

Talking Points – Status of the American Community Survey

Census Bureau Director Dr. Robert Groves will testify before a U.S. House of Representatives subcommittee with an update on reforms underway at the Census Bureau to make the agency more efficient and effective, and to report on the status of the American Community Survey (ACS). Over the past two years, the Census Bureau has initiated organizational changes designed to improve its ability to supply the country with credible and cost-efficient economic and social statistics. We plan to use the ACS as the chief test-bed for 2020 Census systems development.

The Director will provide an update on Census Bureau reforms, a comprehensive programmatic review of the ACS, and report on the Bureau's findings regarding proposals to make the ACS a voluntary survey.

The ACS is part of the Decennial Census — collecting characteristics for the country recognized by James Madison and other Founders as an important tool for elected officials since the first census in 1790.

- The ACS is how the American people and our elected officials can best measure our nation's progress on a yearly basis.
- Businesses use the ACS to create jobs, plan for the future, establish new business and grow our economy.
- The ACS was an innovation supported and funded by Congress to give the nation small-area annual estimates that were once only available only every 10 years from the Decennial "Long Form."
- Because the ACS provides a wide range of important statistics on housing, social and economic characteristics for all communities in the country, governments at all levels use the ACS for policy making and to determine where to provide services.

The vast majority of Americans choose to participate when asked.

- The ACS attains high rates of participation from American households, giving users confidence in the accuracy of the results. Since 2005, the combination of mail, telephone, and personal visits has produced annual overall survey response rates between 97% and 98%.

The American Community Survey is authorized by law and has been upheld by the courts.

- The ACS is authorized under Title 13, U.S. Code (the Census Act). On numerous occasions, the courts have judged that the Constitution gives Congress the authority to collect data on characteristics of the population in the census.
- As early as 1870, the Supreme Court characterized as unquestionable the power of Congress to require both an enumeration and the collection of statistics in the census.

Making the ACS a voluntary survey would have major negative impacts.

- Census research and experience in other countries has demonstrated that moving to a voluntary ACS will make the survey more expensive, less accurate, and significantly reduce the number of communities who would receive reliable annual estimates from the survey.
- What distinguishes the ACS from all other surveys is the ability to produce annual estimates on housing, economic and population measures for even the smallest geographic areas. Making the ACS voluntary without spending more to ensure the same number of households participate in the survey, would mean the country for the first time in our lifetimes would not have detailed housing, economic and demographic data for all areas of the country.

Additional Background:

In April of 2011, we launched a full-scale review to conduct an objective and independent assessment of the ACS. In addition, there is also a separate independent review being conducted by a National Academies, National Research Council Panel to assess ACS survey methods and data products.