AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY *FACT SHEET*

How the Census Bureau's Largest Sample Survey Benefits America's

Transportation System

Background:

The U.S. Census Bureau's **American Community Survey (ACS)** is part of the constitutionally required decennial census. While the census counts the population every ten years, the ACS (which replaced the traditional census *long, or sample, form* in 2005) provides more detailed information about the nation's states, counties and cities, towns and rural communities, and neighborhoods every year, giving policymakers a unique, irreplaceable and timely tool to understand and address the nation's needs. The **ACS** samples 3.5 million homes a year (most households will never receive it), producing annual data on commuting patterns and travel modes, education, housing, occupation, disability status, income and poverty, ethnicity, veterans, and other vital social and economic characteristics. In fact, **Congress** requested, directly or indirectly, *all* of the data gathered in the **ACS**; Congress reviews the questionnaire each decade (13 U.S.C. §141(f)). Congress uses **ACS** data to allocate at least $450 billion annually in federal aid to state and local governments. A majority of states also use **ACS** data, directly or indirectly, to set tax and spending limits.

The ACS and Transportation:

The **ACS** collects data on **journey to work**, **place of work, carpooling, mode of travel, income, race and ethnicity, language spoken at home, disability, residence one year ago** and other socio-economic variables that public and private policymakers use to evaluate and meet the nation's vast transportation needs**.** Specific uses of ACS data in transportation planning and infrastructure improvement include:

- Transportation planners use the **ACS-based Census Transportation Planning Package (CTPP)** to monitor and forecast commuter flows, automobile reliance and carpooling, transit use for work, and other transportation behaviors that affect traffic congestion, transit system operations, and commuting patterns.
- Transportation planning agencies in urbanized areas rely heavily on **ACS** data to produce plans required to spend federal road, highway, and transit aid.
- State, regional, and local agencies make broad use of **ACS** data to identify the need for infrastructure improvement, new transit methods to make jobs more accessible, and traffic congestion mitigation. For example, the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission used the CTPP to assess ridership potential for transit improvements such as high-speed rail, express bus, and park-and-ride service.
- Local transit agencies use **ACS** data on *disability* to ensure adequate transportation services for people with functional limitations.
- Businesses use **ACS** data on travel modes and patterns in deciding where to locate stores and services, and evaluating the ability of workers to commute efficiently.
- Police and fire departments use **ACS** data on *place of work* data to plan emergency response services.
- OMB uses **ACS** data on commuting (*journey to work*) in its designation of Metropolitan Statistical Areas.

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Issues:

- In the FY2015 Commerce, Justice, and Science Appropriations bill (H.R. 4660), the House cut $238 million (20 percent) from the Census Bureau's budget request. *The House-passed funding level could jeopardize the Census Bureau's ability to produce reliable ACS data for smaller and less populous areas, leaving many communities without comparable, valid, and objective data about population and housing characteristics.*

- The House also voted to make ACS response **voluntary, a change from 220 years of census history that would leave 40 percent of U.S. counties, small cities and towns, rural areas, neighborhoods, and American Indian reservations without any ACS data at all!**

- A 2003 Census Bureau test of voluntary ACS response showed that response rates would drop and survey costs would increase, *both dramatically,* jeopardizing the validity and availability of data for many U.S. counties, cities, and towns.

- The Census Bureau would not have an extra $90 million a year to overcome lower response rates, so making response optional will eliminate all data for rural areas, towns, and neighborhoods.

- The ACS is a unique source of information about the nation's communities. *No other federal survey or database provides comparable information*. The private sector cannot replicate the ACS, even if the federal survey disappeared. In fact, the ACS is the denominator for most public and private sector surveys, as well as for other core Census Bureau programs.

- Without the **ACS**, American businesses would lose vital tools to guide capital investment, location of facilities, hiring, and merchandise and service decisions, all of which drive economic growth, job creation, and sustained business success.

- Without a mandatory **ACS**, Congress would not have the data it needs to allocate grants and other program assistance to rural areas, smaller communities, and less populous counties.

Solution:

To ensure the ACS remains a representative, valid, and comprehensive source of information for the public and private sectors, Congress must fully fund the ACS and not risk losing data for most American communities and counties by making participation optional.