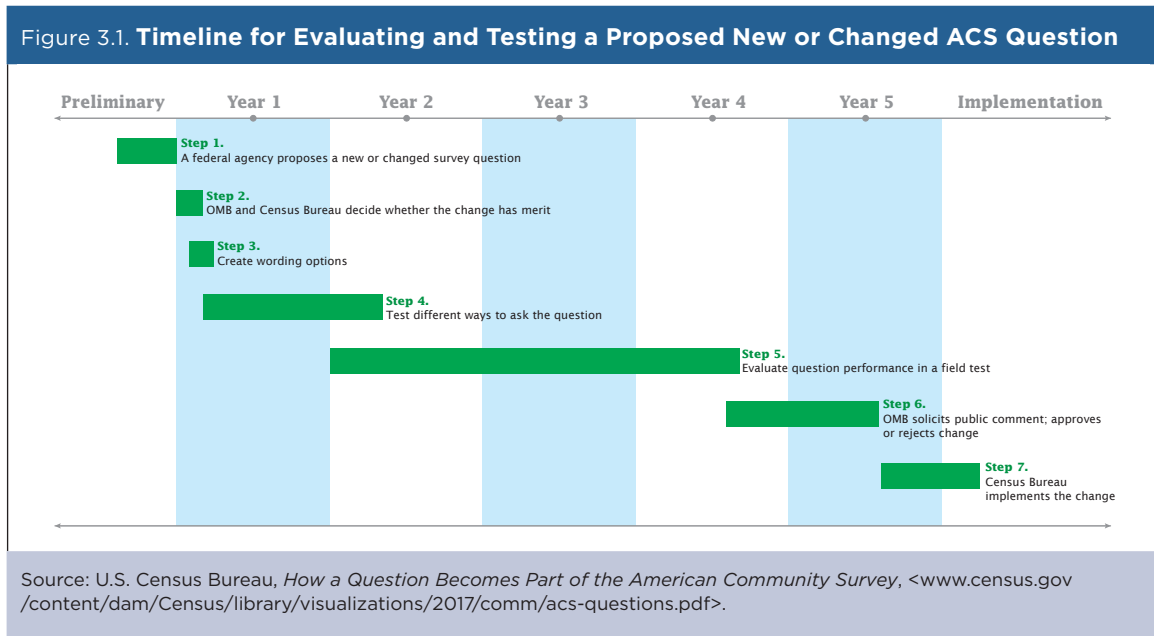


3. HOW A QUESTION BECOMES PART OF THE ACS

The U.S. Census Bureau must balance the information needs of a growing, changing nation with respect for the privacy and time of the American public. Adding a question or making a change to the American Community Survey (ACS) involves extensive testing, review, and evaluation over a 5-year period. This ensures the change is necessary and will produce quality, useful information for the nation. The Census Bureau requests authorization from the Office of

Management and Budget (OMB) for any revisions to the ACS questionnaire.

Although the timing may vary depending on improvements in testing methods, availability of resources, and urgency of the request, the process generally follows the evaluation and testing timeline shown in Figure 3.1.



Each step in the process is described in more detail below:

- **A federal agency proposes a new or changed survey question.**
The requesting agency must show that it needs frequent data for small geographic areas, that no other sources of information are available, and that its mission would be compromised if the question was not added or changed.
- **OMB and Census Bureau decide whether the change has merit.**
In consultation with federal agencies, OMB and the Census Bureau decide whether the request merits further consideration.
- **Create wording options.**
Subject-matter experts identify ways to ask each question using different words and phrases.
- **Test different ways to ask the question.**
The Census Bureau conducts cognitive interviews to gauge which wording is best understood and produces the most accurate results. Subject-matter experts review the cognitive testing results and recommend the version for field testing.
- **Evaluate question performance in a field test.**
Census Bureau staff finalize the wording for the test, create instruments to field the test, develop the systems to process the data collected, and conduct the test. Then, they tabulate and analyze the results and provide them to the federal agency that requested the change.
- **Census Bureau solicits public comment; approves or rejects change.**
The Census Bureau and requesting federal agency review the research results and decide whether to recommend implementation of the new or changed survey question. The Census Bureau solicits public comment through a Federal Register Notice to inform a final decision in consultation with the OMB and the Interagency Council on Statistical Policy Subcommittee on the ACS.
- **Census Bureau implements the change.**
If approved by the OMB, the Census Bureau prepares to implement the change by updating systems, questionnaires, and materials. Implementation takes effect at the start of a calendar year.

Changes to ACS Questions

Over time, questions have been added, revised, or removed from the ACS questionnaire as shown in Table 1.1. For example, in 2008 new questions on marital history, health insurance coverage, and military service-connected disability status were added to the form, while the questions on disability were significantly revised. Because of the changes to the questions, the ACS disability estimates for 2008 and later years should not be compared with 2007 and prior ACS disability estimates. The data from these new and revised questions collected in 2008 were first available in the ACS products released in 2009. A new question on bachelor's field of degree was added in 2009 with data available in 2010. In 2013, three new questions on computer ownership and Internet access were added with data available in 2014.

When a new question is added to the survey, 1-year estimates are available the following year, but it takes 5 years to accumulate data for small geographic areas. While ACS 1-year estimates of health insurance coverage were first available in 2009, ACS 5-year estimates of coverage (for 2008–2012) were first available in 2013.

The Census Bureau conducts periodic reviews of the ACS to consider any deletion or addition of questions. In 2014, the Census Bureau conducted a comprehensive assessment of the ACS program, including a review of each ACS question. This ACS Content Review sought to understand which federal programs use the information collected by each question and assess how the Census Bureau might reduce respondent burden.¹⁰ Based on this assessment, the questions on the presence of a flush toilet and whether there is a business or medical office on the property were removed from the ACS beginning with the 2016 survey.