

# **Final Report**



**SIPP ADVANCE LETTER RESEARCH:  
COGNITIVE INTERVIEW RESULTS, IMPLICATIONS,  
& LETTER RECOMMENDATIONS**

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**March 23, 2001**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report documents research regarding the revised advance letter used for the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP). The main goal was to create a pretested, quality introductory letter that balanced both the Census Bureau's disclosure requirements and respondent's most common initial inquiries and concerns. It was expected that portions of the revised letter would serve as a prototype or template for advance letters from other demographic surveys conducted by the Census Bureau.

After a series of focus groups, a revised advance letter was created and cognitive interviews were conducted in an effort to evaluate respondents' comprehension and perception of the letter's revised content and presentation. Modified letters emerged and were evaluated through iterative rounds of pretesting. The numbered sections below briefly outline important aspects of the entire research process: 1) issues identified in the original SIPP advance letter; 2) strategies used to create the revised letter; and 3) main findings from iterative rounds of cognitive interviewing with several versions of the revised letter. The recommended SIPP advance letter, based on the results of pretesting, follows part three below.

### **PART I: From the focus groups, the following ineffective and problematic areas were identified in the original advance letter:**

#### **1. Ineffective organization of information**

- Much pertinent information was presented in less salient positions—on the back of the letter
- Topic overlap throughout

#### **2. Salient, sensitive topics preventing field representatives from securing initial interviews**

- Social Security Number request paragraph in FAQ section created respondent anxiety, and this data is not collected until Wave 2 in Methods Panel
- References to “bank statements and pay stubs” was misinterpreted as the Census Bureau requesting to review these documents, and also created respondent anxiety
- Voluntary disclosure statement was written such that respondents prematurely ceased processing entire message, possibly causing survey refusal

#### **3. General formatting issues**

- Unconventional/confusing salutation and closing
- Insufficient font size (Times Roman, 12-point)

### **PART II: Versions of the revised advance letter incorporated the following solutions to address the problematic areas mentioned above:**

#### **1. Organize information to increase saliency of topics most requested by respondents**

- Survey purpose & data uses — *What is this? What's it used for?*
- Selection process — *How was I picked?*
- Survey sponsor — *Who's doing this?*
- Confidentiality assurances — *How will my information be handled?*

#### **2. Use uncomplicated syntax and brief sentences, avoiding academic terms**

#### **3. Decrease saliency for problematic topics best handled by field representatives at the doorstep**

- Voluntary disclosure statements utilized a two-part strategy designed to encourage participation by controlling the order of presentation so the acceptability of item non-response, as opposed to a complete refusal, would be emphasized

- “Standard” confidentiality paragraph, written from the Census Bureau’s perspective, was relocated to the FAQ section so a paragraph from a respondent’s perspective could be presented first within the letter’s body
- Time commitment references, both the individual survey length (30 minutes) and follow-up interviews, were located in a less salient position on the back of the letter
- Social Security Number request paragraph was omitted from the advance letter and will be reintroduced in the Wave 2 letter, where this data is collected in the Methods Panel

**4. Reformat letter for reading ease and sponsor saliency**

- Helvetica font, 12-point used to *decrease reading difficulty for vision-impaired respondents*
- Phrase “Dear Resident,” used for salutation
- Author of the letter, as well as his title and agency, was moved to closing where respondents expect to find such information

**PART III: Major findings resulting from iterative rounds of cognitive interviewing with several revised advance letters include:**

- 1. Strategies used to increase the saliency of the most sought-after information were successful**
  - Independent recall tasks indicated respondents retained essential information (i.e., survey purpose/data uses, selection process, sponsor, confidentiality messages, survey’s voluntary nature)
- 2. Most salient aspect of the letter was the data use example regarding health insurance for children**
  - Positively impacted respondents’ decision-making process in the face of a survey participation request, but was supplemented by their desire to enrich area neighborhoods with federal funds (possible Census 2000 effect)
- 3. Strategies used to decrease salience of anxiety-producing material were successful**
  - Most respondents did not attend to time commitment statements
  - Respondents correctly interpreted and attended to all aspects of the voluntary statements
  - Removal of Social Security Number paragraph prevented premature concern over this data request (a revised version was pretested and may be included in a Wave 2 letter; however, issues external to this letter remain)
- 4. Two-part voluntary disclosure strategy successfully encouraged complete processing of message**
  - Respondents encouraged to participate due to the salient portion of message—acceptability of item non-response
- 5. Alternating presentation order of the two confidentiality paragraphs successful**
  - Paragraph moved into the letter’s body, written from respondents’ perspective, was initially more informative and reassuring
  - “Standard” paragraph, considered more general by respondents, when relocated to the letter’s back became less salient and discouraged negative interpretations



**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE**  
**Bureau of the Census**  
Washington, DC 20233-0001

Dear Resident:

I am writing to ask for your help with an important survey that the U.S. Census Bureau is conducting, called the Survey of Income and Program Participation. In a few days, a Census Bureau field representative will contact you. He or she will show you an official identification card and then ask you questions about your job and economic situation.

This survey is used to make decisions about programs that affect millions of people in the United States. For example, results from the survey are used to develop programs to make sure more children are covered by health insurance. Policymakers use these results to evaluate the future needs of the Social Security System. The Census Bureau needs your help to collect accurate data, so that policymakers can plan for important government programs for the future.

The Census Bureau chose your address, not you personally, as part of a randomly selected sample. We need to interview every household in our sample to get a complete picture of the economic situation of people across the country. Your participation in the survey is important; however, you may decline to answer any particular question.

All the information the Census Bureau collects for this survey about you and your household is confidential by law (Title 13, United States Code, Section 9). By law, every Census Bureau employee—including the Director as well as every field representative—has taken an oath and is subject to a jail term, a fine, or both if he or she discloses ANY information that could identify you or your household.

I have included additional information on the back of this letter. ***Learn more at our website: [www.sipp.census.gov/sipp/](http://www.sipp.census.gov/sipp/).***

Thank you for your cooperation. I am grateful for your help.

Sincerely,

William G. Barron, Jr., Acting Director  
U.S. Census Bureau

**For more information, contact: [FILL RO ADDRESS].**

## **Why does the Census Bureau collect this information?**

Although we conduct a census every ten years, we need to collect some kinds of information more often. Information collected for this survey allows us to keep abreast of changes people have experienced in their jobs, the kind of work they do, the number of people looking for work, the situation of people in government programs, as well as other information. The country changes rapidly, and we need up-to-date facts in order to plan effectively for future programs. This means providing current economic information to people in government and private organizations so that they can make informed decisions about policies that affect people of all income levels. Your voluntary participation is essential for ensuring that this survey's results are complete and accurate.

## **How do I know the Census Bureau will protect my information?**

The law authorizes the Census Bureau to collect information for this survey (Title 13, United States Code, Section 182). Section 9 of this law requires us to keep all information about you and your household strictly confidential. The Census Bureau will use this information only for statistical purposes.

## **Additional information about this process:**

We estimate that it will take about 30 minutes, per person, to collect the information. This includes time for reviewing instructions and completing and reviewing your answers. After the initial interview, we will conduct a follow-up interview periodically, in order to learn how people's economic situations change over time. Send comments regarding time estimates, or any other aspect of this data collection process, including suggestions for reducing this burden to:

Associate Director for Finance and Administration  
ATTN: Paperwork Reduction Project 0607-0865  
Room 3104, Federal Building 3  
U.S. Census Bureau  
Washington, DC 20233-0001

The U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) approved this survey and gave it OMB approval number 0607-0725. Displaying this number shows that the Census Bureau is authorized to conduct this survey. Please use this number in any correspondence concerning this survey.

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## RESEARCH PURPOSE

Advance letters in survey research have the potential to improve response rates, but they are also necessary vehicles for: 1) piquing and maintaining respondent interest by providing sufficient relevant information; and 2) conveying required legal information. Since the use of advance letters is potentially advantageous to the Census Bureau in terms of response rate effects, it is important to balance bureaucratic and respondent needs in the presentation of information. By placing emphasis on the survey's purpose and participation request, in terms easily digestible by respondents, these introductory letters can avoid alienating potential respondents and impeding field representatives' (FR) ability to gain cooperation at the doorstep.

Concern over the quality and effectiveness, as well as the lack of pretesting, of advance letters for demographic surveys prompted an evaluation-centered research agenda. This research project focused on the advance letter used for the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) in hopes that an improved revision would serve as a prototype advance letter for other surveys. A group<sup>1</sup> was assembled to oversee the redesign of respondent letters and ultimately approved a final version of the new SIPP advance letter, after the letter was pretested by researchers from the Center for Survey Methods Research (CSMR).<sup>2</sup> The SIPP Executive Committee also provided input.

The first phase of this project utilized focus groups, with Census Bureau field representatives (FRs), to explore and identify the following issues: 1) negative effects of the original letter in the field; 2) primary respondent concerns upon first contact; 3) topics of particular interest to respondents faced with a preliminary participation decision; and 4) respondent interpretation of and sensitivity toward language and concepts. Exploring pre-existing issues, through focus group research, proved to be essential in guiding subsequent research and shaping recommendations used to create a letter that would attempt to balance both bureaucratic and respondent needs.

The second phase involved three rounds of cognitive interviewing with several versions of the revised letter. These results not only provided insights regarding respondents' interpretation of various concepts and statements, but they also confirmed earlier focus group findings. Iterative rounds of pretesting, that included comparison and ranking tasks among similar statements, encouraged the evolution of a more effective letter—evoking considerably less negative feedback than earlier versions.

In the summer of 2001, the third phase of this research will be used to evaluate the revised letter's performance by monitoring response rates in a split-panel experimental design embedded in Wave 1 of the SIPP Methods Panel.

This report provides a discussion of the methodology used for the cognitive interviews and a brief background history on the process of the first revision for the letter. Results from the three rounds of cognitive interviews and their impact on subsequent letter revisions are also discussed below, along with recommendations for adapting the pretested material to other Census Bureau advance letters.

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<sup>1</sup> Redesign group participants included: Lorena Carrasco (DSD), Theresa DeMaio (CSMR), Patricia Doyle (DSD), Donald Fischer (DSMD), Gerald Gates (POL), Ashley Landreth (CSMR), Elizabeth Martin (DIR), and Karen Schwager (DSD). At various stages of the project, the working group met to discuss current research findings and implications, in order to shape the letter's wording and information disclosure strategies.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Martin collaborated on revising the new SIPP advance letter. Theresa DeMaio and Kristen Hughes helped carry out the research, and Elizabeth Murphy provided comments on an early version of the letter.

Attachments for this report are as follows:

- 1) Attachment A – The original letter, also used during focus group research;
- 2) Attachment B – Letter used in the first round of cognitive interviews;
- 3) Attachment C – Letter used in the second round of cognitive interviews;
- 4) Attachment D – Letter also used in the second round of cognitive interviews, and presented and recommended to the redesign group along with an executive summary;
- 5) Attachment E – Letter used in the third round of cognitive interviewing, approved by the redesign group (slightly modified from the recommended version); and
- 6) Attachment F – Final recommended letter.

## **METHODOLOGY**

From November 2000 through March 2001, a total of 25 respondents were recruited and interviewed at either the Center for Survey Methods Research's (CSMR) cognitive interview lab or a location more convenient for the respondent, usually their place of employment. Three CSMR researchers conducted the cognitive interviews and summarized the results. The interviews ranged in duration from 45 minutes to one and a half hours, and were audio- and video-taped after gaining respondents' consent. Three rounds of interviewing helped determine respondents' comprehension and perception of the revised SIPP advance letter—17 interviews in the first round, with two additional rounds of four interviews each after more changes to the letter were made.

## **RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS**

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Most respondents were recruited from the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area; however, two were Baltimore residents. In total, 13 males and 12 females were recruited for this research. Respondent characteristics varied across age, education, gender, household income, race, and reading ability. The 17 respondents recruited for the first round of cognitive interviewing included nine males and eight females, whose ages ranged from the mid-twenties to the mid-sixties. Among male respondents, three were Caucasian, five were African-American, and one was Asian. Among female respondents, five were Caucasian and three were African-American. Education attainment among these respondents varied from the high school level to having received a graduate degree. Respondents' level of income also varied from below \$25,000 to over \$100,000 annually.

The respondents recruited for the second round of interviewing were comprised of one Caucasian male, one African-American female, and two African-American males. High school graduates were targeted for this round of cognitive interviewing in order to ascertain the letter's effectiveness in conveying the essential topics to individuals of average educational attainment. These respondents had obtained a high school diploma, or its equivalent. One respondent had some college, but none had college degrees. In addition, respondents from this round most likely fell into a modest income bracket—below \$50,000, and some below \$25,000.

Respondents recruited for the third round of interviewing were comprised of one African-American male, two African-American females, and one Caucasian female. These respondents also had high school diplomas, and one respondent had a graduate degree. These interviews were used to monitor any shifts in respondents' interpretation of main concepts after minor changes were made to the letter in the redesign group meeting.



## **PROTOCOL**

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The structured cognitive interview protocol was comprised of retrospective and concurrent probes designed to build an informative and exploratory conversation regarding respondents' general impressions of the letter, processes involved in their participation decisions, comprehension and retention of key concepts and information, sensitivity toward certain topics, and anxiety produced by the letter.

This protocol relied on several strategies to produce significant amounts of information regarding respondents' retention and interpretation of the letter's contents. While it is essential to understand respondents' reactions to, and interpretations of, certain material during the focused read-aloud tasks occurring in mid-interview, it is important to remember that information captured in the very first moments of the interview—during the independent recall tasks—more closely approximates the way actual respondents would process and comprehend the letter in the field.

## **INTERVIEWS**

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Respondents were given an envelope addressed to "CURRENT RESIDENT" and instructed to process the letter as if they had received it at home. Respondents were left alone in a quiet room by themselves to review the letter for a maximum of 5 minutes. By manipulating the environment—removing the interviewer from the presence of respondents—the expectation was that respondents' capacity to focus on the letter's contents would be maximized, since it would more closely approximate the experience of reviewing the letter at home. Respondents could be monitored through a two-way mirror in CSMR's cognitive lab, allowing interviewers to return to the room shortly after respondents concluded their review of the letter. When respondents were interviewed at their place of employment, they often sought out the interviewer just after finishing the letter. Interviews were audio- and video-taped not only for summary and analysis purposes, but the videotapes were also used to observe respondents' interaction with the letter during the interviewer's absence (e.g., attention to the letter's front and back portions).

When the interview resumed, letters were removed from the respondent's view and they were given an independent recall task—a series of short questions designed to explore initial reactions and the amount and quality of retained information. Results from this particular exercise came the closest to approximating actual respondent reactions in the field, because respondents had not yet been instructed to scrutinize the letter in greater detail. Actual respondents most likely would not attend to the letter in the same manner as cognitive interview respondents, since the latter were refocused on several aspects of the letter and asked to provide interpretations later in the interview. After interviewers obtained respondents' initial reactions, they returned the letter to the respondents. Respondents were then asked some additional questions regarding their feelings about participating in the proposed survey, mail-processing habits in the home, and perceptions of missing or inadequate information.

A read-aloud task was applied to most paragraphs in the letter, in which respondents read entire paragraphs aloud for the interviewer and then responded to specific probes. This was useful for gaining an understanding of respondents' reading abilities, exploring respondents' comprehension of particular concepts, and identifying difficult words and complex syntax. Respondents were also asked to compare and rank similar statements and provide reasons for their preferences. This was used to determine optimal wording for certain concepts and information. In particular, this technique was used for several versions of the survey purpose/data uses paragraph, which emerged in the last two rounds of interviewing. At the conclusion of the interview, debriefing questions were administered to revisit key concepts and measure changes in attitudes over the course of the interview and to summarize respondents' perceptions about the letter.

## REVISING THE LETTER

### **SUMMARY & IMPLICATIONS OF FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS** *Creating a Revised Letter*

As directly and briefly as possible, the original advance letter (See Attachment A) was rewritten to address respondents' most common concerns upon first contact—as reported in FR focus groups.<sup>3</sup> The very first revision of the letter's body covered the following main topics (See Attachment B):

- Survey's purpose (“What’s this all about?”)
- Data uses (“What’s this for?”)
- Selection process (“How was I picked? Are you targeting me?”)
- Confidentiality statement (“Will you promise to protect my information?”)

In addition, focus group results indicated respondents frequently inquired about the identity of the survey's sponsor. So the Census Bureau was made more salient within the letter's body by replacing words such as “we” and “us” with “the Census Bureau” in the confidentiality paragraph, as well as placing the phrase “Bureau of the Census” underneath the sender's printed name at the end of the letter's body (Kenneth Prewitt). The title “Director” was also added to the sender's printed name to further identify the letter's sender.

The paragraph containing the survey's purpose and data uses was written as specifically as possible, but was difficult to construct since mandated purposes for SIPP's data collection do not exist. It was possible to state how the data were used previously, but future uses fluctuate with the country's perceptions of social problems and public needs. In order to maximize respondents' feelings of sympathy, civic duty, and perceived personal benefit, brief and specific statements were included regarding one past data use and one likely future data use (making sure all children have access to health care and possible changes to the Social Security system). To summarize and conclude this paragraph, the final sentence mentioned that the data were needed to assist policymakers in making good choices for the country's important government programs.

Since focus group findings indicated respondents wanted to know how they were selected for the survey, a statement was added to convey that households were selected by address, and not by some other criteria. Focus group findings also suggested refusals resulted from respondents not recognizing the importance of their participation in the survey, even if they did not participate in a government program. In addition, FRs reported that respondents often tried to elude initial interviews by suggesting the FR interview a neighbor instead. Therefore, two statements were added to this paragraph to help address these common responses of reluctant respondents.

Focus group findings suggested certain text should be omitted, since its presence consistently evoked negative respondent reactions that FRs found difficult to neutralize when attempting to gain cooperation (e.g., the phrase “bank statements and pay stubs,” the voluntary disclosure statement, and the Social Security Number request in the FAQ section). The sentence suggesting that respondents search their “bank statements and pay stubs” was removed, as well as the Social Security Number (SSN) request. The SSN request could be removed from this initial letter because respondents are not asked for this information until the second interview. So, it was agreed that this disclosure could be inserted into a subsequent letter respondents receive after the initial interview.

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<sup>3</sup> Results from focus groups conducted with FRs/SFRs from various regional offices are discussed in a November 5, 2000 report titled *Focus Group Results: Issues and Recommendations for the SIPP Advance Letter*.

Although FRs reported that the overt voluntary participation statement also caused refusals, this statement could not be removed altogether. So, it was rewritten in an attempt to downplay its overt nature, thereby preventing respondents from opting out of the survey before learning they could decline any particular question. In the body of the letter, an indirect voluntary participation statement was inserted to encourage more extensive message processing, where emphasis could be placed on the acceptability of item-nonresponse, as opposed to refusing the survey. In an effort to maintain full disclosure, a more direct voluntary statement using the word “voluntary” was placed in the first FAQ on the back of the letter, where it would be less likely to derail a respondent from processing the letter further.

Since much of the information present in the FAQ section had either been condensed and relocated to the body of the letter or removed entirely, it was possible to reduce the text on the back of the letter to three manageable and useful sections: 1) an expanded explanation of why the Census Bureau collects information through SIPP; 2) an additional explanation regarding the consequences for breaching confidentiality, specifically addressing a respondent’s perspective; and 3) a catch-all category outlining time commitments for this survey, directions for submitting suggestions for aspects of the data collection process, as well as displaying the OMB approval number authorizing the Census Bureau to conduct the survey.

Finally, some formatting changes were made that increased readability and more closely resembled a friendly business-letter form. For example, the salutation format was changed to the more widely recognized standard for a letter’s introduction, “Dear \_\_\_\_\_,” (in this case, “Dear Resident,” was used). Also, the letter’s reference number was relocated to a less visible position (bottom right), since it holds little informative value for respondents. In addition, the letter’s font was changed to 11 point Helvetica, which appears to be larger and easier to read than the Times Roman font. For informational purposes, the Census Bureau’s website was added, both in the letter’s body and in the lower right hand corner, should respondents care to learn more about the survey.

## **COGNITIVE INTERVIEW FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS**

### ***The Letter’s Body & FAQ Section***

This section of the report presents major findings pertaining to the letter, included as Attachment B, and resulting recommendations. Where subsequent rounds of testing were used to focus on problematic areas of the letter, results of those separate rounds are discussed. So, this report assumes consistent results between rounds of testing unless otherwise stated. First, a brief overview of the letter’s general performance is provided, followed by the discussion of more specific topics.

### **OVERVIEW**

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For the most part, the revised letter performed well and iterative rounds of cognitive testing provided opportunities for refining and testing certain portions of the letter that were either misinterpreted or negatively interpreted (e.g., unwanted negative changes made to the Social Security System, “government programs” interpreted too narrowly as stereotypical “welfare programs,” respondents being covertly targeted for the survey despite the letter’s assurances to the contrary). Letter revisions resulting from the first round of cognitive interviewing were extensive enough to necessitate an additional round of interviews. Of particular concern were the performance of the revised survey purpose/data uses paragraph and the relocated confidentiality paragraphs.

Results from the independent recall tasks suggest the revised construction of the advance letter was successful in its ability to immediately convey essential information respondents typically search for in

these types of letters. In general, most respondents were able to quickly and accurately recall the letter's essential topics, which were previously identified as those most often inquired about in doorstep FR introductions (survey purpose, data uses, selection process, information protection/confidentiality statement, and the survey's sponsor).

During the independent recall tasks, there was strong evidence that a two-statement approach for disclosing the voluntary nature of the survey encouraged respondents to process the statement's entire message—one that stressed the acceptability of item non-response as opposed to a complete refusal. Most respondents reported thinking that the survey was voluntary, but they recalled the letter's exact words when probed directly about their assumption: "...you may decline to answer any particular question." Some respondents added that the tone of the letter also made them think the survey was voluntary—the letter was asking for their help in the first paragraph, in addition to references throughout the letter that mentioned the need for accuracy and completeness.

The most salient portion of the letter for almost every respondent was that the data were used to help ensure more children could access health insurance—the data use example in the second paragraph. Whether or not they themselves had children, this particular example became a very compelling reason for most respondents to participate in the survey. Addressing the future needs of the Social Security System was far less salient for most respondents, although read-aloud tasks occurring later in the interview prompted positive reactions to this data use example. Most respondents understood from an initial reading of the letter that survey questions would focus on income and employment data, and most only noticed that they might be asked questions about "program participation" after they processed the letter in greater detail.

The majority of respondents commented on the vague quality of the letter's stated survey purpose and data uses. Although the advance letter gave two specific data use examples (i.e., children's health care and Social Security) and two summary survey purpose statements (i.e., "survey is used to make decisions about programs" and "so that policy makers can plan for important government programs"), some respondents reported they would not make a participation decision until they could get more information from an FR. Before making a decision, these respondents wanted to learn more about how the data would be used, as well as the kinds of questions contained in the survey. Even so, when probed directly, respondents were unable to identify any missing information they would expect to see in a letter of this type.

Even though many respondents felt compelled to participate in the survey, their decision-making processes often had little to do with the letter's contents. Participation decisions seemed at first to be based upon feelings the letter evoked, mainly civic duty and helping behavior; however, respondents talked quite a bit about the allocation of resources (federal dollars) in their communities—which is most likely a Census 2000 PR campaign effect. Additional reasons given for participation were having had a positive experience with the decennial, having feelings of goodwill and trust for the Census Bureau, and having an expectation that results would benefit humanity and the immediate community.

Topics for which saliency was purposefully reduced, went largely unnoticed in cognitive interviews (e.g., time for initial interview, follow-up interviews, overt voluntary statement), and therefore, did not cause significant problems for most respondents. The anxiety produced by the SSN paragraph, however, far exceeded any anxiety produced about any other topic in the letter. This topic caused concern over the type of information that would be gathered, confidentiality issues such as data sharing, and the uses for such information.

## **FORMATTING & APPEARANCE**

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### ***General:***

The font used throughout the first round of cognitive interviewing was an 11-point Helvetica, which is noticeably larger than a 12-point Times Roman font in both width and height, without consuming much additional space. The Helvetica font's straightforward and unfettered appearance is also due to its letters having relatively simplistic design properties. There exists some empirical research suggesting text in Times Roman facilitates speedy reading; however, we should seek to employ strategies that facilitate respondents' ability to simply read this brief letter and avoid font types that may make text uncomfortably small.

### ***Problem(s):***

Even with the 11-point Helvetica font, respondents with impaired vision stated they would prefer a larger font for reading ease.

In the original letter, an identifying number [SIPP-20105(L)] was located in the upper left-hand corner, just above the salutation, and was in the same font size as text in the letter's body. The location and appearance of this identifier seemed as if it might compete for respondents' attention, and it would not communicate any pertinent information.

### ***Recommendation(s):***

Increase the font in the letter's body to a 12-point Helvetica to alleviate eyestrain for vision-impaired respondents. This recommendation was implemented in the second and third rounds of cognitive interviewing, and seemed to work as intended. For example, after learning he would be required to read a letter, one respondent began to put on his reading glasses. When he saw the letter (with the 12-point Helvetica font) he announced he would not need his glasses, because the print was larger and more readable than the newspaper he had been reading en route to the interview that morning.

Render the SIPP letter's identifying number [SIPP-20105(L)] less salient by reducing its font size and relocating it to the bottom right-hand corner on the front page. This recommendation was implemented in the second and third rounds of interviewing, however, in the first round this number was located in the bottom left-hand corner. Respondents did not comment on this aspect of the letter.

### ***Future Considerations:***

While this format deviates from Census Bureau standards, it should be applied to subsequent letters. Font style and size consideration for the letter are critical aspects of design, which can ultimately encourage respondents to read the letter.

## **SALUTATION & CLOSING**

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### ***Problem(s):***

Organizing important and useful information according to unconventional formats increases the likelihood that respondents will overlook the information entirely. The letter's original salutation did not quite adhere to any standard business letter form, and looked more like an adaptation of an internal memo:

**FROM THE DIRECTOR  
U.S. CENSUS BUREAU**

Within the context of the letter this looks confusing, because the sender's information does not appear where readers most expect to find it—in the closing. In addition, focus group participants pointed out that

the letter's closing only includes the director's name—leaving out this individual's title and place of employment.

***Recommendation(s):***

Adopt a simplified and more common approach, used in formal letter writing, for the salutation and closing. This strategy takes advantage of respondents' existing framework for understanding and processing information from a letter such as this. Using the phrase, "Dear Resident," for the salutation and relocating the director's/acting director's title and place of employment to the closing will allow respondents to grasp this essential information quickly:

**Dear Resident:**

**XXX...**

**Kenneth Prewitt, Director  
US Census Bureau**

This strategy seemed to work well in every round of cognitive interviewing; many respondents were able to independently recall that the letter originated from the director of the Census Bureau. The retention of this information should bolster the perception of the importance of this letter, since the Census Bureau as an organization is typically regarded in a positive manner.

A positive byproduct of the revised salutation was the perception of internal consistency within the letter—between the "Dear Resident" salutation and the selection process explanation in the third paragraph. Respondents recognized and appreciated the implied message that the Census Bureau did not already know residents' names, which meant they truly had been selected by their address.

***Future Considerations:***

The "Dear Resident" salutation strategy may not be appropriate for all advance letters, especially for surveys where selection methods differ from the one used in SIPP.

**PARAGRAPH I**

***Introduction***

***General:***

This paragraph introduces the survey's name and participation request to the respondent. It also gives respondents some indication about the survey's topic, as well as letting them know what will happen next:

**I am writing to ask for your help with an important survey that the U.S. Census Bureau is conducting, called the Survey of Income and Program Participation. In a few days, a Census Bureau field representative will contact you. He or she will show you an official identification card and then ask you questions about your job and economic situation.**

Respondents understood this paragraph to mean that they were being asked to participate in a survey. Most respondents also understood someone would be "contacting" them regarding the survey; however, many respondents wondered if this would be accomplished by phone, another letter accompanied by a paper survey, or a personal visit.

It is unclear why the survey's name was left out of the text on the front of the original letter, and was only included in the FAQs on the reverse. Perhaps this was done in an effort to decrease the saliency of the sensitive topic "income," which appears in the survey's name. While creating the revised letter, it was thought that the survey's name should be included in the opening paragraph for informational purposes.

Focus group results indicated that respondents wanted to know exactly what they were being asked to participate in, so the survey's name was included up front to help introduce the letter's purpose.

Cognitive interviews revealed the inclusion of the survey's name in the first paragraph had little impact on respondents, aside from providing the notion that income questions would be asked in the survey. In an independent recall task, not even one respondent was able to correctly or fully remember the survey's title. Instead, respondents reported having a general impression that the survey would cover income and employment topics. In general, respondents had the sense that survey questions would be very general. For example, many respondents tended not to think the survey would ask detailed questions, such as amounts held in checking and savings accounts. Therefore, most respondents only admitted that this topic was sensitive when directly probed at the conclusion of the interview. The more detailed respondents perceived the income questions to be, the stronger their negative reactions.

### ***Problems & Difficult Concepts:***

#### How will I be contacted?

The information regarding contact initiated by a Census Bureau field representative was presented at the end of the original letter, and was moved to a more primary position in revised versions so respondents would know what to expect next. The FR contact information was written in an indirect manner:

**In a few days, a Census Bureau field representative will contact you. He or she will show you an official identification card and then ask you questions...**

For many respondents, the FR visit information was not very salient, and later in the interview these respondents wondered HOW they might be contacted. Initially, only about a third of respondents correctly interpreted the intended message—that an FR would be coming to their doorstep. Most respondents thought an FR might “contact” them by phone, a few thought they might receive another letter, and others were unsure how they might “contacted.” After briefly revisiting this portion of the text later in the interview, two-thirds of respondents were able to extract the intended meaning. A few respondents seemed to experience increased anxiety after learning about this. In the most mild of cases, respondents were concerned that an FR would show up at an inconvenient time. In more severe cases, of which there were only a few, respondents expressed their reluctance to provide information to strangers at their doorstep.

#### “Program Participation”

Prior to pretesting the revised letter there was concern over possible interpretations of the phrase “program participation” in the survey's name. Focus group results indicated that actual respondents often thought the survey was mainly about stereotypical types of “welfare programs.” Moreover, focus group results suggested that respondents' willingness to participate decreased if the survey's topic was perceived as unrelated to their daily lives—and the topic of “welfare programs” reportedly had this very effect in the field for those respondents who did not receive such benefits.

Respondents were probed retrospectively during a read-aloud task and, depending upon the version of the letter, they interpreted the term “program participation” in the survey's title differently (this is discussed in greater detail in the next section of this report). These varying interpretations were predicated upon the presentation of the “programs” concept in the following paragraph. In earlier letter versions, the term “government programs” was present in the first sentence of the second paragraph, and led respondents to interpret “program participation” in terms of stereotypical “welfare” types of programs (e.g., food stamps, WIC, and AFDC). When the word “programs” was substituted for “government programs” at this point in the second paragraph, respondents were less confident in their interpretations of “program participation” in the first paragraph. In fact, respondents tended not to interpret this phrase in stereotypical welfare terms, and instead more closely associated this phrase with the “government

programs” given as examples in the second paragraph (i.e., health insurance for children and the Social Security System).

#### “Economic Situation”

Most respondents interpreted the vague phrase “economic situation” as relating to facets of their job and income. A few respondents interpreted this more broadly than intended, by including the egress of financial resources as well as the influx (“...you’re going to ask me what [money] comes in and what [money] goes out”). At this point, it is not clear if the more broad interpretation of this term would occur frequently in the general population, causing respondents to determine prematurely that upcoming income questions would be overly intrusive.

#### ***Recommendation(s):***

No further action should be taken with regard to this paragraph at this time. Respondents should be informed of future contacts, and the vagueness with which this information is presented may prevent respondents from becoming overly concerned. For the most part, respondents did not find this problematic, so the best solution at this time seems to be notification of an FR visit without causing concern by writing the statement at a greater level of specificity. The likelihood of respondents interpreting the survey’s title as referring to stereotypical welfare programs was also greatly reduced in later versions of letter.

#### ***Future Considerations:***

Although few respondents reacted negatively as a result of interpreting the phrase “economic situation” too broadly, we should probably remain mindful of possible negative consequences resulting from the use of this vague term. Additional evidence from the letter’s performance in the field would be helpful for further evaluation.

It would be possible to adapt this paragraph to other survey’s advance letters, by inserting the new survey’s name and altering the stated survey topics, provided that an FR would still make the initial contact in person.

## **PARAGRAPH II**

## ***Survey Purpose & Data Uses***

### ***General:***

This paragraph was, by far, the most difficult to construct, since mandated purposes for the collection of SIPP data do not exist, and uses for these data are likely to change as our society’s perceptions of social problems shift. Focus group results revealed that FRs use highly tailored introductions with specific examples of SIPP’s purpose and data uses, based upon observed respondent characteristics at the doorstep. So, this static paragraph was at a disadvantage, because its contents had to be simultaneously compelling, brief, specific, broadly interpretable, accurate, as well as convey a sense of importance without misleading or frightening respondents. The first version of this paragraph, used for round one of cognitive interviewing, attempted to address these concerns by providing respondents with summary survey purpose statements and specific data use statements:

**This survey is used to make decisions about government programs that affect millions of Americans. For example, results from this survey were used to develop a program to ensure that all children were covered by health insurance. In the future, policymakers will use the data to evaluate possible changes in the Social Security system. The Census Bureau needs your help to collect accurate data, so that policymakers can make good choices for the country about important government programs.**



Many respondents commented on the vague nature of the stated survey purpose and data uses, although most respondents found the data use examples provided a compelling reason to participate in the survey. The most salient aspect of the entire letter was the data use example of providing health insurance for children, which every respondent was able to recall independently. The Social Security example was less salient for respondents—about half attended to “changes in Social Security.” Although these two specific examples were used, most respondents interpreted the survey’s purpose and potential data uses very broadly—to include all government programs and planning.

While most respondents found this paragraph compelling, it was not problem free. As a result, two additional versions of this paragraph emerged and were tested in the second round of cognitive interviewing. Respondents were asked to rank these new paragraphs, in order of preference, and asked to provide explanations for their selections. During the redesign group’s review of the revised letter, one minor revision was made to the final paragraph—the word “soon” was removed from the third sentence. So, this revised paragraph was used in the third round of cognitive interviewing to ensure that respondents’ interpretation of its message was not altered. Respondents continued to interpret the paragraph’s main messages consistently, even with the removal of the word “soon.”

### ***Problems & Difficult Concepts:***

#### **Varying Verb Tenses**

In the version used for the first round of cognitive interviews, respondents had great difficulty with the past/present/future construction of the stated data uses. This construction caused comprehension difficulties because the sentences were syntactically difficult to comprehend. For respondents who attempted to process these statements’ implied meaning, they became confused about why they would be asked to participate in a survey for which data had already been collected. Many respondents simply abandoned efforts to interpret the meaning behind the variation in verb tenses once they found these statements to be awkward to read.

Some respondents found the use of past, present, and future tenses within the data uses statements to be difficult to read and comprehend. Confusion resulted because longitudinal data collection is too complex to explain in the letter’s body, and is only hinted at by providing examples of past data uses. Careful readers thought references to past data uses meant the survey was already completed. This had some respondents wondering why they received a survey participation request if the data had already been collected. For those readers who did not pay close attention to the implied meaning of this verb strategy, reading sentences whose verbs did not agree was awkward and caused some respondents to reread these statements over and over.

#### **Inaccurate Statement**

One respondent noted during the interview that, at this time, not all children were covered by health insurance. This data use example was written in such a way that it could easily have been interpreted as an inaccurate statement.

#### **Negative Connotations**

This paragraph was also the victim of misinterpretations and negative interpretations. The reference to “government programs” in the first sentence elicited stereotypical “welfare” interpretations. Although some respondents’ stereotypical interpretations were, to their surprise, broadened by subsequent statements, more sensitive respondents were offended—both because they thought programs typically viewed as helping minorities were being singled out by this survey and because they were concerned this survey might lead to further social disinvestments in this area.

Although the Social Security statement was cast in a neutral tone (“...to evaluate changes...in the system...”), respondents interpreted this negatively (“...this means they are going to screw up the

system...”). After so much negative context had been established in the previous statements, the last sentence’s message regarding “good choices” for government programs was also poorly received and interpreted narrowly as “good choices” for someone other than the respondent.

### ***Version 2 – Round II:***

The wording for revision two, used for the second round of cognitive interviews, was adjusted in order to avoid the negative aspects detected in the previous version. The word “government” in the first sentence was removed to avoid narrow interpretations of this concept early in the letter and to avoid creating sensitivity to this topic. To avoid negative interpretations, the survey’s purpose and data uses statements were rewritten in a more abstract and vague manner. And, to avoid confusion, most verbs were changed to the present tense. The last sentence (“good choices...for government programs”) was dropped altogether. In addition, to avoid sounding exclusionary, the word “Americans” was replaced by the phrase “people of the United States” in the first sentence. The following wording was tested in the second round:

**This survey provides policymakers with current information about the economic well being of people in the United States. The results are used to evaluate current government programs and plan for future needs. For example, these data are used to develop programs to make sure all children have access to health insurance. This survey is also used in long range planning for other programs, such as Social Security.**

Although this paragraph received far less criticism, it quickly became clear in a ranking task that respondents preferred the first version to the second version. While respondents favored this paragraph’s Social Security statement, they noted the paragraph in general was written in a more abstract and academic fashion, whereas the first version was more simply stated and easier to comprehend. When probed for what they liked about the text in the first version, respondents pointed out two summary survey purpose statements, which explained WHY their participation was important:

1<sup>st</sup> sentence: “...used to make decisions about government programs...”

4<sup>th</sup> sentence: “...needs your help to collect accurate data, so that policymakers can make good choices...”

These results seemed surprising in light of the strong negative connotations the first version elicited in round one interviews. When comparing the two paragraphs directly, negative interpretations tended not to surface. One explanation for this may be that context was already established for respondents, in relatively neutral terms, by the second version of the paragraph. Meaning, respondents avoided interpreting “programs” too narrowly in the second version, but after reading the first version they realized the second version was missing the directly written summary data use statements. These summary statements seemed necessary to respondents, even though they too were vaguely written.

### ***Version 3 – Round II:***

It became very clear that an amalgamated paragraph was needed mid-way through the second round of cognitive interviewing. So, the most effective portions of the previous two paragraphs were merged: 1) reinterpreted specific data use examples; and 2) summary survey purpose statements. The following paragraph was created and used for the remaining round two interviews:

**This survey is used to make decisions about programs that affect millions of people in the United States. For example, results from the survey are used to develop programs to make sure more children are covered by health insurance. Soon, policymakers will use these results to evaluate the future needs of the Social**

**Security System. The Census Bureau needs your help to collect accurate data, so that policymakers can plan for important government programs for the future.**

In the remaining portion of the second round, respondents were exposed to the third version initially, and then asked to compare it with the previous two versions. Respondents ranked these paragraphs, from most to least preferred, in the following order: third version, first version, and second version. Even the phrase “government program” in the last sentence performed well, since the term “programs” in the first sentence had been previously contextually defined by the text between the first and last sentence.

***Version 4 – Round III:***

Upon the letter’s review at the redesign group meeting, it was suggested that the word “soon” in the third sentence be omitted. The resulting fourth version of this paragraph was used for round three of cognitive testing:

**This survey is used to make decisions about programs that affect millions of people in the United States. For example, results from the survey are used to develop programs to make sure more children are covered by health insurance. Policymakers use these results to evaluate the future needs of the Social Security System. The Census Bureau needs your help to collect accurate data, so that policymakers can plan for important government programs for the future.**

This paragraph worked very well in the third round of cognitive interviewing, and did not evoke negative reactions from respondents. Respondents continued to report, however, that the survey’s purpose and data uses were vague.

***Recommendation(s):***

In light of the information gained through having several versions of this paragraph processed by respondents, version four should be used for the new SIPP advance letter. Not only did it satisfy most respondents’ need for general survey purpose and data uses information, but it also avoided the negative interpretations of earlier versions.

***Future Considerations:***

For SIPP’s advance letter, further cognitive testing may be needed when policy focus and public attention shift away from these specific issues. It may be helpful, when constructing the survey purpose and data uses paragraph for other advance letters, to consider the basic components of this paragraph’s construction. One or two specific data use statements, along with summary survey purpose statements seemed to provide most respondents with enough information until an FR could reach them.

Furthermore, the passive voice in the first sentence was used to emphasize the summary data use statement, and not the agency taking the action. It is critical for the subject, copula (linking verb “is”), and verb to remain at the forefront of this sentence, as it more directly conveys a piece of important information respondents seek out in survey participation request letters. This is an example of a time when it is more appropriate to use the passive voice—for a sentence when the person who performed the action is not mentioned. To reconstruct this sentence in an active voice would de-emphasize the main message. Here, the survey’s purpose is the focal point, rather than the Census Bureau, data users, or decision makers.

**PARAGRAPH III**

***Selection Process & Voluntary Statement***

***General:***

This paragraph contained information about the selection process as well as the first statement, in a two-part disclosure strategy, regarding the survey’s voluntary nature. This paragraph was also designed to

discourage two common respondent statements geared at deflecting a SIPP interview: 1) “Interview my neighbor instead;” and 2) “I don’t get welfare, so this survey doesn’t apply to me.” The following paragraph was the version used in round one interviews:

**We selected your address, not you personally, as part of a scientifically selected sample. We cannot substitute another address for yours. Whether or not you participate in a government program, we need to interview you to get a complete picture of the economic situation of people across the country. Your participation in the survey is important; however, you may decline to answer any particular question.**

Most respondents were able to independently and accurately recall this paragraph’s selection process message. Consistent with FR sentiment in focus groups, cognitive interview respondents wanted to know how they had been selected for the survey. Response was positive regarding the selection message in the first sentence, and many respondents were relieved by the implied message that they had not been singled out or “targeted” for this survey (“Your address was selected, not you personally...”); however, some respondents did spend some time wondering if they might have been targeted by the Census Bureau for some reason. A few respondents suspected “the government”—of which the Census Bureau is deemed a part—might operate in this covert manner, regardless of the letter’s overt selection message.

One aspect of the letter that seemed reassuring to respondents was the “Dear Resident” salutation. Many respondents spontaneously offered that this salutation assured them they had been selected “randomly” and not by some other means. So, for many respondents, the salutation seemed consistent with the letter’s selection statement, as they interpreted it to mean the Census Bureau did not already know residents’ names.

Focus group research seemed to indicate that respondents often recited the fact that the survey was voluntary just prior to refusing the survey completely during initial doorstep contacts with FRs. Considering the sentence used to convey this information in the original letter:

**Although answering the questions is voluntary, each unanswered item lessens the accuracy of the data.**

It seems possible that the voluntary nature of the survey was made unnecessarily salient by the use of the word “voluntary.” It is also possible that once respondents feel they understand this statement’s main message, they cease to process the remaining portion of the message. The message in the second part of this statement attempts to stress that missing data lessens accuracy, which only alludes to the idea that respondents may decline to answer any particular question. This unstated message—item non-response being preferable to a complete refusal—is probably an essential message for persuading reluctant respondents. In addition, the original voluntary statement is written in a negative fashion, and the revised advance letter’s essential messages should probably be written in a positive manner.

In order to decrease the saliency of the term “voluntary,” a two-statement strategy for divulging this message was used not only to encourage respondents to read the entire statement presented in the letter’s body, but also to emphasize the acceptability of item non-response—as opposed to a complete refusal. The statement within the body of the letter, the indirect voluntary statement, was very well received and easily understood by all respondents. When paraphrased by respondents, few used the term “voluntary” to describe this statement’s meaning. Instead, respondents explained the letter indicated they could decline to answer any questions that made them uncomfortable. Cognitive interview results supported the idea that an indirectly written statement encourages respondents to read the entire sentence, because they

cannot extrapolate meaning from any particular word. This statement should encourage actual respondents to more fully process this statement's meaning.

The second statement, appearing at the end of the first paragraph in the FAQ section on the back of the letter, was more directly written. It used the term "voluntary" and stressed the importance of gathering complete and accurate data. In cognitive interviews, the combination of the two statements achieved the desired effect of decreasing the salience of the word "voluntary," while putting respondents at ease by letting them know they could decline to answer a question if they wished. (Please also see additional discussion regarding the performance of the second voluntary statement in the section labeled **FAQ I** below.)

### ***Problems & Difficult Concepts:***

#### **"Scientifically selected sample"**

Some respondents suspected the phrase "scientifically selected sample" was written in such vague terms to avoid explaining aspects of the true selection process—a process whereby neighborhoods or individuals were selected based upon demographic characteristics. Respondents were unable to paraphrase this term, and most wondered if this meant "random sample." Respondents were not able to easily nor confidently paraphrase these terms, but the latter seemed more familiar and less open to negative interpretations.

#### **No substitutions within the sample & interviewing every household**

Respondents were relieved by the implied message that they were not singled out or "targeted" for this survey ("Your address was selected, not you personally..."); however, the subsequent sentence all but reversed this comforting message. This statement, "We cannot substitute another address for yours..." seemed disconnected and ominous to respondents, because it was not clear how it related to the rest of the paragraph. This statement made many respondents wonder if the Census Bureau had covertly targeted them; this made them extremely uncomfortable.

The next sentence ("Whether or not you participate in a government program, we need to interview you...") was both difficult to immediately comprehend and was also perceived by some respondents as another reference to the stereotypical welfare recipient that the Census Bureau might be attempting to target in this survey. This statement did not perform as intended, which was to convey the importance of interviewing all respondents selected for the interview—not merely those who might be involved in a government program.

### ***Version 2 – Rounds II & III:***

For cognitive interview rounds two and three the word "random" was substituted for "scientifically," since respondents seemed more familiar with this term. In addition, the word "scientifically" seemed to raise more issues regarding covert selection ("targeting") for more sensitive respondents. "We cannot substitute another address for yours" was dropped completely for similar reasons. The phrase "whether or not you participate in a government program" was removed and a more benign statement about "needing to interview every household in our sample..." was put in its place. In addition, "The Census Bureau" was substituted for "We" at the beginning of the first sentence, to help clarify the selection process. The revised wording, tested in rounds two and three, appeared as follows:

**The Census Bureau chose your address, not you personally, as part of a randomly selected sample. We need to interview every household in our sample to get a complete picture of the economic situation of people across the country. Your participation in the survey is important; however, you may decline to answer any particular question.**

The use of the term “we” at the beginning of the second sentence is necessary to avoid alternative language, which is deemed awkward, overly technical, repetitive, inaccurate or inappropriate (e.g., “The Field Representative(s)/Your Field Representative/The interviewer/The Census Bureau needs to interview every household...”). Using “we” allows for more general and neutral interpretation and is understood contextually as “the Census Bureau and its employees.” So, using this brief and simple term adequately conveys the intended meaning, while keeping with the letter’s friendly tone and allowing greater processing of the sentence’s main message—which is that the respondent’s household will need to be interviewed to produce accurate data.

***Recommendation(s):***

The paragraph above, used for rounds two and three, should be included in the new SIPP advance letter.

***Future Considerations:***

With the exception of the first sentence, this paragraph should transfer readily to other advance letters. Care should be taken when explaining alternative selection procedures, to avoid negative reactions to abstract terminology not typically used by the general population.

**PARAGRAPH IV & FAQ II**

***Confidentiality Statements***

***General:***

The confidentiality message was comprised of one paragraph located in the letter’s body and one paragraph located in the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) on the back of the letter. The paragraph in the body of the letter emphasized particular sections of United States Code in order to convey information about the authority under which the Census Bureau conducts the survey, as well as the manner in which survey data were kept and utilized (i.e., “strictly confidential,” and “statistical purposes”). In contrast, the FAQ’s confidentiality paragraph stressed consequences for data misuse and placed references to the United States Code in parentheses, relegating it to a secondary position. During the first round of cognitive interviews, respondents were asked to interpret and compare these two paragraphs:

Letter’s Body Paragraph:

**The Census Bureau is authorized to conduct this survey under Title 13, United States Code, Section 182. Section 9 of this law requires us to keep all information about you and your household strictly confidential. The Census Bureau will use this information only for statistical purposes.**

FAQ Paragraph:

**How do I know the Census Bureau will keep my information private?**

**All the information you give to the Census Bureau for this survey is confidential by law (Title 13, United States Code, Section 9). By law, every Census Bureau employee—including the Director as well as every Field Representative—has taken an oath and is subject to a jail term, a fine, or both if he or she discloses ANY information about you or your household.**

In the first round of cognitive interviews, the paragraph in the letter’s body was regarded as “boiler plate” by many respondents, while the paragraph in the FAQs garnished more positive comments. Respondents consistently reported that the FAQ paragraph contained “more” information, which not only explained the consequences for data abuse, but also let them know there were safeguards to protect them. Respondents often reported feeling the two paragraphs contained essentially the same information, but the FAQ paragraph “explained things a little better.” When comparing the two paragraphs, it became clear that the FAQ paragraph placed secondary emphasis on the United States Code, by putting it in parentheses, and was written more from a respondent’s point of view.

### ***Problems & Difficult Concepts:***

#### Governmental tone

While respondents recognized the Census Bureau's attempt to assure the protection of respondent data, many noted that the paragraph in the letter's body had an "overly governmental" tone. In addition, the standard confidentiality statement was perceived as bureaucratic jargon designed to protect the Census Bureau's interests. One likely contributing factor to their perception was the order in which information was presented in this paragraph. This standard confidentiality paragraph begins with a statement regarding the Census Bureau's authority to conduct the survey, instead of information about laws that exist to protect respondents. The perception that this confidentiality paragraph was written from a governmental viewpoint probably also stems from its emphasis on particular sections of the United States Code, which was an unfamiliar term to every respondent. In addition, some respondents felt uncomfortable with the vague manner in which the data's intended uses are implied (i.e., "only for statistical purposes"). Some respondents felt this paragraph was included for the sole purpose of protecting the Census Bureau in potential legal snafus.

#### "Statistical purposes"

Respondents' general notion regarding this term seemed to be related some kind of summary data product (e.g., "...they combine my information with everyone else's..."), but a few respondents felt this term was intentionally vague in order to leave "wiggle room" for future data uses not specifically addressed by the letter.

#### "United States Code"

Within the paragraph in the letter's body, some respondents had difficulty connecting "United States Code" to the concept of a "law," which exists to protect respondents' data. Few respondents were successful in correctly differentiating and interpreting the two sections of this law (Section 9 and 182). Most respondents either overlooked the differences in meaning for these two sections completely, or they perceived an inconsistency—most wondered if this was a printing mistake.

#### "Authorized"

When probed directly, respondents interpreted this term to mean the Census Bureau had been given "permission" to do this survey.

#### "Required"

When probed directly, respondents interpreted this term to mean the Census Bureau "had to" conduct this survey. A few respondents offered that the term "required" was inappropriate, because it does not convey the necessary strength of the intended message. In other words, this term does not necessarily give the impression that the task **MUST** be done. These respondents felt the word "mandated" would be a better choice.

### ***Version 2 – Round II:***

In the second round of cognitive interviewing, the location of the confidentiality paragraphs was reversed. The FAQ paragraph was placed within the body of the letter and the "standard" paragraph was moved to the back of the letter, in the FAQ section. The standard confidentiality statement—formerly in the letter's body—was not changed; it was moved to the back of the letter so that respondents would be exposed to the more informative and persuasive confidentiality paragraph first—the paragraph formerly located in the FAQ. The paragraph formerly located in the FAQ section was written from a respondent's perspective and more clearly explained what Title 13 was and how the law was designed to protect them. The revised order for these paragraphs in the second round of interviewing appear below:

Letter's Body:

**All the information you give to the Census Bureau for this survey is confidential by law (Title 13, United States Code, Section 9). By law, every Census Bureau employee—including the Director as well as every Field Representative—has taken an oath and is subject to a jail term, a fine, or both if he or she discloses ANY information about you or your household.**

FAQ:

**How do I know the Census Bureau will protect my information?**

**The law authorizes the Census Bureau to collect information for this survey (Title 13, United States Code, Section 182). Section 9 of this law requires us to keep all information about you and your household strictly confidential. The Census Bureau will use this information only for statistical purposes.**

Just as in the first round, respondents in the second round preferred the more informative paragraph—now located in the letter's body—because it explained this aspect of the data collection in terms they readily understood and recognized as benefiting them personally. Respondents in this round had few, if any, negative comments about the confidentiality statements, especially since the more “governmental” sounding paragraph was located on the back of the letter. Presenting confidentiality information in this order allowed respondents to process the respondent-friendly information first, which may have decreased sensitivity to or even awareness of information contained in the subsequent standard paragraph in the FAQ. Respondents noted that the text relocated to the FAQ was more generally written, and provided additional information about concepts presented in the letter's body. Since the confidentiality paragraph most likely to cause concern was now in a secondary position, respondents did not spend much time evaluating text that was previously interpreted negatively in the first round of cognitive interviews (e.g., “statistical purposes” defined as “wiggle room” for data use).

The new presentation order of these two paragraphs should greatly enhance respondents' ability to link the concept “United States Code” to the concept “law,” since the paragraph now in the letter's body more closely associates the two terms. In addition, the second sentence begins with the phrase “By law,” which further reinforces the linking of the two concepts. Response was quite positive for the phrase “confidential by law” in the first sentence of this paragraph, because the mandatory nature of protecting respondent data was very clear. The second sentence specifies the penalties for failure to comply with the law. Placing “By law” at the beginning of the sentence keeps this important concept from being buried within the message. Although the second sentence begins with a preposition, this sentence construction helped respondents to correctly interpret the “code” concept. Although the phrase “confidential by law”—at the end of the preceding sentence—makes the following sentence's “By law...” sound redundant, it actually works in conjunction with the previous phrase to emphasize and reinforce correct interpretation of the parenthetical text/concept that separates the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> sentences [(“Title 13, United States Code, Section 9”)].

### ***Version 3 – Round III:***

During the final redesign group meeting, a few minor changes were made to the paragraph in the letter's body, in order to make certain this paragraph's message was consistent with approved Census Bureau terminology with regard to the possible identification of particular individual's data. The changes mainly involved adding the following phrases: 1) “...about you and your household...”—added to the first sentence; and 2) “...that could identify you or your household”—added to the last sentence. The following version of the paragraph was used in the third round of cognitive interviewing, to make certain interpretations did not vary due to the alterations:



Letter's Body:

**All the information the Census Bureau collects for this survey about you and your household is confidential by law (Title 13, United States Code, Section 9). By law, every Census Bureau employee—including the Director as well as every field representative—has taken an oath and is subject to a jail term, a fine, or both if he or she discloses ANY information that could identify you or your household.**

Changes in respondents' interpretations were not detected in the third round, and the paragraph's message continued to work as well as it had in the second round of interviews.

***Recommendation(s):***

The revised order and wording for the confidentiality paragraphs should be used for the new SIPP advance letter.

***Future Considerations:***

The strategy and paragraphs employed for the SIPP letter could easily be transferred to other advance letters, unless of course, the data are collected under Title 15.

**PARAGRAPH V**

**Conclusion Statements**

***General:***

This paragraph served to wrap-up the letter and provided respondents with avenues to gather more information—by mentioning the FAQs on the back of the letter and by providing a website. Many respondents noticed the website, and some admitted they would actually utilize such a resource. When probed, respondents expected to find a telephone number listed somewhere on the letter if they wanted to ask a question about the survey or the letter. A few respondents offered that they remembered seeing a phone number on the back of the letter—in actuality, this was the OMB number. The following paragraph was tested in the first and second rounds of interviewing:

**I have included answers to some frequently asked questions on the back of this letter. Please also visit the Census Bureau's website at [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov) to learn about current social and economic trends, and to learn more about this survey.**

***Version 2 – Round II:***

In an effort to shorten this paragraph and increase the saliency of the website, the amount of text was reduced and the URL was changed to route a curious respondent more directly to SIPP information. The following paragraph was included in round two of testing:

**I have included answers to some frequently asked question on the back of this letter. *Learn more at [www.sipp.census.gov/sipp/](http://www.sipp.census.gov/sipp/).***

***Version 3 – Round III:***

Concern was voiced by some of the redesign group members over this paragraph's message (i.e., "answers to some frequently asked questions are provided on the back of this letter"), since one of the FAQ headings (i.e., "Additional information about this process") was not written in a question format. Respondents in rounds two and three did not comment on this aspect of the letter, and did not seem to have trouble with it.

The sentence directing respondents to the back of the letter for answers to frequently asked questions was changed in an effort to more accurately reflect the text presented there. So, the phrase "additional information" was substituted for "some frequently asked questions." The following wording was used in round three of testing:

**I have included additional information on the back of this letter. *Learn more at [www.sipp.census.gov/sipp/](http://www.sipp.census.gov/sipp/).***

***Problems & Difficult Concepts:***

Most respondents recognized [www.sipp.census.gov/sipp/](http://www.sipp.census.gov/sipp/) was a website, even though the word “website” was not included in this paragraph. It became apparent in the third round of cognitive interviews that respondents would have benefited from a more explicit sentence including the word “website,” instead of relying on format and appearance alone to convey this information. Respondents with limited internet knowledge had difficulty retrieving the word “website” to describe this information.

***Recommendation(s):***

With the exception of one addition, the wording from round three should be used for the new SIPP advance letter. The phrase “our website” should be added to this statement to avoid confusion and assist less web savvy respondents in identifying the web address as such. The following is the final recommended version:

**I have included additional information on the back of this letter. *Learn more at our website: [www.sipp.census.gov/sipp/](http://www.sipp.census.gov/sipp/).***

**FAQ I**

***Why does the Census Bureau collect this information?***

***General:***

Due to lengthy cognitive interviews, which averaged more than an hour, some paragraphs were subjected to less intensive scrutiny than others. Respondents were not probed in-depth about the text contained in the first FAQ paragraph. They often volunteered, however, that they found the information helpful. The paragraph was generally well received, because it gave respondents a little more information about the Census Bureau’s survey practices (i.e., that the Census Bureau collects information between decennial activities) and reasons for this activity (e.g., needing up-to-date information as the country changes rapidly). In fact, when respondents were asked to paraphrase these statements, the most salient piece of information was that the Census Bureau “...need[s] up-to-date facts in order to plan effectively for future programs.”

More attention was given to the direct voluntary statement at the end of this paragraph, since the strategy for conveying the voluntary nature of this survey involved not only this statement, but also the indirectly written statement in the letter’s body. This strategy was adopted in an effort to encourage respondents to fully process the message—the survey is voluntary, but item non-response is acceptable.

In a direct comparison exercise, respondents found this statement to be similar to the statement in the letter’s body. A few respondents noted that this statement carried the added message pertaining to the Census Bureau’s need for “complete” and “accurate” data. In the independent recall task, respondents most often recalled details from the indirectly written voluntary statement in the letter’s body, as opposed to the directly written statement in the FAQs. When respondents were asked if they had a sense about whether or not the survey was voluntary or mandatory, most reported thinking the survey was voluntary. In answer to this question, many respondents followed up by saying, “It said I could decline to answer any question.” Some respondents commented that the letter’s “tone” was written to convey the voluntary nature of the survey (e.g., “I am writing to ask for your help,” and “Your participation in the survey is important”).

***Problems & Difficult Concepts:***

Although respondents reportedly appreciated the additional information contained in this paragraph, some respondents seemed to have difficulty understanding that the Census Bureau collected data for surveys

apart from the decennial. A few respondents were never able to distinguish SIPP from the decennial. This may have been a Census 2000 effect, since the decennial occurred within the same year as this research and it was salient for most respondents. At this time, it is not completely clear whether this paragraph adequately conveys the message that the Census Bureau collects data for other surveys, but many respondents correctly interpreted this paragraph's message.

***Recommendation(s):***

For the most part, this paragraph performed well and does not require major adjustments at this time.

***Future Considerations:***

Many respondents were curious to learn more about this particular survey process, and this paragraph seemed to satisfy that need. Although this paragraph was probably not processed in as great detail as the content in the body of the letter, respondents did recognize the existence of the additional information. Some respondents reported remembering pieces of information it contained; for instance, the fact that the Census Bureau collects data between each census because up-to-date information is needed.

In the future, these types of general paragraphs could be developed specifically for other surveys' introductory letters, and should be organized as follows: 1) keep the first sentence of the paragraph, which is an educational statement about the Census Bureau's interim decennial activities; 2) include an expanded statement regarding general topics or reasons for the data collection; and 3) end the paragraph with the explicit voluntary statement—unchanged and used exactly in its pretested form.

**FAQ II** ***How do I know the Census Bureau will protect my information?***

See discussion in previous section titled, "Paragraph IV & FAQ II: Confidentiality Statements."

**FAQ III** ***Additional information about this process***

***General:***

This paragraph served as a catchall for miscellaneous information, as well as for information that would benefit from decreased saliency (i.e., time estimates, follow-up interviews). In the independent recall task, few respondents were actually able to retrieve specific information regarding the estimated length of an actual interview. It is not surprising that most respondents found the 30-minute interview length estimate to be reasonable when probed directly, since they all agreed to commit about an hour for the cognitive interview process. So, respondents' true reactions to this estimate were difficult to detect.

Only a few respondents recalled the disclosure about additional follow-up interviews and most were not bothered by it immediately, but more than a few respondents commented that this information hinted at a greater time commitment than they had first anticipated. Because most respondents were concerned about time in some fashion, this information's salience should be kept at a minimum until FRs have the opportunity to explain these aspects of the survey process in person. This is sufficiently accomplished by the location of time estimate information (i.e., bottom of back page), as well as the paragraph heading, which is written to avoid mentioning "time" or other phrases that allude to the length of the survey process (e.g., "how long will this take?").

Most respondents recognized there was an address provided in this FAQ that they could write to, but it was not clear whether they understood its actual purpose. In response to the question, "What would you do if you had a question about this letter or survey?" respondents reported that they could write a letter and send it to this address. In response to this same question, some respondents said they would make a phone call—mistaking the OMB approval number for a telephone number.

When probed directly, most respondents understood the presence of the OMB number meant the Census Bureau had been given permission to do the survey. Some respondents offered that actual respondents might not care about this information, because it seemed as if it was included for purposes only known to the Census Bureau.

***Problems & Difficult Concepts:***

**“Search your records”**

Some respondents interpreted the phrase “search your records”—used to describe a task to be included in the 30-minute interview estimate—in ways that were unintended. Some respondents wondered what records the Census Bureau would be interested in seeing during the interview, while others assumed the Census Bureau would conduct an independent search of respondents’ personal records. Both situations seemed to cause respondents to become concerned over their understanding of the meaning of the “search your records” phrase. Of the respondents who attended to this phrase, none interpreted it correctly to mean “respondents should find and review their own records to increase reporting accuracy during the interview.” Furthermore, at this point in the SIPP process, respondents have yet to learn about the specific topics covered in the survey, so they would not necessarily understand which records to search before the FR’s arrival. In addition, some respondents guessed that a records search would further increase their time commitment for this survey.

**“Time estimates”**

One respondent felt the phrase “time estimates” in the last sentence of the first paragraph was ambiguous.

***Recommendation(s):***

The phrase “search your records” was removed to avoid respondent anxiety caused by misinterpretation, and because the letter does not contain enough information about which records should be reviewed prior to an interview. The phrase “conduct a follow-up interview periodically” replaced the phrase “conduct a follow up interview every four months for a fixed period of time,” since it was considered to be more accurate given the varying lengths of SIPP panels. The recommended wording is as follows:

**Additional information about this process:**

**We estimate that it will take about 30 minutes, per person, to collect the information. This includes time for reviewing instructions and completing and reviewing your answers. After the initial interview, we will conduct a follow-up interview periodically, in order to learn how people’s economic situations change over time. Send comments regarding time estimates, or any other aspect of this data collection process, including suggestions for reducing this burden to:**

**Associate Director for Finance and Administration  
ATTN: Paperwork Reduction Project 0607-0865  
Room 3104, Federal Building 3  
U.S. Census Bureau  
Washington, DC 20233-0001**

**The U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) approved this survey and gave it OMB approval number 0607-0725. Displaying this number shows that the Census Bureau is authorized to conduct this survey. Please use this number in any correspondence concerning this survey.**

***Future Cautions & Considerations:***

There was some interest within the redesign group to re-write this paragraph’s heading as a question, in order to maintain a consistent format. A concise and workable question was not identified, due to the nature of the information contained within this section. This section serves as a catchall position for

information that either needed to be or could be made less salient. So, writing this paragraph's heading at a greater level of specificity is not recommended, especially if doing so causes the issue of time to become more salient.

With the exception of the time estimate and the phrase "...in order to learn how people's economic situations change over time..." in the first paragraph, as well as the OMB number in the last paragraph, this revised section could be transferred to the backs of other introductory letters.

## **SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER REQUEST**

### ***Omitted Paragraph***

The Social Security Number (SSN) request paragraph was removed from revisions of the SIPP advance letter; however, this paragraph was shown to respondents near the end of the cognitive interview in order to determine interpretations and reactions. Since this paragraph will likely be included in the Wave 2 Methods Panel SIPP letter, a discussion of the findings is included below.

#### ***General:***

Results from cognitive interviews on this topic were so compelling that the paragraph's reconstruction should be given serious consideration prior to its reintroduction into a follow-up letter. Attrition rates are highest at the second interview, and reintroducing this paragraph just before this contact may further suppress response rates. Furthermore, it is unlikely the public's awareness of privacy and confidentiality issues will decrease in the years to come, so additional research in this area is necessary if the Census Bureau hopes to inform respondents of their intentions in a non-threatening manner.

An SSN request is an extremely sensitive topic in and of itself; however, the confusion caused by this paragraph's academic tone, complex concepts, and confusing sentences seemed to heighten respondents' anxiety levels in almost every cognitive interview. Respondents generally did not spend much time deciphering vague and unfamiliar terms. Instead they imagined the worst possible scenario, based upon what little information they were able to glean from the paragraph. Respondents also perceived inconsistencies between this paragraph's message and the confidentiality statements in the letter, due to seemingly contradictory logic and respondents' existing beliefs about the government.

Respondents often voiced their fear of consequences, but these fears were often vague and contradictory. Some respondents said an SSN represented "your whole life" and anyone with that information could "really mess you up." Although most respondents were unable to produce specific examples of consequences, identity theft was commonly cited. An additional, and more general, fear was that providing your SSN was like giving the government carte blanche over the use of an entire lifetime's worth of information. A few respondents said they would provide their SSN—because "the government" could obtain this information without respondents' permission anyway; however, many respondents seemed reluctant to say they would definitely provide this information to an FR.

Some respondents said they would refuse the survey entirely if this paragraph was present in the letter. This was surprising, since compliant behavior was already demonstrated among these respondents—as evidenced by their agreement to take part in a cognitive interview. Yet, respondents said they would refuse the survey based on this paragraph alone. To the contrary, anecdotal evidence suggests that SSN requests in the field unfold with much less drama, and interviewers seem to be capable of collecting this type of data without difficulty. In the end, it is probably unwise to presume respondents' attitudes and subsequent behaviors surrounding these types of sensitive data requests will remain stable over time. So, at the very least, the information included in this paragraph should not add to the anxiety produced by the paragraph's disclosure.

### ***Problems & Difficult Terms:***

#### Academic & Vague Terminology

The following terms were problematic either because they were vague, unknown, or difficult to pronounce:

- Administrative records information
- Unauthorized use
- Accuracy
- Demographic
- Other government agencies

Respondents with high school educations and adequate reading skills had difficulty pronouncing words and deciphering meanings and concepts in this paragraph (administrative records information, unauthorized, accuracy, demographic). Even respondents with more education and sufficient to excellent reading ability had difficulty interpreting concepts such as “administrative records information,” “unauthorized use,” and “other government agencies.”

Comprehension difficulties caused by unfamiliar terms and complex sentences forced respondents to independently interpret meaning, which lead to anxiety-producing, inaccurate, broad interpretations. For example, respondents interpreted “administrative records information” as any and all information and transactions recorded by government agencies with which they had come in contact over the course of a lifetime. In addition, many respondents assumed the Census Bureau would contact all social service agencies to determine if they had received any type of assistance over the years. Respondents also thought the Census Bureau could access even more detailed information, such as medical records, incarceration records, work history—even bills and credit card information.

Only a few respondents assumed “other government agencies” merely referred to the Social Security Administration and other government entities charged with administering government programs (e.g., welfare agencies), since these types of entities were mentioned in the letter’s body. Many respondents interpreted this more broadly as the “entire federal system,” which included government at the federal, state, and local level. Respondents also assumed a great level of connectivity and communication between these branches of government, and often felt that an SSN could be “plugged in” to any government computer in order to retrieve vast amounts of detailed personal information.

For a few respondents, the term “unauthorized use” brought into focus the possibility that data would be used for purposes not fully explained by this paragraph. For these respondents, this phrase seemed to reinforce earlier negative reactions to other vague statements within the letter that they perceived to be vague for purposes of deception (i.e., “statistical purposes” in the standard confidentiality paragraph—now located in the FAQs).

In general, the terms “economic” and “demographic” are used casually by researchers, but not by individuals who normally receive these types of introductory letters. Respondents were more successful in providing general definitions for “economic” than for “demographic.” Even though these terms did not appear to directly affect respondents in this paragraph, they could be eliminated in order to decrease the number of times respondents are exposed to unfamiliar terms. These terms could also be eliminated because this information is generally conveyed throughout the letter.

#### Data Sharing & Confidentiality Messages

Almost every respondent felt that compliance with this request was akin to giving the federal government carte blanche over the accumulation and use of every minute detail of their life’s history. In addition, this

paragraph raised serious issues with respondents' ability to believe in and trust the confidentiality assurances offered in the letter, because they found it difficult to believe data sharing would be a one-way street. Respondents were also left to wonder why "other government agencies" would share their personal data with the Census Bureau, when previous interactions were perceived to be confidential at the time. So, this particular paragraph, not just the SSN request itself, seems very likely to impede successful SIPP interviews if included it is included in subsequent respondent letters.

Respondents often perceived an inconsistency between the confidentiality messages in the letter and messages in this paragraph, which may be related more to the beliefs respondents hold about the far-reaching mechanisms of the government than the presence of vague and unfamiliar terms. Although this paragraph attempts to assure respondents that two-way data sharing will not occur, the very idea that this could be prevented defies respondents' logic. Not only does one-way data sharing contradict common sense, but respondents also felt as if the government—acting as a single entity—reserved the right to raid respondents' detailed data for any purpose. Respondents often felt that "if [the government] really wanted [my personal information], they'd get it." Some respondents offered examples of the government's behavior, such as the FBI obtaining confidential data about criminals in order to track them down—referencing television shows like "America's Most Wanted" and "Cops." Although these respondents did not see themselves ever being a televised fugitive, it remained unsettling for respondents to think the government might use its power against them in the future—for reasons respondents could not name.

***Recommendation(s):***

Respondents in the third round of cognitive interviews were given the opportunity to review the following alternative SSN paragraph:

**Why does the Census Bureau ask for my Social Security Number?**

**Providing your Social Security Number allows the Census Bureau to get some additional data from other government agencies. This helps make sure the data are complete. It also reduces the number of questions you are asked in this survey. The Census Bureau keeps this additional information confidential and it is NEVER shared with other government agencies. The same confidentiality laws that protect your survey answers also protect any additional information we collect (Title 13, United States Code, Section 9). Providing your Social Security Number is voluntary.**

Although this paragraph evoked much less negative feedback, it was not able to solve the root causes of sensitivity for this subject. In addition to some respondents simply not trusting the message that their data would never be shared and was completely safe and confidential, respondents sometimes were unable to extract that message from this paragraph the first time through.

The revised SSN paragraph may lessen initial negative responses by omitting vague terminology found to be problematic in the original paragraph (i.e., "administrative records information," and "unauthorized use") and placing emphasis on the message that two-way data sharing between the Census Bureau and other government agencies will not occur. The purposes for the SSN request ("...make sure the data are complete...reduces the number of questions...") were rewritten to restrict possible negative interpretations observed after respondents were exposed to the original paragraph. Respondents sometimes interpreted the "accuracy" purpose/explanation, from the original paragraph, to mean the Census Bureau was going to check their answers to see if they were telling the truth. The paragraph heading was also rewritten in a less threatening manner (from "...want to know..." to "will ask for...").

Finally, the last sentence from the original paragraph was omitted entirely:

**We collect all data in this survey under Section 182 of Title 13, United States Code, which gives us the authority to conduct surveys to produce demographic and economic data.**

since this information is duplicated elsewhere in the letter.

***Future Cautions:***

Respondents most likely will become increasingly concerned over privacy issues. Altering the wording of this notification cannot serve as the sole solution, for this problem has many contributors—some of which are outside of the Census Bureau’s control.

Respondents sometimes had difficulty reading the fifth sentence of the revised SSN paragraph (i.e., “The same confidentiality laws that protect your survey answers also protect any additional information we collect...”). This was especially true for first portion of the sentence: “The same confidentiality laws...” When read aloud by respondents it was apparent the sentence structure was awkward, causing respondents to either slow down or re-read this passage in order to adequately comprehend the message. Reconstruction of this sentence should be considered, being careful not to bury the main message later in the sentence—which is that the same confidentiality laws mentioned earlier in the letter also protect “administrative records information.”

## CONCLUSIONS

The previous sections’ recommendations, taken together, form the version of the new SIPP advance letter accepted by the redesign group. Before this letter’s inclusion in Wave 1 of the SIPP Methods Panel in the summer of 2001, the phrase “our website:” should be added to the closing statements of this letter’s fifth paragraph. The final recommended version of the new SIPP advance letter, with this suggested change, is attached to this report (See Attachment F).

For advance letters, survey purpose and data uses statements may be the key to encouraging interest and positive responses. The most salient information for respondents was the survey’s purpose and data use examples. Respondents placed a great deal of emphasis on this particular aspect of the letter when considering whether or not to participate in such a survey—and many times this was the sole piece of information considered by respondents during their decision-making process.

Given that these statements carry a lot of weight, they must be carefully crafted and pretested to make certain the main messages are persuasive and comprehended with ease. Respondents must be able to immediately comprehend why the survey is conducted and how their data may be used, should they decide to participate in the survey. The statements were written as directly as possible, in simple language and short, basic sentences that were easy to comprehend.

Of course, even the most effective survey purpose and data uses statements can easily be overshadowed by an introductory letter that is poorly organized and presents anxiety-producing subjects in a salient manner. An effective introductory letter should introduce basic information to potential respondents



about the survey in ways that avoid alarming them. This information must adequately cover questions about topics most likely to surface during survey participation requests:

- Survey purpose & data use examples (mentioned above) – *What’s this all about...What’s it for?*
- Survey sponsor – *Who’s doing this?*
- Selection process – *How did I get picked?*
- Confidentiality statements – *How do I know my information will be protected?*

Not only must this information be adequately conveyed without causing negative reactions, but it must also be located in places where respondents are most likely to concentrate their attention—which will most likely be on the front page of the letter. More general types of information (e.g., expanded survey purpose explanation), information requiring decreased saliency, or legally required information not necessarily of primary significance to respondents (e.g., OMB number) should be located on the back of the letter.

Certainly, FRs’ ability to persuade respondents at the doorstep can be facilitated by an introductory letter that avoids increasing the saliency of anxiety-producing information (e.g., time commitment).

Convincing respondents to participate in a survey can no doubt be accomplished more efficiently when a live person can address specific concerns as they surface in conversation. The Census Bureau relies on FRs to counteract respondents’ impulse to refuse the survey, by addressing concerns as they surface—and the advance letter should avoid providing respondents with reasons to be concerned about participating. To the extent that it is possible, FRs should be allowed the opportunity to be the first to broach many of these anxiety- and refusal-producing topics, by eliminating them entirely from the letter (e.g., SSN request), or decreasing their saliency (e.g., survey length).

Until the letter was pretested in cognitive interviews, it was unclear how revised statements in the new SIPP advance letter would be interpreted by respondents. The fact that respondents’ interpretations were sometimes surprising and unexpected provides a strong argument for the value of pretesting advance letters. This research also indicates that even the most informed, well-intentioned writers can create statements that are negatively interpreted. And, without pretesting, it is impossible to understand how even minute revisions affect respondent’s interpretations.

Having pretested the SIPP advance letter, portions of it could be adapted to other advance letters with greater confidence. Most pieces of this letter are interchangeable with other letters for which Title 13 data are collected and respondents are selected by address. Obviously, the survey purpose and data uses statements would require careful, tailored construction. In addition, the survey’s name and topics would need to be changed in the first paragraph.

The outstanding issues include future cognitive testing for the survey purpose and data uses statements that will surely change in the future as the focus of policy shifts. In addition, it is not completely clear how the insertion of the revised SSN request paragraph will affect response rates in Wave 2 of the SIPP Methods Panel.



**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE**  
**Bureau of the Census**  
Washington, DC 20233-0001

SIPP-20105(L)

FROM THE DIRECTOR  
U.S. CENSUS BUREAU

A Census Bureau field representative, who will show you an official identification card, will call on you within the next few days. The field representative is conducting a survey on the economic situation of households in the United States. The survey will collect information on topics, such as jobs, earnings, and participation in various government programs. We will use the information obtained in the survey to learn more about how people, such as yourself, are meeting their everyday expenses and how government programs are working.

This is a sample survey in which the Census Bureau selected your household to represent other households in the United States. Your participation is essential to obtaining the most accurate information possible so that we have a complete picture of the economic situation of the people throughout the country. You can help us by referring to your records (for example, bank statements and pay stubs) when answering the questions. This also will reduce the time required for the interview. Although answering the questions is voluntary, each unanswered item lessens the accuracy of the data.

We are conducting this survey under the authority of Title 13, United States Code, and Section 182. This law requires us to keep all information about you and your household strictly confidential. We may use this information only for statistical purposes and only in ways that no one can identify you as an individual.

On the other side of this letter are the answers to questions most frequently asked about this survey.

Thank you for your cooperation. The Census Bureau is grateful to you for your help.

Sincerely,

Kenneth Prewitt

## **WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS SURVEY?**

We are conducting this survey to get a picture of the economic situation of people throughout the country. We are interested in the situation of people from all walks of life and from every part of the country.

To understand the economic situation of people and families, we need information about jobs, income, unemployment, disabilities, and so forth. We will combine your answers with the information we get from other households throughout the country. Then we will use the information to find out how the economy is affecting the young, the old, the workers, the retired, the disabled, the disadvantaged, and others. We also will use the data to find out if the government assistance programs are reaching the people who need help the most.

## **WHY DOES THE CENSUS BUREAU NEED THIS INFORMATION?**

In a country as large and rapidly changing as ours, we need up-to-date facts to plan effective programs for the future. Although we conduct a complete census every ten years, we need to collect some kinds of information more often. A Census Bureau field representative will contact you once every four months for the Survey of Income and Program Participation. Thus, we can keep abreast of changes people have in their jobs, the kind of work they do, the number of people looking for work, the situation of people on government programs, and other information.

## **WHY DOES THE CENSUS BUREAU WANT TO KNOW MY SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER?**

We would like to know your social security number so we can obtain information that you have provided to other government agencies. This will help us avoid asking questions for which information is already available and will help ensure the accuracy and completeness of the survey results. We will protect administrative records information that we obtain from these agencies from unauthorized use just as the survey responses are protected. Providing your social security number is voluntary. We collect all data in this survey under Section 182 of Title 13, United States Code, which gives us the authority to conduct surveys to produce demographic and economic data.

## **HOW WAS I SELECTED?**

We selected your household from a list of all the residential addresses in the country. We did not choose you personally but whoever is living at the address when our field representative arrives. After your initial interview, we conduct a follow-up interview with you every four months for a fixed period of time, in order to learn how people's economic situations change over time. Because this is a scientific sample, we must interview all people living at each address selected for the survey and continue to interview those same people when they move.

## **WHY ARE MY ANSWERS IMPORTANT?**

People in government and private organizations need the statistics from this survey to develop and evaluate policies and programs that meet the needs of Americans today. For this reason, this information must be as accurate and complete as possible. The only way we can get this information is through the cooperation of sample households such as yours. Your answers represent approximately 6,500 households.

## **INFORMATION ABOUT THIS INTERVIEW**

Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 30 minutes per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to:

Associate Director for Finance and Administration  
Attn: Paperwork Reduction Project 0607-0865  
Room 3104, Federal Building 3  
U.S. Census Bureau  
Washington, DC 20233-0001

This survey has been approved by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and has been given OMB approval number 0607-0865. Displaying this number shows that the Census Bureau is authorized to conduct this survey. Please use this number in any correspondence concerning this survey.

## **WHAT GUARANTEE DO I HAVE THAT THE INFORMATION I GIVE TO THE CENSUS BUREAU ABOUT MY PERSONAL BUSINESS IS NOT REPORTED TO OTHER PEOPLE OR ORGANIZATIONS?**

All the information you give to the Census Bureau for this survey is confidential by law (Section 9 of Title 13, United States Code). Every Census Bureau employee takes an oath and is subject to a jail term, a fine, or both if he or she discloses any information that could identify an individual. We may use this information only for statistical purposes and only in ways that no one can identify you as an individual.



**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE**  
**Bureau of the Census**  
Washington, DC 20233-0001  
OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

Dear Resident:

I am writing to ask for your help with an important survey that the Census Bureau is conducting, called the Survey of Income and Program Participation. In a few days, a Census Bureau Field Representative will contact you. He or she will show you an official identification card and then ask you questions about your job and economic situation.

This survey is used to make decisions about government programs that affect millions of Americans. For example, results from this survey were used to develop a program to ensure that all children were covered by health insurance. In the future, policymakers will use the data to evaluate possible changes in the Social Security system. The Census Bureau needs your help to collect accurate data, so that policymakers can make good choices for the country about important government programs.

We selected your address, not you personally, as part of a scientifically selected sample. We cannot substitute another address for yours. Whether or not you participate in a government program, we need to interview you to get a complete picture of the economic situation of people across the country. Your participation in the survey is important; however, you may decline to answer any particular question.

The Census Bureau is authorized to conduct this survey under Title 13, United States Code, Section 182. Section 9 of this law requires us to keep all information about you and your household strictly confidential. The Census Bureau will use this information only for statistical purposes.

I have included answers to some frequently asked questions on the back of this letter. Please also visit the Census Bureau's website at [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov) to learn about current social and economic trends, and to learn more about this survey.

Thank you for your cooperation. I am grateful for your help.

Sincerely,

Kenneth Prewitt, Director  
Bureau of the Census

## **Why does the Census Bureau collect this information?**

Although we conduct a census every ten years, we need to collect some kinds of information more often. Our country changes rapidly, and we need up-to-date facts in order to plan effectively for future programs. This means providing current economic information to people in government and private organizations so that they can make informed decisions about policies that affect people of all income levels. Collecting information through the Survey of Income and Program Participation allows us to keep abreast of changes people have experienced in their jobs, the kind of work they do, the number of people looking for work, the situation of people in government programs, as well as other information. Your voluntary participation is essential for ensuring that this survey's results are complete and accurate.

## **How do I know the Census Bureau will keep my information private?**

All the information you give to the Census Bureau for this survey is confidential by law (Title 13, United States Code, Section 9). By law, every Census Bureau employee—including the Director as well as every Field Representative--has taken an oath and is subject to a jail term, a fine, or both if he or she discloses ANY information about you or your household.

## **Additional information about this process:**

We estimate that it will take about 30 minutes, per person, to collect your information. This includes time for reviewing instructions, searching your records, and completing and reviewing your answers. After the initial interview, we conduct a follow-up interview every four months for a fixed period of time, in order to learn how people's economic situations change over time. Send comments regarding time estimates, or any other aspect of this data collection process, including suggestions for reducing this burden to:

Associate Director for Finance and Administration  
ATTN: Paperwork Reduction Project 0607-0865  
Room 3104, Federal Building 3  
U.S. Census Bureau of the Census  
Washington, DC 20222-001

This survey has been approved by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and has been given the OMB approval number 0607-0865. Displaying this number shows that the Census Bureau is authorized to conduct this survey. Please use this number in any correspondence concerning this survey.



**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE**  
**Bureau of the Census**  
Washington, DC 20233-0001

Dear Resident:

I am writing to ask for your help with an important survey that the Census Bureau is conducting, called the Survey of Income and Program Participation. In a few days, a Census Bureau Field Representative will contact you. He or she will show you an official identification card and then ask you questions about your job and economic situation.

This survey provides policymakers with current information about the economic well being of people in the United States. The results are used to evaluate current government programs and plan for future needs. For example, these data are used to develop programs to make sure all children have access to health insurance. This survey is also used in long range planning for other programs, such as Social Security.

We chose your address, not you personally, as part of a randomly selected sample. We need to interview every household in our sample to get a complete picture of the economic situation of people across the country. Your participation in the survey is important; however, you may decline to answer any particular question.

All the information you give to the Census Bureau for this survey is confidential by law (Title 13, United States Code, Section 9). By law, every Census Bureau employee—including the Director as well as every Field Representative—has taken an oath and is subject to a jail term, a fine, or both if he or she discloses ANY information about you or your household.

I have included answers to some frequently asked questions on the back of this letter.

**Learn more at [www.sipp.census.gov/sipp/](http://www.sipp.census.gov/sipp/).**

Thank you for your cooperation. I am grateful for your help.

Sincerely,

Kenneth Prewitt, Director  
U.S. Census Bureau

## **Why does the Census Bureau collect this information?**

Although we conduct a census every ten years, we need to collect some kinds of information more often. Information collected for this survey (SIPP) allows us to keep abreast of changes people have experienced in their jobs, the kind of work they do, the number of people looking for work, the situation of people in government programs, as well as other information. Our country changes rapidly, and we need up-to-date facts in order to plan effectively for future programs. This means providing current economic information to people in government and private organizations so that they can make informed decisions about policies that affect people of all income levels. Your voluntary participation is essential for ensuring that this survey's results are complete and accurate.

## **How do I know the Census Bureau will protect my information?**

The law authorizes the Census Bureau to collect information for this survey (Title 13, United States Code, Section 182). Section 9 of this law requires us to keep all information about you and your household strictly confidential. The Census Bureau will use this information only for statistical purposes.

## **Additional information about this process:**

We estimate that it will take about 30 minutes, per person, to collect your information. This includes time for reviewing instructions and completing and reviewing your answers. After the initial interview, we will conduct a follow-up interview periodically, in order to learn how people's economic situations change over time. Send comments regarding time estimates, or any other aspect of this data collection process, including suggestions for reducing this burden to:

Associate Director for Finance and Administration  
ATTN: Paperwork Reduction Project 0607-0865  
Room 3104, Federal Building 3  
U.S. Census Bureau of the Census  
Washington, DC 20222-001

This survey has been approved by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and has been given the OMB approval number 0607-0865. Displaying this number shows that the Census Bureau is authorized to conduct this survey. Please use this number in any correspondence concerning this survey.



**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE**  
**Bureau of the Census**  
Washington, DC 20233-0001

Dear Resident:

I am writing to ask for your help with an important survey that the Census Bureau is conducting, called the Survey of Income and Program Participation. In a few days, a Census Bureau Field Representative will contact you. He or she will show you an official identification card and then ask you questions about your job and economic situation.

This survey is used to make decisions about programs that affect millions of people in the United States. For example, results from the survey are used to develop programs to make sure more children are covered by health insurance. Soon, policymakers will use these results to evaluate the future needs of the Social Security System. The Census Bureau needs your help to collect accurate data, so that policymakers can plan for important government programs for the future.

We chose your address, not you personally, as part of a randomly selected sample. We need to interview every household in our sample to get a complete picture of the economic situation of people across the country. Your participation in the survey is important; however, you may decline to answer any particular question.

All the information you give to the Census Bureau for this survey is confidential by law (Title 13, United States Code, Section 9). By law, every Census Bureau employee—including the Director as well as every Field Representative—has taken an oath and is subject to a jail term, a fine, or both if he or she discloses ANY information about you or your household.

I have included answers to some frequently asked questions on the back of this letter. ***Learn more at [www.sipp.census.gov/sipp/](http://www.sipp.census.gov/sipp/).***

Thank you for your cooperation. I am grateful for your help.

Sincerely,

Kenneth Prewitt, Director  
U.S. Census Bureau



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William G. Barron, Jr., Acting Director  
U.S. Census Bureau

**For more information, contact: [FILL RO ADDRESS].**

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The U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) approved this survey and gave it OMB approval number 0607-0725. Displaying this number shows that the Census Bureau is authorized to conduct this survey. Please use this number in any correspondence concerning this survey.



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**Bureau of the Census**  
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U.S. Census Bureau

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