From:	Mike Hout
To:	Harris-Kojetin, Brian
Subject:	ACS Marriage question
Date:	Monday, May 06, 2013 2:54:24 PM

Dear Dr. Harris-Kojetin:

I write to comment on the discussion about the American Community Survey (ACS) question about how many times each member of a household has been married.

For sociologists and demographers such as myself the answers to this question help contextualize the exposure of the nation's children to different kinds of household environments. Some children experience one family environment throughout childhood; many others see the composition of their household shift as they grow up. Stability is correlated with other stable experiences; shift is correlated with other experiences of instability. The answers to the times married question help us separate marriage and household factors from neighborhood, school, and ecological factors.

In 2006 a colleague and I published Century of Difference: How America Has Changed Over the Last One Hundred Years. In the family chapter of our book we noted how hard it was to properly characterize changes in American family life over the century because the Census lacked consistent measures of marital history. Including a count of previous marriages in the ACS was an advance for scientific analysis of these important trends.

Other surveys include relevant questions. We need this one on the ACS because only the ACS can provide the detail that researchers need. Only the ACS is large enough to measure remarriage in small groups, e.g., returning veterans, young widows, people who choose more than one race. Only the ACS is large enough to measure remarriage at the neighborhood level. These details for small groups and specific places are vital to our work of understanding children's lives and the changes they are experiencing.

We use the answers to this question to discover patterns of behavior that might help improve life for America's children. Our interest in these patterns in no way compromises the privacy of the ACS participants, nor do we use the answers to identify individuals. Their usefulness is in the patterns they reveal not in the specifics of any one person's life experiences.

-Michael Hout
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