

Chapter 5.

Content Development Process

5.1 OVERVIEW

American Community Survey (ACS) content is designed to meet the needs of federal government agencies and is a rich source of local area information useful to state and local governments, universities, and private businesses. The U.S. Census Bureau coordinates the content development and determination process for the ACS with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) through an interagency committee comprised of more than 30 federal agencies. All requests for content changes are managed by the ACS Content Council, which provides the Census Bureau with guidelines for pretesting, field testing, and implementing new content and changes to existing ACS content. This chapter provides greater detail on the history of content development for the ACS, current survey content, and the content determination process and policy.

5.2 HISTORY OF CONTENT DEVELOPMENT

The ACS is part of the 2010 Decennial Census Program and is an alternative method for collecting the long-form sample data collected in the last five censuses. The long-form sample historically collected detailed population and housing characteristics once a decade through questions asked of a sample of the population.¹ Beginning in 2005, the ACS collects this detailed information on an ongoing basis, thereby providing more accurate and timely data than was possible previously. Starting in 2010, the decennial census will include only a short form that collects basic information for a total count of the nation's population.²

Historically, the content of the long form was constrained by including only the questions for which:

- There was a current federal law calling for the use of decennial census data for a particular federal program (mandatory).
- A federal law (or implementing regulation) clearly required the use of specific data, and the decennial census was the historical or only source; or the data are needed for case law requirements imposed by the U.S. federal court system (required).
- The data were necessary for Census Bureau operational needs and there was no explicit requirement for the use of the data as explained for mandatory or required purposes (programmatic).

Constraining the content of the ACS was, and still is, critical due to the mandatory reporting requirement and respondent burden. To do this, the Census Bureau works closely with the OMB and the Interagency Committee for the ACS, co-chaired by the OMB and the Census Bureau. This committee was established in July 2000, and includes representatives from more than 30 federal departments and agencies that use decennial census data. Working from the Census 2000 long-form justification, the initial focus of the committee was to verify and confirm legislative justifications for every 2003 ACS question. The agencies were asked to examine each question and provide the Census Bureau with justification(s) by subject matter, the legal authority for the use, the lowest geographic level required, the variables essential for cross-tabulation, and the frequency

¹ Sampling began in the 1940 census when a few additional questions were asked of a small sample of people. A separate long-form questionnaire was not implemented until 1960.

² In addition to counting each person in every household, the basic information planned for the Census 2010 short form will include a very select set of key demographic characteristics needed for voting rights and other legislative requirements. Currently, the plan is to ask for data on tenure at residence, sex, age, relationship, Hispanic origin, and race.

with which the data are needed. They were asked to cite the text of statutes and other legislative documentation, and to classify their uses of the ACS questions as “mandatory,” “required,” or “programmatic,” consistent with the constraints of the traditional long form.

In the summer of 2002, the U.S. Department of Commerce General Counsel's Office asked each federal agency's General Counsel to examine the justifications submitted for its agency and, if necessary, to revise the information so that the agency would be requesting only the most current material necessary to accomplish the statutory departmental missions in relation to census data. This step ensured that the highest-ranking legal officer in each agency validated its stated program requirements and data needs.

Only questions on those subjects classified as either “mandatory” or “required” were asked on the 2003 ACS questionnaire, along with questions on two programmatic subjects (fertility and seasonal residence). The end result of this review was a 2003 ACS questionnaire with content almost identical to the Census 2000 long form. In 2002, the ACS questionnaire was approved for 3 years by the OMB in its role of implementing the 1995 Paperwork Reduction Act.

5.3 2003–2007 CONTENT

ACS Content

In 2003–2007, the ACS consisted of 25 housing and 42 population questions (6 basic and 36 detailed population questions). (See Table 5.1 for a complete list of ACS topics.) The ACS GQ questionnaire contains all population questions in the population column of Table 5.1, except the question on relationship to householder. One housing question, food stamp benefit, is on the ACS GQ questionnaire.

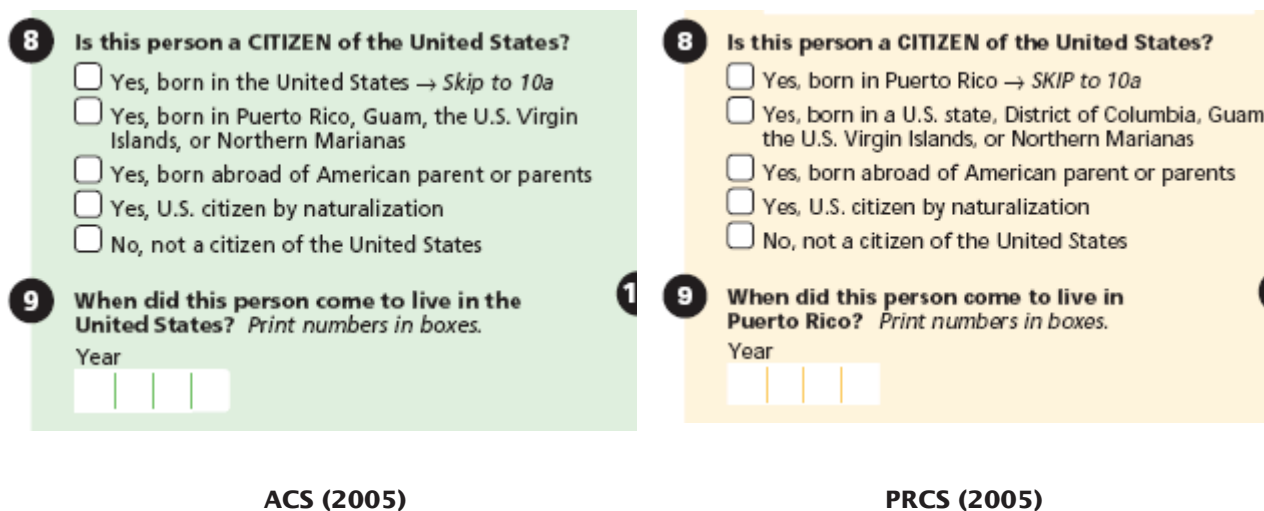
Table 5.1 **2003–2007 ACS Topics Listed by Type of Characteristic and Question Number**

Housing	Population
Household size	Name
H1 Units in Structure	P1 Sex
H2 Year Structure Built	P2 Age and Date of Birth
H3 Year Householder Moved Into Unit	P3 Relationship to Householder
H4 Acreage	P4 Marital Status
H5 Agricultural Sales	P5 Hispanic Origin
H6 Business on Property	P6 Race
H7 Rooms	P7 Place of Birth
H8 Bedrooms	P8 Citizenship
H9 Plumbing Facilities	P9 Year of Entry
H10 Kitchen Facilities	P10 Type of School and School Enrollment
H11 Telephone Service Available	P11 Educational Attainment
H12 Vehicles Available	P12 Ancestry
H13 House Heating Fuel	P13 Language Spoken at Home, Ability to Speak English
H14 Cost of Utilities	P14 Residence 1 Year Ago (Migration)
H15 Food Stamp Benefit	P15 Disability: Sensory, Physical
H16 Condominium Status and Fee	P16 Disability: Mental, Self-care
H17 Tenure	P17 Disability: Going out Alone, Ability to Work
H18 Monthly Rent	P18 Fertility
H19 Value of Property	P19 Grandparents as Caregivers
H20 Real Estate Taxes	P20 Veteran Status
H21 Insurance for Fire, Hazard, and Flood	P21 Period of Military Service
H22 Mortgage Status, Payment, Real Estate Taxes	P22 Years of Military Service
H23 Second or Junior Mortgage Payment or Home Equity Loan	P23 Worked Last Week
H24 Mobile Home Costs	P24 Place of Work
H25 Seasonal Residence	P25 Means of Transportation
	P26 Private Vehicle Occupancy
	P27 Time Leaving Home to Go to Work
	P28 Travel Time to Work
	P29 Layoff, Temporarily Absent, Informed of Recall or Return Date
	P30 Looking for Work
	P31 Available to Work
	P32 When Last Worked
	P33 Weeks Worked
	P34 Usual Hours Worked Per Week
	P35 Class of Worker
	P36 Employer
	P37 Type or Kind of Business
	P38 Industry
	P39 Occupation
	P40 Primary Job Activity
	P41 Income in the Past 12 Months (by type of income)
	P42 Total Income

Puerto Rico Community Survey (PRCS) Content

The content for the PRCS is identical to that used in the United States. The PRCS includes six questions that are worded differently from those on the ACS to accommodate cultural and geographic differences between the two areas. (See Figure 5.1 for an example of ACS questions that were modified for the PRCS.)

Figure 5.1 **Example of Two ACS Questions Modified for the PRCS**



5.4 CONTENT POLICY AND CONTENT CHANGE PROCESS

The ACS is designed to produce detailed demographic, housing, social, and economic data every year. Because it accumulates data over time to obtain sufficient levels of reliability for small geographic areas, the Census Bureau must minimize content changes. Consistency must be maintained throughout all ACS data collection operations, including HUs and GQ facilities. Introducing changes could affect data quality and result in only partial releases of data for a given year if a question changes significantly, or has not been asked for long enough to accumulate 3 or 5 years' worth of data.

In 2006, the OMB, in consultation with Congress and the Census Bureau, adopted a more flexible approach to content determinations for the ACS. In making content determinations, the OMB, in consultation with the Census Bureau, will consider issues such as frequency of data collection, the level of geography needed to meet the required need, and other sources of data that could meet a requestor's need in lieu of ACS data. In some cases, legislation still may be needed for a measure to be justified for inclusion in the ACS. In other cases, OMB may approve a new measure based on an agency's justification and program needs.

The Census Bureau recognizes and appreciates the interests of federal partners and stakeholders in the collection of data for the ACS. Because participation in the ACS is mandatory, only necessary questions will be approved by OMB and asked by the Census Bureau. The OMB's responsibility under the Paperwork Reduction Act requires that the practical utility of the data be demonstrated and that the respondent burden be minimized (especially for mandatory collections).

The Census Bureau's ACS Content Policy is used as a basic guideline for all new question proposals from federal agencies, the Congress, and the Census Bureau. The Content Change Process is part of a risk management strategy to ensure that each new or modified question has been tested fully and will collect quality data without reducing overall response rates.

The policy provides guidance for ongoing ACS content development. To implement this policy, the Census Bureau coordinates input from internal and external groups, while the Interagency Committee for the ACS obtains broad input from all federal agencies. The Census Bureau also coordinates the creation of subject area subcommittee groups that include representatives from the Interagency Committee and the Census Bureau; these groups provide expertise in designing sets of questions and response categories so that the questions will meet the needs of all agencies. Census Bureau staff review the subcommittee proposals and provide comments and internal approval of content changes.

The ACS Content Change Process provides guidance for Census Bureau pretesting, including a field test, for all new or modified questions prior to incorporating them into ACS instruments; this

guidance is based on the standards outlined in the *Census Bureau Standard: Pretesting Questionnaires and Related Materials for Surveys and Censuses* (DeMaio, Bates, Ingold, and Willimack 2006). New pretested questions will be added to the ACS only after OMB approval has been given to the Census Bureau.

Content Change Factors

The OMB and the Census Bureau consider several factors when new content is proposed. Federal agencies must provide both agencies with specific information about the new data collection need(s).

The uses of the data must be identified to determine the appropriateness of collecting it through a national mandatory survey. Other Census Bureau surveys or other sources of data are reviewed and considered. Because ACS data are collected and tabulated at the tract or block-group level, the response burden for the majority of respondents must be considered.

Federal agencies interested in content changes must be able to demonstrate that they require detailed data with the frequency of ACS data collection, and that failure to obtain the information with this frequency will result in a failure to meet agency needs. Requests for new ACS content will be assessed relative to the impact on the requesting agency if the data are not collected through the ACS. Federal agencies requesting new content must demonstrate that they have considered legitimate alternative data sources, and why those alternatives do not meet their needs.

Content Change Requirements

Federal agency or Census Bureau proposals for new content and/or changes to existing ACS questions due to identified quality issues are subject to the following requirements:

- ACS content can be added to or revised only once a year, due to the annual nature of the survey and the number of operations that also must be revised. New content will be incorporated into the ACS only after pretesting, including a field test, has been completed, and the OMB has provided final approval.
- The requesting federal agency will assist with the development of a draft question(s), work with the Census Bureau and other agencies to develop or revise the question, and submit the proposal to the OMB and Census Bureau for further review. In addition, a plan to pretest new or modified content, including a field test, must be developed in accordance with the *Census Bureau Standard: Pretesting Questionnaires and Related Materials for Surveys and Censuses*.
- Pretesting must be conducted to detect respondent error and to determine whether or not a change would increase or decrease a respondent's understanding of what is being asked. Alternative versions of questions are pretested to identify the version most likely to be answered accurately by respondents, and then are field tested.

5.5 2006 CONTENT TEST

In 2004, planning began for the 2006 ACS Content Test, so that the content changes in the ACS could be field tested before the 2008 ACS instrument was finalized. The OMB and the Census Bureau first asked members of the ACS Interagency Committee to review the legislative authority for current or proposed ACS questionnaire content and to identify any questions that needed to be reworded or reformatted.

The 2006 ACS Content Test was the first opportunity to test revisions to the long-form sample questions used in Census 2000. The content of the 2006 ACS Content Test included new questions on the subjects of marital history, health insurance and coverage, and veterans' service-connected disability ratings.

The test methodology for the 2006 ACS Content Test was designed to be similar to ACS data collection in the production phase, and incorporated the prenotice letter, initial mailing package, reminder postcard, and potential second mailing package (due to nonresponse). A computer-assisted personal interview follow-up was conducted. To measure response error, a computer-assisted telephone interview content reinterview also was conducted. Simple response variance and gross difference rates, along with other data quality measures, such as item nonresponse rates and measures of distributional changes, served as indicators of the quality of the test questions relative to current ACS questions.

5.6 REFERENCES

DeMaio, Theresa J., Nancy Bates, Jane Ingold, and Diane Willimack (2006). "Pretesting Questionnaires and Related Materials for Surveys and Censuses." Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006.