

American Statistical Association

Promoting the Practice and Profession of Statistics

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March 5, 2012

Honorable Trey Gowdy, Chairman
Honorable Danny Davis, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Health Care, District of Columbia,
Census and National Archives
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Gowdy and Congressman Davis,

I am writing to express my concerns regarding proposals to convert the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) from a mandatory survey to a voluntary survey. These proposals would have an adverse effect on data quality. Additional funding would address some concerns but questions of data quality would persist.

As you know, if an individual does not respond to the ACS, the Census Bureau follows up by such methods as telephone or personal visits, which add considerable costs to the survey. In a voluntary ACS, there would be a decline in response rates for both the original survey and for follow-up measures.

Lower response rates generally result in less reliable data (i.e., larger margins of error). Lower response rates can also mean data will not be available for smaller demographic or geographic groups.

A Census Bureau report¹ estimates an additional cost of \$66 million per year to improve the reliability of survey estimates from a voluntary ACS. Even if Congress makes such funding available, the reliability will not be the same as for a mandatory survey because

¹ Cost and Workload Implications of a Voluntary Community Survey, Deborah Griffin, 2011, http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Downloads/library/2011/2011_Griffin_01.pdf.

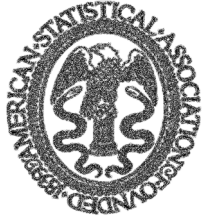
of the differing response rates among demographic and geographic groups.

In short, making ACS voluntary will result in a more expensive ACS with lower quality data.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert N. Rodriguez". The signature is written in a cursive style with a slight shadow effect behind the text.

Robert N. Rodriguez, PhD
President, The American Statistical Association



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