Congressional Briefing on the American Community Survey
September 23, 2013

Participants:

- Mary Jo Hoeksema, Director of Government Affairs at the Population Association of America and Co-Director of the Census Project (paaapc@popassoc.org)

- Mr. Chris Gerlach, Director of Public Policy Research at the International Council of Shopping Centers (cgerlach@icsc.org)

- Max Sevillia, Director of Policy and Legislative Affairs at the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Educational Fund (NALEO) (msevillia@naleo.org)

- Dr. Kathleen Thiede Call, Professor and Director, Graduate Programs in Health Services Research, Policy and Administration at the University of Minnesota (callx001@umn.edu)

- Phil Sparks, Co-Director of the Census Project (psparks@ccmc.org)

- Tim Olson, Respondent Advocate at the U.S. Census Bureau (timothy.p.olson@census.gov)
Participant Biographies

Christopher S. Gerlach is the Director of Public Policy Research with the International Council of Shopping Centers (ICSC). In this role, he is responsible for conducting objective economic analyses to generate insights into federal, state and local legislative policies that have the greatest potential impact on the commercial real estate and retail industries. Prior to joining ICSC, Mr. Gerlach worked as a consultant utilizing sophisticated economic impact models to assist public-sector entities achieve long-term strategic development goals. He began his career as an analyst with the CoStar Group, Inc., a leading provider of commercial real estate information and analytics. Mr. Gerlach holds a Master of Regional Planning degree from the University of North Carolina and an MBA from the George Washington University School of Business.

Max Sevillia is the Director of Policy and Legislative Affairs at the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO) Educational Fund, where he directs the Washington, D.C. office, and serves as the organization’s chief federal advocate and spokesperson. The NALEO Educational Fund is the leading national non-profit organization that facilitates Latino participation in the American political process, from citizenship to public service. The NALEO Educational Fund’s constituency includes the more than 6,000 Latino elected and appointed officials nationwide. Mr. Sevillia’s recent successes include the Senate’s support for the most robust immigrant integration language in decades; the nomination and confirmation of Secretary of Labor Tom Perez; and the selection of the NALEO Educational Fund to the Census Bureau National Advisory Committee on Racial, Ethnic and Other Populations.

Mr. Sevillia has over a decade of Capitol Hill and advocacy experience. He previously served as counsel to U.S. Representative Jerrold Nadler, a member of the Committee on the Judiciary, and as to U.S. Representative Alcee Hastings, then a member of the Committee on Rules. As an immigration lobbyist for the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), he led a national immigration reform campaign focused on civil rights and civil liberties. He also worked as Senior Legislative Consultant for M+R Strategic Services, a national advocacy firm recognized for its innovative services for public interest campaigns and grassroots advocacy day events. Most recently, he served as a Legislative Director at Polsinelli PC, a national law firm where he directed a government affairs effort focused on underserved communities. Mr. Sevillia earned his B.A. from Florida International University (FIU) and his J.D. from Georgetown University Law Center.
**Kathleen Thiede Call, PhD** is a Professor in the University of Minnesota’s School of Public Health, Division of Health Policy and Management. She is an Investigator at the State Health Access Data Assistance Center (SHADAC) funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which assists other states in monitoring rates of coverage and using data to inform policy and improve access. Dr. Call created a survey of health insurance coverage for use by states and has developed a stream of research concerning the complexities of measuring and estimating rates of insurance coverage. Her research interests include disparities in access to health care and health insurance as well as developing community-driven solutions to health care barriers.

**Tim Olson**, Respondent Advocate, U.S. Census Bureau. Tim Olson has extensive experience working with respondents during the 1990 and 2000 decennial censuses, managing field staff in the Pacific Northwest, Alaska, and California. Tim was also the Census Bureau’s senior official responsible for the 2010 Census partnership program that resulted in active relationships with more than 257,000 governmental and non-governmental organizations, community groups, businesses, and media that helped encourage their constituents to participate in the census. Following a 20-year career in data collection and community engagement, Tim was appointed as the Census Bureau’s first-ever Respondent Advocate in April 2013 and represents the survey respondent’s viewpoint throughout the design, data collection, and communications process for all Census Bureau surveys.
AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY FACT SHEET

How the Census Bureau’s Largest Sample Survey Benefits America’s
People, Economy, and Communities

Background:

The U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS) is part of the constitutionally required decennial census. While the census counts the population every ten years, the ACS (which replaced the traditional census long, or sample, form in 2005) provides more detailed information about the nation’s states, counties and cities, towns and rural communities, and neighborhoods every year, giving policymakers a unique, irreplaceable and timely tool to understand and address the nation’s needs. The ACS samples 3.5 million homes a year (most households will never receive it), producing annual data on a wide range of social and economic characteristics. In fact, Congress requested, directly or indirectly, all of the data gathered in the ACS; Congress reviews the questionnaire each decade (13 U.S.C. §141(f)). Congress uses ACS data to allocate at least $450 billion annually in federal aid to state and local governments. A majority of states also rely on ACS data to set tax and spending limits.

Examples of ACS data uses:

- **Businesses of all sizes** use ACS data to make critical investment and operational decisions that generate economic activity, boost employment, and improve the standard of living in communities across the country. Examples include determining where and when to open new facilities or expand existing ones, identifying sound small business lending opportunities, forecasting growth and sales, and hiring decisions and workforce evaluation.

- **State, regional, and local transportation planning agencies** make broad use of the ACS-based Census Transportation Planning Package (CTPP) (based on the journey to work questions) to identify the need for infrastructure improvement, new transit methods to make jobs more accessible, and traffic congestion mitigation. For example, the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission used the CTPP to assess ridership potential for transit improvements such as high-speed rail, express bus, and park-and-ride service.

- The **U.S. Department of Agriculture** uses ACS data to help rural areas build water and waste disposal systems, and to determine eligibility for business start-up grants in rural communities.

- Using ACS data, researchers have determined that veterans with service-related disabilities are concentrated in rural areas and the South, helping the Veterans Administration and lawmakers target medical and employment services where they are needed.

- **State and local agencies** use ACS migration data (residence one year ago) to track changes in the location of older Americans and ensure the availability of appropriate health care services. They also use ACS disability data to plan health care specifically for the disabled elderly under the Older Americans Act and to forecast eligible recipients under the Medicare and Medicaid programs.
o **ACS** data guide **Economic Development Administration grants** to economically distressed areas to attract private investment, create jobs, develop creative initiatives to address economic conditions, and strengthen America’s ability to compete in the global marketplace.

o **Community colleges** that want to serve **veterans** can apply for federal Upward Bound grants using **ACS** data on education, poverty, and veterans.

o **Local transit agencies** use **ACS** data on **disability** to ensure adequate transportation services for **people with functional limitations**.

o Congress uses **ACS** data to allocate funding to **school districts** across the country under the **No Child Left Behind Act**, to help schools better serve children from poor households.

The ACS is a unique, invaluable source of information about the U.S. and its diverse communities. No other federal survey or database provides comparable information. The private sector cannot replicate the ACS, even if the federal survey disappeared. In fact, the ACS is the denominator for most public and private sector surveys, as well as for other core Census Bureau programs

**Without the ACS**, American businesses would lose vital tools to guide capital investment, location of facilities, hiring, and merchandise and service decisions, all of which drive economic growth, job creation, and sustained business success. Elected leaders and public officials would lose a roadmap for prudent allocation of limited fiscal resources, and information with which to monitor the progress of communities and success of public investments. And non-profit institutions would not have data that illuminate populations and neighborhoods in need of a helping hand.

For more information about how the ACS benefits the nation’s communities, please see The Census Project’s in-depth ACS Fact Sheets on specific sectors of the economy and social institutions, at [www.TheCensusProject.org](http://www.TheCensusProject.org).
Preserving a Core Program of the Census Bureau:  
The American Community Survey

The Issues:
- During debate last year on H.R. 5326, the Fiscal Year 2013 Commerce, Justice, and Science Appropriations bill, the U.S. House of Representatives cut $116 million from the President’s funding request for the Census Bureau, most of it coming from the account covering the decennial census, American Community Survey (ACS), and 2012 Economic Census.
- The House also voted to make ACS response optional and then voted to eliminate funding for the ACS entirely.
- The short-term (six-month) FY2013 Continuing Resolution (CR) Congress adopted last fall continued full funding of the ACS and did not include the House-passed language to make ACS response voluntary. Both the House and Senate FY 2013 appropriations bills covering the remainder of the fiscal year continue funding for the ACS, but significant cuts to the Census Bureau’s overall budget could affect the quality of the ACS, as well as timely publication of key Economic Census data and early but vital 2020 Census planning, for which the ACS is a unique, cost-effective test-bed. Senate appropriators also requested an independent report within four months to analyze the costs and benefits of making ACS compliance voluntary.

The Consequences:
- The House-passed funding level (May 2012) for FY2013 would have forced the agency to cancel the ACS, which replaced the decennial census long form in 2005. The ACS is the only source of consistent, comparable, valid, and objective data about our population and housing for every community in the U.S.
- Congress would then lose ACS data used to allocate at least $450 billion annually in federal aid to state and local governments. A majority of states also use ACS data, directly or indirectly, to set tax and spending limits!
- A congressionally ordered 2003 test of voluntary ACS response showed that mail response rates would drop (at least 20 percent) and survey costs would increase ($60+ million a year, or 30 percent more), both dramatically, threatening the validity and usefulness of all data for small counties and cities, towns, neighborhoods, rural communities, and other governmental units with population below 65,000, for which the ACS is the only source. The Census Bureau would not have the additional $60 - $70 million a year needed to overcome the significant drop in response.
- The ACS is a unique, invaluable source of information about the U.S. and its residents. No other federal survey or database provides comparable information in the same timely, comprehensive, and accessible manner. Further, the private sector cannot replicate the ACS, even if the federal survey disappeared. In fact, the ACS is the denominator and benchmark for most public and private sector surveys, as well as for other core Census Bureau datasets.

The Facts:
- Congress has requested, directly or indirectly, all of the data gathered in the ACS. By law, Congress reviews the questionnaire topics and wording each decade (13 U.S.C. §141(f)).
- The ACS is part of the decennial census program, which originates from the U.S. Constitution.

The Solution:
- To ensure the ACS remains a representative, valid source of information for the public and private sectors, Congress must fund the ACS and should not risk losing data for most American communities and counties by making participation optional.
Christopher S. Gerlach
Director of Public Policy Research
International Council of Shopping Centers

Monday, September 23, 2013

ICSC represents the owners, developers, managers, investors, and tenants of shopping centers from the neighborhood grocery-anchored center to super regional malls.

- Economic Footprint
  - 110,000 shopping centers in the U.S. (7.5 billion square feet)
  - 12.4 million shopping center-related jobs (1 in 11 jobs)
  - $175 billion: sales taxes / $22 billion: property taxes (10% of state and local revenues)
  - $2.4 trillion in retail spending annually (personal consumption 2/3 of GDP)

- ICSC Membership
  - ~50 Fortune 500 companies (#1 … 7 in the Top 50 with over $1 trillion in revenues)
  - 1,000s of small businesses (50% of partnerships are real estate-related)
  - 1,000s of communities from Hickory, NC to Chicago, IL
American Community Survey (ACS)

- The ACS is the **only source** of **objective, consistent** and **comprehensive** data about the nation’s **demographic, social, economic and housing** characteristics down to the neighborhood level.

- These data are absolutely vital for the effective and efficient management of limited resources in the private sector and they are the **driving force behind every retail real estate development in the U.S.**

- Before any project breaks ground, our member organizations conduct extensive market analyses to determine … **among other things …**

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... **WHERE to build ...**

- **Location, location, location** … appropriate site selection is the cornerstone of the retail/real estate industry

**Case Study:**

- “The dominant consumers in the area had average and median household incomes higher than the city, their age and number of persons per household indicated a significant number of households with children, and their educational attainment was higher than the city average. All of these factors are very positive for a neighborhood center anchored by a grocery store.”

  (p. 227)

- “**A Starbucks on every corner**” is a misnomer (mostly) … developers and retailers want to know specifically, on what corner, in what city/town, in what state, in what country?

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Fanning, S. Market Analysis for Real Estate: Concepts and Applications in Valuation and Highest and Best Use. 2005
... WHERE to build ...

Exhibit 12.4 The Market Analysis Process for a Shopping Center

Step 2: Analyze the market of users.
- Define the trade area
- Profile customer characteristics

Step 3: Forecast demand
- Analyze trends (inferred analysis)
- Analyze demand by buying power segmentation method (fundamental analysis method 1)
  - Estimate average (median) household income and total income for primary trade area
  - Estimate the percentage of household income that is spent on retail items
  - Estimate the percentage of retail purchases typically made at a shopping center of the subject's type
  - Estimate the percentage of sales retention in the primary trade area from the total potential sales for the primary trade area
  - Estimate the supportable square footage of retail space by dividing total demand by required sales volume per square foot
- Report Steps 3.2(1) through 3.2(5) for the secondary trade area and/or other demand sources.
- Determine total demand in the primary and secondary trade areas.
- Estimate the square footage of nonretail users of neighborhood shopping centers.
- Adjust the estimate of supportable retail space to reflect the frictional (normal) vacancy rate for the market.

... WHAT to build ...

- Is this new construction or a redevelopment?
- Is this a strategic consolidation or a portfolio acquisition?

Is this an urban store format that carries balcony furniture sets and 4-packs of paper towels catering to apartment renters and bus commuters … or …

Is this a suburban format that carries patio furniture sets and 12-packs of paper towels catering to single family home owners with cars?

Case in point …
There is currently a “large retailer” developing 6 new locations, almost 700,000 square feet, within the District of Columbia. The stores are located in very different neighborhoods and range between 75,000 – 125,000 square feet depending on the site.
... WHEN to build ...

- One observation gives you a snapshot
  two observations give you a trend.

- Consistent methodologies over
time allow for "apples to apples" comparisons.

**DC in 2001 versus 2013 ...**
- U Street / 14th Street Corridor
- Atlas District (H Street)
- Columbia Heights

**Case in point ...**

DC USA, a 900,000 square-foot retail development near the Columbia Heights Metro (Census Tract 28.02), was opened in February 2008.

In 2000, that tract had a median household income of $31,879. By 2009, that figure had risen to $42,978.

That was the trend on which the developer was basing their $145 million investment.

That was the trend on which the tenants were basing their long-term leases and justified the modifications to their traditional floor plans.

By 2011, median household incomes for that tract had risen to $47,381—an increase of almost 50% over 2000 levels and a clear indication that the development has contributed significantly to net economic growth. *

* 2000-2009 average annual growth rate of 3.9%; 2009-2011 average annual growth rate of 5.1%

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### Third-Party Vendor Services

**Adding value to ACS data ...**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Owner/Developer</th>
<th>Tenant/Retailer</th>
<th>Public Sector</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Portfolio review</td>
<td>• Market strategy</td>
<td>• Market strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Tenant solicitation</td>
<td>• Feasibility studies</td>
<td>• Feasibility studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Market strategy</td>
<td>• Trade area analysis</td>
<td>• Trade area analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Trade area analysis</td>
<td>• Closure candidates</td>
<td>• Marketing presentations</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Refinance submissions</td>
<td>• New store performance analysis</td>
<td>• Marketing presentations</td>
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<td>• Marketing presentations</td>
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<td>• Feasibility studies</td>
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<td>• Acquisition analysis</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Public Sector/Municipalities

- It is not just the private sector pulling this information … it is also the public sector pushing it for the purposes of business attraction, retention and expansion.

Global/Local Competition

- Country versus Country
- State versus State
- City/Town versus City/Town
- Downtown versus Suburb

Case in point …

In March 2011, Patrick Jankowski, Vice President of Research with the Greater Houston Partnership, an economic development agency in Houston, Texas, spoke at a briefing similar to this one. These were the examples he used to describe how he uses ACS data to generate economic growth:

- Back office operations
  - Commute times – how long will it take their employees to get to work?
- Call centers
  - Number of Spanish and Chinese speakers – does Houston have the population to staff an international call center?
- Japanese companies
  - Size of Asian community in Houston – will their expat workers be comfortable in Houston?
- Manufacturing concerns
  - Population with high school diploma or associates degree – does Houston have enough semi-skilled workers to meet the company's needs?
- R&D operations
  - Number of engineers and scientists – can we find the talent we need in Houston to develop new products?

Connecting the Dots

- Census data, particularly the ACS, give the private sector the confidence to get their limited capital off the sidelines and put it to productive, efficient use.

- In the absence of reliable, quality data …
  - “mom and pops” can't justify their sales projections to qualify for small business loans …
  - multinationals either focus only on top tier “proven” markets or simply reposition existing assets …
  - economic developers outside of the nation's largest markets can't show that their area has what it takes to support a development.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The data show that DC is booming</th>
<th>The private sector responds with investments and jobs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DC USA: $145M investment</td>
<td>1,200 jobs*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington Harbor outlet project: $100M investment</td>
<td>1,000 jobs*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DC “large retailer” deal: $000,000s investments</td>
<td>'000s jobs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Direct jobs created over the next several years according to developer estimates.
About SHADAC

- We help states collect and analyze data to inform state health policy decisions relating to health insurance coverage and access to care
- Our goal: To help states bridge the gap between health data and the policy-making process; make evidence-based policy decisions
- Based at the University of Minnesota
- Funded primarily by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
States’ needs for monitoring coverage
• Consistent estimates
• Trends over time
  • Monitor impacts of health reform, change in economy or demographics
• Comparisons across states
• Subpopulation analysis
  • Race/ethnicity, poverty, age
  • Counties/sub-state areas
• Access to micro-data

Key federal survey data sources
• General household survey
  • ACS: American Community Survey
• Employment/Income survey
  • CPS: Current Population Survey (ASEC)
• Health surveys
  • NHIS: National Health Interview Survey
  • MEPS-HC: Medical Expenditure Panel Survey-Household Component
  • BRFSS: Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System
CPS: the good, the bad, and the ugly

**Good**
- Historic trends
- State-level estimates
- Several control variables available
- State-specific public health insurance program names
- Timely data release

**Bad**
- Low sample in smaller states
- 10% of respondents have entire supplement, with health insurance coverage questions, imputed

**Ugly**
- Concerns about the coverage questions
- No sample in some counties

ACS to the rescue

- SAMPLE SIZE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
- Sub-state estimates
- Robust subpopulation analysis
- Representativeness
- Current coverage measured

The ACS Sample is almost **15 TIMES LARGER** than the CPS Sample.
Questions SHADAC helps states answer with the ACS health insurance questions

- How many uninsured are in my state and where do they live? What is their demographic profile?
- How many kids in each county are eligible for CHIP or Medicaid but not enrolled?
- How many people in my state will be eligible for Medicaid under ACA?

Where should we allocate funds for community clinics?

% Uninsured in West Virginia, Age 0-64, ≤200% of poverty

American Community Survey  Current Population Survey

How many uninsured kids in Colorado are eligible for CHIP but not enrolled?

What percent of adults will be eligible for Medicaid?

Source: Colorado Health Institute Analysis of 2008-2010 American Community Surveys

Source: Colorado Health Institute Analysis of 2008-2010 American Community Surveys
SHADAC’s technical assistance for states

- SHADAC’s Data Center
  - Online table and chart generator of policy-relevant tables of health insurance coverage estimates from the ACS and CPS

- Education and capacity building for states

- Provides health policy relevant indicators
  - Assign family relationships according to health plan eligibility or “health insurance unit”
  - Federal poverty guidelines (HHS) rather than thresholds
  - FPG cuts at policy-specific levels (138%, 200%)

- Control totals for state-specific surveys

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**SHADAC’s Data Center**

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**www.shadac.org/datacenter**
Summary: The value of the ACS

- Due to large and representative sample the ACS fills a gap in state-level data to inform policy decisions
  - Statewide and locally
  - Subpopulations: small minority, age or income groups
- The ACS is widely accessible
  - Don’t need to be a data programmer
- The ACS is a great tool for modeling/linking with other data to develop state-level estimates
- Benchmarking and sub-population analysis will be compromised if ACS becomes voluntary

Wish list for future versions of the ACS

- Data updates during the year
  - e.g., NHIS midyear reporting
- Self reported health status
- Addition of health care access measure
- Addition of insurance marketplace and subsidy questions
Kathleen Thiede Call
Investigator, SHADAC
Professor, University of Minnesota

callx001@umn.edu
Improving the Respondent’s Census Experience

Presentation for Congressional Briefing
Hosted by The Census Project

Tim Olson, Respondent Advocate
September 23, 2013

The Respondent Advocate’s Role

• **Advocate** for and represent the respondent’s perspective throughout the survey lifecycle, including survey design and data collection.

• **Resolve** household survey respondent concerns.

• **Improve** key stakeholder experience in relation to respondent concerns.
Position Began 150 Days Ago

- The American Community Survey is my focus
  - 3.54 million households in ACS each year
  - Most respond on their own (59.76%)
  - Phone and field interviews boost response (97.38%)
  - Less than 8,000 refusals in 2012
  - 173 Congressional letters on behalf of constituents since April 2012

- Activities include
  - Providing direct assistance to respondents
  - Fine-tuning data collection procedures to reduce respondent burden
  - Reaching out to Congressional offices
  - Participating in the ACS Content Review

What Respondents Tell Us

- Most people don’t know about the American Community Survey
  1. They think they already did the Census
  2. They think it is a scam

- Some ACS questions are difficult for different reasons
  1. “What time did this person usually leave home to go to work last week?”
  2. “How much income did you receive in the past 12 months, including interest and dividends?”
  3. “How do you access the Internet, such as through dial-up, DSL, cable modem, fiber-optic, mobile broadband, satellite, or some other service?”
  4. “In the past 12 months, what was the cost of water and sewer for this house, apartment, or mobile home?”
  5. “What is Person 1’s race?”

- Almost everyone agrees to participate when they understand the importance of the ACS to their local community
Congressional Office Meetings

• Co-sponsors of HR 1078 (Poe Amendment) reveal that
  • Most offices report few constituent calls from ACS respondents
  • Primary objection is the mandatory nature of the survey (not specific questions)
  • Offices are glad to have the Respondent Advocate available to assist constituents

• Ongoing visits with Congressional offices in 2014
  • Provide direct support to Congressional staff
  • Assist constituents in Census Bureau surveys who need information or help
  • Gain further insights to help improve the ACS and other household surveys

Resources for Congressional Offices

• New data application entitled “My Congressional District” available at www.census.gov/acs
• New ACS Information Guide available at http://www.census.gov/acs/www/about_the_survey/acs_information_guide
• Interactive ACS form explains why each question is asked http://www.census.gov/acs/www/about_the_survey/explore_the_form
• Specific ACS support available to Congressional offices at http://www.census.gov/acs/www/about_the_survey/resources/congress.php
• American FactFinder tutorials offered by the Census Bureau’s Congressional Affairs Office to help Congressional staff understand data about their district.
  http://www.census.gov/intergov/contactus.html
• Congressional District Wall Maps for 113th Congress available in print or in electronic format.
  http://www.census.gov/geo/maps/data/maps/reference/cd113.html
How To Contact The Respondent Advocate

I will respond to all concerns within 24 hours or less.

Timothy.p.olson@census.gov
(301) 763-3616
Putting Respondents First
Census Bureau Survey Help

Public cooperation is vital to ensuring that the Census Bureau provides accurate statistics about our nation’s people, places and economy to help all levels of government operate efficiently and enable entrepreneurs and businesses to make informed decisions that grow the economy and create jobs. The Census Bureau is committed to making its surveys user-friendly and serving respondents’ needs.

STEPS TO IMPROVE YOUR SURVEY EXPERIENCE

- Appointing a Respondent Advocate within the Census Bureau
- Reviewing every question on the American Community Survey (ACS) to reduce time needed to reply
- Putting the American Community Survey (ACS) and 60 other surveys online to reduce the need for follow-up contacts

RESOURCES TO HELP YOU

TIM OLSON, RESPONDENT ADVOCATE

Tim is your advocate throughout the survey design and data collection process. He collects feedback from people who receive surveys, as well as Congressional staff and stakeholder groups, to ensure that your needs are met, your concerns are addressed, and questions are answered.

TELEPHONE HELP

Census Bureau staff are available to answer questions, assist with completing questionnaires, provide information on protecting the security and privacy of your personal information, and explain the purpose of every question.

CENSUS BUREAU REGIONAL OFFICES

Census Bureau Regional Office staff are available to help you. For more information, please visit www.census.gov/regions.

CENSUS BUREAU WEBSITE

For FAQs related to our surveys and other information, please visit census.gov.

How to Get Help

Constituents with concerns about any Census Bureau survey can contact the Census Bureau’s Respondent Advocate with their questions by phone or email. Our goal is to reply to individual requests within 24 hours.

Tim Olson, Respondent Advocate
timothy.p.olson@census.gov
301.763.3616

ACS Help Line
For help completing the form, from 9 a.m. to midnight Eastern time, call 1.800.354.7271

Census Call Center
For information about Census Bureau surveys and data, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Eastern time, call 1.800.923.8282

ACS Website
Census.gov/acs

Census Regional Offices
For information on contacting your regional office, go to census.gov/regions
Know thyself, America

By George F. Will, Published: July 12, 2013

When Houston was competing with a Brazilian city to be the site of a Japanese-owned plant, Houston could provide the Japanese with pertinent information about the educational attainments and other qualities of its workforce and the number of Japanese speakers in the area. The plant is in Texas partly because Houston had superior statistics, thanks to an inexpensive federal program currently under attack from some conservatives. They may not know that its pedigree traces to the Constitution’s Framers.

These Enlightenment figures — rational, empirical, inquisitive — believed in the possibility of evidence-based improvements. And they mandated the “enumeration” of the population every 10 years. James Madison soon proposed expanding the census beyond mere enumeration to recording Americans’ occupations. And compliance with the survey was compulsory.

During America’s post-Civil War dynamism, President Ulysses Grant proposed a census every five years to keep government abreast of change. Beginning in 1940, a small percentage of households was required to fill out what came to be the “long form.” And since 2005, this has been replaced by the American Community Survey (ACS), which about 3.5 million households a year are required to complete, providing demographic, economic and social information pertinent to government and private-sector activities.

The government still makes mandatory the mild duty of providing information pertinent to governance. This is why some conservatives oppose continuing the ACS. Distrust of the politicized Internal Revenue Service, with its mountains of sensitive information, and anxiety about the National Security Agency’s collection of metadata have deepened Americans’ instinctive suspicion of government, which is healthy. But the ACS should not become collateral damage.

If the survey were voluntary, compliance would plummet and the cost of gathering the information would soar. The data, paid for by taxpayers and available to them at no charge, serve what the nation needs most — economic growth. Target, Wal-Mart and other large retailers tailor their inventories to regional, even neighborhood, differences revealed in the ACS’s granular data. Home builders locate markets rich in people age 25 to 34 and renters.

Information improves the efficiency of markets — and of governments, too. There are systemic reasons why democratic governments frequently behave foolishly: Politicians’ constant incentive is to confer current benefits on targeted beneficiaries and to defer costs (by running deficits). Hence there are weak incentives to formulate government policies with the quaint characteristic of measurably ameliorating broad social problems. The ACS cannot cure systemic problems, but abolishing it would require government to be unnecessarily ignorant.

Some incandescent conservatives propose forbidding the ACS to ask about respondents’ religious beliefs and practices. But it does not ask. It is more interested in, for example, at what time respondents leave home for work, information that helps local governments plan traffic flows. The ACS does not seek to identify illegal immigrants, but by asking respondents their ethnicity, if they are citizens and how long they have been in the country, it informs public debate by estimating the number of illegal immigrants.
Secrecy is government regulation — the rationing of information. The collection and dissemination of useful information by government serve the deregulation of life by empowering the public to direct the government, to judge its performance and to decrease dependence on government by invigorating the private sector.

In the absence of data, politicians pluck factoids from the ether, as Barack Obama did in this year’s State of the Union address: “Every dollar we invest in high-quality early childhood education can save more than seven dollars later on, by boosting graduation rates, reducing teen pregnancy, even reducing violent crime.” Such facially implausible and utterly unsubstantiated claims flourish when there is indifference to information.

The Welfare Reform Act of 1996, which was applied conservatism, happened because empirical data convinced enough Democrats of the costs of welfare dependency. Charles Murray, the most consequential and conservative contemporary social scientist (“Losing Ground,” “Coming Apart”), depends on the ACS and other census surveys. Sociologist Peter Rossi, a liberal Democrat and an accomplished analyst of social programs, formulated two “metallic rules” of policy evaluation. The Iron Law is: “The expected value of any net impact assessment of any large scale social program is zero.” The Stainless Steel Law is: “The better designed the impact assessment of a social program, the more likely is the resulting estimate of net impact to be zero.”

Clearly, conservatives should favor the nation applying to itself the injunction “Know thyself.” Besides, if conservatives do not think information about society — the more the merrier — strengthens their case, why are they conservatives?