

Assessing Respondents' Perceptions of Burden in the American Community Survey

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Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology (FCSM)
Research Conference
March 9, 2018

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Background

- Increasing survey nonresponse has renewed interest in the “burden” of federal surveys on respondents
- Burden is “product of an interaction between the nature of the task [**objective burden**] and the way it is perceived by the respondent [**subjective burden**]” (Bradburn 1978, p. 36)
 - Most research has focused on objective burden of individual survey features (e.g., time, cognitive difficulty of the questions, etc.)

Background (cont.)

- Surveys change objective survey features, assuming this will reduce burden
- Evaluations of changes rely on objective measures (e.g., response rates, time to complete survey)
- No insight into how these changes affect respondents' perceptions of the survey from their own, subjective perspective

The American Community Survey (ACS)

- The ACS produces estimates on more than 35 topics, including:
 - Demographic (age, sex, race, relationship to householder)
 - Social (marital status, disability, school enrollment, veteran status)
 - Economic (health insurance coverage, employment status, income/earnings)
 - Housing (tenure, year structure built, house heating fuel)
- The ACS has 71 questions, and on average it takes about 40 minutes to take the survey

The ACS (cont.)

- ACS samples approximately 3.5 million addresses annually (about 290,000 addresses per month)
- Response modes
 - Self-response
 - Internet
 - Paper
 - Interviewer-administered response (if no self-response received)
 - CATI (until October 2017)
 - CAPI

Burden Research in the ACS

- Over the last several years, respondents concerned about the burden of the ACS have “generated a small but continuous stream of complaints to members of Congress” (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2016)
- Response to these concerns has included:
 - National Academies of Science Committee for National Statistics (CNSTAT) Workshop on Respondent Burden in the ACS (March 2016)
 - “Agility in Action” report on reducing burden while maintaining data quality

Burden Research in the ACS (cont.)

- Until recently, research has focused on **objective** burden
- Currently, we are developing questions to measure respondents' **subjective** perceptions of burden
- These may be implemented on the ACS as optional, follow-on questions
- Three-phase research project
 - Literature review
 - Focus groups
 - Cognitive interviews

Methodology

- In spring 2017, we conducted 10 focus groups with a total of 46 recent ACS respondents
- Goal was to learn about perceptions of the ACS and its burden
- Groups varied by city, size, and response mode
 - City:
 - Washington, DC (2 groups)
 - Chicago, IL (4 groups)
 - Houston, TX (4 groups)

Methodology (cont.)

- Groups varied by city, size, and response mode
 - Size*:
 - Small groups of 3-4 respondents (5 groups)
 - Large groups of 5-8 respondents (5 groups)
 - Response mode:
 - Self-response: Paper/Internet (5 groups)
 - Interviewer-administered response: CATI/CAPI (5 groups)
- Respondents recruited by telephone

*Variation in size was by design as part of separate methodological research

Methodology (cont.)

- Recruitment targets focused on response mode
- Respondent demographics were collected during focus groups
 - Fairly even on sex, race (white v. nonwhite), education (less than Bachelor's degree v. Bachelor's degree or higher), age (younger than v. older than 45)
 - Most lived in 1-2 person households and were non-Hispanic
- All respondents received \$75 at the end of the group

Moderator's Guide

1. Open discussion of ACS experiences
 - Likes and dislikes about the ACS
 - Contacts (number, messaging, mode, timing, etc.)
 - Response to the ACS (deciding to respond, mode, survey question topics, sensitivity, difficulty, completion time, needing to look up information or ask for help, etc.)

Moderator's Guide (cont.)

2. Survey questions on the burden of the ACS

- 13 questions, mostly adapted from 2013 Consumer Expenditure Survey
 - 1 question on overall burden
 - 12 questions on topics such as question difficulty/sensitivity, length, effort, trust, importance of the survey, etc.
- Paper administered, followed by discussion

Research Questions

1. What is respondents' overall level of perceived burden in being contacted by and responding to the ACS?
2. Which features of the ACS contribute to or affect respondents' level of perceived burden? How much does each of these survey features contribute to respondents' perceived burden?

Findings: Overall Burden

What is respondents' overall level of perceived burden in being contacted by and responding to the ACS?

How burdensome was the ACS to you?

Response option	Frequency (n = 46)
Very burdensome	0 (0%)
Somewhat burdensome	7 (15%)
A little burdensome	17 (37%)
Not at all burdensome	22 (48%)

Findings: Overall Burden (cont.)

- Respondents did not have much feedback on how the ACS could be made less burdensome
- “Burdensome” had the connotation of a very negative experience, a high bar for a survey

Findings: Overall Burden (cont.)

- When answering the question about overall burden, most respondents were thinking about the questionnaire
- Fewer comments on the number, mode, and timing of contacts
- Some respondents remembered that the ACS is mandatory, but not everyone viewed this negatively

Findings: Burden of ACS Features

Which features of the ACS contribute to or affect respondents' level of perceived burden? How much does each of these survey features contribute to respondents' perceived burden?

- Length of the survey
- Question difficulty
- Question sensitivity
- Number of contacts

Length of Survey

Do you feel that the length of the ACS was too long, about right, or too short?

Response option	Frequency (n = 45)*
Too long	16 (36%)
About right	28 (62%)
Too short	1 (2%)

*One respondent did not answer this question

Question Difficulty

How difficult or easy was it for you to answer the questions in the ACS?

Response option	Frequency (n = 46)
Very easy	22 (48%)
Somewhat easy	17 (37%)
Somewhat difficult	7 (15%)
Very difficult	0 (0%)

Question Sensitivity

How sensitive did you feel the questions on the ACS were?

Response option	Frequency (n = 46)
Very sensitive	7 (15%)
Somewhat sensitive	16 (35%)
A little sensitive	14 (30%)
Not at all sensitive	9 (20%)

Contacts

Thinking about the contacts you received for the ACS, would you say it was too many, a reasonable number, or not enough?

Response option	Frequency (n = 46)
Too many	8 (17%)
A reasonable number	38 (83%)
Not enough	0 (0%)

Conclusion

- Respondents did not consider the ACS to be burdensome
- Some thought “burdensome” was a strong word for ACS
 - Researchers should explore other options
- When considering the overall burden of the survey, respondents did not always think of the same things
 - Importance of measuring subjective perceptions in addition to objective burden

Conclusion (cont.)

- The questionnaire was most salient, though some respondents also commented on the number of contacts
 - Questions on these topics may be another way to assess respondents' perceptions of burden in the ACS
- Limitations
 - Gap between ACS response and focus group participation
 - Unlikely to have recruited the most burdened respondents

Next Steps

- Cognitive testing of shortened, revised series of questions
 - First round completed, second round underway
 - Will culminate in recommendations for field testing
- Generally, clear need for more research on measuring subjective perceptions of survey burden
- Asking questions about burden can increase burden of a survey
 - Need to be selective, implement only a minimal number

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