

# 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**

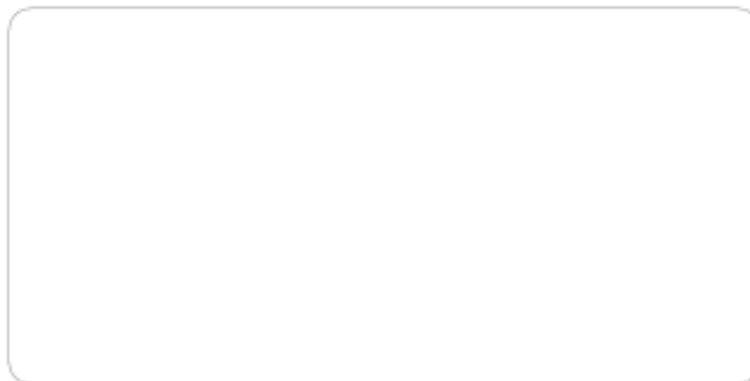


# Experimental - Initial Envelopes

**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>	<b><u>Includes</u></b> 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

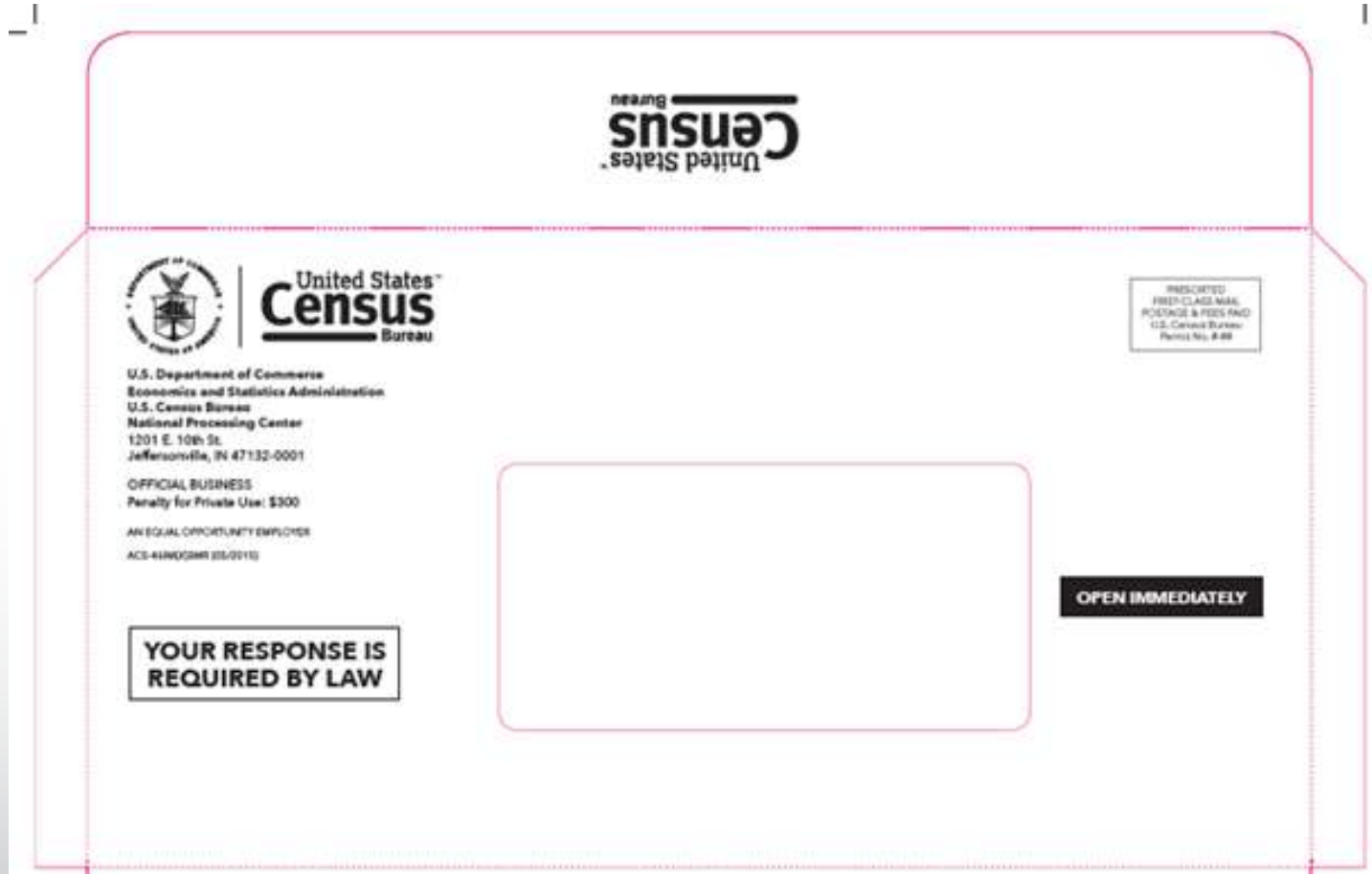
The American Community Survey

**YOUR RESPONSE IS  
IMPORTANT TO YOUR  
COMMUNITY**

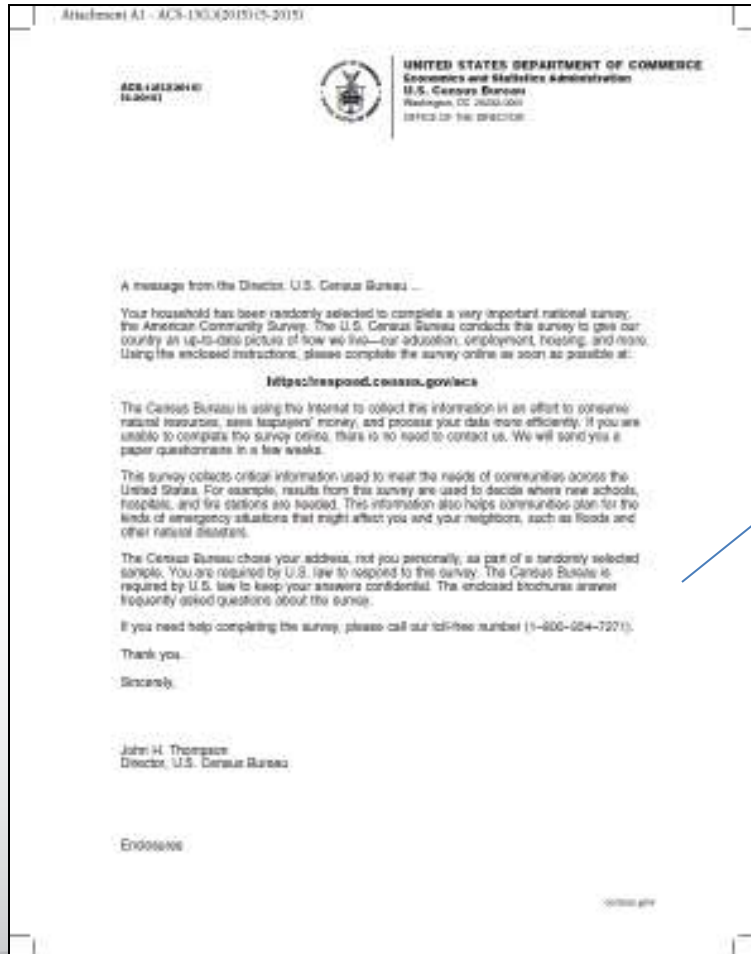
United States™  
**Census**  
Bureau

**OPEN IMMEDIATELY**

# Redesigned Envelope



# Mandatory Message in Control Letters



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-101200013-01-01

census.gov

# Minimal Revised Design Letter

  
U.S. Census Bureau  
Washington, DC 20535

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

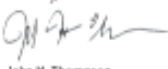
Respond now at <https://respond.census.gov/acs>

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 ENCLOSURE 0-0000 census.gov

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 92), all of the information the Census Bureau collects for this survey is completely confidential, and millions of people voluntarily 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 available 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 responses.

ACS ENCLOSURE 0-0000 census.gov

# 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>