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Interviewer Attitudes about Privacy and Confidentiality

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Disclaimer: This paper reports the results of research and analysis undertaken by Census Bureau staff. It has undergone a Census Bureau review more limited in scope than that given to official Census Bureau publications. This paper is released to inform interested parties of ongoing research and to encourage discussion of work in progress.

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ABSTRACT

Although the U.S. Census Bureau has an admirable record for maintaining confidentiality of census and survey data, investigations have nevertheless found evidence of negative perceptions of the Census Bureau regarding issues of privacy and confidentiality. People often report that questions asked by the Census Bureau are an invasion of their privacy, and also report that they don't trust the Census Bureau to keep data confidential. In addition, studies indicate that some Census Bureau field staff share those negative perceptions. If so, interviewers' attitudes may render them less effective in converting reluctant respondents who are concerned about privacy or doubt confidentiality, thus leading to increased nonresponse.

This paper reports the results of an investigation of current Census Bureau field interviewers' attitudes regarding privacy and confidentiality, and how these attitudes compare to previous assessments. Results from a questionnaire administered to a large sample of field staff, suggest that interviewers believe that privacy issues and doubts about data confidentiality remain important concerns for respondents, and also that a small though persistent minority of interviewers themselves share similar concerns.

Keywords: confidentiality; privacy; nonresponse; interviewer attitudes.

INTRODUCTION

Although the U.S. Bureau of the Census has an admirable record for maintaining the confidentiality of census and survey data, investigations have nevertheless found evidence of negative perceptions of the Census Bureau regarding data confidentiality, and evidence that these negative perceptions have remained consistent for decades (e.g., Bush, 1986; Dillman and Reynolds, 1990; Fay, Bates, and Moore, 1991; Ira O. Glick & Associates, Inc., 1978; Kerwin and Edwards, 1996; McDonald, 1985b; Moore, 1982; Singer, Mathiowetz, and Couper, 1993). These studies have consistently found that people felt that questions asked by the Census Bureau were an invasion of their privacy, that they didn't trust the Census Bureau to keep data confidential, and that they were somewhat reluctant to respond to Census Bureau censuses and surveys. Also troublesome are the indications of misunderstandings among some Census Bureau field staff concerning the Census Bureau's confidentiality policies, and doubts of the Bureau's confidentiality actions and policies. A number of studies have shown that some Census Bureau field staff do not believe that census data will be kept confidential (e.g., Groves and Couper, 1998; Lavin, 1989; and Rothwell, 1969).

Because interviewers are the Census Bureau's "front line" in the struggle to persuade an often-skeptical public that they should participate in the agency's censuses and surveys, interviewers' own attitudes about privacy and confidentiality are of some concern. Specifically, it is possible that these attitudes may affect respondent-interviewer interactions and thus contribute to unit and item nonresponse. For example, Singer and Kohnke-Aguirre (1979) reported that interviewers who expected certain questions to be sensitive and difficult to ask obtained higher nonresponse for those items than did interviewers who were less concerned about these issues (see also Sudman, Bradburn, Blair, and Stocking, 1977). Similarly, Singer,

Frankel and Glassman (1983) found that interviewers who had optimistic expectations about the ease of persuading respondents to participate in a survey obtained significantly higher response rates than those who had more pessimistic expectations. Through a similar process, interviewers who are themselves skeptical about confidentiality may experience more problems (e.g., unit nonresponse) due to respondents' confidentiality concerns.

Interviewers' attitudes and beliefs about privacy and confidentiality are not new concerns for the Census Bureau. McDonald (1985a) reported that in order to address respondent concerns regarding privacy and confidentiality the interviewers must have certain information at their disposal (e.g., Census Bureau confidentiality policies, the use of Social Security Numbers, why certain questions are asked, how the data are used, etc.). She also suggested that interviewers might benefit from training that specifically addressed privacy and confidentiality concerns (see also Baca, 1983; Lavin, 1989).

The purpose of the current study was to measure current Census Bureau interviewers' attitudes regarding privacy and confidentiality, and to compare those attitudes to previous assessments (e.g., Lavin, 1989). A questionnaire was administered to a large sample of field staff exploring issues such as the sensitivity of questions, invasion of privacy, knowledge of legal issues concerning Census Bureau surveys, ways in which confidentiality might be breached, interviewers' perceptions of public attitudes, reasons for nonresponse, etc.

METHOD

Participants

A random sample of approximately one-third of the Census Bureau's current demographic survey interviewer staff (n=930) was selected to participate in the study.

Participants were selected in equal proportions (one-third) from each of the twelve Census Bureau Regional Offices (ROs). The sample consisted of 840 Field Representatives (FRs) and 90 Supervisory Field Representatives (SFRs). Interviewers' tenure ranged from less than one year to over ten years, and their survey experience covered a wide variety of Census Bureau demographic household surveys.

Materials

A self-administered questionnaire entitled "Interviewer Attitudes about Privacy and Confidentiality" was used in this study. The questionnaire investigated attitudes involving the sensitivity of survey questions, the invasion of privacy, the confidentiality of data, ways in which confidentiality can be breached, interviewers' knowledge of legal issues concerning Census Bureau surveys, and their perceptions of public attitudes. A number of the questions on the questionnaire replicated (or closely approximated) questions that had been asked on previous surveys, thus allowing for a comparison of attitudes over time.

Procedure

Census Bureau ROs supplied a list of all current field staff and a sample of approximately one-third was drawn from this population. Questionnaires were sent directly from Census Bureau headquarters in suburban Washington, DC to the interviewers' homes. Participants were asked to return the questionnaire directly to headquarters within two weeks of receipt. Approximately one month after the initial mail-out, RO staff conducted a follow-up to request participation from non-respondents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Self-identified (not anonymous) questionnaires were returned from 625 FRs and 72 SFRs. An additional 49 questionnaires were returned anonymously (without identifying RO and/or FR codes). Also, data from 44 respondents were dropped from the sample because they were ineligible at the time of the survey (e.g., resigned, terminated, retired, extended sick leave, etc.). Thus, a final response rate of $\frac{625 + 72 + 49}{930 - 44} = 84.2\%$ was obtained for the survey (completed returned surveys/eligible respondents).

To assess whether interviewer attitudes regarding privacy and confidentiality have changed over time, responses to questions from the current survey were compared to responses to similar questions reported by Lavin (1989). Lavin administered a questionnaire to 907 Census Bureau interviewers (812 FRs and 95 SFRs), with a response rate of 86.2%.

Interviewers' Perceptions of Respondents' Attitudes

Both the current study and the one conducted by Lavin (1989) investigated interviewers' opinions about whether respondents believe their data will be kept confidential. Interviewers in each study were presented an identical question and were asked to rate their opinion on a five-point scale; Table 1 summarizes the results.

Table 1

Percentage of Interviewer Responses for Respondents' Beliefs in the Confidentiality of Their Answers

“The Census Bureau pledges to respondents that their individual reports are confidential by law. In your opinion, and based on your own experience, how many respondents believe their answers are truly confidential?”

Response	Lavin, 1989	Current Study, 1999
(1) None or Few	4%	5%
(2) A Minority*	9%	8%
(3) About Half	23%	36%
(4) A Majority*	52%	34%
(5) All, or Almost All	13%	18%
Total	100%	100%
Mean response (n)	3.6 (n=782)	3.5 (n=738)

Note. Totals may not add to 100 due to rounding

*Scale point not labeled in the current study

A chi-square goodness of fit test finds a significant difference in the distribution of responses, $X^2(4, N = 738) = 116.06, p < .001$. Whereas it is somewhat encouraging that a greater percentage of interviewers now think that “all, or almost all” participants believe census data to be confidential (18% now vs. 13% then), the major change seems to be a downward shift from “a majority” to “about half,” with more interviewers now of the opinion that only about half of the respondents believe that their answers are kept confidential. The increase in “about half” answers suggests that there may be a trend for today’s interviewers to think that more respondents have doubts about confidentiality than was the case in the past. Still, for both 1989 and 1999, about 87% of the interviewers are of the opinion that at least half of respondents believe that their answers are kept confidential. On the other hand, a consistent proportion of interviewers (about 13%) believe that skepticism about confidentiality is widespread.

The current survey included a follow-up to this question to explore interviewers’ opinions about how respondents’ confidentiality concerns affect survey participation. Table 2 summarizes these results.

Table 2

Percentage of Interviewers Who Reported that Respondents Participate Even When They Do Not Believe Their Data Are Confidential (Current Study)

“Now, just think about respondents who do NOT believe that their answers are truly confidential. How many of these respondents do you think participate in the survey anyway?”

Response	Percent of Interviewers
(1) None or Few	9%
(2)	9%
(3) About Half	30%
(4)	28%
(5) All, or Almost All	24%
Total	100%
Mean response (n)	3.5 (n=736)

Table 2 suggests that, interviewers’ perceptions are that respondents’ confidentiality concerns are not particularly damaging to response rates. The vast majority of interviewers believe that even though some people don’t believe that their data will be kept confidential, this does not seriously hamper survey participation (i.e., 82% of the interviewers believe that “about half” or more of respondents with doubts about confidentiality participate in surveys anyway).

In order to explore the importance of privacy and confidentiality issues relative to other reasons that respondents give for refusing to participate in surveys, interviewers were asked to rank seven reasons commonly given by respondents for not responding to a survey. Table 3 presents the results of this exercise listed in ascending order (most important to least important).

Table 3

Mean Interviewer Rankings of Reasons why Respondents Refuse to Participate in Surveys

“Please rank the following reasons respondents give for not responding to a survey, with 1 being the reason given the most often and 7 being the reason given the least.”

Reason for Refusal	Mean (n)	Standard Error
(1) Too busy/Not interested	2.04 (732)	0.05
(2) Anti-Government attitudes	3.21 (732)*	0.07
(3) Survey not mandatory	3.29 (725)*	0.06
(4) Privacy/confidentiality concerns	3.65 (728)	0.06
(5) Fear/Won't open door to strangers	5.03 (720)	0.06
(6) No one ever home	5.28 (718)**	0.07
(7) Fear of negative consequences	5.30 (719)**	0.06

* and ** indicate mean rank scores that do not differ significantly (e.g., the mean scores for reasons 2 and 3 are not significantly different).

According to these results, interviewers perceive privacy/confidentiality concerns to be a mid-level cause of nonresponse, less important than too busy/not interested, anti-government attitudes, and survey not mandatory, but more important than fear/won't open door to strangers, no one ever home, and fear of negative consequences.

Interviewers' Attitudes

Another question first asked by Lavin (1989) and replicated in the current study asks the interviewers their own opinion about the confidentiality of census data. Table 4 shows the percentages of interviewers who think that another government agency could get access to Census Bureau data “if they really tried.”

Table 4

Percentage of Interviewers Who Think that Another Agency Can Get Census Data

“What is your own personal opinion? Do you think another government agency (such as the FBI or the IRS) could get access to Census Bureau information about an individual respondent if they really tried?”

Response	Lavin, 1989	Current Study, 1999
Yes	20%	22%
Not Sure	24%	26%
No	56%	53%
Total (n)	100% (782)	100% (745)

Note. Totals may not add to 100 due to rounding

A chi-square goodness of fit test showed that the distribution of responses to this question differs marginally significantly across the two studies, $X^2(2, N = 745) = 4.925, p = .10$. The data perhaps results suggest a slightly less optimistic outlook among current interviewers, but in fact the profiles do not appear to differ in important ways. In both studies almost half of the interviewers expressed at least some doubt that the Census Bureau could keep its survey data completely confidential in the face of a serious attempt by another government agency to breach confidentiality protections.

In order to further explore the sensitivity of certain questions, interviewers were asked to rate the sensitivity of seven types of items. Table 5 presents the results arranged in ascending order (least sensitive to most sensitive).

Table 5

Mean Interviewer Ratings of Sensitivity of Questions

“Based only on your feelings about invasions of privacy, please rate (from 1 – 7) the sensitively of the following survey items.”

Reason for Refusal	Mean (n)	Standard Error
(1) Sex	1.17 (738)	0.02
(2) Age	1.53 (741)	0.03
(3) Marital Status	1.60 (739)	0.03
(4) Hispanic Origin	1.65 (731)*	0.04
(5) Race	1.68 (741)*	0.04
(6) Income	3.77 (741)	0.05
(7) SSN	4.12 (740)	0.05

* Indicates mean ratings that do not differ significantly.

The results show that, with the exception of Income and SSN, interviewers have very little concern about most of these items assessing basic demographic characteristics – sex, age, marital status, Hispanic origin and race.

Participants were also asked to read and rate their level of agreement with a number of statements regarding issues of privacy, confidentiality attitudes about the government in general and the Census Bureau in particular, and related matters. Table 6 summarizes the results.

Table 6

Percentage of Interviewers Level of Agreement for Statements Regarding Privacy and Confidentiality

“What is your personal opinion? Please read the following statements and rate how much you agree or disagree with each one.”

Statement	Agree					Disagree	Mean (n)
	1	2	3	4	5		
a. The Census Bureau’s promise of confidentiality can be trusted.	66%	24%	7%	2%	1%	1.47 (710)	
b. People’s answers to Census Bureau surveys cannot be used against them.	82%	13%	4%	1%	1%	1.26 (711)	

c.	One purpose of the Census Bureau is to keep track of people who might cause trouble for the government.	0%	1%	2%	3%	95%	4.91 (721)
d.	Government agencies, in general, usually try to do what is best for the people.	26%	26%	32%	10%	6%	2.43 (715)
e.	The Census Bureau usually tries to do what is best for the people.	49%	28%	18%	3%	2%	1.82 (699)
f.	I trust other Census Bureau INTERVIEWERS to keep respondents' survey information confidential.	67%	24%	7%	2%	1%	1.45 (724)
g.	I trust Census Bureau REGIONAL OFFICE STAFF to keep respondents' survey information confidential.	77%	19%	3%	1%	0%	1.28 (731)
h.	I trust Census Bureau HEADQUARTERS PERSONNEL to keep respondents' survey information confidential.	74%	20%	4%	1%	1%	1.34 (689)
i.	My job as a Census Bureau interviewer sometimes requires me to ask questions that are an invasion of people's privacy.	34%	24%	18%	12%	12%	2.45 (734)
j.	The Census Bureau is doing enough to encourage the public's cooperation.	8%	13%	23%	21%	34%	3.60 (703)
k.	The information collected in Census Bureau surveys is important.	77%	16%	6%	1%	0%	1.31 (740)
l.	Census Bureau survey respondents sometimes feel that they have no choice but to provide information that they really do not want to give.	14%	25%	25%	16%	19%	3.02 (729)
m.	As a Census Bureau interviewer, I am comfortable asking respondents potentially sensitive questions (e.g., income).	47%	30%	14%	6%	3%	1.87 (742)
n.	As a Census Bureau interviewer, when I try to convince reluctant respondents that their answers are completely confidential, I don't fully believe it myself.	4%	6%	7%	16%	67%	4.35 (729)
o.	It's pretty easy to get respondents to cooperate with a Census Bureau survey if their only concern is whether their answers are really confidential.	24%	31%	23%	13%	9%	2.52 (737)

A number of particularly interesting findings in Table 7 merit specific comment. The overwhelming majority of interviewers (about 90%) trust the Census Bureau's pledge of confidentiality, but there is a small core of interviewers (about 10%) who have some doubts (see statements a, b, and n). Virtually no one's confidentiality doubts take the form of some sort of conspiracy theory (see statement c), and there is very little concern about confidentiality problems due to Census Bureau staff (see statements f, g, and h). A majority of interviewers view the government as having a benign intent (see statement d), with considerably more interviewers viewing the Census Bureau as trying "to do what is best for the people" (see statement e). Finally, interviewers see their job as sometimes invading privacy (see statement i), but also recognize the importance of the information collected in Census Bureau surveys (see statement k), and most interviewers feel comfortable asking the questions (see statement m).

In order to explore interviewers' attitudes regarding the likely ways that data confidentiality might be compromised, a series of statements was included in the questionnaire to assess beliefs about four kinds of confidentiality breaches: accidental, malicious, legally mandated, or discovered through data file combinations. Table 7 summarizes these results.

Table 7

Percentage of Interviewers Responding to Each Level of Agreement for Statements Regarding How Confidentiality of Census Data Might be Released

“Although in the past and present the Census Bureau has an impeccable record for maintaining confidentiality, there are a number of ways in which data IN GENERAL might not be kept confidential. Please read the following statements and indicate how likely you think it is that one of these types of violations of confidentiality might happen with Census Bureau data within the next five or ten years.”

Statement	Unlikely					Likely	Mean (n)
	1	2	3	4	5		
a. ACCIDENTAL release of confidential data due to errors made by the staff, such as failing to follow the proper data management procedures.	32%	30%	20%	11%	7%		2.29 (650)
b. MALICIOUS release of confidential data due to unauthorized transfer of data by people such as disgruntled staff, or computer hackers.	39%	29%	14%	10%	9%		2.22 (683)
c. MANDATORY release of confidential data ordered by a court of law.	57%	19%	9%	7%	7%		1.89 (658)
d. DISCOVERY of an individual’s personal information by someone who puts Census Bureau data together with information from other sources.	46%	27%	14%	6%	7%		2.01 (638)

Somewhat surprisingly, no clear “favorite” emerges from interviewers’ judgments; although there seems to be somewhat less concern about mandated data release and discovery through data file accumulation as compared to accidental or malicious release. It is noteworthy, however, that a nontrivial portion of Census Bureau interviewers – between 13 and 19% – think that it is quite likely that, at some point in the future, the confidentiality of Census data will be breached.

Finally, to explore interviewers’ knowledge about the policies associated with responding to Census Bureau surveys and keeping data confidential, three true-false questions were asked regarding these issues (see Table 8).

Table 8

Percentage of Interviewers Responding True, False, or Don't know

Question	True	False	Don't Know
15. True or false? The Census Bureau is forbidden by law from giving other government agencies survey information identified by name or address.	97%	1%	2%
16. True or false? Respondents are required by law to respond to most Census Bureau surveys (other than the decennial census).	2%	97%	1%
17. True or false? Respondents are required by law to respond to the decennial census.	79%	11%	10%

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These results indicate that interviewers are quite knowledgeable about the laws regarding the protection and collection of survey data. Not surprisingly, however, they are not as knowledgeable about the rules concerning the decennial census (about 21% of interviewers do not know that respondents are required by law to respond to the decennial census).

CONCLUSIONS

Several important conclusions can be drawn from this review of Census Bureau interviewers' attitudes and beliefs about confidentiality. First, although the vast majority holds positive attitudes, there is a small, persistent, portion of Census Bureau interviewers who perceive extensive confidentiality-related concerns among survey respondents, and who, more importantly, do not fully believe the promise of confidentiality that they themselves give to respondents. These results do not show evidence of improvement compared to the results found by Lavin (1989). In addition, some interviewers believe that if prospective respondents have concerns about confidentiality it might be difficult to get them to participate in the survey. These results suggest that additional research should investigate the development of new training

techniques designed to improve interviewers' knowledge and attitudes about privacy and confidentiality, and how they can appropriately address similar respondent concerns.

NOTES

¹Two forms of the questionnaire were created to examine the effects of asking field staff for personal identifying information (e.g., their Regional Office code and their interviewer code). The two forms were identical in content and order except one form asked for RO and FR codes as the first two questions and the other asked for this information as the last two questions. There were no differences in response behavior between the two forms.

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