

The General Social Surveys

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GSS Project Report No. 32

June, 2016



## **Overview**

The National Data Program for the Social Sciences (NDPSS) is a social-indicators and data-diffusion program. Its basic purposes are 1) to gather and disseminate data on contemporary American society in order to a) monitor and explain trends and constants in attitudes, behaviors, and attributes and b) examine the structure and functioning of society in general as well as the role played by various sub-groups; 2) compare the United States to other societies in order to a) place American society in comparative perspective and b) develop cross-national models of human society; and 3) to make high-quality data easily accessible to scholars, students, policy makers, and others with minimal cost and waiting.

These purposes are accomplished by the regular collection and distribution of the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) General Social Survey (GSS) and its allied surveys in the International Social Survey Program (ISSP). Both the GSS and the ISSP surveys have been efficiently collected, widely distributed, and extensively analyzed by social scientists around the world.

## **Organization**

Tom W. Smith (NORC), Michael Hout (NYU), Michael Davern (NORC), and Jeremy Freese (Stanford) are the principal investigators. They are assisted by a Board of Overseers that provides guidance to the GSS, forms linkages to the various research communities, spearheads the development of topical modules, approves the content of each survey, and evaluates the

project. Core support for the NDPSS comes from the National Science Foundations (NSF).

### **Data Collection: 1972-2014**

Since 1972 the GSS has conducted 30 independent, cross-sectional surveys of the adult, household population of the United States and in 1982 and 1987 carried out oversamples of Black Americans. There have been a total of 59,599 respondents.

By using a strict, full-probability sample design, rigorous field efforts, and extensive quality control, the GSS produces a high-quality, representative sample of the adult population of the United States. The GSS response rate has generally been in the upper 70s, with a high in 1993 of 82.4%. However, in recent years the response rate has averaged just over 70%. This rate is higher than that achieved by other major social science surveys and about 60 percentage points higher than the industry average.

In order to accommodate more questions, the GSS employs a questionnaire design under which most questions are asked of only a subset of respondents. From 1972 to 1987, that was accomplished with a rotation design under which questions appeared on two out of every three years. In 1988, the GSS switched from an across-survey rotation design to a split-ballot design. Under this design questions are asked every year, but only on two of three sub-samples. Over a three-year period, questions that would have appeared on two surveys with a total of 3,000 respondents ( $2 * 1,500$ ) under the old rotation design, now appear on two-thirds sub-samples on all three surveys for a total of 3,000 respondents ( $3 * 1,000$ ). This shift eliminated the problem of periodic gaps in the annual time series and facilitated time-series analysis (Smith, Marsden, and

Hout, 2015).

## **Components**

The GSS is divided into five components: 1) the replicating core, 2) topical modules, 3) cross-national modules, 4) experiments, and 5) reinterviews and follow-up studies. In recent years the replicating core has taken up about half of the interviewing time and the topical, cross-national, and supplemental modules take up the other half. Experiments are done within either the core or the modules. The reinterviews and follow-up studies involve additional interviewing after the GSS has been completed.

### **I. Replicating Core**

The replicating core consists of questions that regularly appear in surveys either as full-coverage items or on sub-samples. The content of the core is periodically reviewed by the PIs and Board of Overseers to insure that the content remains relevant and up-to-date. Currently the replicating core consists of about one-third demographic questions and two-thirds attitudes and behaviors. The replicating core forms the basis for the trend analysis and pooling of cases for sub-group analysis.

The GSS is intentionally wide ranging in its contents with 5,597 variables in the 1972-2014 cumulative file. One needs to peruse the GSS Cumulative Codebook (Smith, Marsden, and Hout, 2015) or the on-line version at

[http://gss.norc.org/documents/codebook/GSS\\_Codebook.pdf](http://gss.norc.org/documents/codebook/GSS_Codebook.pdf) to fully appreciate the scope of the GSS.

The GSS is different from most surveys in the wide variety of demographics included and the detail in which they are asked and coded. In addition to covering the extensive background variables on the respondent's current status, the GSS has extensive information on the respondent's family of origin and parental characteristics. Among the family of origin items are questions on the intactness of families, number of siblings, religion, region, and community type. Additionally, parental variables include mother's and father's education, church attendance, occupation, and industry. There are also many questions about spouses.

Besides the demographics, the core items cover a variety of behaviors, personal evaluations, and attitudes about central social and political issues from death (e.g. capital punishment, suicide, euthanasia) to taxes (as a redistribution measure, paying too much?). Among the many topics covered are abortion, civil liberties, confidence in institutions (including the courts and law enforcement), crime and punishment (including capital punishment, fear of crime, gun control and ownership, police use of force, sentencing by courts, victimization, wiretapping), government-spending priorities (including law enforcement), poverty and inequality, intergroup relations, religion, and women's rights.

## **ii. Topical Modules**

Topical modules (special sections on a particular theme) first appeared in 1977 and have been an annual feature since 1984. The topical modules are designed to facilitate both innovation

and greater depth. They introduce new topics not previously investigated by the GSS and cover existing topics in greater detail with more fully-specified models. The original concept for a module may come from the principal investigators, the Board of Overseers, or other interested scholars.

Topical modules relating to crime are negative life events (including items on victimization) in 1991 and 2004, the regulation of firearms (2004, 2006, 2008), workplace conflict and violence (2004, 2012), terrorism preparedness (2008), and crime and punishment (2010).

### **iii. Cross-National Modules**

The GSS has spurred cross-national research by inspiring other nations to develop similar data-collection programs (e.g. the ALLBUS (Germany), British Social Attitudes, National Social Science Survey (Australia), the Taiwan Social Change Study, the Polish, Japanese, Korean, and Chinese General Social Surveys (Smith, Koch, Park, and Kim, 2006) and by joining these and other programs in the ISSP. (See [www.issp.org](http://www.issp.org)).

The fundamental goal of ISSP is to study important social and political processes in comparative perspective. In addition, by replicating earlier modules, ISSP not only has a cross-national perspective, but also an over-time perspective. With ISSP one can both compare nations and test whether similar social-science models operate across societies, and also see if there are similar international trends and whether parallel models of societal change operate across nations. Thus, by combining an across time with a cross-national design, ISSP incorporates two

powerful perspectives for studying societies.

Since founded in 1984, the ISSP has grown to involve 58 nations, the founding four-- Germany, the United States, Great Britain, and Australia-- plus Argentina, Austria, Bangladesh, Belgium, Bolivia, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, China, Cyprus, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, the Dominican Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Hungary, Iceland, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Kenya, Korea, Latvia, Lithuania, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Palestine, the Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, Sri Lanka, Suriname, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, Tanzania, Turkey, Uruguay, and Venezuela. Over one million respondents have been on ISSP surveys.

ISSP maintains high standards of survey research. Each nation uses full-probability sampling, carefully monitors all phases of the data collection, and cleans and validates the data. The ISSP's Central Archive further checks all data archived by the member nations and creates a harmonized, merged data set. Each country reports to ISSP its methods and various technical details such as its response rate. To check on the representativeness of the sample, each country compares distributions on key demographics from ISSP surveys to the best data sources in their respective countries.

ISSP modules have covered the following topics: 1) Role of Government (1985, 1990, 1996, 2006, 2016), 2) Social Support and Networks (1986, 2001, 2017), 3) Social Inequality (1987, 1992, 1999, 2009), 4) Gender, Family, and Work (1988, 1994, 2002, 2012), 5) Work Orientation (1989, 1997, 2005, 2015), 6) Religion (1991, 1998, 2008, 2018), 7) Environment (1993, 2000, 2010), 8) National Identity (1995, 2003, 2013), 9) Citizenship (2004, 2014), 10)



Leisure Time (2007), and 11) Health Policy (2011).

#### **iv. Experiments**

Experimental forms have always been a regular part of the GSS. The GSS has used split samples in 1973, 1974, 1976, 1978, 1980 and 1982-2014. They have been an integral part of the GSS's program of methodological research. Dozens of experiments have examined differences in question wording, response categories, and context (Smith, Marsden, and Hout, 2015).

Experiments are carried as part of the replicating core, topical modules, and supplements. In some years the experiments consist of additional questions not regularly appearing on the GSS, such as the inter-racial friendships experiments in 1998 and the wording and response-order experiments on genetic-screening items in 1991 and 1996. Most of the time, however, the experiments compare a variant wording or order with the standard GSS wording and/or order being the control. Examples are the experiments on measuring race and ethnicity in 1996 and 2000.

#### **v. Reinterviews and Follow-Ups**

GSS respondents have been reinterviewed both as part of methodological and substantive studies. The methodological uses have included studies of reliability, cognition, and wording and context. In 1972, 1973, 1974, and 1978, test/retest studies of item stability and reliability were conducted (Smith and Stephenson, 1979). In 1988, the normal GSS validation effort added recall questions about the timing and content of the initial interview. In 1990, about a third of the 1989 GSS cases were recontacted by phone. Comparisons were made between standard and variant

questions across sub-samples on the reinterview, between standard questions on the GSS and the reinterview, and between standard questions on the GSS and variant questions on the reinterviews.

There have been 10 substantive reinterviews of GSS respondents. Reinterviews in 1987 were conducted on 1) on political tolerance and 2) Cloninger's Tridimensional Personality Scale. In 1990, the National Survey of Functional Health Status reinterviewed respondents from the 1989/1990 GSSs and in 1994/95 respondents were reinterviewed again. In 1992, respondents to the 1991 GSS were reinterviewed in order to 1) collect information for the ISSP social inequality module and 2) study changes in negative life events over time. In 1997, the GSS recontacted parents of students in grades 1-8 from the 1996 GSS. In 1998, GSS did reinterviews on knowledge about and attitudes towards the role of behavioral interventions and social-science, health-care treatments. In 2001, there was an extension of the 2000 topical module on computers and the Internet. In 2002/2003, GSS respondents from 2002 were reinterviewed about work-related, health issues. In 2004, the National Voluntary Associations Study reinterviewed GSS respondents. In 2006, the Systematic Therapy Inventory was part of a reinterview.

Starting in 2006 three, three-wave panels were an integral part of the GSS. Respondents first interviewed in 2006 were reinterviewed in 2008 and 2010 and similar panels were done in 2008-10-12 and 2010-12-14. All standard GSS questions were asked on all three waves. These panels allow the separation of individual change from gross change and enhance the establishment of causal connections.

The GSS has also served as the source for nine special follow-up studies, most involving hypernetwork sampling. First, the National Organizations Studies contacted employers of

respondents on the 1991, 2002, and 2008 GSSs. Second, in 1994 a random sibling was selected for an interview in order to study social mobility within sibsets. Third, in 1998, 2000, 2006, and 2012 samples of respondents' congregations were created. Finally, in 2001-2002, the National Tragedy Study used items from the GSS as baseline readings to assess the impact of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on American society.

### **Publications, Teaching, and Other Uses**

As of 2015, the GSS was aware of over 25,000 research uses of the GSS in articles, books, dissertations, etc. Moreover, with the exception of the Census and its Current Population Survey, the GSS has been the most frequently used data set in the top sociology journals.

The GSS is widely used in teaching at the undergraduate and graduate levels. About 400,000 students annually take courses that utilize the GSS and over 2,000 college textbooks and teaching manuals use GSS data.

The GSS has also been used outside the academic community by the government, media, non-profits, and business community. Taking the federal government as an example, the GSS has been used by 1) the Congressional Reference Service of the Library of Congress, 2) the Science and Engineering Indicators series of NSF, and 3) Statistical Abstract of the United States of the Bureau of the Census. GSS data have also been cited in 20 briefs to the US Supreme Court.

### **Summary**

The GSS has aptly been described as a "national resource" (Firebaugh, 1997; NSF 2007, 2013), as a "core database" in both sociology and political science (Campbell, 2001; Kasse, 2001), as having "revolutionized the study of social change (ICPSR, 1997)," as "a major source of data on social and political issues and their changes over time (AAPOR Innovators Award, 2000)," and as a "gold standard" by the Consortium of Social Science Associations (2013; Silver 2011, 2013), NSF (2006, 2007, 2013; Hackett, 2011; Lightfoot, 2008; White et al. 2011), and over 40 others.

In order to serve the social-science community the GSS draws heavily upon that community of scholars in the selection and development of modules and items. Between the Board and developmental committees hundreds of researchers have participated in the design of GSS components. Then the GSS provides quick, free, equal, and easy access to the data which in turn leads to widespread utilization of the data by thousands of social scientists and hundreds of thousands of their students. It is not only widely used in the United States, but especially through ISSP is used by scholars around the world.

In sum, the GSS produces top-quality, representative data for the United States and through ISSP in many other countries on topics of fundamental importance to the social sciences, is extremely widely used in both teaching and research, and has considerably expanded the knowledge base in the social sciences in a cost effective manner.

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