.3):

- Mentioning a specific due date.

- Testing messages such as "The ACS is better when everyone participates" that had encouraging results in the CBAMS and Reingold, Inc., research.

- Focusing on the financial cost of not responding.

- Encouraging recipients to make a commitment to respond.

- Using mandatory messages; for example, "your response is required by law."

Although messages that communicate the mandatory nature of the ACS have been shown to increase response rates (see Section 3.4.2.3), focus group data show that these messages are not well-received by some recipients, particularly the cynical and distrustful (see Section 4.2.2.3). The Census Bureau continues to conduct research on how to communicate this legal obligation in a manner that is better received.

The Census Bureau has a legal mandate to communicate the law protecting data confidentiality (Title 13 of the U.S. Code). Wherever this statement is communicated, we recommend a simple, non-alarming statement that provides the minimum legal assurances while avoiding details that may alarm potential respondents and decrease response rates (see Section 3.4.2.3). Further testing and research is required to understand what level of detail to convey and when (within what mailing).

6 CONCLUSION

The Census Bureau has conducted considerable research to improve the ACS mail materials and messaging, particularly to address respondent burden and declining response rates. Strategic messaging can help in this endeavor. This report presents a strategic framework for messaging in the ACS mail materials to increase self-response through a sequence of complementary mail communications.

This framework recommends primary and secondary strategic messages in broad terms or themes in the first four mailings. We drew from cross-disciplinary research to establish a baseline understanding of what constitutes effective communication to aid the development of this framework.

The recommended messages were designed to resonate with the cynical and distrusting segments of the population, as an increase in their self-response has the most potential to increase overall self-response. Messages that resonate with this population have broad appeal in the general population.

We begin the conversation by inviting the prospective respondents to respond to the ACS using messages which convey that the ACS is a legitimate survey affiliated with the U.S. Census Bureau, a legitimate and trustworthy federal agency. The discourse continues in the second mailing with information about the tangible benefits to the prospective respondents' community because of their survey response. In the third mailing, we seek to empower prospective respondents who may not have responded due to a lack of a suitable response mode by letting them know they now have a choice—respond online or by paper form. The fourth mailing summarizes messages from the first three mailings by restating the appeals to trust, benefit, and reducing burden in a new way. Research is still needed to develop messaging for the fifth mailing and any subsequent mailings.

We recommend that ACS staff evaluate the messaging in the current mail materials in context of the framework, propose revisions to the materials, and test them. In order to better understand the audience for each set of ACS mail materials, we also recommend conducting analysis on the demographic characteristics of households who self-respond at various points in the mail contact cycle. This would document how the demographic audience of responders changes throughout the response period.

The strategic framework and subsequent mail material development will be an ongoing and collaborative effort to improve our communication with survey recipients.

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