

WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, AND WHY: AN ANALYSIS OF USAGE OF  
THE GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEY, 1972-1980

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The National Data Program for the Social Sciences is a data diffusion project and program of social indicators research. Annually from 1972 to 1978 and in 1980 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 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 priorities. 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, (1981) lists 659 papers using the GSS. While it is known that this falls 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 659 papers in the bibliography have a total of 1,042 authorships; 13 with institutional authors, 376 with single authors, 185 with two authors, 63 with three authors, 18 with four authors, 2 with five authors, and 2 with six authors. Most authors (87.5 percent) are academics with college affiliations. They are followed by associates of research centers or foundations (5.0 percent), government employees (2.9 percent), journalists and editors (1.5 percent), miscellaneous (1.1 percent), and unknown (2.0 percent). Among the academics Sociologists predominated (73.2 percent), followed by Political Scientists (11.7 percent), Business Administration/Management (4.5 percent), Communications (3.1 percent), Criminal Justice and Law (2.5 percent), Psychologists (1.2 percent) and others, including physicians, statisticians, geographers, educators, etc. (3.7 percent). Within Sociology almost every speciality is covered including gerontology, demography, religious studies, statistical and survey methods,

rural and urban studies, cross national comparisons, social deviance, social change, social control, stratification, mobility, etc.

### What1

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 481 variables. Of these, fully 73 (.152) are not used in any of the papers analyzed here. While this seems like a high number of unused items, it is actually misleading. Of the 73 unused variables, 15 appear only in the 1980 survey, 3 in only the 1978 survey, and 2 only in the 1978 and 1980 (total of 20). 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 264 papers, 1973 in 356, 1974 in 230, 1975 in 285, 1976 in 251, 1977 in 210, 1978 in 114, and 1980 in 18. The more recent the survey the less opportunity there has been to use it.) Excluding these variables from consideration we find that 53 (.115) of the remaining variables have never been used.

The largest group of 11 unused variables consist of the Department of Labor's measures of general education and vocational training needed per occupation; an accompanying prestige score for respondent, father, and spouse; and spouse levels for data, people, and things (DOTGED, DOTPRES, SPDOTGED, SPDOTSVP, SPDOTPRE, PADOTGED, PADOTSVP, PADOTPRE, SPDOTDATA, SPDOTPEO, SPDOTTHN). Next comes the 10 words making a vocabulary test (WORDA, WORDB,

<sup>1</sup>This section is based on the 559 papers that have been abstracted in the Annotated Bibliography. It excludes the 100 papers in the supplement.

WORDC, WORDD, WORDE, WORDF, WORDG, WORDH, WORDI, WORDJ) which are of little interest since a summary variable (WORDSUM) gives a person's total score on the test. Other (7) 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, two other Protestant variables (SPOTH, SPOTH16) have never been used. Other variables of this type include date of birth (BIRTHDAY, BIRMONTH), hours normally worked by those temporarily not working (HRS2, SPHRS2), and branch of armed forces (VETKIND).

Another 12 unused variables consist of items which appeared in only a single survey: respondent's and spouse's days and shifts of work (SPDAYS, SPHOUR, WORKDY, WORKHR) which appeared in only the 1972 survey, interviewer's ranking of cooperation (COOP2) used in 1972, filters to the equal rights question (ERAREAD, ERAREAD) used in 1977, personal abortion use (ABHAVE1, ABHAVE2, ABHAVE3) used in 1977, smoking cigarettes during last week (CIGWEEK) used in 1977, and racial interaction of employer-employee (RACSUPS) used in 1977.

Finally, the other unused variables consist of the following 13 miscellaneous items: number of children expected (CHLDSOON), who respondent would have voted for president if he/she had voted (IFWHO68, IFWHO76), spouse's industry (SPIND), and several life trauma items (CHLDDTH, HOSREL4, UNREL4, TRAREL1, TRAREL5, TRATOT1, TRATOT5, TRAUMA5).

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 some of the trauma items and the fertility expectation 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, income and occupation, coming in fourth and fifth. Coming right behind education are the three basic biological attributes: age, race, and sex. The top cultural demographic--religion--ranks seventh, followed by the geographic variables--size of place and region--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 are still the central concerns 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 dozen groups of items include four on race relations, three on crime and punishment, the confidence scale, the Stouffer civil liberty items, the Anomia scale, the spending priority items, and a sexual morality item. Behavioral and related items are topped by a wide edge by church attendance. Then come group memberships, political participation, socializing, victimization, and gun ownership. It appears that interest has been widely spread among a variety of attitudes, personal evaluations, and behavioral 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 two to five times, expectation of war six times, support for the United Nations seven times, and involvement in foreign affairs, 12 times.

#### When

The GSSs have gained usages with time. There was only a single use in 1972, six in 1973, 20 in 1974, 46 in 1975, 70 in 1976, 54 in 1977, 127 in 1979, 134 in 1980 and 77 in 1981 or 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. This growth has continued despite the fact that starting in 1979 the GSS was conducted on a biennial basis. The large number of papers already recorded for 1981 suggests continued growth of usages<sup>1</sup>.

#### Where

Papers using the GSSs have appeared in a wide variety of places. Journal articles led with 323 occurrences followed by presentations at scholarly meetings with 156, books with 94, reports with 46, and student dissertations and theses with 40. As Table 2 details, most have appeared at

<sup>1</sup>Our coverage is less complete for the more recent years. In our analysis of usage in the 1980 edition of the Annotated Bibliography we counted 184 uses for 1972-1977, 104 for 1978, 80 for 1979, and 33 for 1980 or forthcoming. Our current count shows an increase of 7.1 percent for 1972-1977, 22.1 percent for 1978, 52.2 percent for 1979 and 306 percent for 1980. This probably means that 1) the plateau of usages in 1978-1980 will eventually form a monotonic upward slope and 2) usage in 1981 will probably set a new high.

conferences or in journals in the field of sociology. Virtually every major sociological and survey research journal has had articles using the GSSs with the Public Opinion Quarterly leading with 27 and closely followed by the Journal of Marriage and the Family and the American Sociological Review both with 24 and Social Forces with 17. 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., Personnel Psychology), communications (Journal of Communications and Journal of Broadcasting), political science (American Political Science Review), psychology (American Psychologist), and education (Journal of Research and Development in Education), journals of a popular scientific nature (e.g., Science and Scientific American), and journals of a general political or policy nature (e.g., Public Opinion, The Nation, or Society). In general, use has centered in sociology with secondary concentration in the other social sciences, and peripheral usages in a wide range of fields.

#### 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 III and in 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 items 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 politics and policy.

#### 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 have been used in a large and varied number of places including nine 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, is for even more extensive and diverse usage in the coming years.

TABLE 1

## NUMBER OF PAPERS USING GSS VARIABLES BY VARIABLE TYPE

GSS Variable	Number of Papers
<u>Demographics</u>	
Years of Schooling (EDUC, DEGREE)	309
Age (AGE)	287
Race (RACE)	278
Sex (SEX)	270
Total Family Income (INCOME, INCOME72, INCOME77)	205
Occupational Standing (OCC, PRESTIGE)	202
Religion (RELIG)	168
Size of Place (NORCSIZ2, NORCSIZE, XNORCSIZ, SIZE, SRCBELT, PSUSIZE)	127
Marital Status (MARITAL)	116
Region (REGION)	113
<u>Personal Evaluation</u>	
Personal Happiness (HAPPY)	85
Job Satisfaction (SATJOB)	67
Family Satisfaction (SATFAM)	60
Financial Satisfaction (SATFIN)	59
Friendship Satisfaction (SATFRND)	55
Marital Happiness (HAPMAR)	53
<u>Attitudes</u>	
Abortions ABNOMORE (75), ABPOOR (65), ABHLTH (65), ABDEFECT (62), ABSINGLE (62), ABRAPE (56)	56-75
Capital Punishment (CAPPUN, CAPPUN2)	62
Stouffer (Civil Liberties) SPKATH (59), SPKCOM (58), SPKSOC (38), SPKHOMO (30), SPKMIL (17), SPKRAC (15), LIBATH (49), LIBCOM (50), LIBSOC (36), LIBHOMO (27), LIBMIL (13), LIBRAC (12), COLATH (48), COCOM (52), COLSOC (35), COLHOMO (28) COLMIL (14), COLRAC (12)	12-59
Interracial Marriages (RACMAR)	58
Confidence in Institutions CONBUS (52), CONFED (55), CONLABOR (49), CONLEGIS (54), CONMEDIC (50), COMPRESS (51), CONEDUC (47), CONCLERG (48), CONJUDGE (52), CONARMY (48), CONSCI (41), CONF INAN (26)	26-55
Court Severity (COURTS)	
Spending Priorities NATFARE (52), NATEDUC (49), NATCITY (48), NATENVIR (46), NATHEAL (50), NATARMS (44), NATRACE (43), NATCRIME (46), NATDRUG (36), NATAID (35), NATSPAC (35)	35-52

TABLE 1 (Continued)

GSS Variable	Number of Papers
Anomia ANOMIA1(28), ANOMIA2(28), ANOMIA3(28), ANOMIA4(36), ANOMIA5(47), ANOMIA6(46), ANOMIA7(43), ANOMIA8(33), ANOMIA9(31)	28-47
Gun Registration (GUNLAW)	43
School Busing (BUSING)	42
Premarital Sex (PREMARSEX)	42
Black Dinner Guest (RACDIN)	39
School Desegregation (RACSCHOOL)	39
<u>Behaviorial and Related</u>	
Church Attendance	92
Membership in Various Organizations/MEMUNION, UNION(33), MEMFRAT(20), MEMSERV(19), MEMCHURH(22), MEMHOBBY(18), MEMLIT(19), MEMNAT(17), MEMPOLIT(18), MEMSPORT(20), MEMYOUTH(16), MEMFARM(15), MEMGREEK(15), MEMOTHER(14)	14-33
Visit Relatives (SOCREL)	22
Own Gun (OWNGUN)	22
Visit Friends (SOCFRIEND)	21
Voting in 1972 Election (VOTE72)	21
Presidential Choice in 1972 (PRES72)	19
Visit Neighbors (SOCCOMMUN)	19
Robbed (ROBBRY)	19
Burgarlized (BURGLR)	19
Frequent Bars (SOCBAR)	14

TABLE 2

## DISTRIBUTION OF JOURNALS AND CONFERENCES BY FIELD

	Journals	Conferences
A. Summary		
Sociology and Related	52.8%	73.1%
Gerontology	(4.7)	(4.5)
Criminology	(1.9)	(1.3)
Demography	(0.9)	--
Religion	5.6	0.6
Political Science	3.7	5.8
Psychology	3.7	--
Communications	3.7	1.3
Management	3.1	3.2
Education	0.6	0.6
Statistics	--	5.1
Survey Research	10.2	0.6
Interdisciplinary	4.0	1.3
Public Interest/Commentary	8.7	3.2
Government	0.6	--
Miscellaneous	<u>3.1</u>	<u>5.1</u>
	99.8	99.9
	(323)	(156)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

	Number of Papers
<b>B. <u>Journal Appearances</u></b>	
Public Opinion Quarterly	27
Journal of Marriage and the Family	24
American Sociological Review	24
Social Forces	17
Public Opinion	12
Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion	11
Journal of Gerontology	9
Ethnicity	8
Annals of the American Academy of Political & Social Sciences	8
Journal of Communications	6
American Journal of Sociology	6
American Journal of Political Science	6
Review of Religious Research	5
Rural Sociology	5
Journal of Applied Psychology	4
Gerontologist	4
Communication Research	4
Sociological Quarterly	4
Criminology	4
Social Focus	4
Pacific Sociological Review	4
Review of Public Data Use	4
Personnel Psychology	3
Public Interest	3
Social Problems	3
Social Policy	3
Social Indicators Research	3
Resources for the Future	3
Journal of Social Issues	2
Marquett Business Review	2
Academy of Management Journal	2
Society	2
Social Science Research	2
Social Science Quarterly	2
Journal of Black Studies	2
Social Biology	2
Journal of Clinical Psychology	2
American Politics Quarterly	2
Fortune	2
Sociology and Social Research	2
Sociological Symposium	2
Social Psychology Quarterly	2
Sociological Methods and Research	2
Journal of Family Issues	2
Family Planning Perspective	2

TABLE 2 (Continued)

	Number of Papers
<b>B. <u>Journal Appearances</u> (Continued)</b>	
Psychology Today	2
Sociology of Education	2
Sociological Analysis	2
Teaching Sociology	2
Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare	2
Dissent	2
The Nation	2
International Journal of Sociology of the Family	1
University of North Carolina Newsletter	1
Cornell Journal of Social Relations	1
Journal of Research and Development in Education	1
International Journal of Comparative Sociology	1
The American Scholar	1
Social Science Review	1
Daedalus	1
Annual Review of Sociology	1
Scientific American	1
Status	1
Journal of Homosexuality	1
Science	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
Southern Journal of Criminal Justice	1
Sex Roles	1
Business Horizons	1
Personnel Administration	1
Personnel	1
Demography	1
Computers and the Humanities	1
Our Sunday Visitor	1
Family Planning Perspectives	1
Discovery	1
Journal of Sex Research	1
Texas Business Review	1
Journal of Broadcasting	1
Mid-American Review of Sociology	1
American Political Science Review	1
American Psychologist	1
Journal of Market Research	1
Psychometrika	1

TABLE 2 (Continued)

	Number of Papers
<b>B. <u>Journal Appearances</u> (Continued)</b>	
Public Relations News	1
Wilson Quarterly	1
Overview	1
International Journal of Aging and Human Development	1
EPA Journal	1
Political Methodology	1
Sociological Methodology	1
Phylon	1
Journalism Quarterly	1
Historical Methods	1
Population and Development Review	1
Media Politics	1
Population and Development Review	1
Wyoming Issues	1
Political Criminal Science Quarterly	1
Journal of Law and Criminology	1
Monthly Labor Review	1
Multivariate Behavioral Research	1
Community and Development Issues	1