

# Evaluation of the 2008 American Community Survey Employment Status Question Change

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# Introduction

- For the 2008 American Community Survey (ACS), changes were made to the questionnaire that modified and improved existing questions for several subject areas.
- In particular, an improved series of labor force questions was introduced to better capture data on employment status.

# Introduction (continued)

- This paper will detail the specifics of the employment status question change.
- We will also present comparisons to Bureau of Labor Statistics data (i.e., Current Population Survey (CPS) and Local Area Unemployment Statistics (LAUS)) for the years 2007, 2008, and 2009.

# Introduction (continued)

- We believe the modifications and improvements made to the existing series of labor force questions had the effect of increasing the number of employed persons captured in the 2008 ACS.
- As a result of the above changes, we find that ACS data are more consistent with both CPS and LAUS data.

# Background

- In January through March of 2006, the ACS conducted the first field test of new and modified content since the ACS reached full implementation.
- One objective of this field test was to improve the measurement of employment status by addressing several limitations present in the ACS question wording.

# Background (continued)

- Past research revealed that employment levels were underestimated and unemployment levels were overestimated relative to benchmark data from CPS and LAUS.
- Three of the employment status questions were modified: whether the respondent (1) “worked last week;” (2) “was temporarily absent from their job or business;” and (3) “was looking for work.”

# Background (continued)

- The findings from the field test showed that the test questions produced a higher estimate of employed people compared to the control.
- The test questions did not produce a lower estimate of unemployed people, though the overall unemployment rate was lower.
- Given the above positive findings, the revised questions were implemented in the 2008 ACS.

# Characteristics of Respondents Answering the Revised Question Sequence

- One of the more significant changes to the employment status sequence of questions was the change made to the “worked last week” question.
- Findings from the field test and other research indicated that the ACS was not completely capturing those workers with a “marginal” or “irregular” attachment to the labor market.

# ACS Employment Status Questions

2007

**28** LAST WEEK, did this person do ANY work for either pay or profit? Mark (X) the "Yes" box even if the person worked only 1 hour, or helped without pay in a family business or farm for 15 hours or more, or was on active duty in the Armed Forces.

- Yes
- No → SKIP to question 34

**34** a. LAST WEEK, was this person on layoff from a job?

- Yes → SKIP to question 34c
- No

b. LAST WEEK, was this person TEMPORARILY absent from a job or business?

- Yes, on vacation, temporary illness, labor dispute, etc. → SKIP to question 37
- No → SKIP to question 35

c. Has this person been informed that he or she will be recalled to work within the next 6 months OR been given a date to return to work?

- Yes → SKIP to question 36
- No

**35** Has this person been looking for work during the last 4 weeks?

- Yes
- No → SKIP to question 37

**36** LAST WEEK, could this person have started a job if offered one, or returned to work if recalled?

- Yes, could have gone to work
- No, because of own temporary illness
- No, because of all other reasons (in school, etc.)

2008

**28** a. LAST WEEK, did this person work for pay at a job (or business)?

- Yes → SKIP to question 29
- No – Did not work (or retired)

b. LAST WEEK, did this person do ANY work for pay, even for as little as one hour?

- Yes
- No → SKIP to question 34a

**34** a. LAST WEEK, was this person on layoff from a job?

- Yes → SKIP to question 34c
- No

b. LAST WEEK, was this person TEMPORARILY absent from a job or business?

- Yes, on vacation, temporary illness, maternity leave, other family/personal reasons, bad weather, etc. → SKIP to question 37
- No → SKIP to question 35

c. Has this person been informed that he or she will be recalled to work within the next 6 months OR been given a date to return to work?

- Yes → SKIP to question 36
- No

**35** During the LAST 4 WEEKS, has this person been ACTIVELY looking for work?

- Yes
- No → SKIP to question 37

**36** LAST WEEK, could this person have started a job if offered one, or returned to work if recalled?

- Yes, could have gone to work
- No, because of own temporary illness
- No, because of all other reasons (in school, etc.)

# ACS Employment Status Questions (continued)

2007

**28** LAST WEEK, did this person do ANY work for either pay or profit? Mark (X) the "Yes" box even if the person worked only 1 hour, or helped without pay in a family business or farm for 15 hours or more, or was on active duty in the Armed Forces.

Yes  
 No → SKIP to question 34

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**34** a. LAST WEEK, was this person on layoff from a job?  
 Yes → SKIP to question 34c  
 No

b. LAST WEEK, was this person TEMPORARILY absent from a job or business?  
 Yes, on vacation, temporary illness, labor dispute, etc. → SKIP to question 37  
 No → SKIP to question 35

c. Has this person been informed that he or she will be recalled to work within the next 6 months OR been given a date to return to work?  
 Yes → SKIP to question 36  
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# Characteristics of Respondents Answering the Revised Question Sequence (continued)

- In 2008, there were approximately 1.2 million people who were considered “marginal” workers.
- Demographic and economic differences\* between marginal and non-marginal workers were consistent with characteristics of workers who may work temporarily or have changing work schedules.
- For example, marginal workers were more likely to be enrolled in school and self-employed.

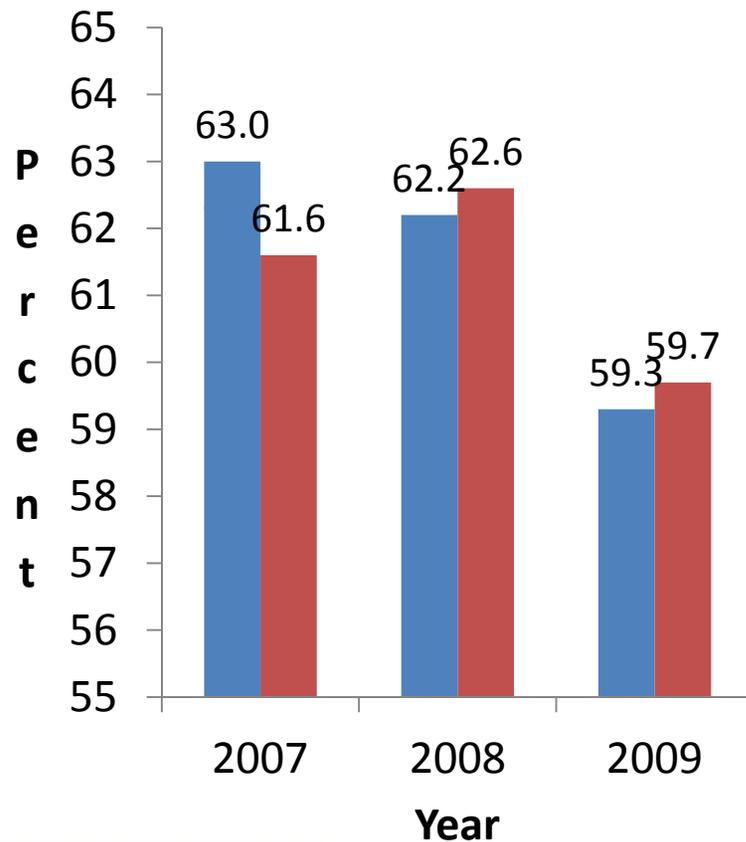
# Effect on Employment and Unemployment Estimates

- The CPS and LAUS are used to produce the official estimates of employment, unemployment, and the unemployment rate for the nation and states.
- The CPS provides the official national level estimates, while the LAUS data provide the official estimates for the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

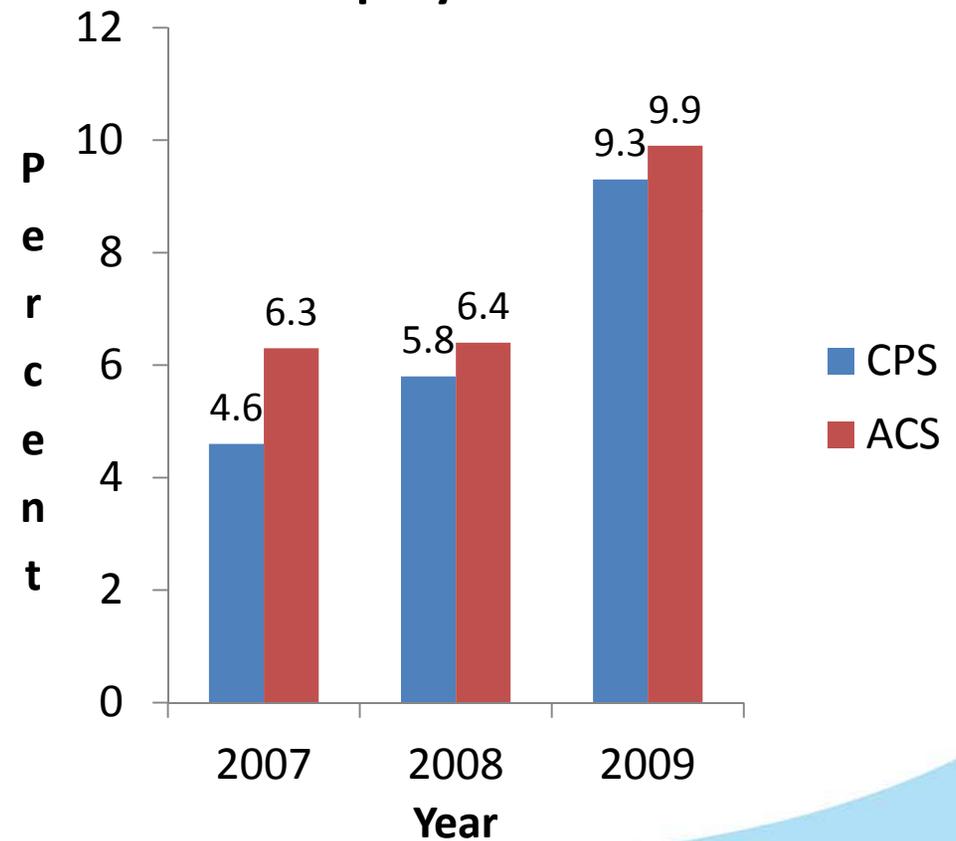
# Effect on Employment and Unemployment Estimates (continued)

## Employment-Population

### Ratio

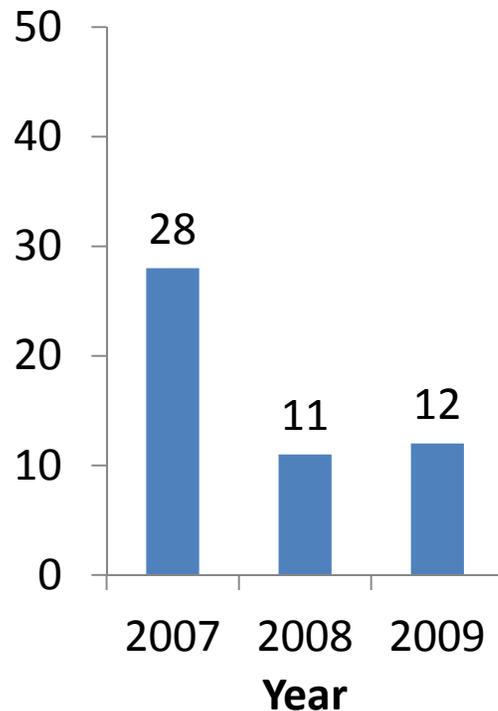


### Unemployment Rate

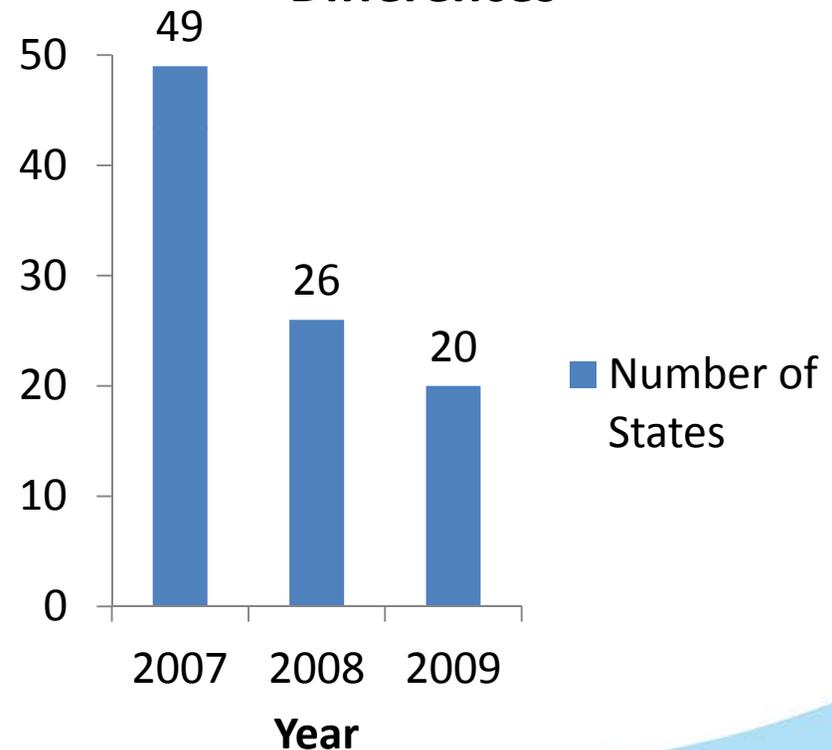


# Effect on Employment and Unemployment Estimates (continued)

## State Employment-Population Ratio Differences



## State Unemployment Rate Differences



# Conclusion

- ACS labor force data is now more consistent with benchmark data from the CPS and LAUS program.
- We believe the revised “worked last week” question is capturing those additional workers potentially not identified in the past.

# Contact Information

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