

June 8, 2010

Edward J. Sondik, PhD
Director, National Center for Health Statistics
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
3311 Toledo Road, Room 7209
Hyattsville, MD 20782

Dear Ed:

The Board of Scientific Counselors (BSC) of the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) is pleased to submit a commissioned review of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG). As part of the BSC's ongoing program, we commissioned a panel of experts in the field to review the data collection and program activities of the NSFG and provide specific recommendations for data collection and dissemination. The panel submitted the enclosed report to the BSC.

Dr. Wendy Manning of Bowling Green State University was the chair of the panel. The other panel members are listed in Appendix 1 of the report. After careful review, the BSC commends Dr. Manning and her fellow panel members for an outstanding review and report, and forwards the report to you for action.

The review panel and the Board recommend without reservation that the NSFG program of data collection and dissemination continue. Recognized as the "Nation's fertility survey," the NSFG is critical in monitoring fertility patterns and reproductive health status in America. NSFG data and research informs health and social services and health education programs, and it is important that the survey continue and not be compromised scientifically by reduction or elimination.

The report contains seven key recommendations listed below that focus on planning new directions for the survey in the future (recommendation 1); improving data use and dissemination (2-5); and securing needed funding and staff to carry out new directions for the survey and address recommendations to improve dissemination and use (6,7). The first recommendation encourages the study and NCHS to implement a strategic plan that will evaluate potential new directions for the survey in terms of content, methods, and design, and we highlight it below, followed by a list of the other recommendations. Additional details are provided in the full report to the BSC.

1. *Implement an on-going overall strategic planning process to guide the survey in future directions by determining goals and priorities for the NSFG and the best ways to reach those goals and support those priorities.* In this process, the NSFG should incorporate a systematic way of gaining input from a broad spectrum of current and potential data users. The strategic planning process should be used to evaluate the feasibility, advantages, and disadvantages of future survey options, including expanding the survey age range, adding new population groups to the survey's sample, creating a survey core and rotating modules, incorporating longitudinal components, adding biomarkers, and other possible options.

2. ***Develop a marketing plan to promote the NSFG and data products produced by the survey to new and continuing audiences.*** Highlight new or “unexpected” topics from the NSFG and focus on the new marketing opportunities resulting from the continuous survey.
3. ***Improve the user experience by making a number of changes in the NSFG public and restricted use data files and their availability by remote access.*** Make optimal use of the most popular software packages, including Stata and incorporate as much information and instructions as possible in the actual data files.
4. ***Study ways to improve survey processes such as streamlining the production of documentation, possibly through the use of relational data bases.*** Communicate the most realistic schedule of data release, updating it frequently when necessary.
5. ***Improve the timeliness of release of data by all possible methods.***
6. ***Increase funding for the NSFG by exploring increases from NCHS and current or new sponsors.*** Increased funding is necessary to reach the necessary sample size for reliable trend data and estimates for critical sub-population groups.
7. ***Enhance NSFG staff opportunities by requesting additional staff, exploring ways that new hires can complement existing staff, and determining ways to promote staff development.***

The strategic plan will help NSFG prioritize the primary survey objectives and, based on these objectives, new directions the survey can incorporate in the near future. We also expect the strategic plan will outline a plan to implement many of the other recommendations for timely and efficient dissemination of data. The review strongly encouraged the survey program to exploit rapidly changing technology for more effective and timely dissemination of the data, as well as strategies for increasing use of the data to a larger disciplinary and policy community of users. The products and expertise of the NSFG program should be aggressively marketed to current and potential users and potential funders. The future fiscal well-being of NSFG depends on a vibrant and active community of supporters who not only depend on its products for their own work but promote its continuation through helping to generate adequate funding. The NCHS Director’s Office has the responsibility and the capacity to bring professional marketing expertise to develop a strategy that will help secure increased funding and staff support for NSFG as the Nation’s Fertility Survey.

We hope that you will take the review panel’s full set of recommendations into consideration as the NSFG plays an important role in the scientific integrity and reputation of NCHS. We welcome your response and continued dialogue on how the BSC can assist in implementing the recommendations of the NSFG review panel.

On behalf of the Board of Scientific Counselors, I respectfully submit the enclosed report.

Sincerely,

Lynn A. Blewett, Ph.D.
Chair, Board of Scientific Counselors of the National Center for Health Statistics