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**2013 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY RESEARCH AND EVALUATION REPORT  
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**MEMORANDUM FOR** ACS Research and Evaluation Advisory Group  
(email list "ACSO RE Advisory Group List")

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**Subject:** Evaluation of the Operational Feasibility of Using Regional Office  
Language Support for Telephone Center Activities

Attached is the final American Community Survey Research and Evaluation report for the Evaluation of the Operational Feasibility of Using Regional Office Language Support for Telephone Center Activities. This report documents the effectiveness and costs of using the Los Angeles Regional Office for non-English telephone support during two 2009 tests.

If you have any questions about this report, please contact David Raglin (301-763-4226) or Samantha Fish (301-763-7542).

Attachment

cc:  
ACS Research and Evaluation Workgroup (email list "ACSO RE Workgroup List")  
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JANUARY 22, 2013

# Evaluation of the Operational Feasibility of Using Regional Office Language Support for Telephone Center Activities

FINAL REPORT

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## Background

The American Community Survey (ACS) is a continuous, national survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau that provides detailed demographic, socioeconomic, and housing data. The annual ACS sample is divided into 12 monthly sample panels with each panel having a three-month interview period.

Prior to 2013, a sample panel consisted of three sequential data collection modes: mail, telephone, and personal visit, each mode taking one month for completion.<sup>1</sup> (This changed in 2013 to include an internet mode as the initial mode of contact.) A new panel begins each month so that all data collection modes run simultaneously throughout the year. The following paragraphs discuss the 2009 ACS methodology as it was during the time of operational feasibility testing.

Most 2009 sample addresses were initially mailed an ACS questionnaire in English and given several weeks to respond.<sup>2</sup> Telephone numbers for both English and Spanish speakers are listed on the paper questionnaire in case they need telephone questionnaire assistance (TQA). Respondents who call in are encouraged to complete the ACS interview over the phone, but can complete the English questionnaire they have or request a Spanish version.

In 2009, the questionnaire was only available in English and Spanish; however, an informational multi-lingual brochure was mailed as part of the initial contact to assist non-English speakers in filling out the English form (called the Multi-lingual Brochure Test). Nonrespondents in the mail mode are followed up in the telephone mode if ACS telephone vendors can match a telephone number to those sample addresses.

Three telephone centers conduct the Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) and the WebCATI system permits workload sharing among the centers. Interviewers dial sample addresses' phone numbers distributed to them and ask respondents to complete an ACS interview.

When interviewers encounter a language barrier, they try to determine the language spoken by the respondent and record the case in the system as having a particular language need. WebCATI then dispatches these cases to an interviewer who is skilled in the appropriate language. In 2009, the call centers supported approximately 19 languages (Fish, 2010b).

It is ideal to complete as many interviews as possible by mail and telephone not only because they are less expensive, but also because only a subsample of the remaining CATI workload is passed to the personal visit mode. Approximately one in three CATI noninterviews is subsampled for personal interviewing.

Unmailable sample addresses, like those in Remote Alaska, and mail nonrespondents ineligible for CATI also become part of this the Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) workload. In 2009, the CAPI workload was divided among twelve regional offices in the U.S.

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<sup>1</sup> However, late mail returns are accepted during the other collection modes.

<sup>2</sup> Sample addresses are mailable in the United States if there is either a complete city-style or rural route address.

(there are now only six regional offices) and field representatives travel to each sample address to conduct an interview in person. Resources including community groups and additional field representatives that are skilled in a variety of languages are available to assist representatives when they encounter language barriers.

For additional information on ACS data collection, please consult U.S. Census Bureau (2009). Specific results related to the multi-lingual brochure test such as the number of calls or interviews by language are documented in Joshipura (2010).

## **Introduction**

Historically the telephone centers had some difficulty in staffing bilingual interviewers that speak a wide spectrum of languages, largely due to the limited linguistic diversity of the communities in which the telephone centers are located. In addition, the telephone centers code approximately 2,000 cases each year as speaking an “unknown language” and are unable to conduct interviews in languages other than those they support. These cases are then subsampled at a rate of about one in three for CAPI, causing us to lose the chance to collect survey data from many of these households.

Conversely, regional offices are spread across the country in larger metropolitan areas with diverse language communities, and have a more diverse pool of bilingual staff. In 2009, a test was conducted using bilingual staff in the local commuting area of the Los Angeles Regional Office to support the survey’s TQA and CATI activities. Field interviewers came into the regional office weekly to access the WebCATI system, the computer application that manages ACS telephone calls.

The feasibility test consisted of two phases: The first phase used regional office staff that speaks Chinese, Russian, and Korean to provide backup support for calls stemming from the multi-lingual brochure test in the TQA operation. The second phase involved support for the CATI operation using the same staff to follow up on nonresponse cases identified by the Tucson Telephone Center as requiring assistance in a language unsupported by the telephone centers.

## **Research Questions**

The following research questions report on the timing, technical issues, efficiency, and costs involved in each phase of the feasibility test.

The first four research questions are based on using the Los Angeles Regional Office staff support in Chinese, Russian, and Korean for the TQA operation:

1. During what period of the multi-lingual brochure test did we rely upon assistance from the Los Angeles Regional Office?
2. Was regional office staff able to resolve technical issues related to accessing the WebCATI system, access telephone messages left by callers, and manage the flow of workload between the Los Angeles Regional Office and the Tucson Telephone Center?
3. Did the addition of regional office staff facilitate responding to TQA calls?

4. What were the additional costs of the Los Angeles Regional Office's efforts in providing language support for the multi-lingual brochure test?

The next set of questions are based on using the Los Angeles Regional Office staff support in Armenian, Indonesian, Turkish, Japanese, Korean, and for "unidentified language" cases in the CATI operation:

5. During what period did the Los Angeles Regional Office staff provide telephone assistance for the CATI operation?
6. Was regional office staff able to resolve technical issues related to transferring CATI nonresponse follow-up cases via WebCATI and manage the workload between the Los Angeles Regional Office and the telephone centers?
7. How successful was the Los Angeles Regional Office staff in obtaining interviews from the CATI nonrespondents and identifying the language for "unidentified language" cases?
8. What were the additional costs of the Los Angeles Regional Office's efforts in providing language support for CATI nonresponse cases?

## **Methodology**

Emails between the Census Bureau Headquarters, the Los Angeles Regional Office, the Tucson Telephone Center, and the National Processing Center provide us with the instructions given for each test and status reports issued throughout testing. These documents, accompanied with input from staff involved in the test, are used to answer questions about the logistics and practicality of using field interviewers from the Los Angeles Regional Office for TQA and CATI language support. Because our results compile input from participants nearly two years after the tests took place, this is a limitation of the study. (The documentation of these feasibility results temporarily took on a lesser priority while the ACS prepared for simultaneous data collection with the decennial census and planning of the new internet mode.)

## **Results**

### **1. During what period of the multi-lingual brochure test did we rely upon assistance from the Los Angeles Regional Office?**

The ACS mail materials included a multi-lingual brochure offering help via TQA in Spanish, Chinese, Russian, and Korean for the April through July 2009 panels. This was the first time TQA had dedicated phone lines for language support in languages other than English or Spanish. Calls began after the April panel pre-notice letters were mailed to respondents.

The first call was received on March 23, 2009, but overall TQA call volume in languages other than English or Spanish was low. On March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2009 the Los Angeles Regional Office stopped TQA support as instructed by the American Community Survey Office because their efforts were not cost effective.

**2. Was regional office staff able to resolve technical issues related to accessing the WebCATI system, access telephone messages left by callers, and manage the flow of workload between the Los Angeles Regional Office and Tucson Telephone Center?**

While the nature of interviewing for CATI and CAPI is essentially the same, the Los Angeles CAPI interviewers needed a modest amount of training on some of the computer systems. The telephone center staff were very effective in modifying the existing training approaches for the Los Angeles staff. The learning curve for the CAPI interviewers was very short.

There were no major, technical obstacles in setting up or accessing the WebCATI system in the Los Angeles Regional Office. The Bureau's Technologies Management Office installed three computer stations to provide WebCATI access to the field representatives. Then, two staff members from the Tucson Telephone Center visited the Los Angeles Regional Office to train field representatives on how to use the WebCATI system. The Tucson Telephone Center staff acted as a central point of contact for the Los Angeles Regional Office throughout both tests (TQA and CATI language support).

Guidelines for handling calls, responding to messages left by callers, and transferring cases between the Los Angeles Regional Office and Tucson Telephone Center were established in a two page document that was sent out to supervisory staff, interviewers, and field representatives (see Attachment A). The Los Angeles Regional Office was originally only going to provide backup TQA language support by responding to voicemails left by callers for the Tucson Telephone Center, but a separate phone line was later installed so that the regional office could receive incoming calls directly from respondents.

Before the TQA phone line was installed at the regional office, a supervisor from the regional office would call the Tucson Telephone Center supervisor station at the beginning of each shift to determine if there were any voice mail messages left on the TQA language lines. During this period, when field interviewers were away from the office, the Tucson Telephone Center staff would contact a supervisory field representative from the Los Angeles Regional Office if a voice message came in so that a staff member could call back the respondent as soon as possible.

Call backs to respondents who left voice mails were made by the Tucson Telephone Center or the Los Angeles Regional Office staff depending on who had staff available with the required language skill. Return calls were made as soon as possible within 24 hours of the respondent's message being left and every TQA call received on the Chinese, Korean, and Russian toll-free lines were documented. Language cases that had an appointment set by the Los Angeles Regional Office outside of their hours of operation were sent into the WebCATI pool to be fielded by telephone center staff.

All TQA calls fielded by the Los Angeles Regional Office were recorded on paper and mailed to Census Headquarters for tracking. This process could have been facilitated by the telephone centers' automated system, called the Telephone Center Survey Processing and Operations Tracking Tool (TCSPOTT), which creates electronic records of TQA. This would have eliminated the use of staff time to fill out, mail, and manually key records from forms that were physically mailed across the country to the Census Bureau Headquarters.

### **3. Did the addition of regional office staff facilitate responding to TQA calls?**

There were 111 calls made to the toll-free TQA lines for Chinese, Russian, and Korean over the designated testing period, which was fewer than anticipated. Based on the low number of calls in these languages, the Los Angeles Regional Office supported this operation for only a few days. Regional office staff administered 7 calls during that time. The telephone centers administered the remainder of the calls (140 calls) throughout the testing period.

### **4. What were the additional costs of the Los Angeles Regional Office's efforts in providing language support for the multi-lingual brochure test?**

Startup costs for this operation include WebCATI training for field representatives and office installations for the WebCATI system and the toll-free TQA telephone line. The training and office installations cost \$12,269 and \$1,104, respectively, which both exclude the costs of paid regular employee time. Additionally, some field representatives worked outside of their normal business hours to monitor the TQA line and perform interviews over the telephone at the Los Angeles Regional Office; overtime paid for this amounted to \$18,408. The American Community Survey Office knew that this test would not be cost effective, but it was conducted because the multi-lingual brochure test needed backup language support and it was beneficial to test if regional office language support would gain more interviews from language households.

### **5. During what period did the Los Angeles Regional Office staff provide telephone assistance for the CATI operation?**

For the months of May and June 2009, the Los Angeles Regional Office staff took responsibility for all the Armenian, Indonesian, Turkish, Japanese, and Korean CATI cases. They also identified the languages spoken by "unknown language" cases sent to them by the telephone centers and attempted to interview them.

### **6. Was regional office staff able to resolve technical issues related to transferring CATI nonresponse follow-up cases via WebCATI and manage the workload between the Los Angeles Regional Office and the telephone centers?**

The regional office had no problems accessing the WebCATI system to obtain their non-English language CATI nonresponse cases. This was largely due to the fact that WebCATI software was already installed at the regional office for the TQA backup assistance. This eliminated the need for additional spending on training, equipment, and installation.

The telephone centers identified workloads for the Los Angeles Regional Office by assigning a "RO Language Support" skill within the WebCATI environment to each sample case with an unidentified language need. The system routed these cases to the Los Angeles Regional Office seamlessly. There were no technical problems setting up or using this assignment process.

**7. How successful was the Los Angeles Regional Office staff in obtaining interviews from the CATI nonrespondents and identifying the language for “unidentified language” cases?**

Using the final WebCATI results, we assess the regional office’s outcomes of workloads identified by the telephone center as Armenian, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Turkish, or “Unknown”.

Table 1 shows, by the CATI-identified language, how many cases were completed as well as how many were unable to have their addresses identified, returned a late mail form, remained open cases, required assistance in a language unsupported by the regional office staff, or resulted in a noninterview. The columns of the table indicate the workload as specified by the telephone centers, and the rows show the outcomes for those workloads.

Table 1. Workload Outcomes for Cases Sent to the Los Angeles Regional Office by the Telephone Centers

Outcome After LA RO Follow Up	Language Identified By Telephone Centers						
	Armenian	Indonesian	Japanese	Korean	Turkish	Unknown	All
Completed	11 73%	1 14%	13 50%	53 65%	1 20%	35 26%	114 43%
Mail form received	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	1 1%	0 0%	0 0%	1 0%
Other Language	0 0%	2 29%	1 4%	4 5%	0 0%	20 15%	27 10%
Unable to Verify Address	1 7%	0 0%	4 15%	13 16%	0 0%	13 10%	31 12%
Case Closed (Noninterview)	1 7%	3 43%	4 15%	8 10%	2 40%	44 33%	62 23%
Still Available	2 13%	1 14%	4 15%	3 4%	2 40%	21 16%	33 12%
<b>Total Workload</b>	<b>15</b> <b>100%</b>	<b>7</b> <b>100%</b>	<b>26</b> <b>100%</b>	<b>82</b> <b>100%</b>	<b>5</b> <b>100%</b>	<b>133</b> <b>100%</b>	<b>268</b> <b>100%</b>

*Note: The case status “Other Language” means the case required language assistance unsupported by the in-office regional staff, “Case Closed” means the case resulted in a noninterview, and “Still Available” means the respondent was not contacted by closeout.*

The Los Angeles regional office staff obtained completed interviews from about 50 percent or more of the cases identified by the telephone center as Japanese, Korean, or Armenian. The Indonesian, Turkish, and “Unknown” cases, however, had interview rates ranging from about 14 percent to 26 percent. For these workloads, a substantial portion of cases were either still unresolved by the closeout for each interview period or classified as requiring a language skill unsupported by the regional office staff.

This may imply that the telephone centers incorrectly assigned one of the specific languages supported in these test cases when referring the case to the LARO. In addition, the telephone center interviewers classified some cases as “Unknown” when they contacted a household and realized they did not speak the anticipated language. Internal telephone center processing generally reroute these “Unknown” language cases to multi-lingual support that triage the cases.

The assignment of language skill to cases by the Tucson Telephone Center is subjective, and respondents' willingness to report data over the phone may vary among the categorizations determined by the call center. Overall, the Los Angeles Regional Office successfully provided additional non-English telephone support to respondents that could be reached.

#### **8. What were the additional costs of the Los Angeles Regional Office's efforts in providing language support for CATI nonresponse cases?**

Since the WebCATI system was installed prior to the beginning of this test and field interviewers routinely use the CATI instrument, there were no equipment or training costs. Additionally, no overtime was necessary. However, as is standard practice for field representatives, the American Community Survey Office reimbursed field representatives for their commutes into the Los Angeles Regional Office.

### **Conclusions**

Testing the operational feasibility of using a regional office for non-English language telephone support has been a recurring question in an effort to expand language support within the ACS. Results from this report show that the Los Angeles Regional Office successfully provided additional non-English language assistance to the TQA and CATI operations.

For the TQA operation, the Los Angeles Regional Office provided Chinese, Russian, and Korean support for one month. To do this, the Tucson Telephone Center set up computer stations with WebCATI access in the regional office and provided CATI training to field interviewers. Additionally, a direct TQA phone line was installed (although it was not complete when the test began) so that the regional office staff could answer respondent calls directly. Field interviewers commuted into the Los Angeles office to answer TQA calls (and CATI nonresponse calls since the CATI test ran simultaneously).

The American Community Survey Office halted regional office language support for Chinese, Russian, and Korean TQA due to low call volumes, so the Los Angeles Regional Office only interviewed 7 cases. Despite this low workload, this test demonstrated the regional office's ability to handle TQA calls. This is valuable to know if the TQA operation ever needed additional language support or experienced higher call volumes.

To assist the CATI operation, the Los Angeles Regional Office followed up with cases flagged by the Tucson Telephone Center as requiring Armenian, Indonesian, Turkish, Japanese, and Korean speakers. Additionally, the telephone center sent all cases they flagged as requiring an "unidentified language" skill to the regional office. The WebCATI system managed these workloads for the Los Angeles Regional Office.

The regional office staff completed many interviews and had low rates of nonresponse for the Japanese, Korean, and Armenian cases assigned to them (less than 15 percent). However, the Indonesian, Turkish, and "unidentified language" cases had noninterview rates ranging from 33

to 43 percent. This result may be by nature of the respondent (varying response propensities among cultural groups) and/or the subjectivity involved when assigning a language skill.

Because WebCATI had already been installed for the TQA test, there was no additional start up costs associated with providing CATI support. The total cost for the two tests amounted to \$31,781, with the largest expenses coming from training (39 percent) and overtime pay (58 percent). If this sort of operation were implemented again, it might be done using a secure remote connection on the field interviewers' laptops to eliminate the need for overtime and commuting expenses into the Los Angeles Regional Office. Given that some field interviewers commuted upwards of 45 minutes one way into the office, this would be an advantage for them.

In conclusion, the ACS was able to successfully use the non-English language skillsets of the CAPI interviewers to provide backup/additional non-English telephone support for the TQA and CATI operations. Using regional office staff for additional non-English support is a feasible option for the future, and variations of the implementation described herein may result in a lower start up cost.

## References

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- Joshiyura, M. 2010. "Evaluating the Effects of a Multilingual Brochure in the American Community Survey". DSSD 2010 American Community Survey Memo Series #ACS2010-RE-03. August 17, 2010.
- U.S. Census Bureau. 2009. . *Design and Methodology*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2009.

## Attachment A

### American Community Survey Telephone Questionnaire Assistance Language Brochure Test Instructions for Supervisory Staff, Interviewers and Field Representatives

#### Contact Numbers

**Tucson Telephone Center**, supervisor station: 520-798-4173

#### **Los Angeles RO - Primary contacts:**

Brad Rogers: 818-267-1759

Audrey Cheever: 818-267-1765

Diana Turley: 818-267-1780

LARO, alternate contacts:

Tina Rush: 818-267-1791

Mei Ling See: 818-267-1742

#### General Procedures

- For **every** TQA call received on the Chinese, Korean, and Russian toll free lines, an ACS-404X form and ACS-401 must be completed.
- When voice messages are left on the Chinese, Korean, Russian and Spanish toll free lines, a return call should be made to the respondent as soon as possible within 24 hours of the message being left.
- For **every** TQA call received on the Chinese, Korean, Russian and Spanish toll free lines, interviewers/FRs should encourage the respondent to complete the interview over the phone at the time of the TQA call. If the respondent can not complete the interview at the time of the TQA call, the interviewer should offer to schedule an appointment for a later date with the respondent to complete the interview over the phone.
- If an appointment is scheduled to complete the interview with the respondent, a TQA case should be created in WebCATI and the appointment information entered into WebCATI.
- When returning respondent calls, if an answering machine is reached, the interviewer/FR should leave the particular language toll free line for the respondent to return the call.
- Allow the respondent two days to return the call from messages left on answering machines.
- If the respondent does not return the call in two days, make another call to the respondent.
- Make a maximum of 10 calls on TQA cases.
- In general, make no more than 1 call on a TQA case in a day, unless circumstances of the case indicate multiple calls in one day are appropriate.
- If LA staff want an ACS Title 13 letter sent to a respondent, LA staff can select "request copy of Title 13" as one of the reasons for the call in TCSPOTT, Record TQA to request the letter be sent. OR, LA staff can complete the Title 13 letter request form and fax it to TTC and TTC staff will enter the request in the T13 database.

#### Voice Mail Messages

- When the LA language staff are scheduled to work, at the beginning of the shift, a supervisor from LA will call the TTC supervisor station to determine if there are any voice mail messages on the language lines that LA needs to listen to.
- During the shift when LA language staff are working, if a voice mail comes in on one of the language lines, the TTC staff will contact LA staff to have LA staff listen to the message so the LA staff can make a callback to the respondent as soon as possible.
- When retrieving information off of the language lines voice mail in TTC, record the information on an

ACS-404X form. [If LA staff are listening to the voice mail via conference call because TTC staff for that language are not available, then LA would start the ACS-404X form, assuming LA staff will be the first to call back the respondent.]

- Using the phone number the respondent left on the voice mail message, use TCSPOTT HU Browse to see if that phone number is in the ACS control file and thus you can determine the CMID and address for the case. Record the CMID and address on the ACS-404X and ACS-401 forms.
- A call back to the respondent who left the voice mail should be made by TTC or LARO depending on who has staff available in that language.
- Give the interviewer/FR making the callback the ACS-404X form so the interviewer/FR can record the appropriate information about the call. The interviewer will also have to complete an ACS-401 form.

### **Transferring Cases Between TTC and LA**

- Language interviewers in TTC and LA should have the staffing schedules for the language interviewers for both TTC and LA so they can know when staff in each specific language are working. This will enable them to more efficiently schedule any callbacks/appointments with respondents.
- At the end of each shift in either TTC or LA, if there are TQA cases needing additional follow-up that need to be transferred to the other site, send an e-mail to the “NPC ACS Language Support List “ with (non PII) information about the cases needing follow-up.
  - If a TQA case has already been created for the TQA call, then in the e-mail state the CASEID number of the TQA case. Make sure there is detailed information in the Notes section of the TQA case so the receiving site knows what has happened on the case and what further follow-up is needed.
  - If a TQA case does not exist for the case, create a TQA case in WebCATI. Note the CASEID of the case. When creating a TQA case, you MUST enter a phone number in the case in order for the case to be worked further. Enter into the TQA case all known information such as respondent name, address, phone number, etc. In the Notes for the case, enter the respondent’s name, any respondent concerns, and specific information on why a callback is needed. In the e-mail, include the TQA CASEID number from WebCATI for all cases.
- It is preferable that the TTC and LA staff complete their own ACS-401 and ACS-404X forms for each case worked in each site. Do not fax these forms back and forth.

### **Disposition of ACS-401 and ACS-404X forms**

- Send weekly via FEDEX the completed ACS-401 and ACS-404X forms for language cases that have been completed/resolved to:

Megha Joshipura  
U. S. Census Bureau  
4600 Silver Hill Rd.  
Room 4H472A  
Suitland, MD 20746

- Ship the forms on Tuesdays, starting on March 31, 2009 and through the conclusion of the test.
- If you will not be shipping any forms for a particular week, please send an e-mail to “NPC ACS Language Support List “ to document that no forms are being shipped that week.