

January 23, 2004

CENSUS NEWS BRIEF

Voluntary ACS Would Cost \$60M More Per Year, Test Shows

Plus: *Sciences Panel Cites Census 2000 Highs and Lows In Final Report;
Senate Clears Census Bureau Funding for FY04, But FY05
Could Be a Squeeze; and more.*

Mail response would drop significantly and costs would increase by almost \$60 million a year if the American Community Survey (ACS) were administered on a voluntary basis, the Census Bureau reported. These and other conclusions were based on a test last year that compared voluntary response with the mandatory response being used in 31 ACS test sites and the national Supplementary Survey. Concerns over the length and content of the traditional census long form prompted Congress to request a test of how voluntary participation in the ACS would affect costs and data quality.

The Census Bureau tested two different approaches to a voluntary ACS in the March and April 2003 ACS samples, one with a standard message used in other voluntary surveys and one with a more explicit message about voluntary response. (Telephone and in-person interviews were conducted through June 2003.) One quarter of sample households received a mandatory questionnaire in the mail phase of the survey, with a portion of those receiving the current mandatory version of the ACS (for control purposes) and others receiving a "user friendly" version of the mandatory survey. However, follow-up by telephone and personal visit with unresponsive households was conducted entirely with the voluntary approach. The analysis the Bureau released last month primarily compares the standard voluntary approach with the March and April 2002 ACS samples, in which response was required by law. Future reports will analyze alternative voluntary and mandatory survey approaches from the 2003 test.

Roughly 20 percent fewer households contacted for the survey returned their form by mail when told their response to the ACS was voluntary. The absolute drop in mail response was greater for households in areas that had high response rates in Census 2000, than for households in low response areas, but the relative decrease for both types of areas was comparable. "Low response areas" are younger, more Hispanic and non-White, poorer, and less educated than "high response areas." Cooperation by mail was already significantly lower in low response areas under the mandatory survey.

Telephone response also fell, by more than 14 percent overall, when ACS participation was voluntary. The Census Bureau follows up by telephone with households that don't mail back a questionnaire. The relative decline in cooperation by telephone was greater in high response than low response areas, suggesting, the report said, a "greater impact [of the change to voluntary response] ... in areas that are traditionally more cooperative." Overall, 55.7 percent of occupied households were "interviewed" by mail or telephone with the voluntary approach in the 2003 test, compared to 68.4 percent using mandatory methods in March/April 2002.

Only a portion of households that fail to respond to the ACS by mail or telephone are visited in person. In the ACS Voluntary Test, lower mail and phone cooperation increased the workload

for personal visits. Nearly 7 percent fewer households that received follow-up visits responded to the voluntary survey, compared to previous results when the survey was mandatory.

The evaluation showed that the large drop in cooperation by mail and telephone under voluntary methods reduced data reliability and increased survey costs. Without an increase in the sample size, there would be a smaller number of completed interviews in a voluntary survey (1.7 million) than in a mandatory survey (2.2 million). The Census Bureau estimates it would have to increase the ACS sample by 700,000 housing units a year in order to produce data of comparable reliability to a mandatory survey, at an additional annual cost of \$59.2 million. The current mandatory design would cost an estimated \$155.3 million a year, compared to \$214.5 million for a voluntary survey of comparable reliability.

The current ACS design includes three million housing units a year, a number the Census Bureau said is “just barely adequate” to produce data of acceptable reliability. If response to a voluntary ACS followed the patterns seen in the 2003 test, the resulting data would be as statistically reliable as data produced by a survey of only 2.4 million housing units annually, an outcome that “would not allow the ACS to produce data of sufficient quality to replace the long form,” the Bureau concluded.

In addition, under the current mandatory ASC design, a higher proportion of Black and Hispanic households than households of other race groups fail to respond by mail or telephone, resulting in a larger proportion of Black and Hispanic households being subject to the one in three sampling rate for personal follow-up visits. Increasing the sample size in a voluntary survey would not overcome this problem without modifying the sample design for the personal visit phase of the ACS.

The difference in rates of item non-response under voluntary versus mandatory methods was relatively low, although statistically significant overall, suggesting that “once the respondent made the choice to participate, the data provided were nearly as complete,” the report said.

Chip Walker, a majority professional staff member of the House Subcommittee on Technology, Information Policy, Intergovernmental Relations and the Census, which requested the report, told the Association of Public Data Users annual conference last fall that the American Community Survey likely would be launched nationwide next year as a mandatory survey, based on the findings of the 2003 test.

The full report is available on-line at <http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Downloads/Report03.pdf>.

NRC panel issues final report on Census 2000: In its final report on planning, methods, and operations, the National Research Council's Panel to Review the 2000 Census concluded that the last decennial count “experienced both major successes and significant problems.” The report, *The 2000 Census: Counting Under Adversity*, said that Census 2000 was “generally well executed,” even though battles over the proposed use of statistical sampling forced last minute changes to the census design. Following are highlights, outlined in the Executive Summary.

The panel cited two major successes of Census 2000: A halt to the decline in mail response seen over the previous two decades, and well conducted, timely operations. The panel credited better questionnaire design and expanded advertising and outreach for gains in mail response. The report also identified “error-plagued development of the Master Address File (MAF)” and difficulties with the group quarters count as two major deficiencies of Census 2000. Efforts to

build the address list using multiple sources, the panel said, resulted in a large number of duplicates.

The NRC panel urged the Census Bureau to give “high priority” to three areas of research: Mailing a replacement questionnaire to unresponsive households; improving address list compilation, particularly for multiple unit buildings, and redesigning the Local Update of Census Addresses (LUCA) program; and improving enumeration of group quarters, such as college dorms, nursing homes, and juvenile institutions.

Panel members found “sufficient evidence” to conclude that net undercount rates were lower in 2000 than in 1990 and that differential undercounts of historically hard-to-enumerate groups, such as minorities, children, and renters, were also reduced. The panel noted, however, that large numbers of duplicates (triple the number in 1990) and imputations helped lower net undercount rates. Overall, the 2000 census continued to undercount some demographic groups while overcounting others. “Reducing such differences will be an important goal for the 2010 census,” the panel wrote.

The panel reviewed decisions not to adjust the census based on results of the Accuracy and Coverage Evaluation (A.C.E.) survey, calling all three determinations (March 2001; October 2001; and March 2003) “justified.” In particular, final estimates of census accuracy (A.C.E. Revision II) were “too uncertain to be used with sufficient confidence about their reliability” for adjusting census counts below the national level and for specific population groups.

Nevertheless, the panel stressed the need for a “large post-enumeration survey” in 2010 to measure accuracy, citing the “prospect” that improved methods to reduce double-counting, coupled with a failure to reduce omissions, could result in a higher net undercount. Panel members called upon the Administration and Congress to fund an “improved A.C.E. program” in 2010 that would evaluate census accuracy for small geographic areas and for population subgroups, as well as for group quarters. They also concluded that the Census Bureau could not fully review accuracy down to the block level in time to meet the legal deadline for redistricting data; the panel urged Congress to consider pushing back that date (currently 12 months after Census Day).

The panel urged the Census Bureau, Administration, and Congress to agree by 2006 on an overall census plan that can be fully tested in the 2008 dress rehearsal. A second group of experts assembled by the NRC, the Panel on Research on Future Census Methods, has been reviewing plans for the next enumeration more closely and will issue a final report soon.

The National Research Council is the principal operating agency of The National Academy of Sciences and The National Academy of Engineering. The census panel was established by the NRC’s Committee on National Statistics in 1998. The full report is available via the Internet at <http://books.nap.edu/catalog/10907.html>.

Appropriations update: The U.S. Senate yesterday cleared a mammoth spending bill that includes Census Bureau funding for Fiscal Year 2004 (FY04), after Democrats gave up efforts to overturn provisions on overtime pay, media ownership, and food labeling regulations. The FY04 Consolidated Appropriations conference agreement (H.R. 2673), passed by the House in December, allocates \$630.9 million for Census Bureau activities in the budget year that started October 1, 2003. That amount will be reduced by an across-the-board cut of just over one percent (0.59 percent applied to all programs in the bill; an additional 0.46 percent applied to the Departments of Commerce, Justice, and State, and several other smaller agencies). The

President is expected to sign the legislation. For further details on FY04 census funding, please see the January 14th *Census News Brief*.

President Bush will submit his Fiscal Year 2005 budget proposal to Congress in two weeks. In post-State of the Union statements this week, the President said his FY05 budget would hold most discretionary spending to a one percent increase. The Census Bureau is expected to request at least \$155 million for the American Community Survey, more than twice the amount allocated this year. The President also said he will seek a ten percent spending boost for anti-terrorism programs, devoting a large chunk of the extra funds to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Money for the FBI is included in the same appropriations bill that covers the Census Bureau. Early in the annual budget process, Congress sets spending caps for each of 13 regular appropriations bills; all programs within each account must compete for a fixed pot of funds.

New publication: The Russell Sage Foundation and Population Reference Bureau have issued a report, "Politics and Science in Census Taking," authored by former Census Bureau Director Kenneth Prewitt. The report is part of a series, *The American People*, designed to put the results of Census 2000 in context. Dr. Prewitt, who served as director during the second Clinton Administration, reviews the historical quest for census accuracy, the tension between science and politics in planning the last census, and highlights of Census 2000 operations.

For more information on this report and others in the series, visit www.russellsage.org or www.prb.org.

Census News Briefs are prepared by Terri Ann Lowenthal, an independent consultant in Washington, DC. Please direct questions about the information in this News Brief to Ms. Lowenthal at 202/484-3067 or by e-mail at TerriAnn2K@aol.com. Please feel free to circulate this document to other interested individuals and organizations. The Communications Consortium Media Center (CCMC) has posted News Briefs through April 2003 on the Census 2000 Initiative web site, at www.census2000.org. If you would like copies of Census News Briefs distributed after April 2003, please contact Ms. Lowenthal directly.