July 16, 2013

The Honorable Harold Rogers
Chairman
House Appropriations Committee
Washington, D.C.  20515

The Honorable Nita Lowey
Ranking Member
House Appropriations Committee
Washington, D.C.  20515

Dear Chairman Rogers and Ranking Member Lowey,

We are writing on behalf of the Population Association of America (PAA) and the Association of Population Centers (APC) to urge you to oppose any amendments that may adversely affect the American Community Survey (ACS) when the House Appropriations Committee considers the Fiscal Year 2014 Commerce, Justice, Science Appropriations bill tomorrow.

Although we have not seen any amendments, we understand Congressman Nunnelee may be offering an amendment that would make participation in the ACS voluntary. As you know, the ACS replaced the census long form in 2005 and is, therefore, part of the constitutionally mandated decennial census program. Individuals who receive the ACS questionnaire are required to participate in the survey or face possible civil and criminal penalties. The mandatory nature of the ACS helps to ensure a sufficiently high response rate, which is essential given the fact that the ACS is the only source of consistent, comparable, valid, and objective data about our population and housing for every community in the U.S. Its unique representative nature makes the ACS an invaluable resource for data users in the private and public sectors alike. For example, developers use ACS data to determine where they will build factories and stores; state policy makers use ACS data, directly or indirectly, to set tax and spending limits; and at the federal level, the ACS is used to allocate over $450 billion annually. Members of the PAA and APC, who have diverse research interests and expertise, ranging from adolescent health to population aging, rely on the ACS to access accurate, timely data about the nation’s changing socio-economic and demographic characteristics. Finally, the ACS is the benchmark for most public and private sector surveys, as well as for other core Census Bureau datasets.

Moving from a mandatory to a voluntary ACS would not only affect adversely the survey’s response rate and data quality, it would also dramatically increase the program’s costs. A congressionally ordered 2003 test of voluntary ACS response showed that mail response rates would drop (at least 20 percent) and survey costs would increase ($60 million a year or 30 percent more). In the words of columnist George Will, “If the survey were voluntary, compliance would plummet and the cost of gathering the information would soar.” (Washington Post, July 14, 2013) The Census Bureau would not have the additional $60-$70 million a year needed to overcome the significant drop in response. Because these figures are now 10 years old, Congress, in the fiscal year 2013 Continuing Resolution, asked the Department of Commerce to update the cost implications of a voluntary ACS. A report is due to Congress later this year. Certainly, Congress should await this updated analysis before taking premature action to alter the survey’s status.

In closing, we urge you to oppose any amendments that may be offered during full committee mark up of the FY 2014 Commerce, Justice Science Appropriations bill that would change the survey’s mandatory status or eliminate or diminish its funding. Thank you for your consideration of our views. Please contact us if we can provide additional information.

Respectfully,

Christine A. Bachrach, Ph.D.

Pamela J. Smock, Ph.D.