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Even After Two Years of Warnings, Essential Data for the Nation Remains At Risk

Investments for American Community Survey Needed

Washington, D.C. – Despite ever more expansive use of its data, the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS) continues to be at risk of failing to deliver essential data for the nation and needs significant investment, according to an updated [study](#) released by Census experts.

The Census Project provided updated analysis for what has become an annual clarion call about the national neglect of the nation’s largest and most comprehensive source of data on every community in the nation. The report is a stern reminder that data quality issues at just the wrong moment in history, especially given the importance of the ACS to businesses, state and local governments, and federal funding decisions, could degrade policy and investment decision making. The Census Project conducted the new review of the ACS to highlight the survey’s myriad uses and outline how it could be enhanced to better aid the nation as we address confounding changes in the labor force, the workplace, social dynamics, and neighborhoods across America.

With an annual sample size of about 3.5 million addresses, the ACS is the largest survey of American households. No other data source provides such a rich source of information about American society. The three major findings of the report are:

- The ACS provides critical social, economic, housing, and demographic data about our nation every year, for communities large and small.
- All census-guided federal spending depends on the ACS in some way, shape, or form. For example, in 2017, 316 federal spending programs distributed more than \$1.5 trillion to states and local areas on the basis, in whole or in part of data derived from the ACS.
- The operational challenges threatening the ACS have been persistent and worsening year by year, and a national initiative is urgently needed to ensure the ACS can deliver high quality, accurate data reflecting the nation's increasingly complex population.

The Census Project's Recommended ACS Enhancements

- Fully integrate the ACS in the Census Bureau's enterprise transformation initiatives.
- Develop new ACS data products and tools to upgrade data users' access to ACS data and address more complex public policy challenges.
- Accelerate research to advance the use of administrative records and alternative data sources in the ACS to improve data quality and reduce respondent burden.
- Enhance ACS nonresponse follow up operations to achieve higher response rates, address inequitable data quality and upgrade local community stakeholder engagement to promote response.
- Increase the annual survey sample size to better serve rural, remote and underserved areas of the country.
- Revise ACS content to improve data quality.
- Increase funding by Congress to the ACS program overall.

"The ACS is so vital to every community in the country for planning of government services and economic development alike. No other data source provides such critical information for every community in our nation, every year," said report author Linda Jacobsen of the Population Reference Bureau.

Census Project co-director Mary Jo Mitchell said their stakeholders are strongly committed to reminding the nation of the risks of inaction on the ACS. "We are going to make the case for investment and innovation every year until it happens, because so much is at stake."

Despite these warnings, legislation has been introduced in Congress that would further weaken the ACS by undermining its design, and in some cases, eliminating it altogether. The U.S. business community [recently warned](#) the leadership of the U.S. House of Representatives about the detrimental impact of a provision in federal funding legislation that would "crater response rates to all Census Bureau surveys and result in the decennial census and the American Community Survey (ACS) counting barely a third of the country," while having "negative ripple effects across the U.S. economy..." they wrote in a [letter](#) to House leaders released earlier this month.

Census Project co-director Howard Fienberg stressed that, "...we need Congress to work with business leaders, community planners, and all our stakeholders to preserve, protect, and enhance the official surveys which are relied upon by so many to make policy and investment decisions every day."

The Census Project (<https://thecensusproject.org>) is a broad-based coalition of national, state, and local organizations and companies that support an inclusive and accurate 2030 Census and American Community Survey (ACS) (the modern version of the census "long form"). Its 900+ member organizations and companies, representing the private, public, non-profit, and academic sectors, rely on objective data that the Census Bureau produces to inform evidence-based investment, policy, and planning decisions.