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Results and Recommendations from the Final Round of Cognitive Presting with the SIPP Advance Letter

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
Economics and Statistics Administration
U.S. Census Bureau
Washington, DC 20233-0001

July 1, 2002

MEMORANDUM FOR DISTRIBUTION LIST

From: Theresa J. DeMaio TDM
Center for Survey Methods Research
Statistical Research Division

Subject: Results & Recommendations from the Final Round of Cognitive Pretesting with the SIPP Advance Letter

In response to a recent request for changes to the revised Survey of Income & Program Participation (SIPP) Advance Letter, initiated by the Associate Director for Demographic Programs, staff from the Center for Survey Methods Research (CSMR) conducted additional cognitive research for the purpose of evaluating these proposed changes. The changes include a revised survey purpose/data use statement regarding children's health insurance and the addition of a statement that explicitly outlines penalties for disclosure of confidential information.

Attached is a report that documents the major findings of this research. The results indicate that 1) a revised survey purpose/data use statement regarding children's health insurance seemed to maintain the core message of the existing statement, and may safely replace the original; and 2) the addition of an explicit penalty statement in the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) paragraph on confidentiality tended to raise more issues than the letter was equipped to address, and should therefore be omitted from the final version of the SIPP Advance Letter. An unrelated, but additional finding, was that many respondents were unable to determine the letter's origin, which could be remedied by including "U. S. Census Bureau" just after Kincannon's title of "Director" in the salutation.

The recommended version of the SIPP Advance Letter appears as Attachment B.

Any questions about this research may be directed to Ashley Landreth at extension 8457.

Attachments

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Results & Recommendations from the Final Round of Cognitive Pretesting with the SIPP Advance Letter

Report Prepared by Ashley Landreth & Jennifer Hunter
Center for Survey Methods Research
Statistical Research Division
U. S. Census Bureau

July 1, 2002

PART I BACKGROUND & PURPOSE FOR RESEARCH

This report reflects the Center for Survey Methods Research's (CSMR's) evaluation of two changes recently proposed by the Associate Director for Demographic Programs, with regard to the revised Survey of Income & Program Participation (SIPP) Advance Letter currently used in both the production survey and the methods panel. The research described in this report follows a previous and more extensive line of research geared toward creating a pretested and standardized SIPP Advance Letter.[1] Some members from the SIPP Advance Letter Redesign Group, who guided the original SIPP Advance Letter research effort, suggested that current proposals for final changes to this letter be cognitively pretested prior to a decision on including any altered or new material.[2] Results from the current research will help inform this decision, by illuminating possible effects from the inclusion of the proposed material in the letter.

The impetus for the two specific proposed changes arose from concern over certain portions of this letter, which included: 1) the non-neutral tone of the survey purpose/data use statement regarding children's health insurance; and 2) the absence of an explicit penalty statement outlining the exact nature of the maximum fine and jail term invoked, should Census Bureau employees inappropriately disclose respondents' confidential data. Thus, the pretesting effort involved observing respondents' reactions to, and interpretations of, a set of revised survey purpose/data use statements regarding children's health insurance, and an explicit penalty statement added to a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) paragraph on confidentiality. A copy of the pretested letter is included as Attachment A.

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[1] The report documenting the original research, *SIPP Advance Letter Research: Cognitive Interview Results, Implications, & Letter Recommendations*, is located at http://www.census.gov/srd/papers/pdf/sm2001-01.pdf.

[2] Members of the original Redesign Group included: Lorena Carrasco (DSD), Theresa DeMaio (CSMR), Patricia Doyle (DSD), Donald Fischer (DSMD), Gerald Gates (POL), Ashley Landreth (CSMR), Elizabeth Martin (DIR), and Karen Schwager (DSD).

PART II METHOD & RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS

In June of 2002, ten respondents were recruited and interviewed at the Census Bureau's cognitive interview lab. CSMR staff conducted the interviews, which ranged in duration from 30 minutes to just over an hour and were audio-taped after gaining respondents' consent.[3]

A structured cognitive interview protocol was used to gain the following types of information from respondents: 1) initial reactions to salient portions of the letter; 2) aspects of preliminary participation decisions; 3) comprehension of and reaction to several statements regarding survey purpose/data use where children's health insurance was concerned; and 4) comparative reactions to the original FAQ paragraph on confidentiality and the paragraph containing the added explicit penalty statement.

The ten respondents were recruited so that a variety of demographic characteristics would be represented. Three respondents were male and seven were female. Seven were African-American and three were caucasian. Respondents were evenly distributed between 30 years and 60 to 70 years of age. At least three respondents achieved a high school diploma or equivalent, one had some college, five had college degrees, and one had a graduate degree. Respondents' annual income characteristics tended to pool around $25,000 (4) and between $50,000 and $100,000 (4), with one respondent falling in between $25,000 and $50,000. Income information was not obtained for one respondent.

PART III FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Survey Purpose/Data Use Statement: Children's Health Insurance

Statement Revision & Pretesting Strategy

The objection to the phrase "to make sure..." in the survey purpose/data use statement, regarding children's health insurance, arose because it may give the misleading impression that the Census Bureau itself controls such programmatic issues. So, a revised sentence was proposed, which was considered more accurate and neutral than the current sentence in the revised advance letter. Below appear the current and revised statements; the differences between them are underlined for comparison purposes:

Current Statement: For example, results from the survey are used to develop programs to make sure more children are covered by health insurance.

Revised Statement: For example, results from the survey are used to develop programs to allow more children to be covered by health insurance.

[3] CSMR staff responsible for conducting the cognitive interviews included Jennifer Hunter and Ashley Landreth. Elizabeth Murphy provided comments on the revised version of the survey purpose/data use statement used for this research, and assisted in generating concepts and terms used in the alternate versions.

The objective in pretesting the revised statement was to determine whether respondents' reactions to the new version of the statement would be consistent with the goals of the original statement (i.e., to give a positive example of how the data from the survey might be used, and to elicit helping behavior). Three alternate versions of this statement were also created for the purpose of comparing them to the revised statement. These statements were presented to respondents on a show card after they read and discussed the revised statement contained in the letter:

Alternative # 1:	For example, results from the survey are used to develop expanded health insurance programs for uninsured children who are without insurance.
Alternative # 2:	For example, results from the survey are used to develop health insurance programs to cover more uninsured children.
Alternative #3:	For example, results from the survey are used to develop programs to make health insurance available to more children.

General Observations

Revised Statement:

- Overall the statement continued to perform as intended. There was no major change in respondents' interpretation of or reaction to the message it contained.
- Respondents' interpretation of the statement was consistent and favorable, i.e., that one general goal of the survey is to improve quality and coverage of health insurance for children.
- Most respondents referred to this statement early in the interview when initial impressions of the letter were gathered, indicating the message remains extremely salient.
- Many respondents mentioned this purpose as one of the factors that would help them to decide to participate in the survey.

Alternative Statements:

- Most respondents thought that all of these sentences were conveying the same message.
- Most preferred version #3 to the other 2 alternatives because, as one respondent said, "it's just easier, it's plain, it's not technical."
- Several respondents noted the redundancy of the terms ***expanded health care*** and ***uninsured*** in versions #1 and #2, as these concepts were already implied in the revised statement and alternative version # 3.
- Academic terms and complex phrases, like ***uninsured*** and ***expanded health care***, may be difficult for some people to understand; in fact, several respondents indicated they did not know how to interpret ***expanded health insurance***.

Ultimately, most respondents either preferred the sentence in the letter or had no preference between it and alternative #3, and most thought both of these sentences were equally easy to understand.

Recommendation(s)
Though the revised version and alternate version #3 seemed to perform equally well, we recommend the former because it is the only version pretested for this research containing the phrase "covered by health insurance." In our estimation, this phrase may convey the intended message most simply because it uses a familiar set of terms to express the concept of health insurance coverage. So, due to the favorable response to the revised statement included in the letter for pretesting, replacing the original children's health insurance statement with the following revised statement is recommended:

> ***Revised Statement:*** **For example, results from the survey are used to develop programs to allow more children to be covered by health insurance.**

In reference to crafting illustrative purpose statements for future use, it should be noted that respondents reacted negatively towards what they considered technical, or academic, terms. Many respondents favored the revised statement because it was simpler and more general than the first two, more complex sentences that were presented as alternatives. Though survey designers may intend to aid understanding by presenting more complex information, simpler sentences seem to be preferred by respondents, particularly those of low income and low education.

Explicit Penalty Statement: Fines & Jail Terms

Pretesting Strategy
During the cognitive interviews, respondents were first exposed to the original Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) paragraph as they read the letter. Then, the augmented FAQ paragraph, containing the explicit penalty statement, was presented to respondents on a show card containing the following text:[4]

> **How do I know the Census Bureau will protect my information?**
>
> The law authorizes the Census Bureau to collect information for this survey (Title 13, United States Code, Section 182). Section 9 of this law requires us to keep all information about you and your household strictly confidential. By law, any Census Bureau employee who discloses confidential information about an individual would be subject to a jail term of 5 years and/or a fine of $250,000. The Census Bureau will use this information only for statistical purposes.

[4] Added text in the augmented paragraph is underlined for emphasis only in this report; this text was not underlined for the purpose of conducting the cognitive interviews.

Presenting the original paragraph first and the augmented paragraph second, allowed us to observe whether or not respondents' reactions to, and interpretations of, the Census Bureau's confidentiality promise changed in the presence of a more explicit penalty message.

General Observations

In both versions of the FAQ paragraph, respondents generally interpreted inappropriate data disclosure scenarios narrowly. For instance, more respondents gave examples of interviewers divulging information to their families or respondents' neighbors, than examples of the Census Bureau inappropriately releasing survey data to organizations or companies. Some of the more significant differences between respondents' reactions to the two FAQ versions appear below:

Original FAQ:

- Most respondents expressed very little concern over the confidentiality messages.
- Most respondents reported the FAQ was clear, overall, although many noted the ambiguity of "Title 13" and "statistical purposes." Even so, most were satisfied with vague information regarding an existing law that seemed to protect their information.

Augmented FAQ:

- Reactions were mixed. Many respondents were curious to learn detailed information about the fines and jail terms, and some said afterward that it made them feel more confident about the Census Bureau's confidentiality promise.
- But, the explicit penalty statement tended to raise more issues for respondents than the advance letter was able to address (e.g., Who would enforce the law? Is it ever enforced? Would both a jail term and a fine be applied?).
- Some respondents doubted penalties could or would be strictly enforced.
- Some respondents deemed the penalties inadequate, both financially and generally (e.g., fine amount seemed insignificant; once private information is disclosed, fines cannot restore privacy).
- Many noted the new information highlighted the role potentially fallible employees might play while operating on behalf of a trusted organization. Respondents wondered why the explicit penalty statement sounded as if only individuals, not the organization nor those at higher levels of authority, would be held accountable if confidential information was mishandled.
- Respondents' reaction to the more vague penalty/oath statement in the fourth paragraph on the front of the letter was generally more favorable (i.e., "By law, every Census Bureau employee—including the Director as well as every field representative—has taken an oath and is subject to a jail term, a fine, or both if he or she discloses ANY information that could identify you or your household."). Several respondents noted this statement, in contrast to the explicit penalty statement, presented novel information because it stated that everyone in the Bureau took an oath and was subject to punishment in case of disclosure.

- The explicit penalty statement did seem redundant to most respondents when comparing it to the more vague statement on the front of the letter, mentioned in the bullet above.
- The additional text seemed particularly salient to respondents, merely because the "$250,000" stands out from the surrounding text, causing respondents to notice it and the accompanying statement immediately.
- One respondent pointed out the explicit penalty statement caused a disconnect between the messages of the sentences located above and below the new text.

When asked for the minimum amount of confidentiality-related material they would expect to see in a letter such as this, respondents often opted for the more general confidentiality FAQ paragraph already contained in the letter. Several respondents thought they could ask an interviewer for more detailed confidentiality information if they felt the need.

Recommendation(s)
Even with the cognitive interview results, it is unclear just how the addition of the explicit penalty statement could sensitize *actual* respondents to confidentiality issues. Considering what is known about the correlation between lengthier and more explicit confidentiality messages and the suppression of cooperation rates, it may be more appropriate to deliver the proposed information in another manner. For instance, field representatives, when confronting a particularly reluctant respondent, might find it more useful to convey this information verbally or through another piece of literature (e.g., a brochure) when necessary, rather than having to combat concerns resulting from providing too much detail before it was warranted.

Thus, it is recommended the proposed explicit penalty statement be **omitted** from the advance letter altogether, lest it raise more questions and concerns than the letter alone is equipped to address.

Miscellaneous Findings

General Observations
Aspects of the letterhead (e.g., Commerce Department's logo and title, title of organization under which the U. S. Census Bureau falls—the Economic and Statistics Administration, and finally the U. S. Census Bureau), combined with the vague "Director" title in the salutation, caused ambiguity about the letter's origin for respondents. Even though the letter contains a Census Bureau graphic and website address toward the bottom, respondents were often unable to confidently or correctly identify the organization to which Kincannon belonged.

Recommendation(s)
Because the Census Bureau name enjoys considerable recognition and trust among the public, it stands to reason that clarifying the letter's origin could only yield positive benefits. Adding "U. S. Census Bureau" just after Kincannon's title will clarify the letter's origin:[5]

Sincerely,

Charles Louis Kincannon
Director, U. S. Census Bureau

PART IV RECOMMENDED LETTER

Taking all of the above findings into account, we recommend that the version of the advance letter included as Attachment B be adopted for use in subsequent implementation of SIPP.

[5] The letter used for pretesting contained an atypical version of Kincannon's name (i.e., Charles Kincannon), but the adopted letter should of course align itself with Kincannon's usual signature style (e.g., Charles Louis Kincannon, C. Louis Kincannon, etc.).

ATTACHMENT A

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
Economics and Statistics Administration
U.S. Census Bureau
Washington, DC 20233-0001

Dear Resident:

I am writing to ask for your help with an important survey that the U.S. Census Bureau is conducting called the Survey of Income and Program Participation. In a few days, a Census Bureau field representative will contact you. He or she will show you an official identification card and then ask you questions about your job and economic situation.

This survey is used to make decisions about programs that affect millions of people in the United States. For example, results from the survey are used to develop programs to allow more children to be covered by health insurance. Policymakers also use these results to evaluate the future needs of the Social Security System. The Census Bureau needs your help to collect accurate data, so that policymakers can plan for important government programs for the future.

The Census Bureau chose your address, not you personally, as part of a randomly selected sample. We need to interview every household in our sample to get a complete picture of the economic situation of people across the country. Your participation in the survey is important; however, you may decline to answer any particular question.

All the information the Census Bureau collects for this survey about you and your household is confidential by law (Title 13, United States Code, Section 9). By law, every Census Bureau employee—including the Director as well as every field representative—has taken an oath and is subject to a jail term, a fine, or both if he or she discloses ANY information that could identify you or your household.

I have included additional information on the back of this letter. ***Learn more at* our website: *www.sipp.census.gov/sipp/*.**

Thank you for your cooperation. I am grateful for your help.

Sincerely,

Charles Kincannon
Director

Why does the Census Bureau collect this information?

Although we conduct a census every ten years, we need to collect some kinds of information more often. Information collected for this survey allows us to keep abreast of changes people have experienced in their jobs, the kind of work they do, the number of people looking for work, the situation of people in government programs, as well as other information. The country changes rapidly, and we need up-to-date facts in order to plan effectively for future programs. This means providing current economic information to people in government and private organizations so that they can make informed decisions about policies that affect people of all income levels. Your voluntary participation is essential for ensuring that this survey's results are complete and accurate.

How do I know the Census Bureau will protect my information?

The law authorizes the Census Bureau to collect information for this survey (Title 13, United States Code, Section 182). Section 9 of this law requires us to keep all information about you and your household strictly confidential. The Census Bureau will use this information only for statistical purposes.

Additional information about this process:

We estimate that it will take about 30 minutes, per person, to collect the information. This includes time for reviewing instructions and completing and reviewing your answers. After the initial interview, we will conduct a follow-up interview periodically, in order to learn how people's economic situations change over time. Send comments regarding time estimates, or any other aspect of this data collection process, including suggestions for reducing this burden to:

Associate Director for Finance and Administration
ATTN: Paperwork Reduction Project 0607-0725
Room 3104, Federal Building 3
U.S. Census Bureau
Washington, DC 20233-0001

The U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) approved this survey and gave it OMB approval number 0607-0725. The expiration date for this OMB approval number is September 30, 2004. Displaying this number shows that the Census Bureau is authorized to conduct this survey. Please use this number in any correspondence concerning this survey.

ATTACHMENT B

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
Economics and Statistics Administration
U.S. Census Bureau
Washington, DC 20233-0001

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Director, U. S. Census Bureau

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Washington, DC 20233-0001

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