

WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, AND WHY: AN ANALYSIS OF USAGE OF
THE GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEYS, 1972-1978

By Tom W. Smith

GSS Technical Report No. 12
National Opinion Research Center

April, 1979

Draft, Not for Citation
Comments Invited

The National Data Program for the Social Sciences is a data diffusion project and program of social indicators research. Annually from 1972 to 1978 the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), supported by grants from the National Science Foundation, has conducted a General Social Survey (GSS). The GSSs contain a wide range of demographics covering respondent and parental characteristics; behavioral items such as group membership and voting; personal, psychological evaluations of anomia, happiness, misanthropy, life satisfactions, and other aspects; and attitudinal questions on such public issues as abortions, crime and punishment, race relations, sex roles, and spending propriorities. The GSS questions are replicated either each survey or according to a fixed rotation pattern. In addition since many GSS questions were chosen from previous surveys, the GSS points not only serve as base years for the building of social indicators series, but also as contemporary anchors for series already up to three decades long.

The National Data Program for the Social Sciences has made the GSS data available at cost to all interested parties for use in research, teaching, or other applications. Each survey is publicly available within a few months of collection and is distributed by the Roper Center, University of Connecticut; the Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research, University of Michigan; and Conduit.

This report analyzes the usage patterns of the GSSs by examining the papers that have employed the GSSs as part of their data base. The Annotated Bibliography of Papers Using the General Social Surveys lists 254 papers using the GSS. While it is known that this falls far

short of all actual uses of the surveys, it is believed that it represents a sufficiently large, varied, and important body of uses to provide an informative source for analysis.

In examining the use pattern of the GSSs we ask the standard journalistic litany of inquiries:

Who uses the GSSs?

What variables are used?

When have the uses appeared?

Where have they appeared?

Why have the GSSs been used?

Who

The 254 papers in the bibliography have a total of 403 authors; 6 with institutional authors, 146 with single authors, 71 with two authors, 20 with three authors, 8 with four authors, 1 with five authors, and 2 with six authors. The leading authors with the number of papers they authored or co-authored are:

Charles N. Weaver	- 26
Andrew M. Greeley	- 16
Norval Glenn	- 14
D. Garth Taylor	- 11
James A. Davis	- 10
Jon P. Alston	- 9
Tom W. Smith	- 8
James D. Wright	- 8
Stephen J. Cutler	- 6
Frank Clemente	- 5
Seymour Martin Lipset	- 5

Most authors are Sociologists. Of the top eleven listed above there are eight Sociologists, one Sociologist-Political Scientist (Lipset), one Sociologist-Historian (Smith), and one professor of Business Management (Weaver). Sociologists also predominant among authors in

general but many other disciplines are also represented. They include Political Science, Communications, Psychology, Statistics, Social Work and such interdisciplinary and subfields as gerontology, demography, criminology, religious studies, urban studies, and survey methodology.

What

The counting of variables on surveys is a somewhat arbitrary matter, depending on how filters are handled, whether several questions are used for determining one variable or one question coded to form several variables, and other matters. The cumulative GSS files currently contain 446 variables. Of these fully 117 (.262) are not used in any of the papers analyzed here. This of course seems like a high number of unused items, but actually this is misleading. Of the 117 unused variables 38 appear only in the 1978 survey, 12 in only the 1977 survey, and 17 only in 1977 and 1978 (total of 67). There has not yet been sufficient time for these surveys to be widely used by the social science community. (The 1972 survey was used in 129 papers, 1973 in 160, 1974 in 135, 1975 in 88, 1976 in 56, 1977 in 32, and 1978 in 8. The more recent the survey the less opportunity there has been to use it.) Excluding these variables from consideration we find that 50 (.132) of the remaining variables have never been used. Many (13) of the unused items can be classified as minor, detailed demographics. For example, the four questions about respondent's current religion and religion of origin and spouse's current religion and religion of origin each consist of three variables: the person's major religious group, the major denominations of Protestants, and other Protestant denominations not prelisted. While the four religion and four major

Protestant denomination variables have been used, the four other Protestant variables (OTHER, SPOTH, OTH16, SPOTH16) have never been used. Other variables of this type include date of birth (BIRTHDAY, BIRMONTH, ZODIAC), hours normally worked by those temporarily not working (HRS2, SPHRS2), father and mother's education coded by degree rather than by years of schooling (PADEG and MADEG), and branch of armed forces and years served by veterans (VETKIND and VETYEARS). The next largest group is the 11 words making a vocabulary test (WORDA, WORDB, WORDC, WORDD, WRODE, WORDF, WORDG, WORDH, WORDT, WORDJ) which are of little interest since a summary variable (WORDSUM) gives a person's total score on the test. Another 9 unused variables consist of the Department of Labor's measure of general education and vocational training needed per occupation and an accompanying prestige score for respondent, father, and spouse (DOTGED, DOTPRES, DOTSV, SPDOTGED, SPDOTSV, SPDOTPRE, PADOTGED, PADOTSV, PADOTPRE). Another 4 unused variables consist of items on respondent's and spouse's days and shifts of work (SPDAYS, SPHOUR, WORKDY, WORKHR) which appeared in only the 1972 survey. The other unused variables consist of the following 13 miscellaneous items: having heard about the U.S. Supreme Court decision on abortions on the 1973 survey (ABORCT), a variant wording of the expectation of war question in the 1976 survey (USWARY); number of children expected (CHLDNUM, CHLDSOON); interviewer's ranking of cooperation and understanding of respondent (COMPEND, COOP2, COOP); presence of telephone in household (PHONE), who respondent would have voted for president if she/he had voted (IFWHO68, IFWHO72), multistage sampling code (SAMPCODE); spouse's industry (SPIND); and rating of federal tax burden (TAX). In general the unused items tend to deal

with minor details, be partly duplicated by other variables, or appear only on a single survey. There are, however, several items whose lack of use is more surprising such as the interviewer evaluations of respondents, the fertility expectation questions, and the taxation question

Turning from the wallflowers of the GSS to its cheerleaders, we see in Table 1 a list of the most popular items by question type: Demographics are the most heavily used. The list is headed by education with the other major stratification variables occupation and income coming in fourth and fifth. Coming right behind education are the three basic biological attributes: age, sex, and race. The top cultural demographic, religion, ranks seventh, followed by the geographic variables region and size of place, at eighth and tenth and marital status at ninth. The prevalence of demographics, of course reflects their standard use as control variables and the first-place finish of education indicates that stratification and SES is still the central concern of Sociology.

The other three types of items, personal evaluations, attitudes, and behaviors all have been used less frequently. Personal evaluations are led off by the measures of personal happiness and job satisfaction followed by other happiness and satisfaction items. Attitude items are headed by abortion attitudes and the top ten groups of items also includes two on race relations, three on crime and punishment, the confidence scale, the Stouffer civil liberty items, the job qualities scale, and a feminist item. Behavioral and related items are topped by a wide edge by church attendance. Then comes group memberships, political participation, socializing, victimization, and gun ownership.

TABLE 1

NUMBER OF PAPERS USING GSS VARIABLES BY VARIABLE TYPE

GSS Variable	Number of Papers
<u>Demographics</u>	
Years of Schooling (EDUC,DEGREE)	146
Race (RACE)	137
Age (AGE)	137
Sex (SEX)	132
Occupational Standing (OCCUPATION,PRESTIGE)	100
Total Family Income (INCOME,INCOM72,INCOM77)	89
Religion (RELIG)	86
Region (REGION)	65
Marital Status (MARITAL)	63
Size of Place (NORCSIZ2,NORCSIZE,XNORCSIZ,SIZE, SRCBELT,PSUSIZE)	53
<u>Personal Evaluations</u>	
Personal Happiness (HAPPY)	39
Job Satisfaction (SATJOB)	38
Financial Satisfaction (SATFIN)	31
Marital Happiness (HAPMAR)	28
Family Satisfaction (SATFAM)	24
<u>Attitudes</u>	
Abortions ABNOMORE(38),ABHLTH(35),ABPOOR(35), ABDEFECT(34).ABRAPE(30),ABSINGLE(28)	28-38
Interracial Marriages (RACMAR)	29
Capital Punishment (CAPPUN,CAPPUN2)	27
Confidence in Institutions CONBUS(26),CONFED(23), CONLABOR(23),CONLEGIS(23),CONMEDIC(23),CONPRESS(22) CONEDUC(22),CONCLERG(21),CONJUDGE(20), CONSCI(19),CONTV(19),CONFINAN(10)	10-26
Court Severity (COURTS)	26
Stouffer Civil Liberties (SPKATH(23),SPICCOM(22), SPICSOC(14),SPICHOMO(9),SPKMIL(1),SPKRAC(1), LIBATH(19),LIBCOM(18),LIBSOC(14),LIBHOMO(8), LIBMIL(1),LIBRAC(1),COLATH(18),COLCOM(18), COLSOC(14),COLHOMO(9),COLMIL(1),COLRAC(1)	1-23

TABLE 1 (Continued)

GSS Variable	Number of Papers
<u>Attitudes (Continued)</u>	
Gun Registration (GUNLAW)	22
School Busing (BUSING)	22
Voting for a Woman for President (FEPRES)	21
Job Qualities JOBSEC(21), JOBHOUR(21), JOBPROMO(21), JOBMEANS(21), JOBING(20)	20-21
<u>Behaviorial and Related</u>	
Church Attendance	47
Membership in Various Organizations MEMUNION, UNION(19), MEMFRAT(10), MEMSERV(10), MEMCHURH(9), MEMHOBBY(9), MEMLIT(9), MEMNAT(9), MEMPOLIT(9), MEMPROF(9), MEMVET(9), MEMSCHL(9), MEMSPORT(9), MEMYOUTH(9), MEMFARM(8), MEMGREEK(8), MEMOTHER(8)	
Voting in 1976 Election	11
Presidential Choice in 1972	8
Frequent Bars (SOCBAR)	7
Robbed (ROBBRY)	7
Visit Friends (SOCFRIEND)	6
Visit Neighbors (SOCCOMMUN)	6
Visit Relatives (SOCREL)	6
Own Gun (OWNGUN)	6

It appears that interest has been widely spread among a variety of attitudes, personal evaluations, and behaviorial items and that attention has not been overly concentrated in any small substantive area. Reflecting the smorgasbord content of the GSS, the use of variables has been wide-ranging and varied. Perhaps the one area in which usage has been notably light is foreign affairs. The seven national thermometer questions have been used only once or twice; expectation of war and support for the United Nations, each twice; and involvement in foreign affairs, four times.

When

Like a snow ball rolling downhill, the GSSs have gained usages with time. There was only a single use in 1972, five in 1973, thirteen in 1974, forty in 1975, sixty-one in 1976, fifty-two in 1977, seventy-one in 1978, nine forthcoming, and two with dates unknown. The growth of uses reflects several factors, the natural lag time between data collection, analysis, and publication, the addition of more studies with opportunities for trend analysis or pooling, the addition of more questions, and the spreading familiarity of the GSS to the social science community. The trend toward an increasing number of annual usages seems likely to continue in 1979, but the impact of the shift to an every-other-year schedule may dampen the trend starting in 1980/81.

Where

Papers using the GSSs have appeared in a wide variety of places. Journal articles led with 146 occurrences followed by presentations at scholarly meetings with 42, books with 29, reports with 27, and student dissertations and theses with 10. As Table 2 details, most have appeared at conferences or in journals in the field of sociology. Virtually every major sociological journal has had articles using the GSSs with the American Sociological Review leading with 12 and closely followed by Public Opinion Quarterly, the Journal of Marriage and the Family, and Social Forces with 10 each. Outside of sociology journals using the GSS include such interdisciplinary journals as the Annals and Daedalus, journals in other fields such as business administration (e.g., Personal Psychology), communications (Journal of Communications) and education (Journal of Research and Development in Education), journals of a popular scientific nature (e.g., Science and Scientific American)

TABLE 2
COUNT OF PAPERS USING THE GSSs IN JOURNALS AND
AT CONFERENCES

	Number of Papers
A. <u>Journal appearances</u>	
American Sociological Review	12
Public Opinion Quarterly	10
Social Forces	10
Journal of Marriage and the Family	10
Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion	6
Public Opinion	6
Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences	4
Journal of Communications	4
Journal of Applied Psychology	4
Ethnicity	4
Contemporary Sociology	4
Gerontologist	4
Personnel Psychology	3
American Journal of Sociology	3
Journal of Gerontology	3
Marquett Business Review	2
Academy of Management Journal	2
Public Interest	2
Society	2
Social Problems	2
Review of Religious Research	2
Social Policy	2
Journal of Social Issues	2
Social Science Research	2
Journal of Black Studies	2
Dissent	1
The Nation	1
Cornell Journal of Social Relations	1
Sociological Quarterly	1
Journal of Research and Development in Education	1
Social Biology	1
Internation Journal of Comparative Sociology	1
Criminology	1
Intercom	1
Sociological Analysis	1
The American Scholar	1
Social Science Review	1
Teaching Sociology	1
Pacific Sociological Review	1
Daedalus	1
Annual Review of Sociology	1
Qualitative Sociology	1

TABLE 2 (Continued)

	Number of Papers
A. <u>Journal appearances</u> (Continued)	
Scientific American	1
Status	1
Journal of Homosexuality	1
Science	1
International Journal of Sociology of the Family	1
Sociological Symposium	1
High School Behavioral Science	1
Aging and Development	1
New Republic	1
America	1
Social Studies of Science	1
Environmental Affairs	1
The Critic	1
Rural Sociology	1
Southern Journal of Criminal Justice	1
Social Psychology Quarterly	1
Sex Roles	1
Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare	1
Business Horizons	1
Personnel Administration	1
Personnel	1
Sociological Methods and Research	1
B. <u>Conference Prestations</u>	
Regional Sociology	11
American Sociological Association	8
American Statistical Association	7
Regional Economic	3
Business Management	3
Gerontology	2
Other	8

and journals of a general political or policy nature (e.g., Public Opinion, The Nation or Society). The major surprise is that none of the journals or conferences are in political science (although, as noted earlier, several political scientists have used the GSSs). This is partly a result of GSSs conscious attempt to minimize the number of political

items in order to avoid a duplication of coverage with the national election surveys carried out by the Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan. What is surprising is that our attempt at minimization were so successful.

Why

The GSSs have been used for a number of purposes. Most commonly the GSSs have been used to carry out scholarly research in the social sciences on contemporary American society. This research consists of proposing and testing various hypotheses about the organization, operation, and function of various social phenomena; intergenerational studies of mobility and transmittances, trend analyses of social change, cross-national comparisons, and related matters.

In addition the GSSs have been used in social indicators reporting. Data from the GSS were used extensively in Social Indicators 1976 and in annual publications by the National Center for Educational Statistics, the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, the U.S. Bureau of the Census, and the National Science Foundation.

The GSSs have also been used to study various questions of survey methodology by using the split ballot experiments on wordings and context, various item indexes to examine scaling, and using GSS data to illustrate the application of new statistical methods. Finally, the GSSs have been used as guides of item wording, questionnaire construction, and codebook organization; as a teaching tool for Sociology; and as a source for discussions of a policy and political nature.

Conclusion

From the brief analysis of the usage of the GSSs as reflected in papers employing the GSS, it appears that the surveys are being

widely used by a growing number of scholars in Sociology and the other social sciences, by the government, and by people in other areas. The GSSs dozen different journals by an equally varied and even larger number of authors. The set of scholarly hypotheses tested and trends analyzed has likewise been extremely diverse. With the exception of a few topics and groups where extensive usage has not developed, the GSSs have shown considerable success in providing useful data to the social science community. The prognosis for the future, based on past trends and a large number of papers received since the publication of the Annotated Bibliography, is for even more extensive and diverse usage in the coming years.