

Encyclopedia of
Survey
Research
Methods

E D I T O R

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managers in businesses; family members, housekeepers, and so forth. For studies in which children are the intended respondents, parents may be considered gatekeepers in that their consent must be obtained for the child's participation in the study.

A single respondent may have multiple gatekeepers that must be contacted by the data collector. In a secured apartment complex, the security guard may prevent access to an individual apartment unless the data collector has obtained permission from the complex manager. The latter is now a second gatekeeper who must be convinced to grant access to the selected housing unit. If successful there, the data collector may then encounter a third gatekeeper at the housing unit in the form of a parent, other family member, or housekeeper.

It is important to consider that a single gatekeeper may control a data collector's access to not just one but many respondents. For example, in the case of an area probability sample, a security guard at a large apartment complex may prevent access to multiple sampled housing units. An establishment survey wishing to sample multiple employees at a large company may have an administrative assistant standing in the way of gaining access to the director of human resources for the company (who could also be considered a secondary gatekeeper).

Regardless of their relationship to a respondent, gatekeepers must be successfully yet carefully negotiated in order to further the research objectives. Data collectors must walk a fine line between giving gatekeepers enough information about the survey and its sponsorship to motivate them to grant access to the respondent while, at the same time, not revealing sensitive information that could violate the respondent's privacy or reflect negatively on the person. Further, data collectors must be cognizant and respectful of all local laws and regulations regarding trespassing, solicitation, and so on.

Data collectors must assess each controlled access situation and note as many relevant details as possible. For example, when refused entry by a security guard, data collectors can note the guard's name or demographics and then plan to return when another, possibly more cooperative guard is on duty. They can check locked building entrances at other times of the day when they might be open to the public. They can also walk around gated communities to determine if a pedestrian entrance may be open. Data collectors can honk a vehicle horn at a single family housing unit when an unleashed dog prevents access to the

front door. If at home, the resident will likely come to the door in response.

If study protocols permit, data collectors can ask the security guard or complex manager, in lieu of granting access to the housing units, if they would distribute a study brochure or data collector name and number to the selected housing units. If asked, they may also identify which, if any, of the selected housing units are currently vacant.

As society becomes increasingly security-minded in this age of identity theft, terrorism, and crime, the presence of gatekeepers will be encountered more and more frequently. It is critical, therefore, that researchers recognize this trend, as well as the potential effect on nonresponse that gatekeepers represent. In doing so, researchers should include in their procedural manuals and interviewer training programs material on how to deal effectively with gatekeepers. Specific instructions should be included regarding what information may be shared with gatekeepers about the study and what cannot be shared in order to protect respondent confidentiality. Strategies and tools for dealing with gatekeepers should be developed, such as informational brochures suitable for gatekeepers, main office/research director contact information, letters from the research director to the gatekeeper, and so on.

Randall Keesling

See also Contactability; Controlled Access; Establishment Survey; Interviewer Productivity; Interviewer Training

GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEY (GSS)

The National Data Program for the Social Sciences of the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), University of Chicago, is a social indicators and data diffusion program. Its basic purposes are (1) to gather and disseminate data on American society in order to (a) monitor and explain societal trends and constants in attitudes, behaviors, and attributes, and (b) examine the structure and functioning of society in general and the role of various subgroups; (2) to compare the United States to other societies in order to place American society in comparative perspective and to develop cross-national models of human society; and (3) to make high-quality data easily and quickly available to scholars, students, and others. These goals are

accomplished by the regular collection and distribution of the NORC General Social Survey (GSS) and its allied surveys in the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP).

Origins

Two social science movements in the 1960s spawned the GSS. First, the social indicators movement stressed the importance of measuring trends and of adding non-economic measures to the large repertoire of national accounts indices. Second, scholarly egalitarianism was advocating that data be made available to scientists at all universities and not restricted to elite senior investigators at large research centers. In 1971, these ideas were presented together in a modest proposal to the National Science Foundation (NSF) for "twenty-some questions" that called for the periodic asking of items on national samples with these data immediately distributed to the social science community for analysis and teaching. Approval from NSF plus supplemental funding from the Russell Sage Foundation spawned the first GSS in 1972.

Growth

From 1972 to 2004, the GSS conducted 25 independent, cross-sectional, in-person surveys of adults living in households in the United States, and in 1982 and 1987, it carried out oversamples of African Americans. There are a total of 46,510 respondents. During most years until 1994 there were annual surveys of about 1,500 respondents. Currently about 3,000 cases are collected in a biennial GSS.

Additionally, since 1982 the GSS has expanded internationally. The cross-national research started as a bilateral collaboration between the GSS and the Allgemeine Bevölkerungsumfrage der Sozialwissenschaften (ALLBUS) of the Zentrum für Umfragen, Methoden, und Analysen in Germany in 1982 and 1984. In 1984, they joined with the British Social Attitudes Survey of the National Centre for Social Research and the National Social Science Survey at Australian National University to form the ISSP. Along with institutes in Italy and Austria, the founding four fielded the first ISSP in 1985. ISSP surveys have been collected annually since that time, and there are now 41 member countries (the founding four plus Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, the Czech Republic, Cyprus, Denmark, Dominican

Republic, Finland, France, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea (South), Latvia, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, the Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, Turkey, Uruguay, and Venezuela).

Content

The GSS lives up to its title as "General." The 4,624 variables in the 1972–2004 cumulative data set run from ABANY (legal abortion if a woman wants one for any reason) to ZOMBIES (behavioral medication for children) and have core batteries on such topics as civil liberties, confidence in institutions, crime/violence, gender roles, government spending, intergroup relations, psychological well-being, religion, and work.

The balance of components has changed over time, but currently half of the GSS is replicating core topics, one sixth deals with cross-national topics, and one third consists of in-depth, topical modules. Recent ISSP modules include the environment, gender and work, national identity, and the role of government. Recent topical modules include work organizations, multiculturalism, emotions, gender, mental health, giving/volunteering, altruism, Internet, and genetics. The data sets are available on the GSS Web site.

Research Opportunities

Several important types of research are facilitated by the GSS design. First, the replication of items allows the study of societal change. Moreover, because all surveys and all variables are organized in one cumulative file, researchers do not have to patch together time series from different and often incompatible data sets. By just running the data by YEAR, more than 1,600 trends can be tracked.

Second, replication also means that subgroups can be pooled across surveys to aggregate an adequate sample for analysis. For example, Blacks at about 12% of the population account for about 175 respondents in a 1,500 case sample—too few for detailed analysis. But in the 1972–2004 GSSs there are 6,399 Blacks—more than enough for analysis.

Third, researchers can both track trends and pool cases. For example, Blacks from the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s can be combined to have four time points and still have between 1,216 and 2,208 Blacks in each subsample.

Fourth, the 18 ISSP studies (1985–2005) offer the largest and most accessible body of cross-national social science data available. Moreover, reflecting the GSS's core interest in societal trends, the ISSPs have an across-time component. For example, the role-of-government topic in 1985 was repeated in 1990, 1996, and 2006. Thus, the GSS/ISSP has both a cross-national and across-time perspective.

Finally, the GSS's detailed and extensive set of demographics allows in-depth analysis of background influences. For example, the GSS does not have merely a single measure of education, but eight standard measures: the exact number of years of schooling completed and the highest degree obtained for respondents, mothers, fathers, and spouses. For occupation, the GSS has three-digit census codes, International Standard of Occupation Codes, NORC-GSS prestige scores, and Duncan Socioeconomic Index values for respondents, parents, and spouses.

Impact of the GSS

As the largest and longest-running project of NSF's Sociology Program, the GSS has had a tremendous impact on social science research. The GSS has been used in approximately 14,000 publications, and new usages accumulate at more than 700 per year. Among top sociology journals (*American Journal of Sociology*, *American Sociological Review*, and *Social Forces*), GSS use is second only to the U.S. Census.

The GSS has also had a large influence on college teaching. Millions of students have learned about society and research methodology in courses using the GSS. More than 400 textbooks in sociology, political science, statistics, and other fields utilize the GSS.

The GSS has aptly been described as a "national resource" by the National Academy of Science and as a "public utility for the community at large" (NSF).

The GSS is grounded in the past but growing into the future. It combines replication and innovation, incorporates both the societal change and comparative perspectives, and joins patrician quality standards with plebeian dissemination. Through these synergies it serves the social science communities and others.

Tom W. Smith

See also International Social Survey Programme (ISSP); National Opinion Research Center (NORC)

Further Readings

General Social Survey: <http://www.gss.norc.org>

International Social Survey Programme: <http://www.issp.org>

GEOGRAPHIC SCREENING

Most surveys target a specific geopolitical area, so that estimates produced from their data can be representative of that area. For some surveys, the area consists of an entire nation, but other surveys aim to produce regional estimates (such as those for states, counties, or zip codes). Thus, such surveys require some sort of geographic screening, or determination that a sampled case falls within the target geography, to establish study eligibility. If the screening is inherent in the sampling design itself, no further information is required. Other studies require additional screening steps, either prior to sample release or during the field period. Decisions about the level of geographic screening for a study arise from the sampling frame to be used.

When the sampling frame for a desired geographic area can be tied clearly to that area, no screening is needed beyond the design of the sample itself. For example, the sampling frame for a mail-based survey is composed of addresses that are known to be within a specific geographic area. Thus, geographic screening is part of the sampling design itself. Similarly, the sampling frame for an area probability sample is, by definition, geopolitically based, and therefore, no additional geographic screening is needed.

Telephone surveys typically use sampling frames that are defined by areas such as the nation as a whole, states, counties, cities, Census tracts, or zip codes. Samples of telephone numbers are generated by linking telephone exchanges to the desired target geography. In random-digit dialing (RDD) surveys of relatively small areas, it is impossible to match exactly telephone numbers with the boundaries of the target area. Researchers must determine whether the level of agreement between sampled telephone exchanges and the geography of interest is sufficient for their purposes or whether further questioning of the respondents to establish their location is warranted. This questioning can be complex and difficult to operationalize, thus leading to errors of omission and commission in which some eligible people are incorrectly screened out and some ineligible people are incorrectly screened in.