

Mandatory Messaging in the American Community Survey

Elizabeth Poehler, Dorothy Barth, and Todd Hughes

U.S. Census Bureau

Elizabeth.Poehler@census.gov

2015 FCSM Research Conference

Any views expressed are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the U.S. Census Bureau.

American Community Survey (ACS) Background

- Monthly survey sent to 3.5 million addresses per year to collect population and housing data
- Mandatory survey
- 3-month multi-mode sequential data collection for each monthly panel
 - Month 1: Self-response (Internet and Mail)
 - Month 2: Telephone interviews with non-respondents (CATI)
 - Month 3: In-person interviews with a sample of non-respondents (CAPI)

ACS Sample Background

- Annual sample, split into 12 monthly panels of approximately 295,000 addresses
- Each month's sample is further subdivided into 24 equally representative groups of 12,000 addresses
 - Allows testing to be conducted using production sample

Issue to Address

- We are required by law to inform respondents that the survey is mandatory.
- However, respondents and stakeholders of the ACS have expressed concerns about the prominent nature of mandatory messages on the mail materials
- Conducted two tests to study the impact of reducing the prevalence of mandatory messages on the ACS.

Research Questions

- **Test 1: What is the impact on response rates of removing the mandatory message from the envelopes for the ACS?**
- **Test 2: What is the impact on response of modifying mandatory messages in the mail materials for the ACS?**

Previous Research

- 1993 National Census Test
 - Compared envelopes that included the phrase “Your Response Is Required by Law” to envelopes without the phrase
 - Difference in mail response rate of 9.2 percentage points (statistically significant)
- 2013 Messaging and Mail Package Assessment Research
 - Focus groups and one-on-one interviews
 - “Required by Law” single most effective message
 - Most participants said mandatory messaging would motivate them to respond
 - Some bristled at the messaging

ACS Mail Strategy - May

Mailout	Description of Materials
Pre-Notice Letter	Letter excludes mandatory language Multi-Lingual Informational Brochure includes mandatory language
Initial Mailing Package	Letter and FAQ Brochure include mandatory language Internet Instruction Card excludes mandatory language
First Reminder Postcard	Excludes mandatory language
Paper Questionnaire Package	Letter, FAQ Brochure, and Instruction Guide include mandatory language. Paper Questionnaire, Return Envelope, and Internet Instruction Card exclude mandatory language.
Second Reminder Postcard	Includes mandatory language
Additional Postcard	Includes mandatory language

Test 1: Envelope Mandatory Messaging Test

What is the impact on response rates of removing the mandatory message from the envelopes for the ACS?

Envelope Mandatory Messaging Test

- Goal: Study impact of removing mandatory message from envelopes
- Conducted in May 2015
- Treatment 1: Control Materials with Mandatory Message on Envelopes
- Treatment 2: Mandatory Message Removed from Envelopes
- Sample Size: 24,000 addresses in each treatment

Mandatory Message on Control- Initial Envelopes

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
Economics and Statistics Administration
U.S. CENSUS BUREAU
1201 East 10th Street
Jeffersonville IN 47132-0001
OFFICIAL BUSINESS
Penalty for Private Use \$300
ACS-46IM(2013) (12-2012)

AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY EMPLOYER

PRESORTED
FIRST-CLASS MAIL
POSTAGE & FEES PAID
U.S. Census Bureau
Permit No. G-58

The American Community Survey

**YOUR RESPONSE IS
REQUIRED BY LAW**

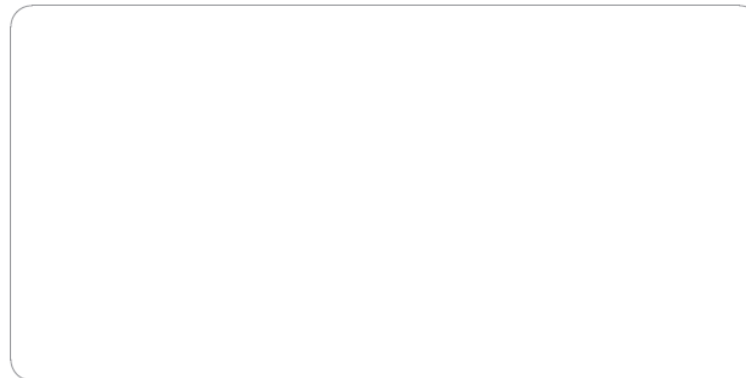


Experimental - Initial Envelopes

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
Economics and Statistics Administration
U.S. CENSUS BUREAU
1201 East 10th Street
Jeffersonville IN 47132-0001
OFFICIAL BUSINESS
Penalty for Private Use \$300
ACS-46IM(X)(2015) (3-2015)

AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY EMPLOYER

PRESORTED
FIRST-CLASS MAIL
POSTAGE & FEES PAID
U.S. Census Bureau
Permit No. G-58



Mandatory Message on Control – Mail Package Envelopes

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
Economics and Statistics Administration
U.S. CENSUS BUREAU

1201 East 10th Street
Jeffersonville IN 47132-0001

OFFICIAL BUSINESS
Penalty for Private Use \$300

ACS-46(2012) (5-2011)

AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY EMPLOYER

PRESORTED
FIRST-CLASS MAIL
POSTAGE & FEES PAID
U.S. Census Bureau
Permit No. G-58

The American Community Survey
Form Enclosed

**YOUR RESPONSE IS
REQUIRED BY LAW**



Experimental – Mail Package Envelopes

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
Economics and Statistics Administration
U.S. CENSUS BUREAU

1201 East 10th Street
Jeffersonville IN 47132-0001

OFFICIAL BUSINESS
Penalty for Private Use \$300

ACS-46(X) (3-2015)

AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY EMPLOYER

PRESORTED
FIRST-CLASS MAIL
POSTAGE & FEES PAID
U.S. Census Bureau
Permit No. G-58

The American Community Survey
Form Enclosed



Envelope Mandatory Messaging Test Results

Total Self-Response Return Rates (Internet & Mail combined)				
Point in Data Collection Cycle	Control (Includes Mandatory)	Test (Removed Mandatory)	Difference	Significant?
Before First Reminder Postcard	3.0 (0.2)	2.6 (0.1)	0.4 (0.2)	Yes
Before Paper Questionnaire Package	22.6 (0.4)	18.7 (0.3)	3.9 (0.5)	Yes
Before CATI	42.5 (0.5)	37.1 (0.4)	5.4 (0.5)	Yes

- Standard errors in parentheses.
- Return Rates exclude Undeliverable as Addressed (UAAs) but include out-of-scope address in the universe.
- Comparisons of Internet response and Mail response were also significant at the $\alpha=0.1$ level.

Envelope Mandatory Messaging Test Results

Final Response Rate

	Control (Includes Mandatory)	Test (Removed Mandatory)	Difference	Significant ?
Final Overall Response	96.3* (0.3)	95.6* (0.3)	0.7 (0.3)	Yes

Distribution of Final Response by Mode

Internet	35.7 (0.5)	32.7 (0.4)	3.0 (0.7)	Yes
Mail	23.8 (0.4)	21.3 (0.4)	2.5 (0.6)	Yes
CATI	3.8 (0.2)	4.7 (0.2)	-0.9 (0.2)	Yes
CAPI	33.1 (0.6)	36.8 (0.6)	-3.7 (0.8)	Yes

- *Rates may not sum to total due to rounding.
- Standard error in parentheses.
- Partial interviews and vacant units are included as responses.

Envelope Mandatory Messaging Test Results

- Because the self-response rate in the test treatment was lower, additional paper questionnaires were mailed to nonrespondents, and the CATI and CAPI workloads were higher than the control panel.
- So, while the overall response rate drop of 0.7 percentage point might not seem to be large, it is estimated that cost impact of eliminating mandatory messages from the envelopes would increase the cost of the ACS by \$9.5 million, annually.

Test 2: Additional Mandatory Messaging Test

**What is the impact on response of
modifying mandatory messages in the mail
materials for the ACS?**

ACS Mail Strategy - September

Mailout	Description of Materials
Pre-Notice Letter	NOT SENT
Initial Mailing Package	Letter, Multi-Lingual Brochure, and FAQ Brochure include mandatory language Internet Instruction Card excludes mandatory language
First Reminder <u>Letter</u>	<u>Includes</u> mandatory language
Paper Questionnaire Package	Letter, FAQ Brochure, and Instruction Guide include mandatory language. Paper Questionnaire, Return Envelope, and Internet Instruction Card exclude mandatory language.
Second Reminder Postcard	Includes mandatory language
Additional Postcard	Includes mandatory language

Additional Mandatory Messaging Test

- Goal: Study impact of removing or modifying mandatory message from broader set of mail materials
- Conducted in September 2015
- 5 Treatments tested softening or removing mandatory messaging and tested a revised design
- Sample Size: 12,000 addresses in each treatment

Additional Mandatory Messaging Test Treatments

- Control
 - No change to materials
- Softened Control
 - Mandatory removed from initial letter, mail package letter, postcards, and envelopes
 - Mandatory kept in FAQ brochure, reminder letter, instruction guide

Additional Mandatory Messaging Test Treatments (Con't)

- Revised Design
 - Redesigned envelopes, use of bold lettering, highlight boxes, “Open Immediately”
 - Strong mandatory language
- Softened Revised Design
 - Revised design used
 - Mandatory Removed from postcards and envelopes
 - Mandatory Softened in letters (plain text)
- Minimal Revised Design
 - Revised design used
 - Mandatory removed in all materials except initial letter
 - Mandatory in initial letter on back of page, in small font

Softened Control Envelope

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
Economics and Statistics Administration
U.S. CENSUS BUREAU
1201 East 10th Street
Jeffersonville IN 47132-0001

OFFICIAL BUSINESS
Penalty for Private Use \$300

ACS-46IM(X)SMC (5-2015)

AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY EMPLOYER

PRESORTED
FIRST-CLASS MAIL
POSTAGE & FEES PAID
U.S. Census Bureau
Permit No. G-58

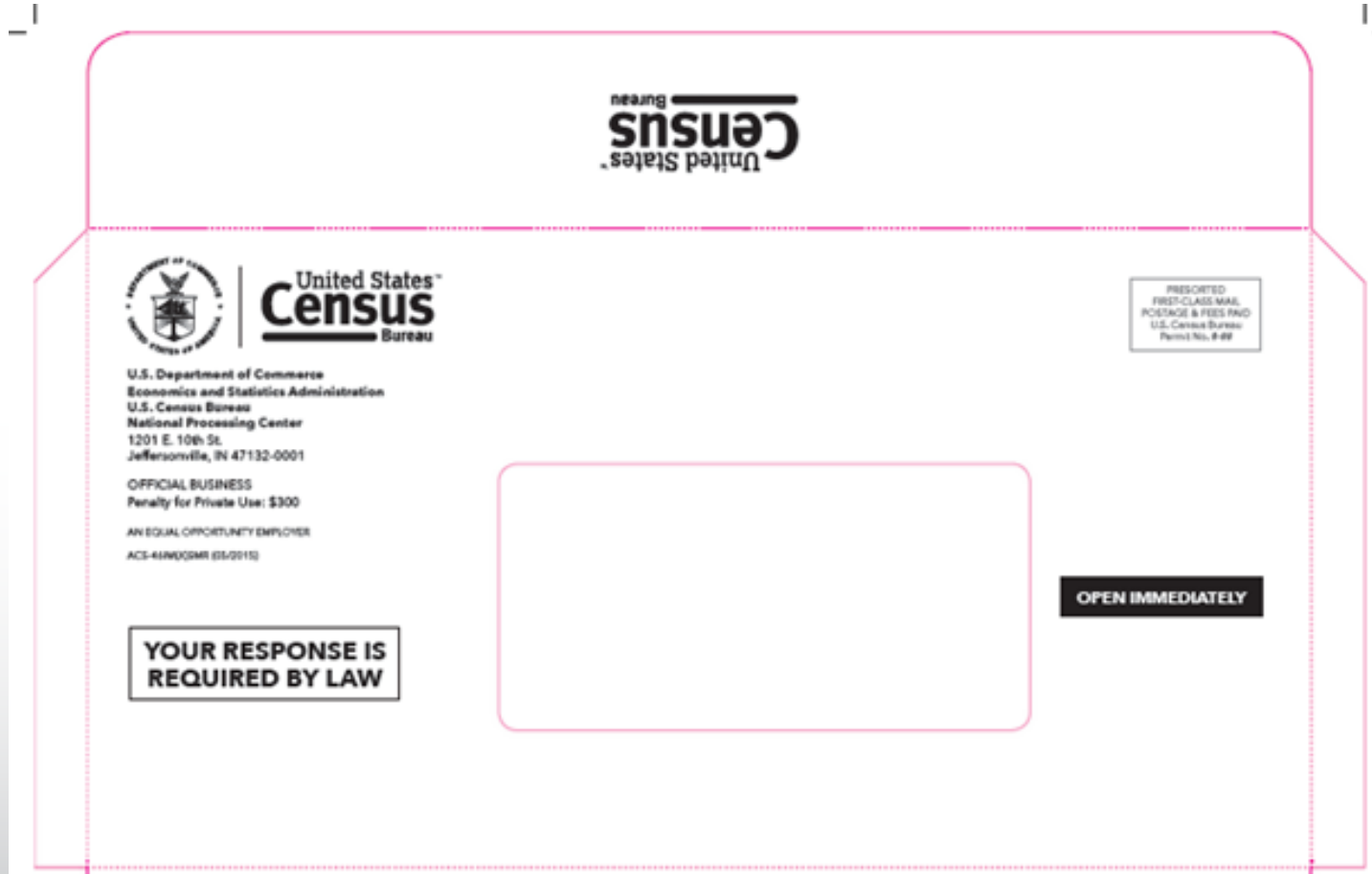
The American Community Survey

**YOUR RESPONSE IS
IMPORTANT TO YOUR
COMMUNITY**

OPEN IMMEDIATELY

United States™
Census
Bureau


Redesigned Envelope



Mandatory Message in Control Letters

Attachment A1 - ACS-13(L)(2015) (5-2015)

ACS-13(L)(2015)
(5-2015)



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
Economics and Statistics Administration
U.S. Census Bureau
Washington, DC 20233-9901
OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

A message from the Director, U.S. Census Bureau ...

Your household has been randomly selected to complete a very important national survey, the American Community Survey. The U.S. Census Bureau conducts this survey to give our country an up-to-date picture of how we live—our education, employment, housing, and more. Using the enclosed instructions, please complete the survey online as soon as possible at:

<https://respond.census.gov/acs>

The Census Bureau is using the Internet to collect this information in an effort to conserve natural resources, save taxpayers' money, and process your data more efficiently. If you are unable to complete the survey online, there is no need to contact us. We will send you a paper questionnaire in a few weeks.

This survey collects critical information used to meet the needs of communities across the United States. For example, results from this survey are used to decide where new schools, hospitals, and fire stations are needed. This information also helps communities plan for the kinds of emergency situations that might affect you and your neighbors, such as floods and other natural disasters.

The Census Bureau chose your address, not you personally, as part of a randomly selected sample. You are required by U.S. law to respond to this survey. The Census Bureau is required by U.S. law to keep your answers confidential. The enclosed brochures answer frequently asked questions about the survey.

If you need help completing the survey, please call our toll-free number (1-800-354-7271).

Thank you.

Sincerely,

John H. Thompson
Director, U.S. Census Bureau

Enclosures

census.gov

The Census Bureau chose your address, not you personally, as part of a randomly selected sample. You are required by U.S. law to respond to this survey. The Census Bureau is required by U.S. law to keep your answers confidential. The enclosed brochures answer frequently asked questions about the survey.

Revised Design Letter

The revised design features:

- Bold text
- Box around the internet URL
- Bulleted lists
- Census Bureau logo
- Text that appeals to the respondent's sense of community



U.S. Census Bureau
Washington, DC 20233

A Message From John H. Thompson, Director of the U.S. Census Bureau:

Your address has been randomly selected by the U.S. Census Bureau to participate in the **American Community Survey**. The Census Bureau conducts this survey each year to give our country an up-to-date picture of how we live – including our education, housing, and jobs.

Communities across the country rely on information from this survey to decide where important services are needed, including:

- Improving roads and reducing traffic
- Building schools
- Planning for the health care needs of the elderly

Respond now at **<https://respond.census.gov/acs>**

Your response is required by U.S. law.

Because your household has been asked to participate on behalf of your community, it is vital that you complete this survey to help meet critical needs in your area.

If you are unable to complete the survey online, we will send you a paper questionnaire in a few weeks. The Census Bureau is using the Internet to collect this information to conserve natural resources, save taxpayers money, and process data more efficiently.

If you need help completing the survey or have questions, please call 1-800-354-7271.

Thank you in advance for your prompt response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John H. Thompson".

John H. Thompson
Director, U.S. Census Bureau


Enclosures

American Community Survey data help determine the annual distribution of more than **\$400 billion** in federal funds to communities nationwide.

ACS-13(L)X5MR (5-2013)

census.gov

Minimal Revised Design Letter


U.S. Census Bureau
Washington, DC 20233

A Message From John H. Thompson, Director of the U.S. Census Bureau:

Your address has been randomly selected by the U.S. Census Bureau to participate in the **American Community Survey**. The Census Bureau conducts this survey each year to give our country an up-to-date picture of how we live—including our education, housing, and jobs.

Communities across the country rely on information from this survey to decide where important services are needed, including:

- Improving roads and reducing traffic
- Building schools
- Planning for the health care needs of the elderly

Respond now at <https://respond.census.gov/acs>


Because your household has been asked to participate on behalf of your community, it is vital that you complete this survey to help meet critical needs in your area.

If you are unable to complete the survey online, we will send you a paper questionnaire in a few weeks. The Census Bureau is using the Internet to collect this information to conserve natural resources, save taxpayers money, and process data more efficiently.

If you need help completing the survey or have questions, please call 1-800-354-7271.

Thank you in advance for your prompt response.

Sincerely,



John H. Thompson
Director, U.S. Census Bureau

Enclosures

American Community Survey data help determine the annual distribution of more than **\$400 billion** in federal funds to communities nationwide.

ACS-13/UX99MM (5-2015) census.gov

ACS-13/UX99MM.indd 1 5/18/2016 6:28:16 PM

- This design includes the revised design features.
- Mandatory messaging is on the back of the letter in small font (below).

Information about Your Responses

The information you provide will help create a picture of your community, but it cannot be used to identify you. By law (Title 13, U.S. Code, Section 9), all of the information the Census Bureau collects for this survey is completely confidential, and millions of people securely participate in the survey each year. Census Bureau employees are subject to a \$250,000 fine and/or up to five years in prison if they disclose any information that could identify you.

As a randomly selected representative of your community, you are the voice of your neighbors and peers. To create an accurate picture of your community, it is critical that you respond. Your response to this survey is required by Title 13, U.S. Code, Sections 141, 193, and 221.

Your confidential response will be aggregated with information from other nearby households to produce a portrait of your community. This information is made freely accessible to government leaders, businesses, nonprofit organizations, and the public at large. Based on the information you provide, you may be asked to participate in other Census Bureau surveys that are voluntary. We may combine your answers with information that you gave to other agencies to enhance the statistical uses of these data. This information will be given the same protection as your survey response.

ACS-13/UX99MM.indd 2 5/18/2016 6:28:16 PM

Additional Mandatory Messaging Test

- Field work concluded in December.
- Results indicated that reducing the frequency and visibility of mandatory messages reduces response rates.

Conclusions

- Removing the Mandatory Messaging from ACS envelopes reduces self-response rates, resulting in a reduction in overall response rates
- Reducing the frequency and visibility of mandatory messages in the mail materials reduces response rates.
- Revisions to the design of the mail materials had a positive impact on response.

Report References

- Preliminary Results of the Envelope Mandatory Messaging Test are available here (final results forthcoming):
<http://www.census.gov/library/working-papers/2015/acs/2015 Barth 01.html>
- Results of the Additional Mandatory Messaging Test are available here:
<http://www.census.gov/library/working-papers/2016/acs/2016 Oliver 01.html>