

THE NATIONAL DATA PROGRAM FOR THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

by

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The National Data Program for the Social Sciences is a social indicator and data diffusion program conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC). The two basic purposes of the National Data Program for the Social Sciences are to measure trends and constants in attitudes, behaviors, and attributes and to make useful and relevant national survey data available to social scientists, policy makers, students and others with minimal cost and waiting. Since the program's inception in 1972 NORC has carried out eight national surveys known as the General Social Surveys (GSSs). From 1972 to 1978 it fielded surveys annually. Currently surveys are conducted biennially with the most recent survey in 1980 and the next survey in 1982. Each GSS is an independent cross-section of the adult population of the United States. A total of 12,120 people have been interviewed, approximately 1500 per survey.

The GSSs replicate items from survey to survey thereby building up a time series for the study of changes and consistencies in American society. Some items appear in each survey while others follow a set rotation scheme. The rotation scheme allows us to buildup a time series while permitting us to fit more items into the series since every item does not appear on every survey. In addition since many GSS questions were selected from earlier surveys it is possible to compare results from the GSS to findings on earlier surveys done by NORC; Gallup; the Survey Research Center, University of Michigan; and other organizations. This permits trend analysis on many topics covering the last several

decades. For example, our question on police permits for guns was originally asked by the Gallup organization in 1959 and was repeated by them several times during the sixties. Thus when we started asking the item in 1973 we were already building on a fourteen year long series. This retrospective feature of the GSS makes it suitable for studying changes over much of the post World War II period.

The replication of items across time is not only useful in the studying of trends and constants, but can be very helpful in the investigation of small subgroups and in multivariate models. There are many social and demographic groups of special interest that are difficult to study because their proportional share to the national population means that a typical 1500 case survey does not find sufficient cases to sustain a special analysis. Blacks, for example, had only 140 cases in the 1980 survey, a number far too low for detailed analysis. Across all GSSs however there are 1383 blacks who can be analyzed in much greater depth. Similarly, the currently divorced or separated are only 10 percent of the population, but across the eight GSSs we have a respectable case base of 1131. For multivariate analysis the benefits are comparable. A multivariate model with a half dozen or more variables might easily be unworkable on a 1500 case survey, but for items that are replicated each year it is possible to bring over 12,000 cases into the analysis. Furthermore both of these uses of the GSSs as a large, pooled data set are made easy because the files are prearranged into a merged or cumulative data set by the project before it is released to the public.

Another basic feature of the GSSs are their broad coverage. There are a total of 481 variables in the cumulative GSS file. These cover basic demographics, attitudes, behaviors, and personal evaluations.

The demographics include standard background items for the respondent including a battery on characteristics of spouse and family of origin such as parent's education and region and type of place raised. Attitude items cover a wide-range of topics such as abortions, child rearing values, crime and punishment, feminism, foreign affairs, institutional leadership, national spending priorities, race relations, religious beliefs, taxation and income redistribution, tolerance of Communists, homosexuals, and others, violence, and the work ethic. Behavioral items include measures of drinking and smoking, gun ownership, organizational memberships, political affiliation and voting, socializing patterns, and trauma and life stress. Personal evaluations are subjective ratings of ones life and include alienation and anomia scales, items on general and marital happiness, and satisfaction questions on job, finances, family, friends, place of residence, health, and hobbies. In all, the GSSs touch upon many areas of social science interest.

Another special feature of the GSSs are their methodological experiments. Through the use of split-ballots, special scales, and ~~supp~~ test/retest subsamples the GSSs have studied measurement error and other major methodological concerns of social science. In 1976 for example, we asked a random half of the sample a question about whether your federal income tax was too high, about right, or too low immediately before an 11 item question on spending preferences and asked the other half the same question immediately after the spending question. We found that when the tax question preceded spending 64 percent thought taxes were too high, but when it followed the spending question only 53 percent said taxes were too high. Other methodological experiments allow researchers to study differences in question wording, the interaction of scale items,

and the reliability and stability of measures. In brief, the General Social Surveys provide social scientists and others with a rich data source suitable for a wide variety of research and teaching applications.

In addition to conducting the General Social Survey and supplying related documentation, the project staff also provides general user support and carries out methodological and substantive research. The project has just completed its 1980 edition of the Annotated Bibliography of Papers Using the General Social Surveys which lists over 400 scholarly or governmental uses of the survey. It provides a full citation to each piece, a list of variables and surveys used, and a short abstract. It also has a mnemonic index which enables users to locate other studies dealing with variables of interest. The project also produces a GSS Technical Report series which currently has twenty pieces examining matters of methodological and substantive interest.

The National Data Program for the Social Sciences is directed by James A. Davis, principle investigator, and Tom W. Smith. The project staff is assisted by a General Advisory Board whose members are David Featherman, Norval Glenn, Philip Hastings, Herbert Hyman, David Knoke, Otto Larsen, John Mueller, James Short, and Stephen Withey and a Methodological Advisory Board with Norman Bradburn, chairman, and Duane Alwin, Howard Schuman, and Seymour Sudman as members. Initial support for the program came from the Russell Sage Foundation and the National Science Foundation (NSF). Subsequently full support has been provided by NSF.

Data from the 1972-1980 GSSs are in the public domain and readily available to all interested parties. Each survey is a subfile in a merged data set which permits the user to automatically combine years for pooled analysis or to breakdown the data by year for trend analysis. The

files are fully documented by the General Social Surveys, 1972-1980: Cumulative Codebook, a 350 plus page document that gives complete file descriptions and locations, the exact wordings and marginals for all items, and additional information on sample design, previous usages, recodings and other matters of interest. The cumulative file is available as raw data or with control cards for SPSS or OSIRIS system files. The GSSs are distributed by the Roper Center, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT. Data can also be obtained from the Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research and CONDUIT.