March 5, 2012

Honorable Trey Gowdy, Chairman
Honorable Danny Davis, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Health Care, District of Columbia,
Census and National Archives
House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Gowdy and Congressman Davis:

On behalf of the over 3,000 members of the Population Association of America (PAA) and over 40 population research centers comprising the Association of Population Centers (APC) nationwide, we write to express our strong support for the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS) and to communicate our concerns regarding proposals your subcommittee may be considering to make participation in the ACS voluntary.

The PAA and APC are comprised of thousands of behavioral and social scientists, including demographers, economists, sociologists and statisticians, studying the implications of population change at public and private research institutions. Our members’ diverse set of research interests include, marriage and divorce, aging, immigration and migration, population forecasting, poverty, mortality, disability, and adolescent health. Given this wide range of expertise, PAA and APC members depend on direct and indirect funding from an equally diverse set of federal agencies and their programs and surveys.

In the 1990s, PAA and APC were proud to join other data users in urging the creation of the ACS. Our members were concerned about transforming the collection and publication of data from the census long form. Detailed demographic and socioeconomic data about the U.S. population published only once each decade was not yielding timely statistics that could be used to inform reliably good policy or research. In close consultation with experts in the public, private, and academic research sectors, the ACS emerged as the solution. Today, the ACS is recognized as the premiere resource for researchers and policy makers alike because it is the only survey in the nation based on a representative sample of the full U.S. population. In addition, it allows analysis of trends at the community level and across populations. Its design makes the ACS an ideal sampling frame for other federally supported surveys, such as the American Time Use Survey and the National Survey of Recent College Graduates.

On March 6, 2012, we understand your subcommittee will be holding a congressional hearing to explore the pros and cons of making participation in the ACS voluntary. We urge you to carefully consider the implications of such a drastic procedural change in the conduct of this vital survey. Since 2003, the Census Bureau has issued several reports and updated analyses all of which have reached the same conclusion: a
Voluntary ACS will mean lower mail response rates and increased costs. Because fewer people will choose to respond (studies show response rates fell by 20 percentage points), the Census Bureau will be compelled to use more costly modes of data collection, such as telephone and door-to-door visits. These strategies will increase the cost of the survey by thirty percent ($60 million at the time of the 2003 field test). Congress, especially in the current fiscal climate, is unlikely to increase funding for the ACS by the amount necessary to overcome low initial response rates, leaving the Census Bureau with insufficient response to produce reliable data for smaller (e.g. rural communities; towns; urban neighborhoods) areas and population groups (e.g. people with disabilities; veterans; immigrant groups). The consequence would be greatly diminished quality of ACS data. The Census Bureau’s tests also showed that the percent of completed interviews (conducted if a household fails to mail back a form) fell significantly if the survey was voluntary, adding to the problem of data reliability.

The ACS, together with the decennial census, is the backbone of the nation’s statistical system. Therefore, the PAA and APC oppose any legislative proposals that could compromise the quality and reliability of ACS data.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment and for including our letter in the official hearing record.

Sincerely,

Daniel T. Lichter    James R. Walker
President     President
Population Association of America Association of Population Centers