

Committee on National Statistics Workshop on the Future of Federal Household Surveys

Presentation to the NCHS Board of Scientific Counselors

April 14, 2011

Tom Plewes

Senior Program Officer

Committee on National Statistics

The National Academies

What would Lincoln have done about the uncertain future of federal household surveys?



Form a committee!

Steering Committee for the Workshop on the Future of Federal Household Surveys

HAL STERN, *Chair*, Donald Bren School of Information and Computer Sciences, University of California, Irvine

KATHARINE G. ABRAHAM, Department of Economics, University of Maryland, and Joint Program in Survey Methodology

CHESTER BOWIE, National Opinion Research Center, Bethesda, Maryland

CYNTHIA CLARK, National Agricultural Statistics Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture

GRAHAM KALTON, Westat, Rockville, Maryland *

JENNIFER MADANS, National Center for Health Statistics, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services *

ALAN ZASLAVSKY, Department of Health Care Policy, Harvard University Medical School *

KRISZTINA MARTON, *Study Director*

JENNIFER C. KARBERG, *on loan from the U.S. Census Bureau*

AGNES GASKIN, *Administrative Assistant*

** NCHS or member, Board of Scientific Counselors*

Future of Household Surveys

- CNSTAT conducted a public workshop on the future of federal household surveys and the role of the American Community Survey vis-a -vis other federal household surveys.
- Held on November 4-5, 2010
- Featured invited presentations and discussions to identify options that alleviate such concerns as nonresponse, survey costs per case, and deficiencies in estimates, as well as options that provide new analytical capabilities.
- Drew on the rich experience and expertise in the U.S. statistical system, academia, and statistical organizations in other nations.
- A summary of the workshop is forthcoming.

Concerns

Why the concern over the future of household surveys?

- 1) increasing costs of data collection;
- 2) stakeholder perceptions of increasing burden on respondents;
- 3) decreasing rates of public cooperation;
- 4) discrepant estimates of key statistics;
- 5) instances of duplication among surveys that are not cost-efficient;
- 6) inadequate timeliness of estimates for some uses;
- 7) instances of gaps in needed data series;
- 8) growing competition from private sector data programs; and
- 9) how best to integrate the new American Community Survey into the mix of federal household surveys.

Bottom Line:

These challenges put at risk the ability of the statistical system to provide important policy-relevant information if solutions are not developed in a systematic, comprehensive, and timely manner.

Concern: Survey Quality

- Household frames provide poor coverage of some segments of the population
- Increasingly difficult to contact survey respondents
 - Gated communities
 - Voice mail, cell-phone-only households
 - Larger share of dual career households
- Increasingly difficult to obtain respondent cooperation
 - Increasing demands on respondents' time (e.g., larger number of telephone solicitations, longer commute times)
 - “Legitimate” survey requests harder to distinguish from market research and sales solicitations
 - Increasing concerns about privacy and confidentiality

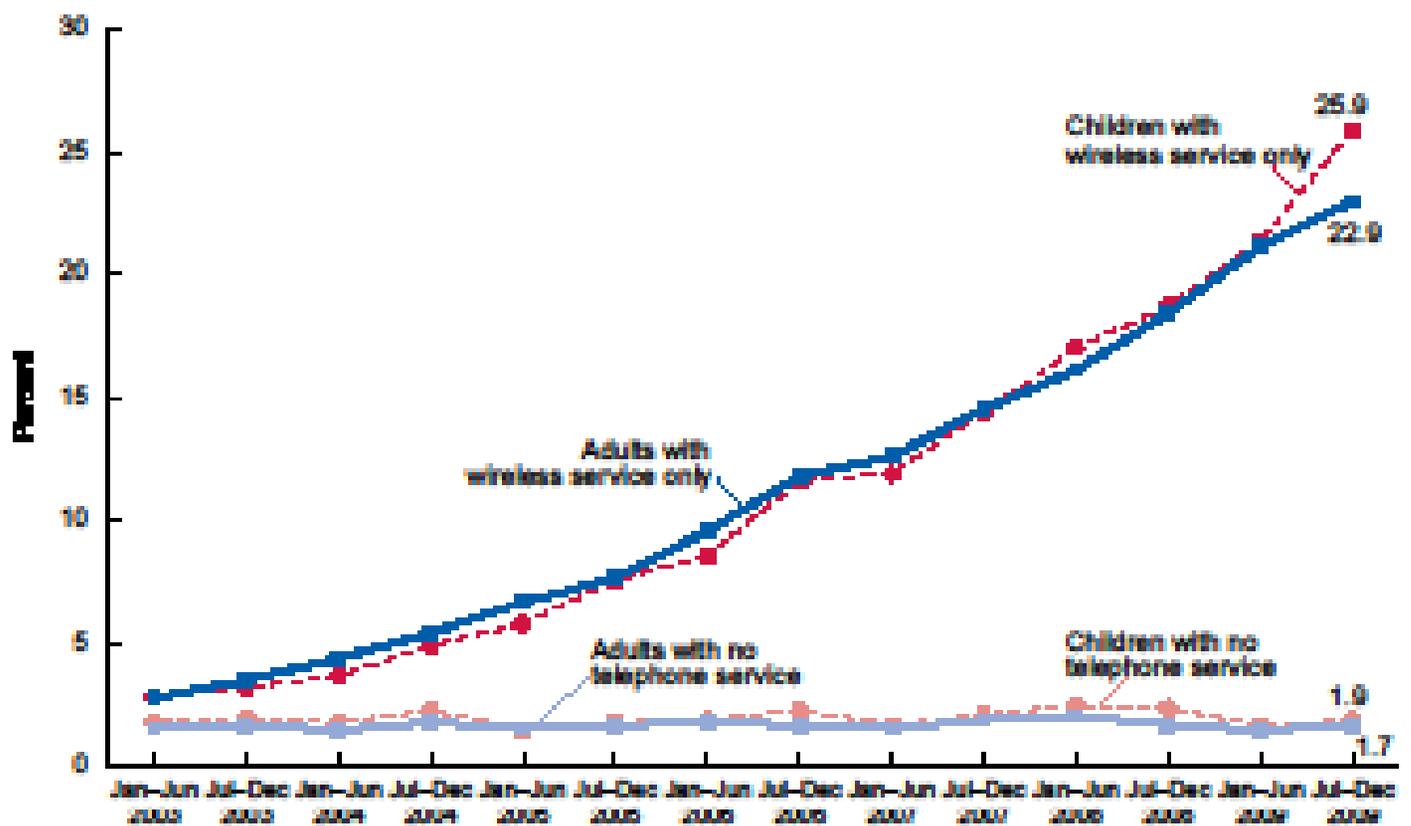
(Source: Abraham, Katharine, *The State of Federal Household Data Collections in the United States*, Paper Presented at the CNSTAT Workshop, November 4, 2010)

Concern: Survey Quality

- **Many surveys exploring the internet as one of multiple reporting options**
- **Can offering a web reporting option increase response rates?**
 - Some groups may find web reporting attractive, but other groups unlikely to respond via the web
 - Further work needed on how web option can most effectively be presented
- **How might web reporting affect data quality?**
 - Most common in work to date to seek web reporting option that mimics already existing reporting options, but that may preclude fully exploiting advantages of the web

(Source: Abraham, Katharine, *The State of Federal Household Data Collections in the United States*, Paper Presented at the CNSTAT Workshop, November 4, 2010)

Concern: Survey Quality



Solutions

Integration of Survey Content

- Requires the use of common definitions for the concepts measured -to the extent that this is appropriate- because comparability enables researchers to make better use of the information available.
- Example: the development of standardized disability measures was a good example of the benefits, especially when the questions are set up in a way that additional measures can be added to expand the definition of a concept. The main set of questions provides a valuable benchmark for comparison across surveys.

Integration of Survey Samples

Examples of survey sample integrations:

- Current Population Survey → American Time Use Survey
- National Health Interview Survey → Medical Expenditure Panel Survey
- American Community Survey → National Survey of College Graduates
- American Community Survey → National Immunization Survey (in development)

New role for federal statistical system?

- In the area of health, there is an explosion of information, including data collections funded by the National Institutes of Health
- Many of these data collections do not go through OMB and may not meet commonly-accepted quality standards.
- Private companies are also producing more and more data.
- The increase in the volume of information from an increasing variety of sources may require federal statistical agencies to step up and provide an assessment – a “consumer’s report – on the quality of these data.

Need for real time data

- Timeliness of federal data releases is a big concern.
- Timing of release of data from federal statistical agencies is out of sync with competing sources of information.
Example: Google Price Index and Billion Price Index
- Some economic data is released very quickly, in other areas the lack of timeliness is a significant problem, for example in many cases the data released is two years old.
- Could defensible estimates be produced at a higher frequency, even if this requires more resources?

Integration of Sampling Frames

- Idea of a common sampling frame is often suggested
- Census Bureau's Master Address File (MAF) represents a starting point.
- Sharing information from the MAF outside of the Census Bureau is subject to confidentiality restrictions
- Some parts of it are not subject to these restrictions and could be made available to other agencies under some kind of an agreement.
- One source of input to the MAF is the U.S. Postal Service's Delivery Sequence File (DSF), and perhaps the Census Bureau could add information to that, and make that product available to others.

The Role of the ACS

- Discussed ACS as a more integrated household survey, with a set of rotated modules.
- Could increase efficiencies and lead to data that serves a broader array of analytic purposes.
- ACS could help other agencies test and develop new modules.
- Need to be mindful of burden placed on ACS respondents, the ACS's inability to collect information that is comparable in depth to topic-specific surveys, and other practical barriers.

Administrative Records

- Obvious uses for administrative records: direct use, imputation, verification of data, and covariates in models
- There may be others; it is important to think broadly. **Electronic health records?**
- Administrative records can represent a source of longitudinal data, sometimes with information available before and after the time of the survey data collection.

Broader Integration of Data Collections

Concept of the statistical system as a giant matrix with interlocking pieces.

Presents a solution to the dilemma of not being able to obtain all the data needed from one survey, and the difficulties related to combining information from surveys that have evolved independently of each other.

Requires a more global way of thinking about the household surveys within the federal system

Linking surveys should continue and extend beyond research domains

Surveys that rely on other surveys as a source of sample tend to do so within the same domain. **NCHS has taken a lead in survey linkage research. Example: relationship between the Medical Expenditure Panel Survey (MEPS) and the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS).**

Need to look beyond the institutional boundaries and to other disciplines.

Questions?