

The 1985 Survey of Users of The
General Social Surveys:
A Summary Report

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GSS Project Report No. 11

January, 1986

This research was done for the GSS project directed by James A. Davis and Tom W. Smith. The project is funded by the National Science Foundation, Grant No. SES-8119731.

A survey of known General Social Survey (GSS) users was conducted in the Fall of 1985 to measure the satisfaction and preferences of the user community.¹ (For details of the survey see Appendix I: Procedural Details of the 1985 Survey of Users of the General Social Surveys.) An analysis of the survey results indicated the following.

1. Satisfaction among users is high.

Users were asked to rate on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 = Excellent to 7 = Poor six features of the GSS: Codebook, Availability, Coverage of topics, Cost of data set, Organization of data set, and Quality of data set. Ratings were generally quite high with a majority of ratings in the excellent category for the codebook, availability, and quality and a plurality in the top category for cost and organization (Table 1). Cost ratings were lower only because of the high number of users who did not know the cost of the data. With the uninformed excluded the mean rating for cost was similar to those for the codebook, availability, quality, and organization (means of 1.6-1.9). Only coverage of topics was rated notably lower than the other features. A plurality gave coverage the next to the highest rating and the mean (2.5) was well above the other average ratings. In a subsequent section we will discuss the reason for this lower level of satisfaction. User satisfaction is also evident from the last question, "Additional comments?" Among the 17.7% who made comments 87.7% were favorable, 8.6% were neutral or extraneous, and only 3.7% were negative. (see Appendix II: Comments.)

¹The secondary purpose of the survey was to identify new GSS usages. This was quite successful since 42% of respondents listed additional uses. In addition, as a consequence of this survey, we now have a machine readable file of users that will generate mailing labels.

2. Users appreciate both the essence and convenience of the GSS.

In response to an open-ended question on "What features or aspects of the GSS do you like the best?" most users mentioned some crucial design feature of the GSS such as: a) its study of time trends (26%), b) its comprehensive coverage of topics (18%), c) its large sample size and national coverage (8%), and d) its up-to-date recency (2.5%). Another large group mentioned factors that facilitated the use of the GSS such as: a) the quality of the data and documentation (14%), b) the ease of use of the data in general and in particular the SPSS files and cumulative data set (12%), and c) its accessibility and low cost (10.5%). Finally, a small number of users rated the inclusion of particular topics or questions as the best feature of the GSS (7%). A discussion of topical preferences appears below.

3. Users would rather add than take away.

Suggestions about topics that should be added or expanded exceeded suggestions for reduction or elimination by 5 to 1 (Tables 3 and 4).

4. Reflecting the heterogeneity of sociology, the wish list of users is very diverse.

Little consensus exists about what topics merit expansion. Table 3 lists 22 different topics with dozens of specific suggestions. Only one topic, work, has notably more adherents than the others (13.2%). The second through eighth favored topics (in order—Politics, Marriage and the Family, Religion, Psychology, Health, Economics/SES, and Race/Ethnicity) are selected by between 5.0 and 7.2% of respondents. Even within these categories there are wide differences in the specific items favored. Under work, for example, the chief specific topics are employment/unemployment history, job satisfaction, technology, and the work hierarchy. Or under Psychology the traits to be measured include well-being/satisfaction, trauma, alienation,

anomia, aspirations, self-concept, self-esteem, and self-fulfillment. While not mutually exclusive, most sub-topics are distinct and thus competing with one another for inclusion. Because of the great dispersion of topics favored, it is difficult to pinpoint a short list of clear favorites. The list of topics does however provide both a selection of ideas that might be considered on their particular merits and a measure of the level of interest in and potential usage of various topics.

5. Users cite few topics for reduction, but the list is still diverse.

The list of suggested reductions is much smaller than additions and we have not grouped them into topics, but rather have only divided them into attitudes and demographics/behaviors (Table 4). As in the additions list, this collection is diverse. Several topics have recently been reduced either by switching from annual replication to rotation (confidence, abortion, and satisfaction) or by the deletion of marginal items (race relations, images of countries, crime and child qualities). Given the small number of people mentioning any possible deletions and the wide number of offered candidates, there is clearly no consensus among users for deletions.

6. Users are more interested in changes in topics than in altering other aspects of the GSS.

While there were 401 suggestions about topical additions, there were only 181 suggestions (or complaints) about other features. Even counting each suggestion as a separate mention this comes to less than 0.4 suggestions per respondent.

7. Users have diverse views on how to change or improve the GSS.

In response to "What features or aspects of the GSS do you like the least?" and "What other changes (besides topics covered) would you like to see

made in the GSS?" we compiled a list of suggested improvements and changes. As in the case of topics, the suggestions were wideranging (Table 5). Various changes were suggested in sample coverage, survey design, content, measurement properties, data distribution, documentation, and communication with users. Some of the chief suggestions were contradictory. For example, 22 urged more replication while 26 favored more depth or the use of supplements. The chief recommendations were for larger samples (10), more oversamples (9), a panel component (10), more depth (26), more replication (22), a PC version of the data (10), and an improved index to the codebook (17).

Conclusion

Overall, user satisfaction with the GSS is very high. All evaluations are positive and there is no major complaint or criticism of the GSS. Suggested changes in basic features or design of the GSS are relatively few and diverse, even contradictory, in nature.

The GSS is an eclectic survey with a wrangle of users from most of the diverse specialities of Sociology (Smith, 1984). They are less content with the topical content of the GSS than with other aspects and much more prone to suggest topical additions than all other changes. Yet users are also attracted to the comprehensive coverage of the GSS, rating it second behind only replication as their most favored feature of the GSS and few could come up with suggestions about deletions. Many of those suggesting particular additions noted that their suggestions reflected only their own special research interest, that their suggestions did not try to assess the needs of Sociology as a whole, and that they realized that the GSS could not cater fully to their own intensive interest in a single, narrow topic. But they did hope that a bit more could be devoted to their topic.

Table 1

Evaluation of GSS Features^a

	Excellent = 1		3	4	Poor = 7	Don't know	Mean ^b
	1	2			5 - 7		
Cookbook	59.0%	26.6	8.7	1.4	2.6	1.7	1.6
Availability	61.8%	22.0	7.5	3.5	1.7	3.5	1.6
Coverage of Topics	23.0%	30.8	23.5	13.7	5.8	3.2	2.5
Cost of Data Set	35.7%	21.2	9.6	7.2	1.7	24.6	1.9
Organization of Data Set	47.4%	27.7	13.0	2.9	2.3	6.6	1.8
Quality of Data Set	53.8%	31.5	7.5	1.7	1.4	4.0	1.6

^aExcluding 94 respondents who did not answer any of these questions

^bDon't knows excluded.

Table 2

Best Liked Features Of The GSS
(multiple mentions counted)

Time Trends, Replication	25.6%
Comprehensive, wide coverage of topics	17.6
High Quality (8.4)	} 13.9
Documentation (5.5)	
Accessible, Easy to obtain (9.0)	} 10.5
Low Cost (1.5)	
Easy to use (6.5)	} 11.7
SPSS Control Cards (2.3)	
Cumulative data set (2.9)	
Large sample size (4.4)	} 8.2
Representative, National Sample (3.8)	
Specific topics	7.1
Current, Up to date	2.5
Miscellaneous (experiments, personal interviewing, black oversample, multiple indicators, crossnational comparisons, reports, bibliography)	2.9
	(477)

Table 3

Topics to be Expanded/Added
(multiple mentions)

	<u>Number of mentions</u>
1. AGING	
General	(5)
Death	(4)
Care of	(1)
2. CRIME	
General	(6)
Weapons	(3)
Courts	(2)
Police	(2)
Violence	(1)
Drug Use	(1)
Deviant behavior	(1)
3. ECONOMICS/SES	
General	(1)
Income in dollars	(5)
Source of income	(3)
Income in constant dollars	(1)
Income of retired people	(1)
Relationship to poverty line	(1)
Financial interests	(3)
SES	(1)
Social class	(1)
Housing	(2)
Government policy	(2)
Economic satisfaction	(1)
Underground economy	(1)
4. ENVIRONMENT	
General	(5)
Energy	(3)
Nuclear energy	(1)
5. Equality/Social Welfare	
General	(2)
Spending	(3)
Taxes	(2)
Welfare	(2)
Social responsibility vs. individualism	(1)
6. HEALTH	
General	(8)
Fitness	(4)
AIDS	(4)
Health care	(3)
Health attitudes	(1)
Health practices	(1)
Eating disorders	(1)
Bioethics	(1)

7.	INTERNATIONAL/DEFENSE	
	General	(8)
	War and peace	(3)
	Disarmament	(3)
	Defense	(1)
	South Africa	(1)
	Middle East	(1)
	Central America	(1)
	Knowledge of other countries	(1)
8.	LEISURE	
	General	(4)
	The Arts/High Culture	(3)
	Sports	(2)
	Sports violence	(1)
9.	MARRIAGE AND FAMILY	
	Marriage	
	General	(4)
	Living together	(1)
	Parents and Children	
	General	(2)
	Child care arrangements	(3)
	Child values	(2)
	Childhood socialization	(2)
	Family of Origin	
	General	(1)
	Birth order	(3)
	Family and Relatives	
	General	(2)
	Kinship	(1)
	Ties and obligation	(2)
	Violence	
	General	(4)
	Child abuse	(1)
	Incest	(1)
10.	MASS MEDIA	
	General	(9)
	TV shows	(1)
	Media and politics	(1)
11.	PARTICIPATION/MEMBERSHIP	
	Group membership	(3)
	Organizational commitments	(2)
	Participation in cultural/civic events	(1)
	Community participation	(1)

12.	POLITICS	
	General	(17)
	Government programs	(3)
	Repeat ANES items	(2)
	Voting theory	(1)
	Replicate Verba/Nie	(1)
	Bureaucracy	(1)
	Presidential performance	(1)
	Extreme left/right	(1)
	Post materialism	(1)
	PACs	(1)
13.	PSYCHOLOGY	
	Subjective well-being	(7)
	Trauma	(3)
	Alienation	(2)
	Mental Health	(2)
	Anomia	(2)
	Aspirations	(2)
	Self-concept	(1)
	Locus of control	(1)
	Personality profiles	(1)
	Self esteem	(1)
	Self fulfillment	(1)
	Relative deprivation	(1)
14.	RACE/ETHNICITY	
	Race	(4)
	Minorities	(2)
	Non-black minorities	(1)
	Ethnic identification	(4)
	Group identity	(1)
	Bogartus Social Distance	(1)
	Feeling thermometer	(1)
	Intermarriage	(1)
	Neighborhood integration	(1)
	Immigrants	(2)
	Refugees	(1)
	Anti-Semitism	(1)
15.	RELIGION	
	General	(20)
	Church membership	(2)
	Occult	(2)
	Born again	(1)
	TV evangelicalism	(1)
	Moral majority	(1)
	Commitment	(1)
16.	SEX ROLES	
	General	(16)
	Comparable worth	(1)
	Bem Sex Role Scale	(2)

17.	SEXUAL MORALITY	
	General	(2)
	Preference	(2)
	Reiss items	(1)
	Behavior	(1)
	Pornography	(1)
18.	SOCIAL SUPPORT/NETWORKS	
	Social Support	(4)
	Networks	(8)
19.	TIME	
	Time use/budget	(5)
20.	TOLERANCE	
	General	(3)
	Stouffer, anti-abortionists	(1)
21.	WORK	
	General	(21)
	Employment/Unemployment history	(8)
	Job satisfaction	(8)
	Technology and work	(5)
	Work hierarchy, authority	(3)
	Job risks/hazards	(2)
	Company characteristics	(1)
	Labor unions	(1)
	Job seniority	(1)
	Work schedule	(1)
	Productivity	(1)
	Deskilling	(1)
22.	MISC.	
	Life events histories	(6)
	More behavior	(6)
	Geographic mobility	(2)
	Knowledge screeners	(2)
	Values	(2)
	More theoretical	(2)
	College major	(1)
	Abortion	(1)
	Children in private/public school	(1)
	Mobility	(1)
	Social change	(1)
	Legal matters	(1)
	Farming	(1)
	Personal injury accidents	(1)
	Social host liability	(1)
	Gambling	(1)
	Problems and resources to deal with	(1)
	Geographic	(1)
	New "hot" topics	(1)

TABLE 4

TOPICS TO BE CUT BACK OR ELIMINATED
(Multiple mentions)

NUMBER OF MENTIONS

<u>ATTITUDES</u>		<u>Behaviors and Demographics</u>	
General	3	Some demographics	2
Confidence	8	Vocabulary test	4
Race relations	6	Zodiac	4
Civil liberties	6	Occupation	3
Images of countries	5	DOT codes	2
Politics	4	Gun ownership	2
Communism	3	Presidential vote	2
Government spending	3	Trauma	1
Prejudice (non-racial)	2	Group memberships	1
Crime	2	Networks	1
Sexual morality	2	Victimization	1
Abortions	2	Family background	1
Happiness	2	Spouse attributes	1
Marijuana	1	Religion	1
Consumer experiences	1		<u>24</u>
Leisure	1		
Child qualities	1		
Sociology	1		
Drugs	1		
Lifestyles	1		
Images of God	<u>1</u>		
	56		

TABLE 5
SUGGEST CHANGES AND IMPROVEMENTS
(multiple mentions)

	NUMBER OF MENTIONS
I. <u>Design</u>	
A. <u>Sampling</u>	
1. Increase size of sample	10
2. Use oversample	
a. General	4
b. Minorities	4
c. Rural	1
3. Expand Coverage	
a. All adults in a household	1
b. 16 or 17 years old	1
c. Non-English speakers	1
B. Panel component	10
C. Biannual	1
II. <u>Content</u>	
A. More replication	22
B. More depth	22
1. Supplements	4
C. More crossnational	6
D. Add contextual variables	
1. State/county codes	6
2. Other	2
E. Less experiments	2
III. <u>Measurements</u>	
A. More interval items	4
B. Create scales	2
C. Open-ended	1
D. Quintamimensional design	1
E. Improve reliability	4
F. Validation	1
IV. <u>Data Set</u>	
A. Too large	
1. General	6
2. Offer single year files	6
3. Offer teaching files	1
4. Offer time series files	1
B. Change Mnemonic names	2
C. Reduce cost	3
D. Create PC version	10
E. Create SAS version	1
F. Other	2

V.	<u>Documentation</u>	
	A. Improve codebook index	17
	B. Separate annual marginals	4
	C. Separate annual codebooks	2
	D. Trends codebook	2
	E. Distribute codebook	1
	F. Include facsimile of questions	1
	G. Reduce size of codebook	2
VI.	<u>Users</u>	
	A. Communication with	
	1. Create newsletter	2
	2. Semi-annual updates	1
	B. Access problems	
	1. ICPSR delays	2
	2. Reporting delays	1
	C. User Input	
	1. Board not responsive	2
	2. Panel of experts for each substantive area	1
	3. Allow purchase of add-ons	1
		(184)

Appendix I: Procedural Details of the 1985 Survey of Users of the General Social Surveys

The Sample

From the latest edition of the GSS bibliography of usages (Smith and Ward, 1984) 794 authors were identified. Attempts were made to find current addresses for them in the latest membership lists of the American Sociological Association, the American Political Science Associations, and the American Association for Public Opinion Research; the latest edition of the National Faculty Directory; and, for particular individuals, in various other sources such as the membership lists of the American Psychological Association and the Midwest Association for Public Opinion Research and Who's Who. Unlocated authors were divided into two-groups. For those using the GSS since 1980 we used their affiliation on their most recent usage. For those not using the GSS since 1980 a call was placed to their last known affiliation in order to try to establish their current location. Finally, for authors unlocated through any of the above procedures and who had a co-author on one or more of their GSS usages letters or calls were placed to the co-author(s). Through these procedures addresses for 673 authors (84.8%) were obtained.

The Data Collection

A two sided, one page questionnaire (see Figure 1) along with citations of known usages, a cover letter, and a return envelope was mailed to all known addresses in mid-September. A second wave of follow-up letters was sent in mid-October and a final request was mailed in mid-November. Not all of the addresses proved to be current and returned letters were sent to current addresses when such were obtainable. Eventually we were able to come up with current addresses for 632 authors (150 authors could not be located or were out of the country for the year and 12 authors had died). Responses were

obtained from 457 authors, 57.6 % of the 794 authors on the original list or 72.3% of the authors who were locatable and living. These rates are similar to those in a previous GSS mail survey (Smith, 1981). These 457 respondents were the authors or co-authors of 83.5% of the 1047 papers listed in the bibliography. (The bibliography lists 1072 citations but the exclusion of unauthored papers and a few papers that reviewed the GSS but did not use it in research reduced the eligible total to 1047.)

Nonresponse

Nonresponse was not random. Unlocatable authors were disproportionately 1) students 2) other than first authors, 3) non-academics, and 4) authors of citations 5 years or older. Among locatable authors we estimated the characteristics of nonrespondents by comparing early and late responders and by comparing respondents to the mail questionnaire with a one-in-seven sub-sample of nonresponders who were followed up on the telephone. Both procedures suggested that nonrespondents were more likely to be infrequent users of the GSS. This was made evident by the much lower percent reporting any recent usage of the GSS and by frequent comments that it had been their co-authors who had used the GSS while they had prepared other parts of the papers. On the other hand neither late responders nor the telephone follow-up responders had more negative assessments of the GSS. In sum, the sample is biased toward academic and recent users of the GSS. While thus compromising our ability to generalize to all GSS users (as defined by the bibliography), responses are concentrated among our core constituency (as is shown by the 84% coverage rate among citations).

Appendix II: Comments

1. Keep up the good work. GSS is a valuable national resource!
2. Overall, this program is very useful for social science/public policy research. Nice brew of old items (continuity) and new items.
3. It is a very good data set.
4. It is easy to suggest additions and deletions. But they are only reflective of my interests.
5. Hello Tom and Jim!
6. Keep up the good work.
7. A very satisfied user.
8. The support services provided by NORC are superb with respect to GSS.
9. Problem I see is that people in poli. Sci. are skittish about the quality of the data.
10. I know I should be more critical, but I find the GSS a splendid, easy to use data set.
11. This is a fundamental resource for social science research and teaching, keep up the good work.
12. Very good work!
13. Keep up the good work!
14. Please continue the annotated bib. of publications which is invaluable in someways.
15. On the whole I'm quite pleased.
16. I appreciate the ready access to the GSS.
17. The GSS is an outstanding resource--Keep at it.
18. The data set you have pain stakeingly developed surely is a hallmark for social science research. Your entire project has made a major contribution to knowledge.
19. Keep up the good work. The GSS is a valuable contribution to the Social Sciences.
20. Keep up the good work!
21. Documentation is horrible!!
22. It is good data set series. I hope you can continue for a long time.
23. Keep up the good work.
24. Keep up the good important work.
25. Keep up the good work.
26. GSS is outstanding and must be continued!

27. Highly satisfied.
28. The GSS is a first class product. Thanks to you and NSF for making it available.
29. Tom is very helpful in providing information and background.
30. A heart felt thanks for allowing the GSS to be done, for seeing to it that it is done so well and for providing easy and economical access to it by people like me.
31. Say hello to Jim Davis and Tom Smith and give them my best wishes.
32. No other data source is as valuable for teaching and research.
33. Keep up the good work!
34. Keep it up.
35. You people have done a great job. GSS is one of the best data sets available and a major contributions to social science.
36. Nice job!
37. Keep up the beautiful project. I use the data set both for research and teaching.
38. This is a very nice data set.
39. An excellent data set.
40. I think it's a splendid undertaking which merits continued support. NSF should be proud--and ashamed for having interrupted the annual series.
41. I use the GSS to draw illustrative material for general hypothesis testing.
42. I haven't used it much recently, but I think the data are managed very well.
43. Keep up the good work!
44. I'm very happy with it.
45. It is really an excellent project. Keep up the good work!!
46. For a survey created by the PI of the GSS, this is pretty unimaginative.
47. Keep up the good work!
48. The GSS is my favorite survey, keep up the good work.
49. The GSS should sponsor theoretically - driven social change studies by outsiders.
50. A great research and teaching resource.
51. I wish I had time to use GSS more; administrative work makes that impossible.

52. My sense of things was that the GSS was the best data set around for what we wanted, but still and all sparse.
53. Excellent for teaching both questionnaire construction and analysis.
54. The best in the business!
55. Good work, keep it up.
56. The GSS is a very important social science resource. A lot of people have worked very hard to bring it to its present status.
57. I am generally very positive.
58. Keep up the good work. Thanks to you folks, I got an early promotion and tenure several years ago.
59. The GSS is an invaluable resource. If you are ever in need of statements of support to help with finding, etc. I would be more than happy to provide a letter strongly advocating its merits.
60. Generally well-satisfied.
61. Keep up the good work.
62. A data base built using repeated questions on many topics in repeated annual surveys with attention to respondent demographics, the data base to be made available to scientists who want to address questions to the data, is an important, sound, essential practice and merits continuing support, use, and competent leadership.
63. Keep up the good work!
64. My salute to its creators and maintainers.
65. This data set appears to make a significant contribution to the sociological community in providing an avenue to explore a variety of ideas.
66. Its a good data set with information not available on a national sample basis anywhere else.
67. I think the GSS is a GOOD thing.
68. Thanks especially to Tom Smith for his help.
69. The GSS has proved to be the useful, nationally shared scientific resource that we had hoped it would become. There should be others - national and regional to ensure even greater amounts of data and greater range of topics than can be reasonably expected of any single survey operation. Keep up the good work.
70. Thanks for asking.
71. I found it to be excellent for my purposes on all major dimensions.

72. I think the project is a super contribution to the social sciences.
73. I'm quite content.
74. Generally, very good.
75. I'm generally extremely pleased with the GSS data.
76. Everything I need and use is available.
77. It's always served me very well.
78. I wish you all the best with your project.
79. It is an extremely useful data set.
80. I'm sorry to say, but I think GSS is the least useful of the large expenses data set.
81. Fine, great service, keep up the good work.

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