It Takes a Team:
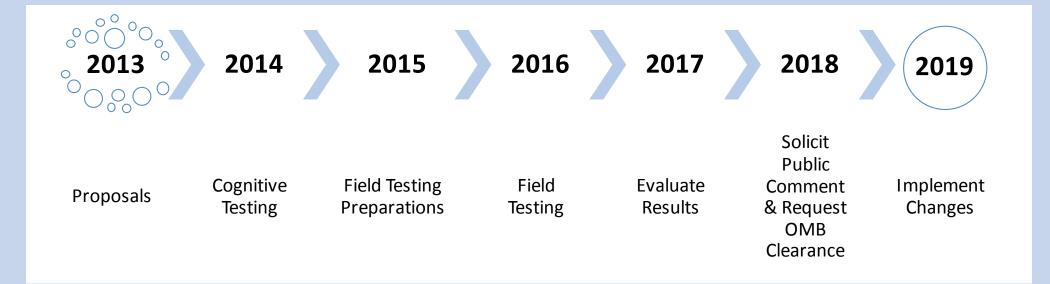# Testing and Implementing Changes for the 2019 American Community Survey

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Changing the ACS to Keep Up With the Times

- Making the ACS questions clear, easy to understand, and relevant are key to improving the response rate and the quality of the data.

- The Census Bureau conducts a content test for the ACS about every 5 years to determine if wording and layout of questions should be updated.

2016 ACS Content Test Process

Process timeline: 2013 → 2014 Proposals → 2015 Cognitive Testing → 2016 Field Testing Preparations → 2017 Field Testing → 2018 Evaluate Results → Solicit Public Comment & Request OMB Clearance → 2019 Implement Changes

- Tested changes to 10 topics (13 questions) and 1 new question.

Methodology

- Split-sample experiment
- Separate sample from production ACS (n≈70,000)
- Excludes group quarters, Alaska, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico
- Content follow-up using telephone reinterview

Key Analysis Metrics

- Item Missing Data Rates
  - Measure question clarity, question sensitivity, and respondent knowledge of the information needed to answer the question.

- Distributions of Response Categories
  - Assess whether the question change affects the resulting estimates.

- Benchmark Comparisons
  - Assess differences from other reliable sources.

- Response Reliability
  - Evaluate consistency in responses by comparing the original interview to the CFU telephone reinterview.

✓ Telephone Service

We are making updates to reflect changes in how Americans use telephones.

Current Production
The telephone service question is among a battery of plumbing and kitchen facilities questions.
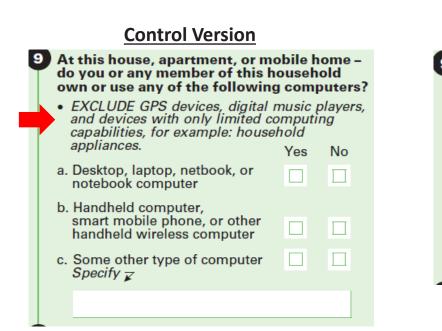
Test Version
The telephone service question is asked as a separate question with an instruction added that specifies the types of telephones and equipment respondents should include when answering the question.

✓ Computer and Internet Use

Technology is changing rapidly, both in terms of the devices we use and how we connect to the internet. We are using new words to describe this evolving technology.
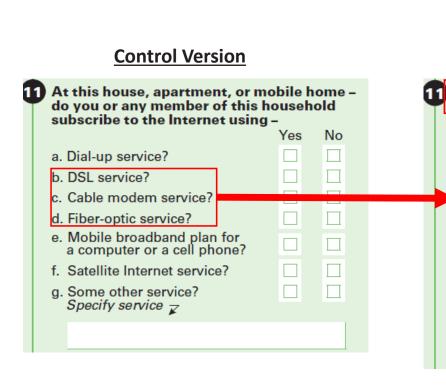
Types of Computers
Increased the number of categories and replaced the term "Handheld Computer" with "Smartphone."
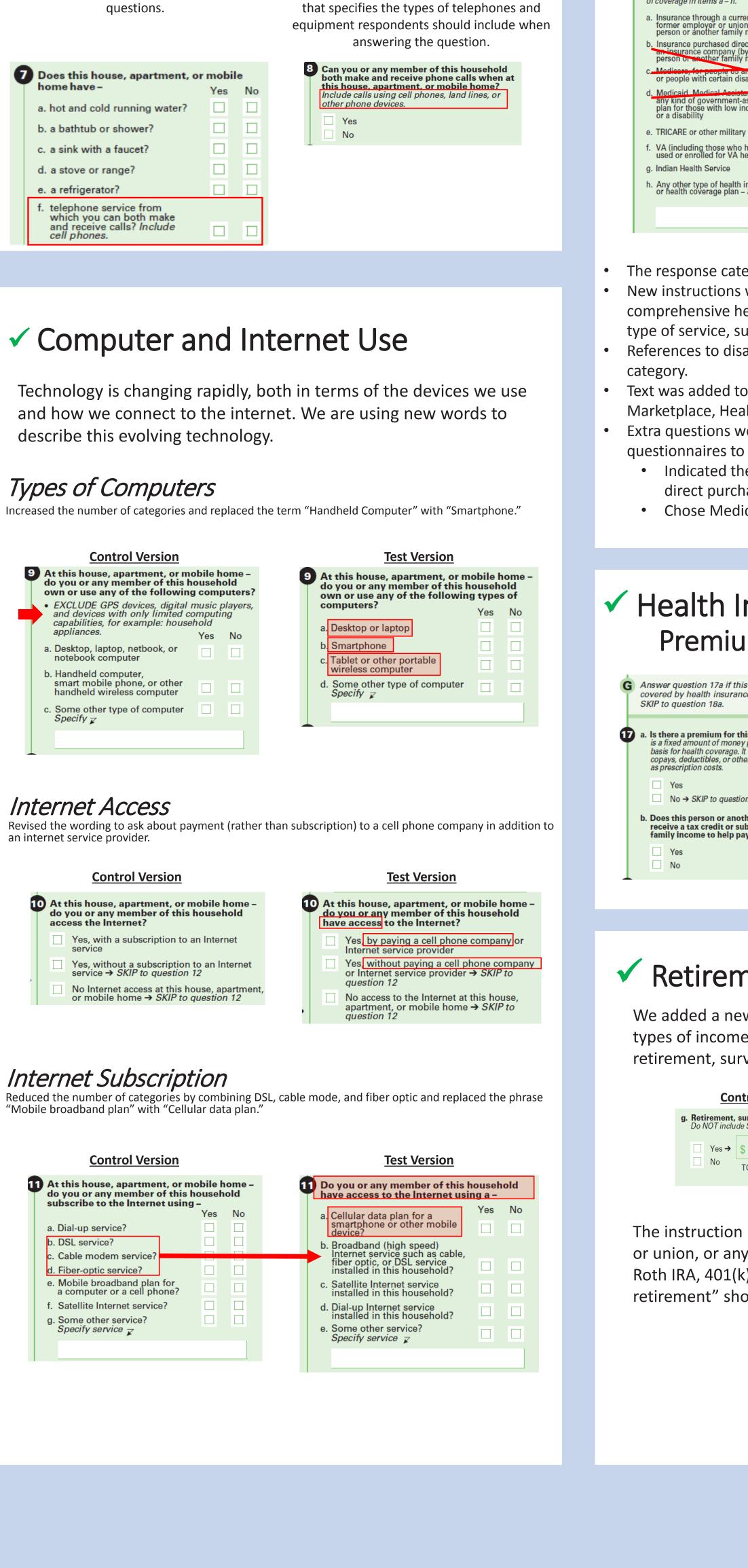
Internet Access
Revised the wording to ask about payment (rather than subscription) to a cell phone company in addition to an internet service provider.

Internet Subscription
Reduced the number of categories by combining DSL, cable mode, and fiber optic and replaced the phrase "Mobile broadband plan" with "Cellular data plan."
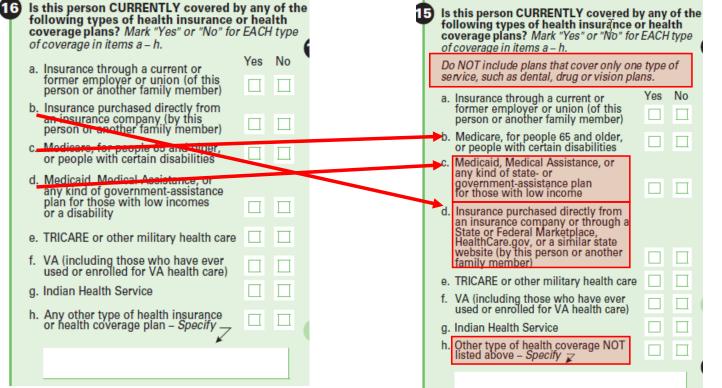

✕ Health Insurance: Coverage

We tested several changes intended to reduce the undercount of those with Medicaid coverage, allow respondents to better distinguish direct-purchase insurance from other types, and to improve the accuracy of the estimates.
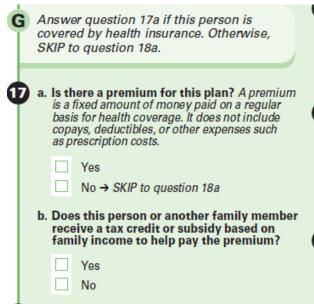

- The response categories were reordered.
- New instructions were provided to clarify that the ACS only asks about comprehensive health insurance coverage, not "plans that cover only one type of service, such as dental, drug, or vision plans."
- References to disability status were dropped from the Medicaid response category.
- Text was added to reference insurance purchased "through a State or Federal Marketplace, HealthCare.gov, or a similar state website."
- Extra questions were added to the internet and interviewer-administered questionnaires to follow up with respondents who:
  - Indicated they had employer-provided insurance in combination with direct purchase.
  - Chose Medicaid in combination with direct purchase.

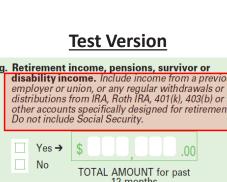### ✓ Health Insurance: Premiums and Subsidies (new question)

We are introducing a question on health insurance premiums and subsidies to provide more accurate information about coverage categories. These data will enhance the ability of HHS and the states to administer Medicaid, CHIP, and the exchanges, and monitor private insurance coverage.

✓ Retirement Income

We added a new instruction to help people better understand the types of income to include when answering the question about retirement, survivor or disability pensions.

The instruction now states that income from "a previous employer or union, or any regular withdrawals or distributions from IRA, Roth IRA, 401(k), 403(b) or other accounts specifically designed for retirement" should be included.

✓ Commuting (Journey to Work)

Changes to the Commute Mode question were motivated by changes in public transportation infrastructure across the United States, particularly the increased prevalence of light rail systems and the need to update and clarify the terminology used to refer to commute modes that appear as categories on the ACS.
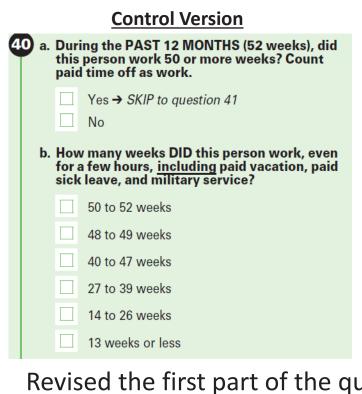
Commute Mode
The category "Streetcar or trolley car" was changed to "Light rail, street car, or trolley," "Subway or elevated" was changed to "Subway or Elevated Rail," and "Railroad" was changed to "Long-distance train or commuter rail." These three rail-related categories were also slightly reordered so that "Subway or elevated rail," the most prevalent rail mode, is listed first. The phrase "trolley bus" was dropped and the phrase "work at home" was changed to "work from home." The subheading of instructions was simplified to read "Mark ONE box for the method of transportation used for most of the distance."

✓ Weeks Worked

We are making changes to make it easier to respond and to better meet the needs of data users.

- Revised the first part of the question to ask whether a person worked "EVERY week," rather than if they worked "50 or more weeks."
- Changed the instructions about what counts as work: "Count paid time vacation, paid sick leave, and military service as work."
- In the second part, we changed the response option to a write-in, rather than asking respondents to select the correct category (e.g., 50 to 52 weeks, 48 to 49 weeks, etc.).
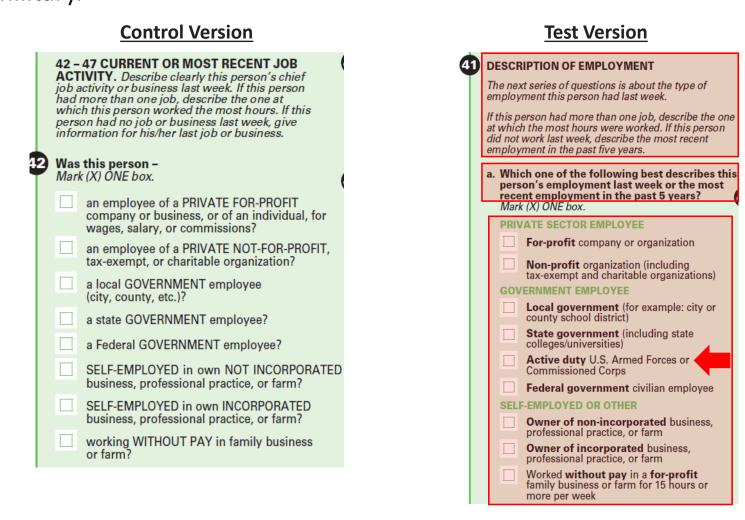
✓ Industry and Occupation

We are making to make the question easier to understand and answer with the level of detail needed to classify these data.

- The introductory text was rewritten to clarify what information we want in response to these questions.
- We moved the check box for those on Active Duty to the question about class of worker.
- New examples were provided and the examples for main occupation and the description of job activities or duties are now consistent. For example, "4th grade teacher" is now an example of occupation and the corresponding example in the job duties question is "instruct and evaluate students and create lesson plans."
- To encourage respondents to provide more details, we increased the space for writing in responses to these questions.
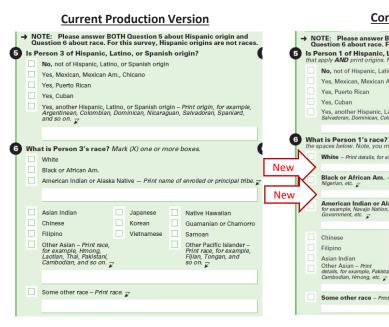
✓ Class of Worker

To make it easier to respond, we clarified definitions, improved the layout, and defined a category for those in Active Duty status in the military.

- The introductory text was reformatted to make it clear the question is about a person's main job or most recent job (unless the person has not held a job in the past 5 years).
- The categories are grouped under general headings: private sector, government, and self-employed or other.
- Active duty was added as a response category.
- The definition of unpaid family worker was clarified.

Race and Hispanic Origin

The Census Bureau has worked for many years to increase the accuracy and reliability of reporting in the major race and ethnicity categories defined by the OMB, collect detailed information for these groups, and increase response to these questions.

- Instead of asking two separate questions, this test combined the Hispanic Origin and race categories into one question, with "Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin" as one of the response options.
- The question now asks what "categories" described the person.
- The total number of detailed race and ethnicity checkbox response options was reduced, but a write-in response area was available for every major group.
- A distinct response option was also for the Middle Eastern or North African (MENA) responses.

The version of the race and Hispanic origin questions selected for the 2020 Census will also be implemented on the ACS in 2020.

✓ Relationship

The question about the relationship of each household member to the "householder" is being revised to reduce errors in reports of same-sex and opposite-sex coupled households.

- The "Husband or wife" and "Unmarried partner" categories were expanded to distinguish between opposite-sex and same-sex relationships.
- Unmarried partner was moved to the top of the list.
- Adding an automated check in electronic modes to ask respondents to verify responses when there are inconsistencies between sex and relationship. For example, if John and Mary are both reported as "Male" and their relationship is "Opposite-sex married couple," the check asks the person filling out the survey to verify that the responses to both questions are correct.

✓	Test results supported implementing change.
✕	Test results did not support implementing change.

Changes Coming to the ACS in 2019

- Computer and Internet Use changes already implemented on the 2016 ACS.

- Changes proposed for implementation on the 2019 ACS:
  - Telephone Service
  - Commuting (Journey to Work)
  - Weeks Worked
  - Class of Worker
  - Industry and Occupation
  - Retirement Income
  - Relationship
  - Health Insurance Premiums and Subsidies (new question)

- Health Insurance Coverage changes not recommended for implementation.

- Decennial Drives Decision: In 2020, the ACS will implement the version of the race and Hispanic origin questions that are used on the 2020 Census.

Census.gov/ACS