

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 Solutions:

- 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.