

# Do Respondents Read Those Key Messages in Our Questionnaire Package Cover Letters?: What Comes Out First Matters

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## Abstract

Questionnaire package cover letters often contain critical survey information, but how many respondents read them? If critical messages are not read, the letters are not effectively influencing respondent behavior.

This paper explores the extent to which respondents find and read key messages in questionnaire package cover letters, and whether the order in which respondents take materials from the envelope influences that outcome. Data come from three cognitive testing rounds of experimental American Community Survey (ACS) messages in cover letters and envelopes. The messages were aimed at mitigating a potential decline in ACS response rates when some respondents get both the ACS and Census 2010 questionnaires from the Census Bureau in 2010.

During cognitive testing, we unobtrusively observed and recorded whether respondents found and appeared to read experimental text in the initial ACS questionnaire package letter and whether they pulled contents from the envelope with the questionnaire or one of four other inserts on top. Results were consistent within narrow ranges and across these testing rounds. Overall, 1) just 32 to 43 percent of respondents appeared to find and read the key letter text; 2) 76 percent opened the envelope with the questionnaire on top; and 3) there were clear differences in who found and read the letter: 18 to 32 percent of the questionnaire-on-top group appeared to read or scan it compared to 78 percent of those with something else on top. The questionnaire-on-top respondents focused on that form and were less likely to find and read the letter. The others were more likely to go through the stack and see the letter before the questionnaire. In comparison, we present 2008 results from separate cognitive testing of the near-final 2010 Census questionnaire, showing different outcomes.

Suggestions for future fixes to increase the chances that respondents will find and read the cover letters include reordering ACS materials in envelopes to make the letter more noticeable, reducing the number of inserts, and/or changing its appearance to make the letter more visible.

**Key Words:** Cover Letters, American Community Survey, Questionnaire Packages

## 1. Introduction

Cover letters in survey questionnaire packages convey important messages to respondents that have the potential to affect whether respondents complete and return the enclosed questionnaires, which may in turn affect response rates. These cover letters provide basic information about the survey, motivational messages to participate, and, in some cases, experimental text in special situations or in split-panel tests. Cover letter messages, however, are only effective if respondents find them in the package and read them.

In this paper, we present results on the extent to which respondents found and were likely to have read experimental messages in special American Community Survey initial questionnaire package cover letters. We address four questions. First, to what extent do cognitive respondents find and read cover letters with key text in the initial ACS questionnaire package? Second, are there differences in whether they find and read these letters based on what is on top when they pull the inserts from the envelope? Third, do we find similar results in testing a census questionnaire package? And fourth, what suggestions can be offered for revising the ACS questionnaire package mailing materials to increase the likelihood that the letter will be found and read in 2010 and beyond?

In 2008, the Census Bureau recognized that 2010 would be a critical year for the American Community Survey (ACS), an ongoing survey of around 250,000 new households per month. This survey was originally designed in part to replace the long form used in past decennial censuses to collect more detailed demographic, housing, education, income and other information from a sample of households. In late 2010, the ACS will produce its first full estimates for the population at all levels of geography, timed to supplement the 2010 Census data.

Additionally, in 2010, the regular environment in which the ACS is collected on an ongoing basis would be replaced with the massive 2010 Census advertising campaign environment in all parts of the country, with its messages of “It’s just 10 questions in 10 minutes.” During the peak months of March and April, 2010 some respondents would be receiving both the ACS and the 2010 Census mailout forms from the Census Bureau. During this period of dual surveys from the same source, would respondents in 2010 confuse the ACS and Census forms and wonder, “Didn’t I already do this?” Would respondents be willing to fill out both or ask, “Why can’t I do just one?” The concern was that if respondents chose to do just one, many would likely choose to do the census form with just ten questions rather than the ACS form (28 pages long).

Would ACS response rates decline during this 2010 Census period? During the previous 2000 Census, changes in mail check-in rates may have been associated with the census environment. A review of ACS mail check-in rates during Census 2000 showed those rates increased from January to March, 2000 during the huge advertising campaign, then declined around seven percent in March and April when the census mailout forms were in the field, then declined around one to two percent between May and December of 2000.

In 2008, a Census Bureau inter-divisional working group was established to address these issues. Group members developed and tested new ACS messages in letters, envelopes, and a flyer with the objective of attempting to maintain—or at least mitigate the potential decline of—ACS response rates during the massive Census 2010 advertising campaign and mobilization (Davis and Tancreto 2008).

## **2. Development of Experimental American Community Survey Letters and Materials**

The experimental letters developed as part of this project included four key messages specifically targeted to ACS sample households that would receive both the ACS mailout questionnaire and the 2010 Census mailout questionnaire. These pre-notice and cover letter messages informed respondents: 1) that they had been selected by random sample to participate in the ACS, 2) that the ACS is associated with, but separate from, the census and is used for different purposes, 3) that they will receive both questionnaires and 4) that they are required by law to respond to both the ACS and the census.

The ACS questionnaire package includes five inserts, oriented in the envelope in such a way that all inserts are facing in the direction of the window of the envelope. The 28 page green and white questionnaire with black ink is right next to the window of the envelope, positioned so that the address label printed on the top front of the folded questionnaire shows through that window. Behind that is the cover letter, folded and with the top half visible, so that when the questionnaire is set aside, the cover letter text is facing the respondent. The third insert is a white brochure printed with blue ink to guide respondents through the questions. The fourth is a brightly colored glossy Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) brochure, and that is followed by the last insert: the large white return envelope, in an upside down position facing the back of the brochure.

Given the order of the materials in the ACS envelope, it makes the most sense for respondents to open the package and remove materials with the questionnaire on top, so that all of the materials are facing up as the respondent moves through the materials. If the respondent opens it with the front of the envelope up, all of the materials are face up. If, instead, the respondent turns the package over to open it by pulling open the flap on the back side, he/she pulls out the stack with the blank back of the return envelope and either has to flip the stack to have everything face up or turn each insert over one at a time to read them, getting to the questionnaire last.

We also developed a laminated flyer for field representatives to show to ACS mail nonresponders during the final personal visit interview phase of ACS data collection. The flyer included the same key messages.

## **3. Methodology**

If the experimental text in the letters is to have some chance of success in improving response rates, respondents have to read, or at least scan, the cover letters to be exposed to the experimental messages. In our cognitive testing, we wanted to observe the extent to which respondents were reading the experimental text in the cover letters.

Hence, we built into our cognitive protocol a checklist of respondent behaviors to observe during each of the cognitive interviews across the rounds of our cognitive testing research. Here we will focus exclusively on our observations on how respondents handled the initial ACS questionnaire package, because that initial questionnaire package likely yields the largest proportion of mail respondents. If that is true, the cover letter in this package is the cover letter among the three we developed and tested in the ACS Messaging Project with

perhaps the best chance to influence ACS sample household persons to respond and achieve the objective of maintaining ACS response rates in 2010. Other results from our cognitive testing are documented elsewhere (Schwede and Sorokin 2009, 2010a and 2010b).

We conducted two rounds of cognitive testing of these letters and experimental envelopes with 17 respondents in the first round and ten in the second. In both of these rounds focused on improving response by mail, we over-selected married homeowners as respondents, as past research on ACS mail response rates has shown this group to be more likely to respond to the ACS by mail. We later conducted one round of cognitive testing of the flyer with ten other respondents. As the flyer was intended for use in the final personal visit stage of ACS data collection with mail and phone nonresponders, we over-selected for renters who, as a group, have been found to be less to respond by mail. Across these three rounds, we had a very diverse group of respondents.

In all three rounds of cognitive testing of the experimental ACS materials, we tried to simulate during the cognitive session, as best we could, the sequence of mailout ACS and census materials that respondents would receive in the mail during the height of the 2010 Census mailout operation in March and April, 2010. We gave them the mailers one at a time and asked respondents to handle each as they would at home if the researcher were absent before giving them the next to process. We started with the 2010 Census advance letter, then initial Census questionnaire package, then the ACS advance letter, followed by the ACS initial questionnaire package (note that this mailing at the center of this paper is the fourth envelope handed to respondents to process). During the presentation of those materials, we simply quietly observed how respondents handled the materials without asking any probes. After this fourth presentation, we paused to ask some nondirective probes about the preceding materials, then presented them successively with the Census reminder card and replacement questionnaire, followed by the ACS reminder card and replacement questionnaire (results of this testing of the letters and envelopes can be found in Schwede and Sorokin 2010a). In the third round of testing, we presented the flyer that would be handed to the respondent by the Field Representative seeking to do a personal visit interview (see Schwede and Sorokin 2010b).

In each cognitive interview across the three testing rounds, we presented respondents with the ACS initial questionnaire package face up, as they would see it in an incoming stack of mail. Then, following our written cognitive protocol checklist, we observed and recorded the following respondent behaviors: 1) whether the questionnaire or some other insert was on top when the respondent pulled the materials from the envelope, 2) if they found and noticed the cover letter embedded within the stack of five inserts, and 3) the extent to which they appeared to read the cover letter: read, scan, glance, and did not read.

## **4. Findings**

### **4.1 ACS Observations**

#### *4.1.1 ACS Phase 1*

After completing around half of the interviews in round one cognitive testing, we noticed that the way respondents pulled materials from the ACS envelope (questionnaire on top or not) seemed to be associated with the extent to which they found and appeared to read the

cover letter in this package. We decided to track this through the remaining two rounds of testing.

**Table 1:** Round 1 Observations with the ACS: Likelihood to Have Read the Letter by What Respondent Pulls Out of the Envelope on Top

	<i>Questionnaire on Top</i>	<i>Questionnaire Not on Top</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Likelihood to have Read Letter Text</i>			
Likely	2	4	6
May or May Not Have	1	-	1
Unlikely/Did Not	8	2	10
Total	11	6	17

Table 1 shows the results from the first round of cognitive testing. The total column on the left shows that of 17 total respondents, six appeared to have read the cover letter enough to read the key messages, and one more might have done so. Thus, just 35 to 41 percent of our respondents are likely to have read the experimental text in the cover letter, a disappointingly low proportion.

Column 2 shows that the majority of respondents were pulling the materials out of the envelope with the questionnaire facing up. Of these 17 respondents, 11 (65 percent) pulled out the materials with the questionnaire on top, while the remaining six (35 percent) had some other piece on top when they removed the set from the envelope.

Table 1 also shows that there are clear differences in the likelihood that respondents read the letter text by whether the respondents pulled out the materials with the questionnaire or some other piece on top. Of those 11 who pulled out the questionnaire on top, just two were likely to have read the key text and one may or may not have. That is just 18 to 27 percent of the 11 in the questionnaire-on-top group.

In contrast, in the questionnaire-not-on-top group in column 3 of Table 1, 4 of the 6 respondents, or 67 percent, were likely to have read the key text.

In summary, a minority of respondents found and likely read the key text in the ACS initial questionnaire package in round one. Second, a clear majority of respondents opened the package with the questionnaire on top. Third, those who opened it with the questionnaire on top were much less likely to see and read the letter than those who opened it with something else on top.

#### *4.1.2 ACS Phase 2*

Table 2 shows the same three patterns in the second round of cognitive testing. Of the ten respondents shown in the Total column on the left, less than a majority of respondents were likely to have read the letter; three appeared to read the letter and one more may or may not have. Thus 30 to 40 percent were likely or possibly likely to have read enough of the letter to read the key messages.

**Table 2:** Round 2 Observations with the ACS: Likelihood to Have Read the Letter by What Respondent Pulls Out of the Envelope on Top

	<i>Questionnaire on Top</i>	<i>Questionnaire Not on Top</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Likelihood to have Read Letter Text</i>			
Likely	1	2	3
May or May Not Have	1	-	1
Unlikely/Did Not	6	0	6
Total	8	2	10

We found the same patterns of the majority of respondents pulling the materials out with the questionnaire on top, but a low number of them likely to have read the experimental text, with the opposite happening in the other group. In column 2 of Table 2, we see that eight respondents pulled the materials out with the questionnaire on top, but only one appeared to read it and one other respondent may or may not have. That suggests that 13 to 25 percent of this group may have read the key text. In contrast, both of those respondents (100 percent) who pulled out something else on top were likely to have read the letter.

#### 4.1.3 ACS Phase 3

The same patterns were found in round three of testing (Table 3 below). Of the ten respondents in this round, three were likely to have read the letter and two more may have. This translates to 30 to 50 percent who may have read the key text.

In terms of how the materials were drawn from the envelope, nine of the ten opened it with the questionnaire on top. Two to four of them, or 22 to 44 percent, may have read the key text. The sole respondent in this round who pulled the materials out with something else on top appeared to have read the letter enough to see the key text.

**Table 3:** Round 3 Observations with the ACS: Likelihood to Have Read the Letter by What Respondent Pulls Out of the Envelope on Top

	<i>Questionnaire on Top</i>	<i>Questionnaire Not on Top</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Likelihood to have Read Letter Text</i>			
Likely	2	1	3
May or May Not Have	2	-	2
Unlikely/Did Not	5	0	5
Total	9	1	10

#### 4.1.4 Summary of All ACS Observations

Given these consistent findings across the three phases, it is not surprising that when we pool all of the 37 respondents from all three phases of our cognitive research, we see the same patterns. Table 4 reveals the pooled results for all 37 respondents across the three

cognitive testing rounds. Overall, a minority of the 37 respondents were likely to have read the experimental text: 12 were likely to have read the letter and another four may or may not have done so, translating to a range across all three rounds of just 32 to 43 percent.

**Table 4:** Summary of All Observations with the ACS: Likeliness to Have Read the Letter by What Respondent Pulls Out of the Envelope on Top

	<i>Questionnaire on Top</i>	<i>Questionnaire Not on Top</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Likeliness to have Read Letter Text</i>			
Likely	5	7	12
May or May Not Have	4	-	4
Unlikely/Did Not	19	2	21
Total	28	9	37

The pattern is clear that a large majority of respondents (76 percent) opened the package with the questionnaire on top of the stack of five inserts.

The third pattern is also clear: there is a strong association between what is on top when respondents pull the stack of ACS inserts from the envelope and the likelihood that they may have read the experimental text. Of those 28 who pulled out the questionnaire on top, just five were likely to have read it and another four may or may not have done so. Thus, just 18 to 32 percent of those pulling out the questionnaire on top appeared to read the cover letter enough to be likely to see the key messages. In contrast, for those pulling out any other insert on top, seven respondents, 77 percent, appeared to read it enough to see the key messages.

In summary, we found several quite consistent patterns over three independent rounds of cognitive testing in this ACS cognitive research. First, just 32 to 43 percent across the three rounds appeared to read or scan enough of the letter to have likely read the experimental messages we were trying to convey about the ACS and the 2010 Census, for use during ACS data collection during the height of the 2010 Census. Stated in another way, 57 to 68 percent in our respondent pool appeared *not* to read the experimental messages at all. The experimental messages in the letters cannot work if they are not read.

Second, there is a consistent and clear pattern in the way respondents open the envelopes and what they see first. Three quarters of our respondents pulled the materials out of the envelope with the questionnaire on top.

The third pattern is that when the questionnaire is pulled out on top, just 18 to 32 percent are likely to read the letter, meaning that 68 to 82 percent of this group did *not* read the experimental messages. In contrast, one quarter of the respondents pulled something else out of the envelope on top. Of this group, 77 percent read the messages, while 23 percent did not.

These results suggest that the order and possibly the number of inserts in the ACS envelope are not conducive to finding and reading the cover letter.

#### **4.2 Some Reasons Why the Questionnaire On Top Might Affect Likelihood to Read the Letter**

Why would opening the initial questionnaire package with the questionnaire on top affect whether respondents read the cover letter or not? The questionnaire is the largest and thickest piece of mail in the package and its green color makes it noticeable. Respondents understand that this is the document they will need to fill out and send in. Our observations indicate that when respondents pull the questionnaire out on top, they are very likely to start paging through the questionnaire to see what kind of questions they will need to answer and start thinking about how they will answer. Some may start to fill in the questionnaire at this point. When our respondents were done looking through the questionnaire, some seem to have less interest in the other materials in the envelope. If they did look at the other materials, they seemed to look at the brightly colored brochure and the guide with its blue ink, but set aside or ignored the black-and-white return envelope and standard cover letter.

The respondents who opened the envelope and took out the materials with the return envelope or some other insert on top went through the inserts faster and saw the letter before seeing the questionnaire. More respondents seem to look at the letter when the questionnaire is at the bottom, rather than the top, of the pieces as they come out of the envelope.

#### **4.3 Census Observations**

After seeing these consistent results across the ACS testing rounds, we wondered whether the same relationship between how respondents pull materials out from questionnaire package envelopes and their propensity to find and read cover letters would also be found with 2010 Census questionnaire packages as well. One of us (Schwede) had participated in cognitive testing of near-final 2010 Census questionnaire mailing packages the previous year and recalled that some of the same unobtrusive observations were made during that testing (DeMaio, Beck and Schwede 2008). She pulled out the set of interview summaries from that testing and analyzed the data.

The census cognitive testing and observation differed from the ACS testing described earlier. We tested just the census advance letter and questionnaire package, rather than a long sequence of mixed materials, as we had with the ACS mailers. The census letter was small and blue, with less text than appeared on the ACS letter, and it was printed on two sides. The first side contained the letter that included among other messages a brief statement about protecting confidentiality, while the back side included an extended confidentiality statement; it was thus not essential that all respondents read the back side. There were just three inserts in the census initial questionnaire package: the short census form of one large piece of paper with two folds, with the questionnaire next to the window so that the pre-printed address would show through, the return envelope in the middle, and the cover letter facing up toward the back of the envelope. If the respondent opened the package with the questionnaire side up, the envelope follows and the letter would need to be turned over to read. If the respondent opened the package from the back, the front of the letter would be right on top and would be the first piece read. The placement of the census letter thus makes it more likely to be seen than the ACS letter in the ACS package.

Table 5 shows the results from observations during cognitive testing of near-final 2010 Census initial questionnaire packages. The census results differ from the ACS results. It



appeared that four of the 13 respondents read both sides and another eight read or scanned at least the front. This adds up to 92 percent of the total who read some or all, very different from the minority who read the key text on the ACS initial package cover letter.

Census cognitive respondents were more evenly divided on how they opened the envelope than the ACS respondents. Six opened it with the questionnaire on top while the remaining seven opened it with the letter on top.

Finally, we did not see the very substantial difference in likelihood to read the census letter when the census questionnaire was pulled out of the package on top. Of those six who opened the census package with the questionnaire on top, one read it all and four read or scanned the front, while just one did not read it. Thus, 83 percent of the questionnaire-on-top group were likely to have read the messages. Conversely, of the seven who opened it with something else on top, three read it all and the remaining four read or scanned at least the front with the key messages: 100 percent of these questionnaire-not-on-top group were likely to have read the key messages in the letter. Just one respondent accounted for this difference between groups, so the difference may very well have been due to chance.

**Table 5:** Observations with the Experimental 2010 Census Form in 2008: Likeliness to Have Read the Letter by What Respondent Pulls Out of the Envelope on Top

	<i>Questionnaire on Top</i>	<i>Questionnaire Not on Top</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Likeliness to have Read Letter Text</i>			
Likely	1	3	4
May or May Not Have	4	4	8
Unlikely/Did Not	1	0	1
Total	6	7	13

In summary, a much higher proportion of the respondents receiving the initial census questionnaire package in the other cognitive testing project were likely to have read the cover letter. They were more evenly divided on whether they opened the package with the questionnaire on top or not, but both groups had a much higher likelihood of reading the census cover letter than we found in the ACS testing.

#### **4.4 Possible Reasons for the Differences Between the ACS and Census Observations**

What are some of the reasons that we might be seeing these differences in the likelihood to read census cover letters and ACS cover letters? One possible reason that must be acknowledged is the design of the cognitive testing session itself. The ACS testing was designed to observe and record how respondents reacted to a long sequence of interspersed 2010 Census and ACS materials. By the time respondents had gone through each of the first three mailings we presented to them (the 2010 Census pre-notice letter and initial questionnaire package, and ACS pre-notice letter), some were starting to grumble about too much to read and may not have been quite as focused when we gave them the larger and bulkier ACS initial questionnaire package with its five inserts as they might be at home when these materials would arrive several days apart, rather than all at once.

That is not likely to be the whole explanation, however. There are several important differences in the two sets of questionnaire package materials that might potentially be affecting how respondents pull materials from the envelopes and whether or not they find and read the cover letters within them.

The first factor is the number of inserts in each package. The 2010 Census initial questionnaire package has just three inserts, while the ACS package has five. Part of the reason the letter may be missed is that the number of inserts is too large.

The second factor is the appearance of those inserts in terms of color, size, and contrast with the other inserts in the package. The census letter and questionnaire are the same shade of pleasant blue and the letter is smaller in size, with less text, making it more noticeable and eye-catching, while the return envelope is plain. In contrast, the ACS questionnaire is green, white and thick and the two brochures are colorful. By contrast, the standard-size ACS letter in black and white and the plain return envelope are formal and bland and may be more likely to be missed.

The third, and possibly most important factor is the ordering and placement of the letters in the envelope. The census letter is positioned just inside the back flap of the envelope and is the first thing seen by the respondent who opens the census package from the back. In contrast, the ACS letter is sandwiched in between the prominent questionnaire and the guide brochure, separated from the back flap of the envelope by three other inserts. Unless respondents take the inserts out of the envelope one at a time (and we did not see any one of the 37 respondents do it that way), the ACS letter will not be on the top of the stack of the materials, no matter which way the stack is removed from the envelope.

As noted earlier, we noticed that respondents who opened the ACS package with the questionnaire on top tended to get immersed in looking through the questionnaire and were less likely to look more than cursorily at the other inserts in the package. In contrast, those who opened it with the blank back of the envelope up or some other insert were more likely to look at each of the inserts, including the cover letter, as they worked their way through the inserts to the questionnaire on the bottom.

If it is important to the survey designers to increase the likelihood that future respondents read the cover letter in the initial questionnaire package and there is sufficient money for further research, it would be well to consider if there is a way to reorder the materials and/or reduce the number of inserts so that the letter is more noticeable to respondents. When we reported these results to our team, the possibility of reordering the materials within the envelope to put the letter just inside the back flap to make it more visible was explored and tested.

Since the final 2010 ACS questionnaire materials had already been finalized and sent to print by the time we had compiled these results from all three rounds of testing, the options to increase the likeliness that respondents would read the cover letter with the experimental text during the actual 2010 Census in 2010 seemed limited to making changes in the materials in the envelope, or altering their placements in the envelope. Changing the number of inserts in the package just a few months before 2010 without having done research on the effects of such a large change was not a prudent option. Unfortunately, when attempts were made by machine to mechanically insert the letters in that location, the letters jammed because they were catching on the open flaps of the envelopes facing

outwards and upwards at the back of the package, so changing the ordering in the envelope was not an option at that time either. Other than wording changes to the letter and substantial changes to the questionnaire envelope described elsewhere, the 2010 ACS initial questionnaire package number and placement of inserts remained the same in the final version of the 2010 ACS questionnaire to be used in the 2010 Census environment.

## **5. Conclusions, Implications, and Suggestions**

The fact that we saw the same patterns across all three phases of cognitive testing of the ACS initial questionnaire package and that the same pattern held in the overall sample is compelling evidence that there is a problem with the placement of the letter in the package and with respondents finding it and reading it. In each of our three phases of testing, we found that a disappointingly low proportion of respondents were finding and reading the cover letter. Just 32-43 percent finding and reading the cover letter in the ACS initial questionnaire mailing package means that 57 to 68 percent appeared not to have read it or were unlikely to have read it.

We also found that just over three-quarters of our respondents were opening the package with the letter on top, but just 18 to 32 percent were likely to have read it, meaning that 68 to 82 percent either did not read the key text or were unlikely to have done so. This is in sharp contrast to the quarter of our respondents, about three-quarters of whom were likely to have found and read the key text, with less than one-quarter not doing so. We did not find the same patterns in observing how respondents opened and read through the near-final 2010 Census initial questionnaire package in a previous study, suggesting that the likely causes of the problems are associated with the ACS initial questionnaire package.

While these results suggest that our objective of putting experimental messages into the letters to try to maintain response rates during 2010 and possibly after that may not be as effective as we hoped, unless some change is made to increase the likelihood that the cover letter is noticed and read by respondents, they must be placed in context. On the one hand, these results come from a small sample of 37 non-randomly selected respondents; the results are neither representative nor generalizable to any larger population. Further, we do not know the extent to which the format of our cognitive interviews (having respondents look at the Census prenotice and questionnaire package and the ACS prenotice envelope before receiving the initial questionnaire package) may have made them less likely to look for and read the initial questionnaire package cover letter than if they had just received that package by itself at the beginning of the interview. Additionally, we do not know the extent to which the cognitive testing situation changes the behavior of respondents to make them more or less likely to open and read materials than they would be if they got the ACS at home without any researcher involved.

However, having noted those caveats, these results were found consistently across three separate samples of respondents—some selected because they are likely to be mail responders and others selected because they seemed unlikely to be responders. The range of the sample that was observed reading the letter was just 30 to 34 percent, with an additional 11 percent who may or may not have read it. That consistency and stability of results is pretty compelling evidence in qualitative studies.

We have heard that early results from the first few months of the split-panel test of experimental ACS envelopes and letters being conducted during the 2010 Census indicate

that the panels with the experimental letters our group developed may have somewhat higher response rates than the panels with the standard control ACS cover letters used in the past. We look forward to hearing final results from the split-panel test of the experimental materials our group developed as they become available.

Yet the suggestions for improving the visibility of the ACS cover letter in the initial questionnaire package and the likeliness that it will be read by respondents are still relevant for revisions to ACS materials in future non-decennial years. Some brainstorm suggestions for improvement include: 1) moving the cover letter to the back of the envelope so it is visible when the flap is opened, while rearranging the other materials or experimenting with an envelope with a side opening, rather than a top flap, to prevent machine jams (as happened when this was tried earlier); 2) folding the letter inside the questionnaire, so that when the questionnaire is unfolded, the letter must be moved to get to the questionnaire; 3) moving the letter to the front of the envelope with the address and barcode printed on it (and also on the questionnaire), so that it the letter is on top when respondents open the actual ACS questionnaire packages; 4) considering removing one or more inserts from the package to make the letter more likely to be seen; and/or 5) some other means of making the letter more visible in the envelope.

Most of these suggestions would represent substantial changes and changes can introduce risks of unintended consequences. The risks were too high to make any substantial changes in the months leading up to the 2010 Census. However, now that the census is winding down, such research could be considered for 2011 when it could be done at a more measured pace and promising alternatives could eventually be tested in live-production split-panel test.

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