

Assessing Respondents' Perceptions of Burden in the American Community Survey

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1 Introduction

Forty years ago, Norman Bradburn (1978) defined survey burden as “the product of an interaction between the nature of the task and the way it is perceived by the respondent” (p. 36). However, research on survey burden conducted in the years since has focused heavily on the nature of the task (objective burden), with most research excluding respondents' perceptions of the task (subjective burden) entirely. Most commonly, the word “burden” is used to mean the amount of time it takes respondents to complete a survey. The Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA) requires federal agencies to publicly report the “paperwork burden” a given data collection activity is expected to require of respondents, defined as the estimated number of minutes/hours a typical respondent would need to complete the data collection task (OPM, 2011). Other common indicators of objective burden include the number of questions in a survey, the number of contacts about the survey, or the cognitive difficulty of the questions, among other things (Tortora 2017).

Survey sponsors concerned about respondent burden usually implement changes to objective survey features, such as the sample design, contact strategy, questionnaire, length, and response mode, with the assumption that these changes will reduce burden. Evaluations of the success of these changes, if undertaken at all, rely on objective measures such as response rates and the time it takes a respondent to complete the survey. While important, these metrics do not provide insight into how these changes affect respondents' perceptions of the survey experience from their own, subjective perspective. It is possible that these changes to objective survey features have no impact on respondents' perceptions, or an impact opposite of what was intended.

One federal survey that has measured respondents' subjective perceptions is the Consumer Expenditure Survey (CE), conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau on behalf of the Bureau of Labor Statistics. In 2012, the CE added a series of 10 questions to the final quarterly interview to assess respondents' perceptions of burden (Yang, 2015). Research has been ongoing, and in 2017, CE asked a shortened, revised series of four questions. The most recent question series asks respondents how “burdensome” the CE was, how long they perceived the survey to be, and how difficult and sensitive the questions were (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Responses to the CE questions have been used to identify burdensome characteristics of the survey, and have also been used to create a composite burden index. In models incorporating both subjective and objective measures, respondents' perceptions of the survey have been shown to significantly predict overall burden (e.g., Fricker, Yan, and Tsai 2014; Yang, 2015).

2 Research on Burden in the American Community Survey (ACS)

Another federal survey that has been studying burden is the American Community Survey (ACS). Since it was fully implemented in 2005, the ACS has served as the premier source for detailed population and housing information about our nation, producing estimates on over 35 demographic, social, economic, and housing topics. ACS data are used by the federal government to allocate over \$675 billion dollars to local communities (Hotchkiss and Phelan, 2017).

The ACS has 71 questions, and with the exception of questions on housing, most are asked at a person-level of all members in the household. Therefore, the amount of time spent answering the survey can vary depending on the size of the household. On average, the ACS takes 40 minutes to complete (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Response to the

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ACS is required by law (Title 13, U.S. Code, Sections 141, 193, and 221). The ACS is also a large and thus very visible federal survey, sampling approximately 3.5 million addresses annually, or about 290,000 addresses each month.

At the time of this research, the ACS collected responses in four sequential modes: 1) internet, 2) paper, 3) computer-assisted telephone interview (CATI), and 4) computer-assisted personal interview (CAPI).² First, sampled addresses were encouraged to self-respond online. If no internet self-response was received, sampled addresses were provided a paper form. Next, telephone numbers were obtained for sampled addresses from which no internet or mail response was received, so that interviewers could call and attempt to complete the ACS by CATI. Finally, a subsample of addresses for which we did not receive a response by internet, paper, or CATI were selected for CAPI follow-up. Respondents could still self-respond online or by paper during CATI and CAPI data collection. Because response modes are offered sequentially, respondents who complete the ACS with an interviewer receive more contacts from the ACS about the survey than those who self-respond. For example, some internet self-respondents receive only two mailing contacts, while respondents answering in interviewer-administered modes would receive five pieces of mail, followed by one or more contact attempts from an interviewer.

Over the last several years, a small number of respondents concerned about the burden of the ACS have “generate[d] a small but continuous stream of complaints to members of Congress” (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2016). In response to these concerns, the Census Bureau developed an “Agility in Action” plan to reduce respondent burden while maintaining data quality (U.S. Census Bureau 2015, 2016, 2017a). The National Academies of Science Committee for National Statistics (CNSTAT) also convened a Workshop on Respondent Burden in the ACS in March 2016 (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2016). Research conducted thus far has included reducing the number of contact attempts and leveraging alternative data sources to allow for the removal of questions from the survey (e.g., Griffin 2013; Griffin and Hughes 2013; Zelenak and Davis 2013; Griffin 2014; Zelenak 2014; Griffin and Nelson, 2014; Griffin, Slud, and Erdman 2015; Hughes et al. 2016; Heimel, Barth, and Rabe 2016).

The current research is one of the first steps being taken to study the subjective component of burden in the ACS, with the goal of developing questions that will measure respondents’ perceptions of burden in the ACS. After questions are developed and cognitively tested, they may be field tested and eventually implemented on the ACS as optional, follow-on questions. Question development is being conducted in three phases, including a literature review, focus groups, and cognitive interviews, and has been guided by four overarching 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?
3. What survey questions can accurately assess respondents’ perceived level of burden?
4. Which respondent and household-level characteristics contribute to variation in respondents’ perceived level of burden?

In this paper, we discuss high-level findings from the focus group phase of this research. Focus groups were conducted to identify potential sources of burden in the ACS and to collect feedback on potential question concepts for cognitive testing, with a particular emphasis on the first two research questions. In-depth findings will be available in a forthcoming report encompassing all three phases of this research.

3 Methods

3.1 Data Collection

In March and April 2017, we conducted 10 focus groups with recent ACS respondents to learn about their perceptions of the ACS and its burden. A total of 46 respondents participated in these focus groups, and the focus groups ranged

² As of October 2017, the ACS no longer uses CATI response (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017b).

in size from three to eight participants.³ We conducted five large groups (five to eight respondents) and five small groups (three to four respondents).

Because of the sequential data collection mode strategy, respondents who self-respond generally do so earlier and may have been more eager to respond to the ACS. Respondents who complete the ACS with an interviewer respond later and may be more reluctant to do so. In order to ensure both perspectives were captured, we separated the focus groups by mode. Five of the ten groups were with those who self-responded (internet and paper), and five were with those who responded with an interviewer (CATI and CAPI). Within each group, we aimed to have equal numbers of respondents for each mode (e.g., 4 paper respondents and 4 internet respondents in a self-response group) when possible. Despite this effort, most of our 46 respondents completed the ACS on the internet (17) or by CAPI (13), followed by paper (9) and CATI (7).

Focus groups were held in the Washington, DC; Chicago, IL; and Houston, TX areas, with two, four, and four focus groups in each city, respectively. Respondents participating in the Washington area focus groups had responded to the ACS in January, while Chicago and Houston focus group respondents had responded to the ACS in January or February. Table 1 shows respondents' demographic characteristics by self-administered and interviewer-administered modes.

All focus group respondents were recruited by the Census Bureau's Hagerstown Contact Center (HCC). Each respondent received \$75. Focus groups were moderated by researchers from the Census Bureau.

3.2 Moderator's Guide

For each of the ten focus groups, researchers followed a semi-structured moderator's guide for most of the discussion, but spontaneously added or eliminated probes as needed to encourage discussion and elicit feedback from respondents. Probes in each section of the moderator's guide started very general and then grew increasingly specific.

Each group began with a discussion of respondents' general survey experiences. We asked respondents how frequently they are asked to respond to surveys, whether they respond to all survey requests, and what they think happens to their answers after they respond. Next, we asked respondents about their ACS experience, including what they liked and disliked, what they remembered about being contacted for the ACS (e.g., the number, messaging, mode, and timing of contacts), and what they remembered about responding to the ACS (e.g., how they decided to respond, the mode in which they responded, survey question topics, sensitivity, difficulty, completion time, and needing to look up information or ask for help).

After collecting respondents' feedback, we administered a survey question assessing overall perceptions of burden, and then asked respondents to discuss how they came up with their answers. Respondents then answered 12 additional survey questions on burden which were also subsequently discussed (see Appendix for question wording). These 13 survey questions were mostly modified versions of questions administered in the 2012 and 2013 CE. The survey questions were used to encourage discussion; the focus groups were not used to cognitively test these questions. To conclude the groups, we asked respondents about other characteristics of the ACS that make it burdensome, changes that would make it less burdensome, and if they had any final comments. Findings presented in this paper largely correspond to the sections of the moderator's guide on respondents' ACS experience and burden. They are presented together because respondents tended to give similar responses in both sections.

3.3 Analysis

Following data collection, respondents' answers to the burden survey questions were tabulated. Responses to select questions are shown in the Results section. Focus groups were either transcribed verbatim (6 focus groups) or

³ Variation in the size of the focus groups was by design as part of methodological research exploring smaller versus larger focus groups.

summarized (4 focus groups).⁴ Personally identifiable information (PII) such as names were not included in the transcriptions and summaries, and respondents were referred to using respondent ID numbers. The introduction, off-topic comments, and moderator probes were generally summarized rather than transcribed. We then created a summary document organized by the research questions and sections of the focus group moderator’s guide that compiled these results. The summary document formed the basis of this paper.

Table 1. Respondent Demographic Characteristics by Mode⁵

	Self-Response: Internet/Paper	Interviewer-Administered Response: CATI/CAPI	Total
N	26	20	46
Household Size			
1	6	11	17
2	9	3	12
3	7	2	9
≥4	4	4	8
Sex			
Male	16	9	25
Female	10	11	21
Age⁶			
18-29	5	1	6
30-44	4	7	11
45-60	8	8	16
Over 60	9	3	12
Race			
White	16	4	20
Black or African American	8	14	22
Asian	2	1	3
More than one race	0	1	1
Education			
Less than high school	0	1	1
Completed high school	3	5	8
Some college, no degree	3	4	7
Associate’s degree (AA/AS)	3	2	5
Bachelor’s Degree (BA/BS)	9	5	14
Post-bachelor’s degree	8	3	11

⁴ We had initially planned for all focus groups to be transcribed but were unable to do so due to budget and schedule constraints. Earlier and larger focus groups were transcribed; smaller and later focus groups were summarized. Four of the six transcriptions were completed by a contractor; the remaining two were completed by Census Bureau researchers. All summaries were completed by Census Bureau researchers.

⁵ Demographic information shown was provided by respondents during the focus group. Only one respondent identified as Hispanic; thus, Hispanic origin is not shown in this table.

⁶ One respondent did not answer this question.

4 Results

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

Respondents did not think the ACS was very burdensome. In response to the survey question on overall burden, none of the respondents said the ACS was very burdensome, and only seven said it was somewhat burdensome (see Table 2).

Table 2. Respondents' Perceptions of Burden in 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%)

Focus group respondents commented that the ACS was “not a big deal” and “not a huge imposition” on their lives. One respondent asked if we were conducting this research because something had “gone wrong” with the ACS.

“I can't say it affected me that way.”

“[It was] not that taxing.”

Respondents also did not have a lot of feedback about how the ACS could be made less burdensome. The most common suggestions were disseminating information about how ACS data is used through advertising, asking fewer questions, and asking less sensitive questions. However, it should be noted that some respondents who said the questions should be less sensitive had difficulty articulating which questions were sensitive.

Generally, respondents' comments suggested that “burdensome” may not be the right word to use, as it seemed to have a very negative connotation that was too strong to describe a survey. Additionally, one respondent who was not a native English speaker did not know what “burdensome” meant. Some synonyms that respondents offered in place of the word burdensome included “bothersome,” “a weight on the shoulders,” “annoying,” “effortful,” or a “hassle,” among other things.

4.2 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?

Before we showed respondents the remaining 12 questions in the burden section, we asked them what they were thinking about when considering how burdensome the ACS was overall. Most respondents said the questionnaire in general or a specific aspect of the questionnaire, such as its length or the time it took them to look up information and coordinate responses with other members of the household.

Less frequently, some respondents thought about the number, mode, and timing of contacts they received. This also included some comments on interactions with interviewers, when applicable. Some respondents suggested that the content and number of the contacts made them expect that the questionnaire was going to be more difficult to complete than it actually was. In a few groups, some respondents made comments about the perceived benefits of responding to the ACS outweighing the cons of having to respond. However, no one remembered any specific messaging from the contact materials about how the data would be used or why the ACS is conducted. Instead, respondents had a general sense that the ACS is like the decennial census and that it is important.

There were also some respondents who considered that response to the survey is required by law when assessing its burden; those who did so usually remembered it clearly and brought it up right away. However, the reaction to the

ACS being mandatory was not consistently negative. Some respondents said it communicated to them that the survey must be important, and that it motivated them to complete the survey.

Since the questionnaire was the most salient to respondents, we focus mostly on further discussion of these perceptions for the rest of the paper. This includes discussion on the length of the survey, question difficulty, and sensitivity. We also briefly describe respondent reactions to the number of contacts because some respondents reported thinking about the contact strategy.

4.2.1 Length

Of the 45 focus group respondents who answered this question⁷, most (28) thought the length of the ACS was about right, with some (16) saying it was too long and just one respondent saying it was too short (see Table 3).

Table 3. Length

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%)

The ACS has 71 questions and takes 40 minutes to complete on average. Respondents reported that it took them between 10 minutes and over an hour to complete the ACS questionnaire, with most respondents saying that they thought it was between 20-60 minutes. Only a couple of respondents said that it took more than an hour. We did not ask respondents in all groups how many questions they thought the ACS had overall, but of those who were asked, respondents varied widely in their estimates, with some saying 20 questions, and some saying 80, 100, or more.

While some respondents said they wished that the ACS would be shorter, many respondents said that the length of time was about right given their expectations based on the number of questions. They also said they understood that the ACS needed to take some time to complete since it is important. A couple of respondents said that the amount of time to complete the survey was okay because the ACS is not a regular, recurring obligation.

However, some respondents thought the questionnaire was repetitive. For some respondents, this was due to having to answer the same questions about multiple people in the household; for others, it was because they perceived the ACS to be asking the same questions multiple times in slightly different ways. Respondents were not able to provide more specific examples of this latter issue.

4.2.2 Question Difficulty and Sensitivity

Respondents generally thought that it was very (22) or somewhat (17) easy to answer the questions in the ACS. Seven respondents said the questions were somewhat difficult (see Table 4). Respondents mostly remembered answering “standard” demographic questions, and occasionally recalled specific questions about housing, income, utility bills, and fuel for heating. Some respondents indicated they had to look up information or ask other household members for the answers to some questions (for example, some respondents indicated that their spouse knew more about bills and income than they did). Respondents who undertook this effort did so because they wanted to be as precise as possible when answering the ACS.

⁷ One respondent did not answer the question.

Table 4. 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%)

Responses were more mixed regarding question sensitivity; most respondents thought the questions on the ACS were somewhat or a little sensitive (see Table 5). Reasons for sensitivity included not understanding the reason for asking specific questions, having to answer questions on the behalf of someone else, and viewing the information on the ACS as generally private. There were at least a few respondents who reported being surprised by certain types of questions or at the level of detail required in the questionnaire; however, some of these respondents also understood there was a reason for asking these questions.

“Yeah, it’s a little bit sensitive, but it needs to get answered.”

Table 5. 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%)

4.2.3 Contacts

Almost all (38) of the 46 focus group respondents thought that they received a reasonable number of contacts for the ACS; the remaining eight respondents said that they received too many (see Table 6).

Table 6. 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%)

Not everyone was able to remember how many contacts they received, but the most common response was around two or three. Only a couple of respondents across all groups reported five or more contacts. Since the ACS encourages self-response and only uses interviewer-administered response modes for nonresponse follow-up, this was somewhat surprising. Respondents in the CATI/CAPI focus groups should have reported receiving more contacts than they did. It is possible that some contacts may have simply gone unnoticed, or for those who did not live alone, the burden of contact attempts could have been shared by multiple household members.

Even those remembering more contacts did not seem bothered by the number of contacts, with many respondents saying that they could not complain because they had not done the survey yet, and that the persistence encouraged them to respond.

“It seemed like a lot to me, but at the same time I [hadn’t done it yet] and so I can’t really complain.”

A few respondents who responded online or on paper said they were motivated to self-respond because they knew someone would contact them if they did not.

5 Discussion

These focus groups provided us with an opportunity to get feedback from ACS respondents and learn more about what features of the ACS may have affected their perceptions of burden. Overall, our focus group respondents did not consider the ACS to be very burdensome. Some respondents also thought that “burdensome” was a strong word to describe a survey. This suggests that researchers should study alternative ways to measure respondents’ overall perceptions of burden without using this word, and compare how the different measures perform.

We found that respondents think about different aspects when subjectively evaluating the burden of a survey. This variation underscores the importance of capturing this respondent perspective in addition to measuring burden using more objective methods, as changes to objective survey features may not have the impact researchers would expect. For the ACS, the most salient aspects of respondents’ experience tended to be aspects of the questionnaire itself, though some respondents also commented on the contacts they received. This may vary by survey.

5.1 Limitations

It should be noted that a few components of our research may have contributed to low levels of perceived burden from focus group respondents. First, not all of our respondents could remember the ACS experience very well. While we attempted to minimize the amount of time between when respondents took the ACS and participated in a focus group, it had generally been about a month or longer since they had responded to the survey. Some explicitly told us that they did not remember the ACS in great detail, and others conflated the ACS with the decennial census. On the other hand, perhaps the fact that respondents could not remember much about the ACS after a relatively short period of time is another indicator that the ACS is not perceived to be very burdensome.

Respondents were also paid participants who volunteered to attend focus groups and may be more agreeable towards the federal government and surveys. While this is a limitation for all qualitative research, this is particularly relevant here because of the direct link between agreeableness and burden. We were probably unable to recruit the most burdened ACS respondents, as they may not have wanted to further engage with the Census Bureau.

5.2 Future Research

This research is only the second step towards developing questions to measure respondents’ perceptions of burden in the ACS. After completing the focus groups with a series of 13 questions, we selected a shorter series of questions for cognitive testing. The first round of cognitive testing was completed in December 2017, and the second round is currently underway. Cognitive testing will culminate in recommended questions for field testing. A full report encompassing all three phases of this research (literature review, focus groups, and cognitive interviews) is forthcoming and will be available in fall 2018.

Generally speaking, there is a clear need for more research on how to measure subjective perceptions of survey burden. We think there needs to be attention paid to the fact that asking questions about burden can increase the burden of a survey, both objectively and subjectively. We suggest that researchers be selective and implement the minimal number of questions that will allow them to adequately study respondents’ perceptions and subsequently decrease the burden of the survey. It would also be beneficial for researchers to more specifically target reluctant respondents and nonrespondents in future burden research, as it seems likely that these people may have higher perceptions of burden. Learning more about their perspective could help inform future directions of burden research and reduction.

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7 Appendix: Burden Questions Used in Focus Groups

1. How burdensome was the ACS to you?
 - Very burdensome
 - Somewhat burdensome
 - A little burdensome
 - Not at all burdensome
2. Do you feel that the length of the American Community Survey (ACS) was too long, about right, or too short?
 - Too long
 - About right
 - Too short
3. How interesting was the ACS to you?
 - Very interesting
 - Somewhat interesting
 - A little interesting
 - Not at all interesting
4. How difficult or easy was it for you to answer the questions in the ACS?
 - Very easy
 - Somewhat easy
 - Somewhat difficult
 - Very difficult
5. Thinking about the contacts you received for the ACS, would you say it was too many, a reasonable number, or not enough?
 - Too many
 - A reasonable number
 - Not enough
6. How sensitive did you feel the questions on the ACS were?
 - Very sensitive
 - Somewhat sensitive
 - A little sensitive
 - Not at all sensitive
7. How agreeable would you be to take another survey like the ACS in the future?
 - Very agreeable
 - Somewhat agreeable
 - Somewhat disagreeable
 - Not at all agreeable
8. If we had to extend the ACS for another 15 minutes, how willing would you have been to continue?
 - Very willing
 - Somewhat willing
 - Somewhat unwilling
 - Very unwilling
9. Thinking about the amount of effort that you put forth into answering the ACS, would you say that you put forth:
 - A lot of effort
 - A moderate amount of effort
 - A little effort
 - No effort

10. Would you say that the time and effort you put into answering the ACS survey questions was:
- Very well spent
 - Somewhat well spent
 - A little well spent
 - Not at all well spent
11. How motivated were you to complete the ACS as quickly as possible? Would you say that you were:
- Very motivated
 - Somewhat motivated
 - Somewhat unmotivated
 - Very unmotivated
12. How much do you trust the U.S. Census Bureau to safeguard the information you have provided them on the ACS?
- Strongly trust
 - Somewhat trust
 - Neither trust nor distrust
 - Somewhat distrust
 - Strongly distrust
13. How important do you think it is for the U.S. Census Bureau to collect the information on the ACS?
- Very important
 - Somewhat important
 - Neither important nor unimportant
 - Somewhat unimportant
 - Very unimportant