Applying a Strategic Framework to Reinvent American Community Survey Mail Contact Materials

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U.S. Census Bureau



U.S. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration U.S. CENSUS BUREAU *census.gov* Disclaimer: The views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of the U.S. Census Bureau.

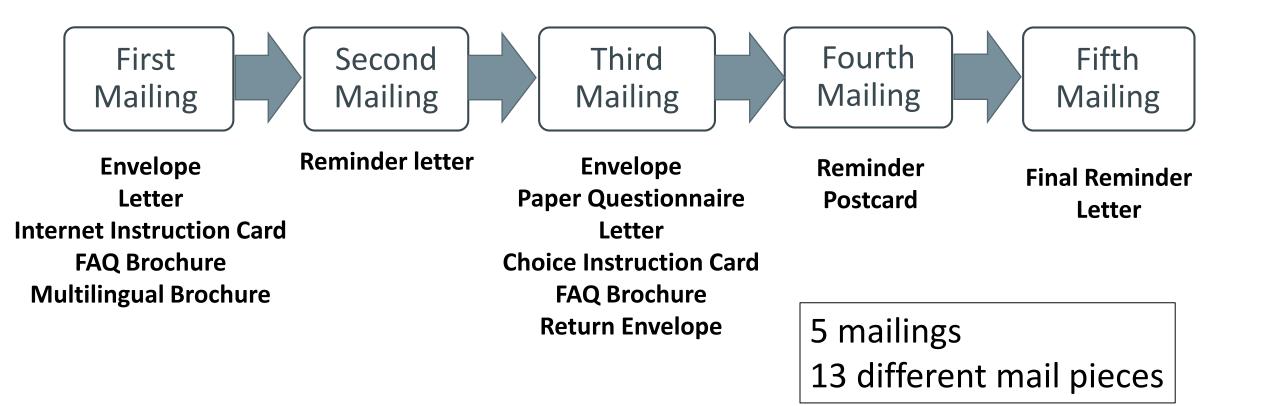
Research to improve ACS mail materials and messaging

The Census Bureau has conducted considerable research to improve its mail materials and messaging. Among the reasons:

- To increase self-response rates
- Increase data quality
- Address respondent burden
- Address concerns about the legitimacy of the survey
- Address concerns about the legal mandate of the survey



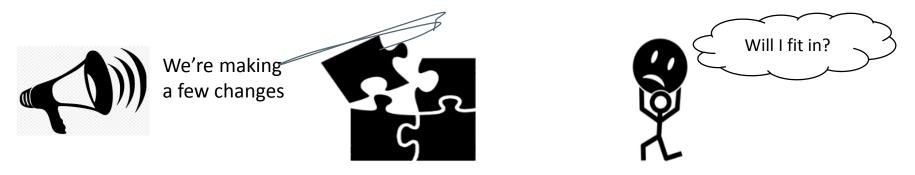
ACS Mail Contact Strategy





Drawback to incremental survey changes

Incremental changes to survey materials can be effective, but it has a drawback



communications strategy

Research has been successful in identifying specific features that tend to have larger versus smaller effects [on response rate], but generally leaves unanswered how all elements of a design fit together (Dillman, Smyth, and Christian, 2014)



Research to develop a Strategic Framework







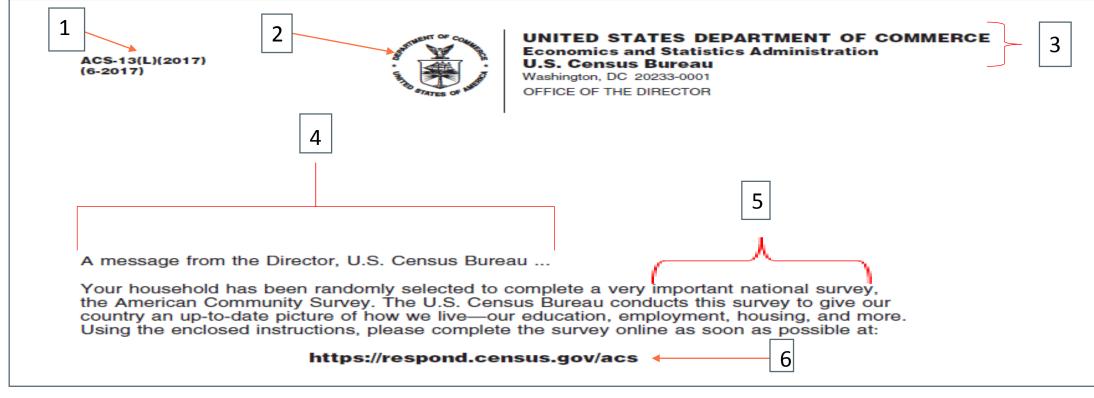
ACS Mail Materials Analysis - Overview

- Use the Strategic Framework report to systematically evaluate current ACS messaging to gain a holistic understanding
- Inventory and analyze the messaging in the current ACS materials
 - What messages are sent?
 - How frequently is each message sent?
 - What messages aren't sent?
 - What is done well?
 - Where can we improve?



Example of ACS messaging elements

Letter in First Mailing





ACS Mail Materials Analysis – Coding Methodology

- Using the Strategic Framework Report, we identified **74 codes** for messaging in **5 categories**:
 - Trust
 - Benefits
 - Reduce Burden
 - Instructions & Information
 - Required Elements



Example: Confidentiality/Data Security

Code	Theme
1.0	Trust : Recipients must believe that the survey is legitimate and that the messages are truthful
1.2	Confidentiality/Data Security
1.2.1	By law, Census must protect your data
1.2.2	 Census employees face fines and prison if they violate law
1.2.3	Federal Cyber Security Act
1.2.4	Census cannot share your data
1.2.5	 Secure website, encrypted browser, screening system transmit data
1.2.6	Oath of nondisclosure statement
1.2.7	• Won't release data in a way that identifies you – such as aggregate data, creating statistics, etc.



ACS Mail Materials Analysis – Coding Methodology

- Coding of materials
 - Two independent coders coded all materials
 - Third independent coder coded select mail pieces
 - Disagreements in coding adjudicated by all three coders
 - Produced consensus coding for all 13 mail pieces.



ACS-13(L)(2017) (6-2017)



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE Economics and Statistics Administration U.S. Census Bureau Washington, DC 20233-0001 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



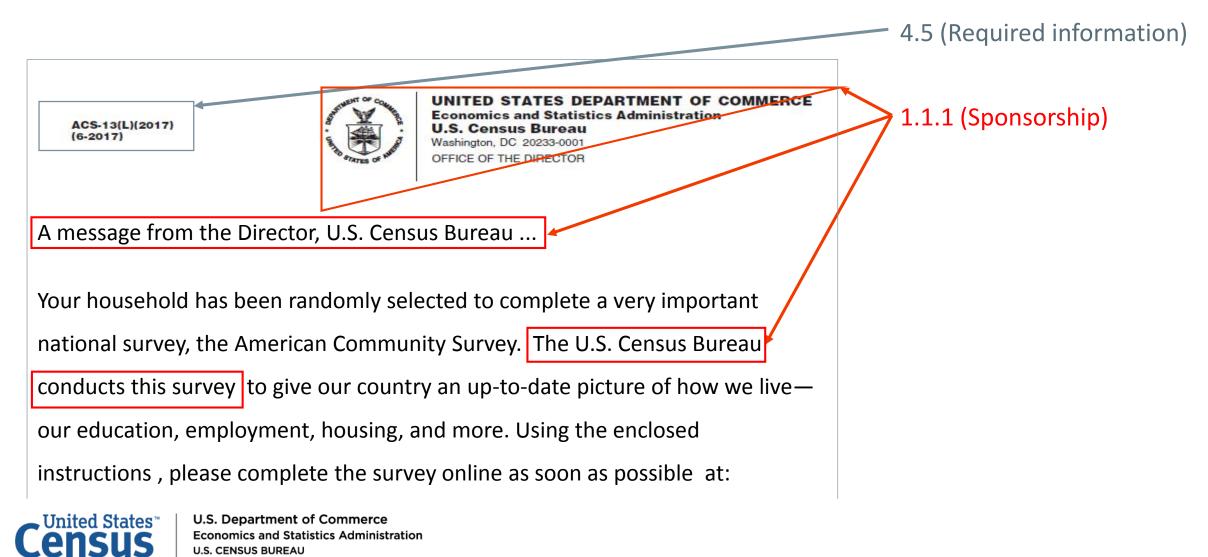
4.5 (Required information)



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

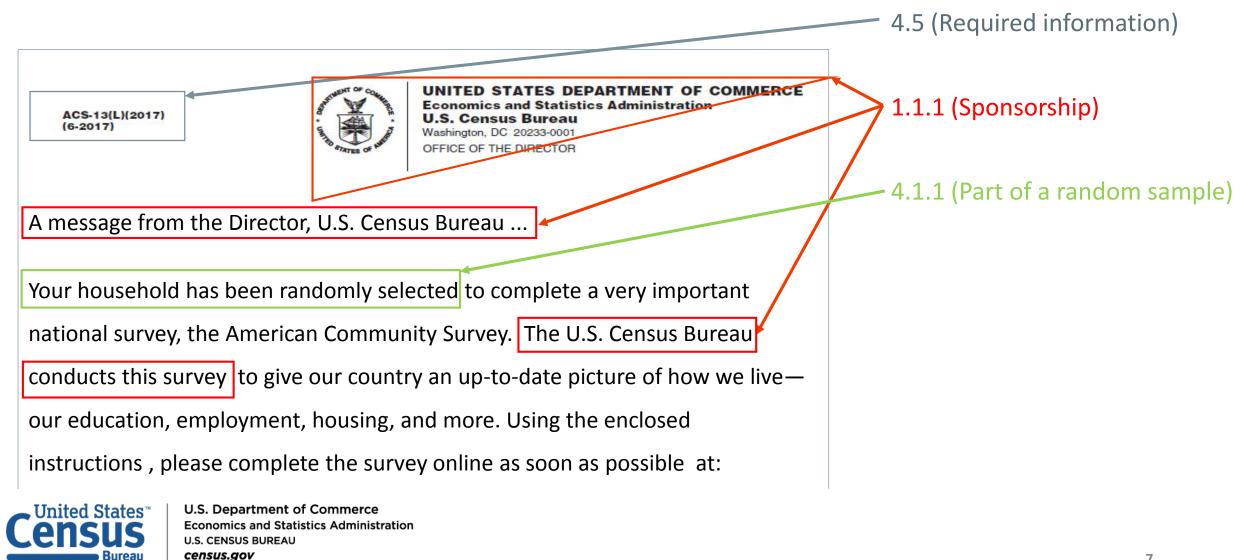
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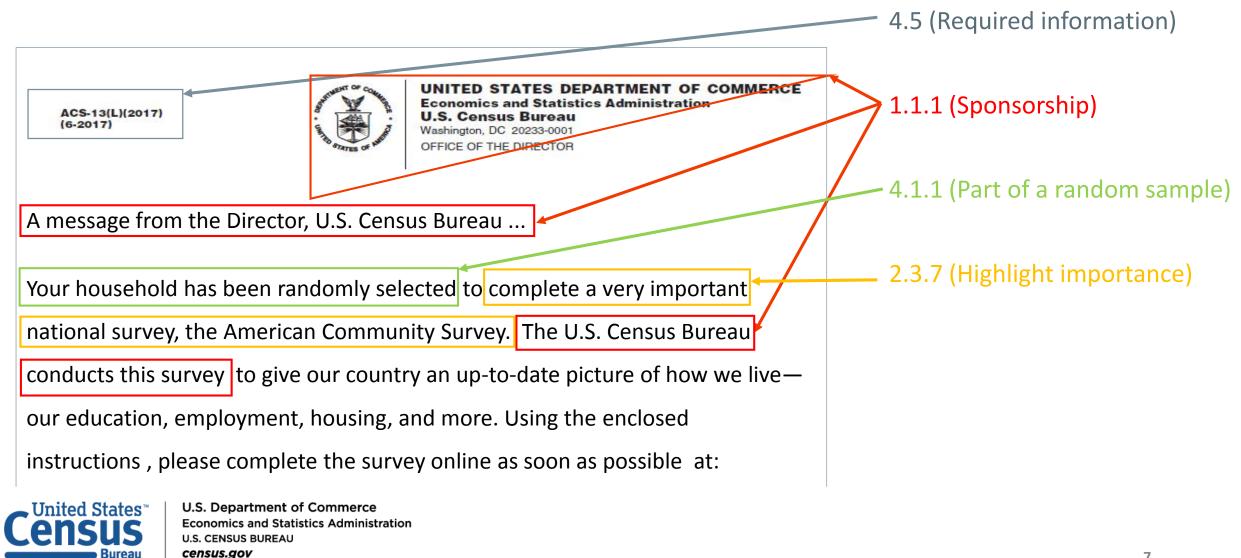


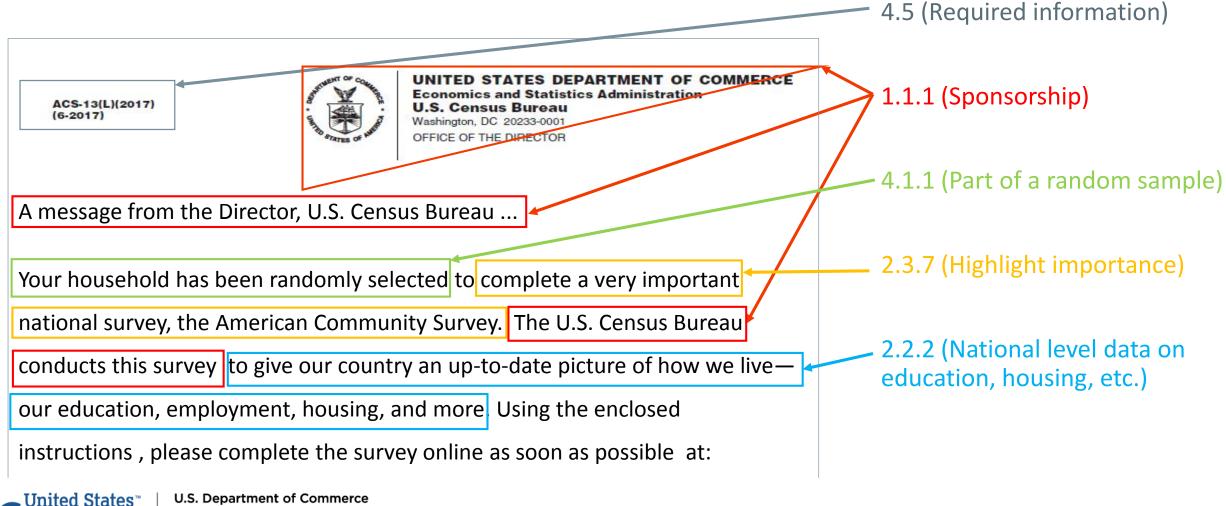


census.gov

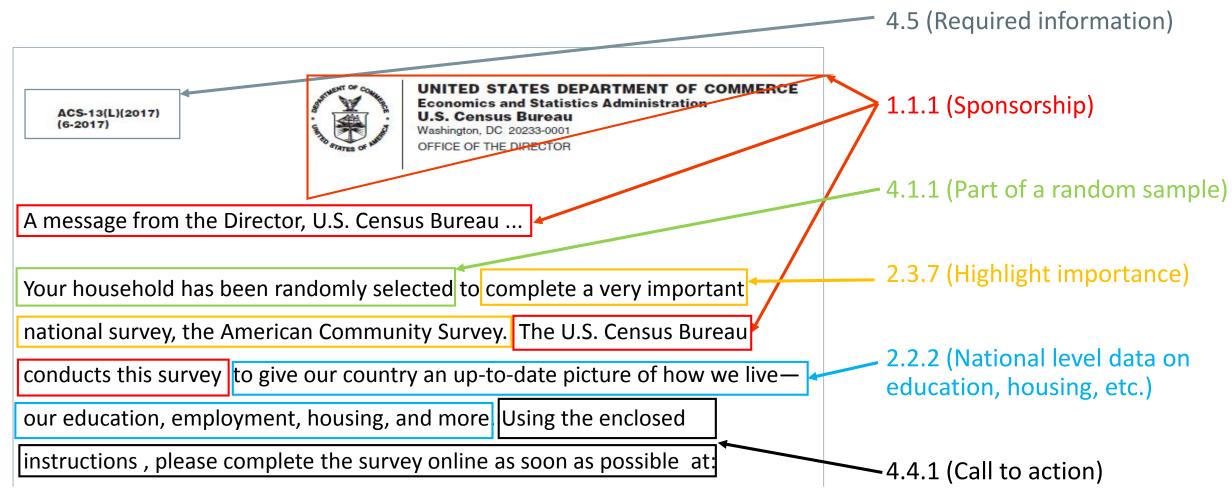
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ACS Mail Materials Analysis - Results

Coded 358 "elements" that each convey a message

- 39% Trust
- **19%** Requirements
- 14%Benefits
- **14%** Reduce Burden
- **14%** Instructions & Information



Most Frequent Message

Connection to known and trusted sponsor

- 59 times (out of 358 messages) across all mail pieces
- 16.5% of all coded messages
- For comparison: ACS Mail materials communicate a connection to a sponsor more often than benefits or reduce burden messaging.



Most frequent message

Connection to known and trusted sponsor

Logos



U.S. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration U.S. CENSUS BUREAU *census.gov* ACS-13(L)(2017) (6-2017) UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE Economics and Statistics Administration U.S. Census Bureau Washington, DC 20233-001 OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

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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 U.S. Census Bureau is required by law to keep your information confidential. The Census Bureau is not permitted to publicly release your responses in a way that could identify you. Per the Federal Cybersecurity Enhancement Act of 2015, your data are protected from cybersecurity risks through screening of the systems that transmit your data. 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.

Enclosures



census.gov

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census gov

Most frequent message

Connection to known

and trusted sponsor

Salutation:

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



U.S. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration U.S. CENSUS BUREAU *census.gov* 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:

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Enclosures



ACS-13(L)(2017) (6-2017)



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE Economics and Statistics Administration U.S. Census Bureau Washington, DC 20233-0001 OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

Most frequent message

Connection to known

and trusted sponsor

Web address census.gov



U.S. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration U.S. CENSUS BUREAU census.gov

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https://respression.gov/acs

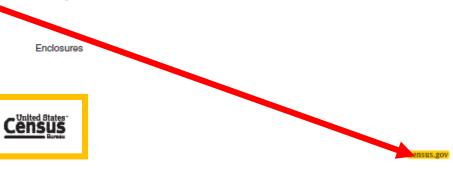
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If you need help completing the survey, please call our toll-free number (1-800-354-7271).

Thank you.



ACS-13(L)(2017) (6-2017)



INITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE Economics and Statistics Administration U.S. Census Bureau

ensus go

Most frequent message

Connection to known

and trusted sponsor

Census conducts this survey

"The U.S. Census Bureau conducts this survey..."

"The Census Bureau is using the internet..."

"The Census Bureau is required by law..."

"The Census Bureau randomly chose..."

"The Census Bureau is not permitted..."



U.S. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration **U.S. CENSUS BUREAU** census.gov

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part of a randomly selected The Census Bureau crosssample. You are required by U.S. naw the paper to this survey. The U.S. Census Bureau is required by law to keep your information configural. The Census Bureau is not permitted to publicly release your responses in a way that could identify you. Per the Federal Cybersecurity Enhancement Act of 2015, your data are protected from cybersecurity risks through screening of the systems that transmit your data. 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.

Enclosures



However... on the survey form:

- 3 Census references
 - 1 Small print as 3rd sponsor
 - 2 Census.gov web addresses
- No Census logo
- No statement that the Census Bureau conducts this survey



U.S. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration U.S. CENSUS BUREAU census.gov



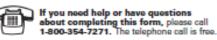
THE American Community Survey

Start Here

Respond online today at: https://respond.census.gov/acs OR Complete this form and mail it

back as soon as possible.

This form asks for information about the people who are living or staying at the address on the mailing label and about the house, apartment, or mobile home located at the address on the mailing label.



Telephone Device for the Deaf (TDD): Call 1-800-582-8330. The telephone call is free.

¿NECESITA AYUDA? Si usted habla español y necesita ayuda para completar su cuestionario, llame sin cargo alguno al 1-877-833-5625. Usted también puede completar su entrevista por teléfono con un entrevistador que habla español. O puede responder por Internet en: https://respond.census.gov/acs

For more information about the American Community Survey, visit our web site at: http://www.census.gov/acs

Please print today's date.

Aonth	Day	Year	
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Please print the name and telephone number of the person who is filling out this form. We will only contact you if needed for official Consus Ruroau husinoss Last Name

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How many people are living or staying at this address?

- INCLUDE everyone who is living or staying here for more than 2 months.
 INCLUDE yourself if you are living here for more than 2 months.
 INCLUDE anyone else staying here who does not have another place to stay, even if they are here for 2 months or less.
- DO NOT INCLUDE anyone who is living somewhere else for more than 2 months, such as a college student living away or someone in the Armed Forces on deployment.

Num			

Fill out pages 2, 3, and 4 for everyone, including yourself, who is living or staying at this address for more than 2 months. Then complete the rest of the form.

FORM ACS-1(2017) OMB No. 0607-0810 OMB No. 0607-0936

ACS-14(L)(2017) (6-2017)



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE Economics and Statistics Administration **U.S. Census Bureau** Washington, DC 20233-0001 OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

Placement matters

			A message from the Director, U.S. Cen	sus Bureau
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE Economics and Statistics Administration U.S. CENSUS BUREAU 1201 East 10th Street Jeffersonville IN 47132-0001	AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY EMPLOYER	PRESORTED FIRST-CLASS MAIL POSTAGE & FEES PAID U.S. Census Bureau U.S. Census Bureau		Bureau sent instructions for completing the American e asked you to help us with this very important survey by ceived your response yet.
OFFICIAL BUSINESS Penalty for Private Use \$300		Permit No. G-58	If you have already completed the surv the survey soon using ONE of the follo	ey, thank you very much. If you have not, please complete wing two options.
ACS-46IM(2013) (12-2012)			Option 1: Go to https://resp Option 2: Fill out and mail bac	ond.census.gov/acs to complete the survey online. ck the enclosed questionnaire.
The American Community Survey			This survey is so important that a Cens telephone or personal visit if we do not	sus Bureau representative may attempt to contact you by receive your response.
YOUR RESPONSE IS			stations are needed. The information a	will help decide where new schools, hospitals, and fire so is used to develop programs to reduce traffic an for the health care needs of the elderly.
REQUIRED BY LAW			sample. You are required by U.S. law to required by law to keep your informatio publicly release your responses in a w Enhancement Act of 2015, your data a	is, not you personally, as part of a randomly selected respond to this survey. The U.S. Census Bureau is n confidential. The Census Bureau is not permitted to ay that could identify you. Per the Federal Cybersecurity re protected from cybersecurity risks through screening of e enclosed brochure answers frequently asked questions
			If you need help completing the survey,	please call our toll-free number (1-800-354-7271).
			Thank you.	
			Enclosures	
	U.S. Department of Commerce		Census bure	census.gov
Conclic	Economics and Statistics Administration U.S. CENSUS BUREAU			
	census.gov			12







UNITED STATES DEPAR Economics and Statistics A U.S. Census Bureau Washington, DC 20233-0001 OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

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

About two weeks ago, the U.S. Census Bureau sent instructions for completing Community Survey to your address. We asked you to help us with this very im completing it online. But we have not received your response yet.

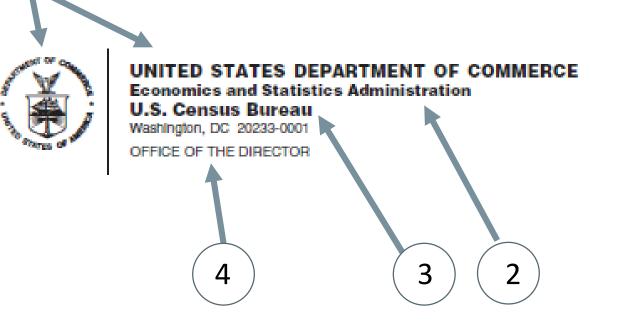
If you have already completed the survey, thank you very much. If you have no the survey soon using ONE of the following two options.

Option 1: Go to https://respond.census.gov/acs to complete the Option 2: Fill out and mail back the enclosed questionnaire.

This survey is so important that a Census Bureau representative may attempt telephone or personal visit if we do not receive your response.



- 1) UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
- 2) Economics and Statistics Administration
- 3) U.S. Census Bureau
- 4) OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR





Most Frequent Message - Conclusion

- If our goal was to let a potential respondent know this survey is conducted by the Census Bureau, this seems to be accomplished by quantity of messaging.
- Could we still improve our messaging to make this connection?
 - Do messages connect to the best sponsor?
 - Are the messages in the best locations?
 - Are we consistent across all mail pieces, including the survey form?



Analysis – The First Mailing

• The First Mailing contained **129 messages** using **39 codes** across the envelope, letter, brochures and instruction card.

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Us Department of Community Licensenics and Statistics Administration Go to https://respond.census.gov/acs to complete the American Community Survey online.	United states to rexample, results non-inis survey are used to decide writer new schools, hoppfais, and the stations are needed. This information also helps communities plan to 'the kinds of emergency eliulations that might affect you and your neighbors, such as floods and other natural desidens. The Census Bureau choice your address, not you personally, as part of a randomity selected sample. You are required by ULS law to respons to this survey. The ULS. Census Bureau is required by law to keep you'r information confidential. The Census Bureau is negulicity release your responses in a way that could idently you. Per the Federal (Detensecutify Enhancement Act of 2016, your data. The enclosed brochures answer thequently asked questions about the survey. If you need help completing the survey, please call our toil-free number (1–600–354–7271). Thank you. Enclosures	Amper Surves A considered to be a set to	American Community Survey? Tea. Your response to this sarvey is required by ize (this 10, 12, 50, 50, 50, 50, 50, 50, 50, 50, 50, 50	Wit the Centre Bureau keep my information confidential? We Tha Centre Bureau is required by law to project year biomation. The Grauns Barna is not permitted to publicly release year response is a way that could denity year. In the Furdhal Cybernecurby Ethocamene Act of 2015, your data as postated from optenecurity inket through sciencing of the systems that transit year data.
IMPORTANT: You will need information from the address label on this card to log in. If you need help or have questions about the American Community Survey, call the toll-free number 1-800-354-7271.	Contract Broker -	Tamilies, and the other population to provide servic them. By responsible to its the Amarian Community of quantisessian, you an a helping your community to establish qala, (dentify proference and baladican, an measure the performance of program. The data also are used to decide where to locate ee helpings, actions, heapital, main community certain also a large corporation that a town has the workth the company needs; and in many other ways.	At Do produce data for year community. Similar data will be united for communities across Peerto Bico and the United States. Me may contine year asswers with information that yeag are to other apprices to estates of the statistical we asses of these data. This information, will be ghown the same of these data. This information, will be ghown the same of these data.	Yos may vibil our Web sile af onsonangenyiect or call 1-100-314-7271, if yos need anisistans or more information.



U.S. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration U.S. CENSUS BUREAU *census.gov* Important Information From the U.S. Census Bureau

1. Repetition within mailing 1

Table 2. Word count* of ACS mail pieces					
	Legal obligation				
	or data security	Total	Percentage		
Letter	77	279	28%		
Multilingual Brochure	74	180	41%		
FAQ Brochure	139	410	34%		

Is this strategic?



2. Repetition across mailings

- The next 4 mailings **add only 5 new codes** that were not communicated in the first mailing.
- Examples:
 - Providing multiple response modes (choice)
 - Reciprocity, thanking respondents, building good will.
 i.e. "If you have already responded, thank you..."
 - If you don't respond, ACS will contact you by phone or personal visit.



Example of Unique vs Repeated Content First 3 letters only

Constant Con	UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE toonomics and Statestics Administration 0.8. Oncore Europy Statestics of the Original Statestics of the Original	UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
An exception the Director U.S. Census Function. Now household has been randomly selected to complete a very important national survey, the memory and up-to-date picture of how we live—our education, employments to give our country an up-to-date picture of how we live—our education, employments to survey, the important national survey, the important problem of the weak of the survey of the s	Amessage from the Director U.B. Census Burnance. A few days ego, you should have received instructions for completing the Interfloan burnances survey on the Local communities depend on information from this survey to a decide where standed, highways, Buspitall, and other important services gas, oeededd, if you have not already responded, please do so now. Respond now I https://respond.census.gov/act Log in using this user ID: If we do not receive your response online, we will mail a paper questionnaire to your address. Successed to construct the survey of news Question, please call to social additional reminder mailings, phone calls, or personal values form Census Bureau interviewers. Mounces held completing the survey of news Question, please call to social-social computing the survey of news Question, please call to social community in advance for your prompt response.	A message from the Director LLE Consus Bureau Sec Instructions for Demoleting the American Demonstration of the Second Se



Example of Unique vs Repeated Content The final reminder...



essage from the Director, U.S. Census Bureau

ithin the last few weeks, he U.S. Census Bureau mailed an American Community Survey lestionnaire package to your address. You are conjured, by U.S. I aw to respond to it's survey. The U.S. Census Bureau is required by law to keep your information infidential. The Census Bureau is not permitted to publicly release your responses in a way at could identify you. Per the Federal Cybersecurity Enhancement Act of 2015, your date and placked from cybersecurity risks through screening of the systems that transmit your date. If u have already responded, thank you. If you have not, please complete the questionnaire is send it now or complete the survey online.

> lespond now at https://respond.census.gov/acs Loo in using this user ID

our response is critically important to your local community and to your ountry. If you do not respond, a Census Bureau interviewer may contact you by personal sit to complete the survey.

f you would like to complete the survey by telephone or need assistance, please call our oll-free number (1–800–354–7271)

hank y



Slight Variation in Messages: Fire Stations to Highways

First letter:

"This survey collects critical information used to meet the needs of communities across the United States. For example, results form this survey decide where new schools, hospitals, and **first stations** are needed."

Second letter:

"Local communities depend on information from this survey to decide where schools, **highways**, hospitals, and other important services are needed."



Missed Opportunities

- Some potentially beneficial codes not used in any ACS mail materials
- Examples:
 - Framing ACS participation as a civic duty or responsibility
 - Asking respondent for their commitment
 - Highlight survey participation is normal (consistency or conformity)
 - Use specific (not vague) examples of benefits
 - ACS data used by small businesses in your community



First Mailing Says it All - Conclusion

- The first ACS mailings contains a lot of messages.
- Messages are repeated verbatim or with slight variations within mail pieces in mailing 1 and in subsequent mailings.
- Aside from a few standard messages, subsequent mailings do not add new messages that may appeal to different potential respondents.
- Consistency accomplished!
 - Perhaps we could try balancing consistency with adding new massaging?



Next Steps



- Continue this type of analysis.
- Additional analysis: visual design, word density, readability & plain language. Not what we say, but how we say it.
- Gather feedback from experts; THANK YOU to everyone here!



Thank you!

• If you have any questions about this presentation contact:

- Jon Schreiner
 - jonathan.schreiner@census.gov
 - (301) 763 9286

