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**Results and Recommendations from the Alternative
Administrative Records Use Paragraph of the
SIPP Advance Letter**

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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.

Report of Cognitive Interview Results from the Alternative Administrative Records Use Paragraph of the SIPP Advance Letter

Prepared by Ashley Landreth
March 1, 2002

PART I BACKGROUND & RESEARCH PURPOSE

The purpose for the research was to create and cognitively pretest an alternative administrative records use disclosure paragraph, to be embedded in the revised advance letter for the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP).¹ The newly created paragraph will be part of an experiment scheduled for Replicate 3 of the SIPP Methods Panel (Summer 2002). This experiment plans to compare unit response rates between households receiving the traditional administrative records use disclosure paragraph (i.e., Social Security number paragraph) and the newly created alternative paragraph, which does not mention Social Security Number (SSN). The need for such an alternative disclosure paragraph is, in part, driven by the Census Bureau's ability and desire to link survey data with administrative records from other government agencies without the assistance of an individual's Social Security number. In addition to cognitively pretesting an alternative disclosure paragraph, a prototype "permission" question was created and fielded during this research, to gain a cursory assessment of a question that directly asks respondents' permission to combine their survey answers with existing administrative records.

The alternative paragraph was placed in the Frequently Asked Question (FAQ) section on the back of the revised SIPP advance letter, just underneath the existing paragraph, labeled *Why does the Census Bureau collect this information?* (See Attachments A & B).

The group charged with the oversight of this project included staff from the Director's Office (DIR), Demographic Surveys Division (DSD), Field Division (FLD), and the Policy Office (POL).² This group provided helpful comments on the first drafts of the alternative administrative records use paragraph. In addition, staff in the Policy and Legal Offices reviewed the alternative administrative records use paragraph, prior to pretesting, for accuracy. Staff from the Statistical Research Division (SRD), in the Center for Survey Methods Research (CSMR), was primarily responsible for the creation of the alternative paragraph, and conducting the cognitive interviews.³

The following sections of this report will outline the research methods used, discuss the major findings, present recommendations for the alternative paragraph's language and placement, and discuss future considerations for its implementation into the SIPP's survey procedures.

¹ Revised SIPP advance letter created and cognitively pretested in 2001, now in use in SIPP production, as well as SIPP Methods Panel.

² The oversight group's members included Adele Alvey (FLD), Wendy Alvey (POL), Nancy Bates (DSD), Sneha Thakor Desai (FLD), Heather Holbert (DSD), Vicki McIntire (FLD), Marilyn Moore (DIR), Ceci Villa (DSD), and Jacqueline Yates (POL).

³ Tom Mayer and Jeffery Moore (CSMR) collaborated on the creation and placement considerations regarding the alternative paragraph. Nancy Bates (DSD) also assisted in the creation of the paragraph, as well as the prototype "permission" question. In addition, Pat Doyle (DSD) provided background information on the purpose for administrative records use in the SIPP.

PART II METHOD & RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS

In February 2002, ten respondents were recruited and interviewed at either the Census Bureau's cognitive interview lab or a location more convenient for the respondent, usually their place of employment. Staff from the Center for Survey Methods Research (CSMR) conducted the interviews, which ranged in duration from 30 minutes to just over an hour and were audio-taped after gaining respondents' consent.

A structured cognitive interview protocol was used to gain the following types of information from respondents; 1) initial reaction to the letter; 2) aspects of preliminary participation decisions; 3) comprehension of main messages and specific terms in the administrative records use paragraph; 4) reading ability for the administrative records use paragraph; 5) comparative reactions to the administrative records use paragraph and the traditional paragraph (i.e., Social Security number paragraph) contained in the revised SIPP advance letter; and 6) reactions to a prototype administrative records use "permission" question.

The ten respondents were recruited so that a variety of demographic characteristics would be represented. Two respondents were male and eight were female. Six were African-American and four were caucasian. Information about the remaining characteristics was provided by only nine of the respondents: four had a high school diploma or less, three had some college, and two held college degrees; one respondent was in their 20s, one in their 30s, four in their 40s, and three were in their 70s; and household income was less than \$25,000 for four respondents, less than \$50,000 for three, and above \$50,000 for two respondents.

PART III FINDINGS

After the first seven cognitive interviews were conducted, there was evidence to suggest that changes to Version 1 of the alternative paragraph would clarify and strengthen its overall message. The revised paragraph, Version 2, was used for the remaining three cognitive interviews. The changes in Version 2 have been underlined to facilitate comparisons between the versions.

The impetus for Version 2's revisions were partially due to respondents' comparisons of the alternative and traditional administrative records use paragraphs, and some of the revisions resulted from respondents' reactions to the alternative paragraph apart from any comparisons with similarly worded statements. The majority of the interview was conducted in reference to the alternative paragraph, and respondents were exposed to the traditional paragraph at the very end of the cognitive interview. This was done so the bulk of respondents' initial reactions to the alternative paragraph would be unaffected by their exposure to the preexisting traditional paragraph. The two versions of the alternative paragraph, along with the traditional paragraph, used in the cognitive interviews appear below:

Alternative Paragraph Version 1 (Attachment A)

As part of the analysis of this survey, the Census Bureau may obtain information you have given to other agencies. This allows us to conduct more research, without having to take up your time with more questions. All of the additional information collected by the Census Bureau is protected by the same law that protects your survey information (Title 13, United States Code, Section 9).

Alternative Paragraph Version 2 (Attachment B)

As part of the analysis of this survey, the Census Bureau might obtain information you have given to other government agencies. This helps make sure the data are complete. It also allows us to conduct more research, without having to take up your time with more questions. All of the additional information collected by the Census Bureau is kept confidential and is protected by the same law that protects your survey information (Title 13, United States Code, Section 9).

Traditional (SSN) Paragraph

Providing your Social Security number allows the Census Bureau to get some additional information from other government agencies. This helps make sure the data are complete. It may also reduce the number of questions you are asked in this survey. The same confidentiality laws that protect your survey answers also protect any additional information we collect (Title 13, United States Code, Section 9). Providing your Social Security number is voluntary.

General Observations

- In an independent recall task at the beginning of the cognitive interview (i.e., respondents were asked, “What did you remember about the letter? Did anything stick out?”), most respondents spontaneously reported having some questions/concerns about the alternative administrative records use paragraph.
- Vagueness in this paragraph caused respondents to ask: What agencies? What info? Why does the CB really need it/do with it?
- Because the paragraph made the Census Bureau’s intentions seem vague, due mostly to the vague phrase *other agencies*, some respondents became concerned about possible negative consequences (e.g., “Will the CB get my credit card information? Will the CB’s access to my personal info cause me harm in the future?”).
- Even after the type of agency was clarified in Version 2, by adding the term “government” (*other government agencies*), respondents still requested examples.
- When comparing the alternative and traditional administrative records use paragraphs at the end of the interview, respondents noted the traditional paragraph gave them a choice about having the Census Bureau obtain more information (i.e., “Providing your SSN is voluntary.”), whereas the alternative version offered respondents no such choice.
- Some thought the reason for obtaining additional information was more believable in the traditional paragraph, which adds a sentence about the extra data being needed to make sure *the data are complete*.
- Many preferred the confidentiality sentence in the traditional paragraph to the one in the alternative, because the term *confidential* was used.
- Respondents were unclear how the Census Bureau would go about gathering additional data about them. Many supposed “the government” was in possession of, and could easily access, large amounts of their personal data. Only a few speculated they might be asked to provide their Social Security number, before they were exposed to the traditional paragraph.
- About half of the respondents thought the *additional information* obtained (last sentence) would be duplicate information, and the other half thought the Census Bureau intended to gather supplementary information.

Difficult and/or Ambiguous Concepts & Terms

- **Other agencies** (Version 1, 1st sentence). Respondents were unclear as to whether these agencies were “private” or “governmental,” and they tended to interpret this phrase broadly (i.e., *agencies* meant everything from private companies to local, state, and federal government). Government agencies were deemed less threatening because respondents believed: 1) the government already had access to their personal information; 2) the government shares information with other branches/agencies anyway; and 3) some thought the government has a right to access respondents’ information for research purposes-- especially if it helped the government make decisions about how to spend resources earmarked for social services programs;
- "...the Census Bureau **may obtain** [your] information..." (Version 1, 1st sentence). Some respondents interpreted as "the CB may or may not get your info, depending on whether or not they need it," while others thought it meant "we, the CB, are giving ourselves permission to get your information--and you (the respondent) can't do anything about it";
- **Additional information** (Versions 1 & 2, final sentence). Some respondents thought this phrase was over and above the *information* referred to in the first sentence, while others thought this phrase was referring to the same *information* mentioned in the very first sentence.

Successful and/or Innocuous Concepts & Terms

- **Analysis & research** (Versions 1 & 2) were vague terms respondents had no negative reaction to, aside from finding it difficult to adequately define the concepts.
- The addition of the term **government** (Version 2, 1st sentence)—**other government agencies**—seemed to narrow down the intended meaning for respondents, although they still wanted to know which ones.
- The term **might** (Version 2, 1st sentence) was much more successful in conveying the intended message (i.e., the Census Bureau may or may not get additional information—only if needed).
- Although the justification statements for obtaining administrative records were vague (Version 2, 2nd & 3rd sentences), few respondents seemed distressed over the explanation provided.
- The addition of the term **confidential** (Version 2, last sentence) seemed to more adequately and immediately convey the intended message that additional information would be kept confidential, and not just protected by law.

Posing The Permission Question

Near the end of the interview, respondents were asked to respond to the following question, as if they were an actual survey respondent, interacting with a field representative:

The Question

As part of the analysis of this survey, the Census Bureau would like to obtain information you have given to other agencies. This would allow the Census Bureau to conduct more research, without having to take up your time with more questions.

Do you give us permission to obtain this information for research purposes?

General Observations

- Only a few respondents gave permission right away, without any questions or concerns, because they assumed the government had their “information” anyway.
- Many respondents, who did not give permission right away, were surprised by the question, because the alternative paragraph did not indicate they would have a choice in the matter (“Oh, now you’re asking my permission?!”).
- Many also reported that, before answering the question, they would first expect interviewers to provide examples of the agencies the Census Bureau would contact.
- In addition, some respondents said they would also want to know what types of information would be obtained and how this additional data would be used.
- When concrete examples were provided (e.g., Social Security Administration & Internal Revenue Service), most respondents were satisfied and said they would grant permission—but not before uttering qualifiers like, “I, however, have nothing to hide.” This suggests that these examples may cause negative reactions for other respondents.
- Many respondents understood the question’s intent (i.e., permission to retrieve and link administrative records data), but some interpreted it as a general survey participation request—not a request for administrative records use permission. This finding might only be an artifact of cognitively testing the question at the end of a discussion about the advance letter. If the question was placed at the end of an actual interview, this finding may no longer apply.
- Fielding the prototype permission question at the end of the cognitive interview may also may have confounded respondents’ perception, comprehension and reaction/response (i.e., may have over or under sensitized respondents to the implications of this administrative records use arrangement).

PART IV RECOMMENDATIONS & FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

The Paragraph

All of the changes implemented in Version 2 of the administrative records use paragraph performed well in the final cognitive interviews, and seemed to address the major issues found when pretesting Version 1.

The location of the paragraph, just below the FAQ heading, labeled *Why does the Census Bureau collect this information?*, seemed logical to respondents and flowed both from and into adjacent paragraphs without being redundant. Thus, it is recommended that Version 2 of the alternative paragraph be used in the upcoming advance letter experiment for the SIPP Methods Panel:

Suggested Paragraph Wording ® *Version 2* (Attachment B)

As part of the analysis of this survey, the Census Bureau might obtain information you have given to other government agencies. This helps make sure the data are complete. It also allows us to conduct more research, without having to take up your time with more questions. All of the additional information collected by the Census Bureau is kept confidential and is protected by the same law that protects your survey information (Title 13, United States Code, Section 9).

Even Version 2 of the alternative paragraph was unable to adequately address respondents’ most frequent inquiry: “*Which* [government] agencies will the Census Bureau collect additional information from?” Respondents’ need for this, and other, information increased significantly

once the permission question was posed. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume actual survey respondents may insist on field representatives addressing the following questions, whether at the first doorstep interaction or upon the administration of some version of the permission question:

- Which government agencies?
- What type(s) of data?
- How will my data be used?

Interviewers should be given some training in appropriate strategies for addressing these likely respondent concerns, otherwise respondents may be reluctant to participate in the survey.

It is not suggested that these concerns be addressed in the letter, as the advance letter should avoid irritating or frightening respondents before interviewers have an opportunity to address their questions and concerns in person. To try and address these concerns in the advance letter may increase the likelihood of unit nonresponse.

The Question

Although many respondents participating in this research said they would grant the Census Bureau permission to obtain additional information from other government agencies, to what extent a “permission” question would be positively received in the field is unknown—even if field representatives were able to provide supplementary information. From the current research, however, it is clear respondents’ reactions to this question varied. A few respondents granted the permission without requesting any additional information regarding the meaning or implication of the request. The majority of cognitive interview respondents granted the requested permission only after learning about specific examples of *other government agencies* (i.e., SSA, IRS), and many simultaneously offered qualifying statements (e.g., “Yes, I would give my permission, but I have nothing to hide.”). Even though these respondents were unable to identify any possible negative consequences resulting from granting this permission, their comments indicated they were cognizant others may be wary of granting such a request. In fact, one respondent was very concerned about the type of information being collected and subsequent consequences (e.g., respondent thought the Census Bureau would uncover his felony conviction, resulting in greater difficulty obtaining future employment).

At this point, a recommendation for permission question wording may be premature, since the cognitive interview research’s main objective was pretesting and refining a disclosure paragraph. Because all inquiries regarding the permission question were held until the end of the cognitive interview, pretesting results run the risk of being muddled by a large amount of priming that occurred throughout the majority of the preceding interview. A separate pretesting effort may be required if such a question is to be implemented in the survey environment to make certain respondents consistently understand the true nature of the Census Bureau’s request, and to better determine respondent’s thoughts and reactions. In addition, if the placement of such a question has not already been decided, this should be given some consideration, lest an ill-timed question dampen response rates (e.g., question posed at the beginning of the first interview).



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 make sure more children are covered by health insurance. Policymakers 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 www.sipp.census.gov/sipp/***.

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

Sincerely,

William G. Barron, Jr.
Acting 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.

As part of the analysis of this survey, the Census Bureau may obtain information you have given to other agencies. This allows us to conduct more research, without having to take up your time with more questions. All of the additional information collected by the Census Bureau is protected by the same law that protects your survey information (Title 13, United States Code, Section 9).

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. Displaying this number shows that the Census Bureau is authorized to conduct this survey. Please use this number in any correspondence concerning this survey.



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Associate Director for Finance and Administration
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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. Displaying this number shows that the Census Bureau is authorized to conduct this survey. Please use this number in any correspondence concerning this survey.