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**SIPP Advance Letter Focus Group Results:
Issues and Recommendations**

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SIPP Advance Letter

FOCUS GROUP RESULTS: ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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Concern with the lack of pretesting of advance letters in demographic surveys and a desire to improve their effectiveness promoted the creation of a research agenda to research and revise the advance letter for the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP). The plan to improve the SIPP Advance Letter consists of several steps, including focus groups with field representatives (FRs), cognitive interviews with respondents, and possibly split panel testing of revised letters. This report contains the results of the first phase of this exploratory research project, which are the findings from the FR focus groups. In the sections that follow, a description of the research methods are presented, along with the research findings regarding uses of the advance letter, impediments to cooperation, and essential topics for the letter. The implications for the letter are discussed, as well as proposed letter revisions. A rough draft of the revised letter is included at the end of this report, as well as the original SIPP Advance Letter used for the focus groups (See Attachments A & B).

Research Methods

For the first phase of this project, exploratory research was conducted through a series of focus groups. These focus groups involved field representatives (FRs) and supervisory field representatives (SFRs) from various parts of the country. The research goal was to assess the uses for and effectiveness of the advance letter in the field during first contacts. These focus groups were conducted in the early fall of 2000, were approximately an hour and a half in length, and included FRs/SFRs from the following regional offices (ROs): Charlotte, Philadelphia, Boston, and Los Angeles. The Boston and Los Angeles focus groups were held separately, via videoconference. A single focus group was held for the Charlotte and Philadelphia FRs/SFRs, due to their close proximity to the Census Bureau Head Quarters, and expected similarities in interviewing experience due to geographic location.

Each focus group contained roughly eight participants, with one to two SFRs per focus group. Participants' SIPP interviewing experience ranged from one to seventeen years, with most participants averaging between four and eight years of SIPP interviewing experience. Although each focus group contained FRs/SFRs working in a variety of urban, suburban, and rural settings, the Charlotte and Philadelphia participants mainly worked suburban and rural cases, Boston participants mainly worked suburban cases, while the Los Angeles participants mainly worked urban and suburban cases. It should be noted that geographic location, varying levels of population density, and varying levels of interviewing experience did not directly affect how the advance letter was used in the field.

How the SIPP Advance Letter Is Used

Findings:

From a survey design perspective, the SIPP advance letter mainly functions as a respondent notification of the up-coming survey request and ensuing FR visit. It also conveys required legal information and briefly answers any residual questions a respondent may have regarding the survey process. In an effort to increase response rates, these pre-notice letters also encourage cooperation by appealing to a respondent's self-interest.

From an FR's perspective, however, the SIPP Advance Letter functions more as a legitimizing prop than as an informative and persuasive pre-notice. At the doorstep, FRs usually find that the letters have not been read (they estimated that this occurs 70 % of the time, or more). This provides FRs with an opportunity to re-issue and immediately summarize the letter. This rapport- and trust-building tactic allows FRs to demonstrate their personal legitimacy as Census Bureau interviewers, as well as reinforcing the survey's legitimacy. Many field representatives even normalize inattention to the mailed letter by offering comments such as, "You might have thought it was junk mail and thrown it away, because it does come addressed to 'Current Resident'." This type of interaction also allows respondents to distinguish the current participation request from other marketing efforts. More importantly, this interaction allows FRs to summarize the letter's important points, tailor each message based upon respondents' observable attributes, and address concerns and questions in a manageable and positive sequence.

Focus group results showed that FRs actually preferred to introduce themselves and the survey to respondents who had not read the letter. FRs reasoned that this situation allowed them to present their introduction to a respondent they saw as a "clean slate," without having to smooth over negative reactions caused by the letter itself.

Although FRs thoroughly summarized the letter during doorstep introductions, beyond handing the letter to the respondent, they seemed to prefer to draw as little attention to the letter itself. FRs felt they had more success with reluctant or curious respondents if they could provide some tailored statements about the data uses, geared toward the respondent's own self-interests. Another very important aspect of this face-to-face interaction seemed to be that FRs could more easily relieve respondents' anxieties if the material was presented for the first time in person, because FRs were able to use counter-arguments (or softening statements) just as respondents raised their objections (e.g., "Yes, it's voluntary, but why don't we get started and you can just tell me which questions you'd rather not answer."). Persuading a respondent to cooperate proved almost impossible if the letter was read beforehand and they had already made a decision not to cooperate due to particular pieces of information presented in the letter.

Impediments To Cooperation

The single most important piece of information gained from the focus groups was that gaining respondents' cooperation often became much more difficult if respondents actually read the SIPP Advance Letter prior to the FR's first doorstep visit. This inadvertent effect can be attributed to the prominent nature of sensitive topics within the letter, which FRs felt decreased their chances of gaining respondents' trust and cooperation. The following three pieces of information caused the highest level of anxiety among respondents who read the letter prior to the FR's visit:

1. The implied request for personal records—"bank statements and pay stubs" (second paragraph, on front);
2. The lengthy explanation regarding an impending Social Security Number request (letter's back, in FAQs); and
3. The disclosure of the voluntary nature of the survey (second paragraph, letter's front).

From an FR's perspective, reading about impending requests for personal records and Social Security Numbers alarms respondents and sensitizes them unnecessarily to the potentially intrusive nature of this survey. Although the impetus behind these requests is to enable quality data collection, these statements are not currently incorporated into the letter in a way that accomplishes the intended goal. Also, it is suspected that FRs may affect this process, by encouraging income estimation, merely because they themselves see these requests as unnecessarily burdensome and intrusive.

FRs noted that the Social Security Number discussion on the back of the letter often introduced concern over giving away such private information, as well as costs related to data sharing. Aside from individuals finding it difficult to supply their SSNs to strangers, the concept of administrative record use seems to contradict the Census Bureau's promise of confidentiality. Respondents have a difficult time believing the flow of information about their lives is truly a "one-way street" (Gerber, 2000, paper pending). So, this brings up confidentiality and privacy issues. FRs have a tough time combating these concerns, and often rely on restating how data uses are restricted under Title 13, as well as the fact that FRs are liable under this same law.

Unfortunately, focus group data indicated the voluntary disclosure statement in the letter was useful to respondents looking for a quick way to refuse to participate, without further considering the survey request. At the doorstep, FRs are very effective at gaining cooperation after disclosing the voluntary nature of the survey, because they follow up with statements stressing the acceptability of item non-response to sensitive issues, the importance of statistical sampling procedures, and their intent to be frugal with the respondents' time. Pitching the survey in this way, FRs are able to make a well-rounded argument for participation. However, respondent processing of the advance letter is likely to have a different outcome for hesitant respondents, because they are looking for one or two highly salient, diagnostic pieces of information to help them make a participation decision—as evidenced by FR reports of respondent comments: "Well, it says right here in your letter that this is voluntary. So, I don't have to do it." It appears that attendance to the word "voluntary" caused respondents to opt out of the survey before the FR visit. Serious consideration must be given to placing this statement in a less prominent position within the letter to avoid making this aspect of the survey unnecessarily salient.

These three highly salient, anxiety-producing bits of information were not only the toughest for FRs to address in general, but also lead to the most serious refusals. The most striking discovery, from the focus group discussions, is that respondents most likely to be negatively affected by these pieces of information are also likely to be SIPP's hard-core refusals. Across focus groups, FRs said the 80 to 90 percent of respondents cooperated immediately, with little or no persuasion. Since SIPP's response rates fall within this range, this perception seems to be accurate. So, all of the discussion generated about the most salient and anxiety-producing pieces of information pertains to those potential respondents who are most difficult to persuade. The focus group data seem to clearly indicate that these three pieces of information are highly damaging to hesitant and reluctant respondents who read the letter.

This finding supports a hypothesis asserted by Groves and Cialdini (1991) while developing concepts explaining the causes for survey participation. They suggested that respondents approach a participation decision by searching for one or two salient bits of information, which have proved to be highly diagnostic in past. So, if individuals seek out one or two salient and diagnostic pieces of information during a compliance decision, then reluctant SIPP respondents are likely to fixate on the presentation of the personal record and SSN request, along with the voluntary disclosure statement—then use this information to support their decision not to cooperate.

It should be noted that, across focus groups, FRs were clearly more successful in addressing these sensitive issues and gaining cooperation if allowed to present this material to respondents in an introductory doorstep-statement, rather than through the mailed letter. At the doorstep, FRs are able to provide more complete information to respondents, than can be conveyed through the letter, in a non-threatening and conversational manner. For instance, when covering the voluntary nature of the survey, FRs tend to emphasize that item non-response is preferable to complete non-response—to ensure data quality.

Dillman (2000) hypothesized that a heightened sense of perceived costs prevented a pre-notice letter from having any affect on response rates for a large sample pretest of a national government survey. He partially attributed this outcome to:

...[the] letter [being] nearly two pages long, going into great detail about the reasons for the questionnaire, the fact that the request was voluntary, and other explanations that seemed likely to raise anxiety (and therefore “costs”), but that the recipient could not resolve by being able to see the nonthreatening content of the questionnaire (Pg. 156).

Here, Dillman refers to a self-administered paper questionnaire, but this example can be related to the effects of the SIPP advance letter. Many of the letter’s aspects mentioned by Dillman are at work in the SIPP advance letter, and some respondents do read it in the absence of a persuasive and informative FR who, given the chance, would address their concerns prior to survey participation.

Time was also mentioned, across focus groups, as a common defense used by respondents facing a participation request, but FRs felt this was easily addressed and posed less of a cooperation impediment than the three items previously mentioned. The ease with which time issues are overcome by FRs can be attributed to the fact that time for the initial interview and subsequent waves of the survey are less salient within the letter (located in FAQs on the back). This gives FRs much more control over the presentation of this material, which results in interviews successfully getting underway. FRs reported being able to overcome time issues by saying that they would be quick, and they usually complete the interview in less time than stated by the letter.

However, it should be noted that information from the focus groups indicate that at one time, the expected initial interview length was disclosed in the body of the letter, which seemed to cause FRs considerable difficulty gaining respondents’ cooperation at the doorstep. This is probably due to the fact that the initial interview time was one hour, and that this disclosure was placed on the front of the letter—in a highly salient position.

In addition, focus group findings also suggest FRs spend the beginning of each interview explaining that the Census Bureau collects data during “the other nine years.” Even though the letter carries the official Census Bureau letterhead and is signed by the director, respondents do not often attend to these official symbols. Plus, the original SIIPP letter does not explicitly state that the Census Bureau collects data continuously, and not just once every ten years.

Recommendation(s):

General I recognize the advance letter enables the Census Bureau to meet specific legal obligations. However, in light of its introductory tone-setting function, information likely to arouse anxiety for respondents, or cause them to refuse, should be rewritten and/or placed in less prominent positions. Given that the advance letter’s message does not reach every respondent, its limitations must be recognized. This advance letter functions as a brief introduction--quality data collection rests mainly upon the interviewer. Therefore, pre-notices should be fashioned so that they do not impede FRs’ ability to gain respondents’ cooperation.

Personal Records Consider eliminating the reference to “bank statements and pay stubs” on the front of the letter. FRs across all focus groups indicated that respondents viewed this implied records request as extremely intrusive and also noted that respondents are generally not motivated to retrieve paperwork.

The trade-offs between data quality and non-response must be examined when revising this section of the letter. While the modifying phrase “bank statements and pay stubs” was included to increase the quality of reporting and to disambiguate the sentence, “You can help us by referring to your records...”—the inclusion of this phrase causes respondents to become angry, because it seems like an intrusive request. Some respondents, who thought Census Bureau personnel would expect to review these records themselves, also misconstrued this concept.

Perhaps the issue of encouraging record use for more accurate reporting could be more effectively addressed through interviewer training. First, quality data can be collected more reliably if the stimulus (instruction for record use) is held constant across respondents. It is likely the majority of respondents do not attend to the letter, so currently, the record use instruction rests upon the interviewer alone in most cases. Second, fear of losing a respondent altogether may cause FRs to encourage income estimation after having to persuade a reluctant respondent who reacted negatively to this request, or some other sensitive information within the letter. In addition, focus group results suggest FRs may be encouraging income estimation, even in the absence of respondent anxiety regarding personal record requests, because FRs themselves may see the request as unnecessarily burdensome.

Social Security Number Discussion The discussion regarding the SSNs on the back of the letter is inconsistent with the intent of the FAQs, which exist only to briefly answer any initial questions respondents may have before the interviewer's first visit. After receiving the letter, respondents are not yet aware they will be asked to report such data, and the presence of this information only serves to heighten a potential respondent's anxiety about the data SIPP collects, in addition to fueling an initial desire to refuse the survey.

Even though this information appears in the least prominent position within the letter—the back—it is one of the more prominent pieces of information, due to its’ formatting. The FAQs on the back of the letter are formatted so that paragraph topics are highlighted by questions placed in bold and all-capital lettering, just above the explanatory paragraphs:

WHY DOES THE CENSUS BUREAU WANT TO KNOW MY SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER?

In addition, this is one of the only paragraph headings written at this level of specificity—other headings are written more generally. It is likely that the specificity of the SSN paragraph heading draws respondents’ attention more than the other, more general headings (e.g., What is the purpose of this survey?, Why does the Census Bureau need this information?, How was I selected?, Why are my answers important?).

In light of the absence of OMB guidelines and the reasons cited above, the removal of the SSN discussion is recommended. There seems to be some disagreement within the Census Bureau about the feasibility of this option, since PPDO (Jerry Gates) indicate OMB guidelines exist that require its inclusion, while FASD (Tom Smith) indicate there are no such guidelines. If this recommendation is not acceptable, then it is strongly suggested that the paragraph heading should be rewritten at a lower level of specificity. A more detailed discussion of additional alternatives are discussed in the FAQ recommendations portion of this report, under the *Essential Topics for the Introductory Letter* section.

Voluntary Disclosure Statement Serious consideration must be given both to the placement of, and alternative wording for, the voluntary participation statement. However, even with alternative wording, it is highly unlikely that reluctant respondents will process this information any differently than before, simply because the word “voluntary” will remain in the same salient position. Respondents often stop processing information when they feel they have gathered enough information with which to respond. Placing the voluntary disclosure statement in such a salient position increases the possibility that

respondents will not only stop reading the letter at that point, but also that they will decide to refuse as well. With that in mind, this statement can either be placed in a less prominent position within the letter, be rewritten with emphasis on refusing particular questions, or be presented with accompanying information that would communicate the acceptability of item non-response over a complete refusal.

The first and most strongly suggested strategy for lessening the prominence of this statement is to relocate it in the FAQs under the selection process discussion. When introducing the survey for the first time, FRs disclose the voluntary nature of the survey, but then follow up with a disclaimer about the acceptability of item non-response. As currently written, the voluntary disclosure statement is very prominent on the front of the letter and carries no accompanying information to let respondents know that they can refuse to answer any particular question. However, even if accompanying information were available, it may be given less consideration than it would during face-to-face interaction with an FR. Again, the voluntary disclosure is likely used as one of those highly diagnostic pieces of information, so it should be placed in a less prominent position—until an FR has the opportunity to visit and present a cogent argument for participation.

If the recommendation to relocate the voluntary disclosure cannot be considered, then following revision should replace the existing statement:

Although answering any question is voluntary, each unanswered item lessens the accuracy of the data.

Essential Topics for the Introductory Letter

Findings:

Information contained on the front of the letter is more prominent, and more frequently read, than information placed on the back. The text's denseness in the FAQs also may deter respondents from digging further into survey explanations located on the back of the letter. Across focus groups, the most commonly cited respondent concerns at the first contact were questions regarding:

1. The purpose for data collection;
2. Data uses;
3. Selection processes; and
4. Matters of confidentiality.

The questions and concerns that surfaced in the focus group are very similar to reluctant respondent concerns documented by Morton-Williams and Young in their tape-recorded doorstep introduction research (1987).

The answers to these most frequently asked questions happen to be addressed on the back of the letter, but they are not well represented on the front of the letter (e.g., survey purpose, data uses, selection process). Since respondents indicate these issues need to be addressed before a participation decision can be made, it seems reasonable for these issues to be adequately addressed in the body of the letter.

In the focus groups, FRs explained that respondents frequently requested information regarding the selection process. Most respondents seemed to think they, or someone in their household, had been selected personally. FRs indicated respondents were sensitive about the amount of information the government already has access to, and an FRs' presence at the doorstep seems to confirm their suspicion that the government knows everything about their lives already.

FRs reported having little trouble with statements of confidentiality, unless a respondent read the administrative record discussion on the back of the letter. Then, issues of confidentiality quickly became difficult to overcome, because statements on the front and back seem to contradict one another. The body of the letter seems to indicate that the Census Bureau will be collecting information from respondents, and that this information will be kept confidential. While in the FAQs, the SSN discussion lets respondents know that the Census Bureau intends to collect respondents' data from other agencies as well. After reading about the Bureau's intentions to use administrative records, earlier assurances of data confidentiality seem to be empty promises. Exploratory research (Gerber, paper pending 2000) suggests that respondents have a more difficult time believing their data will not be shared with other agencies, when other agencies are already sharing their data with the Census Bureau. Essentially, respondents find it illogical that the Census Bureau receives information from other places, but will not export their own data.

Recommendations for the Letter's Body:

General Information contained on the front of the letter is more prominent, and probably more frequently read, than information on the back. This leads to the recommendation that body of the letter should address the four most frequently cited respondent concerns, instead of the back of the letter (See Attachment A). For respondents reading the letter, this information will help satisfy concerns and would be likely to aid in positive participation decisions. These topics could logically be addressed in this order:

1. Specific and widely appealing statement of data collection purpose;
2. Specific statement of data use;
3. Statement of selection process emphasizing address selection, not household nor personal selection; and
4. Assurance of confidentiality.

Data Collection Purposes and Data Uses Statements regarding these topics should comprise the majority of the opening paragraph, and should appeal to many people by citing some specific uses for SIPP data, while reminding respondents that most people are affected by these topics at some point in their lives. Topics of interest may include retirement, post-secondary education costs, health insurance, and childcare. Although, some specific statements about data use should be included in the opening paragraph, mandated uses for the data do not exist—and uses are likely to change over the coming years. Uses for SIPP data are outlined by Dan Weinberg (Census Bureau report, HHES, Pgs. 1-2) in a 1997 report regarding federal and nonfederal SIPP data “stakeholders,” which have been reproduced below:

- Program eligibility and participation rates in the food stamps program, including analysis of dynamics (used in the simulation of proposed changes to the food stamps program);
- The gain or loss of health insurance (used in the development of and debate on the President's health care reform initiative, especially regarding the availability of health insurance to workers losing their jobs) and in development of the Kassenbaum-Kennedy bill to improve health insurance portability;
- Income and poverty changes over both short (month-to-month) and multiyear periods (for example, documenting that most minimum-wage workers do not stay at that wage level);
- Welfare program participation (used in the development of and debate on the President's welfare reform initiative, most particularly to understand the effect of limiting the time on welfare);
- The income replacement role of unemployment compensation and its effects on re-employment (used by the recent Presidential Commission on Unemployment Compensation); and
- The dynamics of health insurance coverage of children (used in debates over establishment of the Child Health Assistance Program).

Weinberg goes on to list the ways in which SIPP data will affect transfer programs over the next few years, as they undergo major changes:

- SIPP will be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996;
- SIPP will continue to be the only data available to evaluate how the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 effects the employment of the disabled;
- Consistent with the recent National Academy of Sciences (NAS) report on poverty measurement, SIPP may become the official source of income and poverty estimates in the U.S.; and
- Because SIPP provides the most accurate picture of program eligibility and participation of any household survey, it, along with the Survey of Program Dynamics (SPD), will let researchers examine what happens to people as they leave welfare because of the reforms enacted in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996.

Although these SIPP data uses provided explanations for how the data are actually used, it was difficult to fashion easily-understood statements with enough specificity to adequately capture respondents' attention in the opening paragraph. Therefore, this paragraph may not be suitable in its current form, and could probably benefit from further input.

FRs indicated that the presentation of tailored SIPP data use examples were essential for appealing to respondents' own interests and gaining their cooperation. However, they also indicated that it was difficult to gain the cooperation of the very poor and the very wealthy. FRs stated that economically disadvantaged respondents fear losing welfare benefits as a result of participating. With the letter's current emphasis on the existence of government programs, the wealthy are likely to feel as though this survey is not relevant to them, and refuse. FRs also stated that "working-class republicans" are likely to refuse, because they associate survey participation with government program support. The implication for these findings is that statements regarding welfare should be downplayed, since many respondents have a negative connotation of welfare, and its salience overshadows other data uses.

A common theme that emerged from the focus groups was that all respondents are unhappy with our government, as it exists now. If most respondents, regardless of income level, feel that government should do a better job, then perhaps the letter should capitalize on that sentiment. Perhaps a statement following the specific example of uses for the data could emphasize the public's role in guiding decisions that affect government. Something like, "This is your chance to provide decision-makers with data that reflect your situation and your desires/needs," or "By providing your data, you help to inform decision-makers as they shape our government."

The data use statement could explain that respondents' information is combined with data from other households across the country. This may help reinforce what we mean by the "statistical uses only" statement that appears in the confidentiality assurance.

The following example incorporates the suggestions above, although additional input would be welcome in fine-tuning this opening paragraph:

I am writing to ask for your help with an important survey that the Census Bureau is conducting, called the Survey of Income and Program Participation. The data collected for this survey are used to evaluate and influence program changes that affect the availability of health insurance, the ability to afford the cost of higher education, and retirement programs. At some point, these issues affect most people in this country. This is your

chance to provide decision-makers with data that represent your situation and your future needs.

Selection Process The sensitive nature of the selection process could be de-emphasized, by explaining that addresses, not particular individuals, were selected during this process. An additional statement reinforcing personal responsibility would also be helpful in conveying the importance of this participation request. Morton-Williams and Young (1987) indicated that response rates could be raised if respondents' felt some amount of personal responsibility for the data quality. They suggested inserting explanations about sampling and selection procedures into the introduction (e.g., substitutes cannot be taken, quality data depends on your responses). A similar approach could be taken with the advance letter. Consider the following wording:

We selected your address, not you personally, as part of a scientifically selected sample. Your participation is extremely important because your responses will represent about 6,500 other households in your area. So, your participation is essential for creating a more accurate picture of the economic situation of everyone across the United States.

Confidentiality Statement Although the confidentiality statement may be one of the more rigid pieces of the letter, due to legal requirements, previous research indicates these assurances should be absolute, rather than qualified (Singer, Hippler, & Schwarz, 1992), and current exploratory research suggests more explicit and disambiguated assurances were preferred over those that were vague (Gerber, paper pending 2000). In addition, past research on respondent behavior, response rates, and data quality suggest that the more important variables in the perception of confidentiality assurances may actually be the respondents' trust in interviewers' assurances (Singer & Miller, 1992) and trust in the integrity and ethics of the research organization (Singer, Mathiowetz, & Couper, 1993; Singer & Miller, 1992; van Melis-Wright, Stone, & Herrmann, 1992), rather than the statements themselves.

Since the letter has less power over the convincing nature of interviewers, and focus group data suggest FRs are very compelling regarding their own involvement in the confidentiality of respondents' data, then attention should be turned to the potential for making the letter's confidentiality assurances as strong as possible. In Gerber's research (paper pending 2000), respondents thought the phrase "strictly confidential" was adequate, but preferred the phrase "confidential by law," because it explicitly linked the promise of confidentiality with "the law," Title 13. When asked about the assurance statement, "We never release information that would disclose your identity," respondents felt the promise was ambiguous and they were unsure to what information the statement was referring. In contrast, respondents preferred a more explicit statement that implied separate data files: "No one else will be able to connect your answers with your name and address," because it implied two separate data files.

Although the current confidentiality statement does not contain the words "confidential by law," it does associate an existing law with a requirement that the Census Bureau keep respondents' data confidential. However, in light of this research on this subject, consider disambiguating the phrase "your identity." If at all possible, making this statement more specific would strengthen the promise of confidentiality by indicating to respondents just what is meant by "your identity." A more specific statement might substitute the phrase "your name and address" for "your identity."

Also, the organization responsible for making such confidentiality claims should be more closely associated with the promise itself. Consider substituting "The Census Bureau," in the beginning of the statement, for "We."

Consider rewording the phrase "authority to conduct the survey" in the confidentiality statement. The word "authority" has a negative connotation, especially when it is embedded in a governmental survey

request. A reworded substitution using the word “authorized” sounds just as powerful, yet less threatening to respondents. In the FAQs, on the back of the letter, the “authorized” phrasing is used, so its use would not set a precedent (“Displaying this number shows that the Census Bureau is authorized to conduct this survey.”).

References to Title 13 should be standardized and consistent throughout the letter, unless accompanying text is clearly delineated from earlier reference contexts. In the current SIPP letter, this law is cited three separate ways, and it is not clear if these are different ways of referring to the same aspect of the law.

The term “may” used in the statistical purposes portion of the confidentiality statement can be interpreted in two ways: 1) “we may, but we may not, use the data in ways that protect your identity; and 2) “we will use the data in ways that protect your identity.” Writing explicit and unambiguous statements will prevent these unintended interpretations. Consider substituting “will” for “may” in this statement.

The following recommendations incorporate the implications from the discussion above:

Suggested confidentiality statement wording:

The Census Bureau is authorized to conduct this survey under 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.

Suggested changes incorporating Gerber’s research:

The Census Bureau is authorized to conduct this survey under 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. This information will only be used for statistical purposes, and no one else will be able to connect your answers with your name and address.

Final confidentiality statement received from Pat Doyle:

We are conducting this survey under the authority of 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. We may use this information only for statistical purposes.

Recommendations for the FAQs:

General Repetition in the FAQs should be eliminated and similar or related information should be organized and centrally located. Anxiety-producing material should be relocated here, to increase the likelihood that respondents will be more open to FRs’ discussion of these important survey aspects (e.g., voluntary disclosure statement, time to complete survey, survey waves, SSN discussion).

References to Title 13 should be standardized and used consistently, so that respondents reading the letter will not be confused.

The FAQs contain specialized technical language, specific to the survey field. These terms are unlikely to be understood by the general public and should be avoided (e.g., “...we conduct surveys to produce demographic and economic data,” and “...gather your existing data sources.”).

Recommendations for the FAQ section on the back of the letter are represented below, section-by-section:

Survey Purpose Incorporate an educational statement into the FAQs regarding the Census Bureau’s activity during “the other nine years.” Combine original paragraphs for survey purpose and reasons for

data collection, because they are related and cause unnecessary repetition. Consider the following wording for the first paragraph in the FAQs:

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. Our 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. Collecting information through the Survey of Income and Program Participation 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, and other information.

Selection Process Reiterate the sampling selection of address, not respondent's name. Relocate information about follow-up interviews in the last paragraph where SIPP waves are discussed. Consider placement of voluntary disclosure statement here.

Why did you pick me?

We did not choose you personally; we selected your address from a list of all the residential addresses in the country. We will conduct the interview with whoever is living at this address when the field representative arrives. Although answering any question is voluntary, each unanswered item lessens the accuracy of the data.

SSN Discussion If no OMB guidelines mandating its inclusion exist, removal of this paragraph is recommended, because it is not a question or concern respondents would have after reading the letter. If this is unacceptable, then consider the suggestions below in order to decrease the saliency of references to Social Security Numbers.

For paragraphs containing highly sensitive information, rewrite paragraph headings at less specific levels. In addition, saliency of the SSN issue can be de-emphasized if it is not placed in bold capital letters within the paragraph heading. Place this paragraph further down on the page, rather than close to the top—where it is currently located.

Consider incorporating the SSN discussion into the paragraph about confidentiality/data protection (“What guarantee do I have that the information that I give to the Census Bureau about my personal business is not reported to other people or organizations?”) Discussions about administrative record use could probably benefit from being associated with the more elaborate confidentiality assurance. This heading should also be written at a less specific level, and should also represent information contained in the newly amalgamated paragraph. Consider the following two heading suggestions:

Heading Option #1:

How does the Census Bureau prevent my information from being reported elsewhere/somewhere else?

Heading Option #2:

How do I know the Census Bureau will prevent my information from being reported to other people or organizations?

Text:

All the information you give to the Census Bureau for this survey is confidential by law (Title 13, United States Code, Section 9). Plus, every Census Bureau employee has taken an oath and is subject to a jail term, a fine, or both if he or she discloses ANY information that would identify any individual. We will only use this information for statistical purposes, and only in ways that will protect your individual identity. The Census Bureau is authorized to collect the data in this survey and produce data about the country's population and economy under Title 13, United States Code, Section 182.

During the survey, the interviewer will ask you for your Social Security Number. The Census Bureau collects this data to help avoid asking you additional questions during the survey, for which information is already available. This also helps to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the survey results. By providing your Social Security Number to us, we can obtain information that you have already provided to other government agencies. We protect the information we obtain from other agencies from unauthorized use in the same way we protect your survey responses. Providing your Social Security Number is voluntary.

Additional Information Paragraph Reword the heading of the last paragraph, substituting "process" for "interview," since this is more accurate. Rewrite the paragraph, eliminating technical and superfluous language, to make it more readable for the general public. Include information about the expected length of the initial interview, as well as information about SIPP waves.

Additional information about this process:

We estimate that it will take about 30 minutes, per interview, to collect your information. This includes time for reviewing instructions, searching your records, and completing and reviewing your answers. After your initial interview, we conduct a follow-up interview with you every four months for a fixed period of time, 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 0607-0865
Room 3104, Federal Building 3
U.S. Census Bureau of the Census
Washington, DC 20222-001**

This survey has been approved by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and has been given the OMB approval number 0607-0865. Displaying this number shows that the Census Bureau is authorized to conduct this survey. Please use this number in any correspondence concerning this survey.

Formatting Issues

Findings

The Times Roman font is difficult to read when applied to a body of text. The individual letters appear to be very small for the amount of space they take up on each line. This may impede respondents' reading when scanning the advance letter.

The current letter's salutation is not formatted properly. Where there is a "From," there usually is a "To." However, this letter is not formatted in a memo style, so "To" and "From" should not be used here. While the intent may have been to draw attention to the fact that this letter was sent by the director of the

Census Bureau, FRs across focus groups felt that respondents often did not associate Kenneth Prewitt's name with his title in the salutation. In addition, the "United States Department of Commerce" is more salient than the "Bureau of the Census," and this probably further impedes respondents' perceptions about the letter's origin.

The SIPP reference number just above the salutation clutters the top of the page and lessens the saliency of the letterhead. The SIPP reference number can be made less salient by moving it into the bottom left corner of the front page.

Recommendation(s):

General Use Helvetica 11 point font for the front of the letter and Helvetica 10 point font for the FAQs on the back of the letter. Individual letters in the Helvetica font are larger than the Times Roman font, yet more words fit on a line without looking crowded and dense. The Helvetica font is also easier to read and more clear when applied to a body of text.

The SIPP's website address could be added to the lower right-hand corner. Even though respondents are not likely to make use of it, it adds to the legitimacy of the letter by indicating that there is more information available if the respondent was motivated enough to search for it. In some usability testing, respondents like the message this conveys, even if they themselves would never search for more information.

Salutation & Closing This could be solved in several ways, but the closing should always associate Prewitt's title with his place of employment:

Salutation #1:

To Whom It May Concern:

Salutation #2:

Dear Resident:

Closing:

Sincerely,

**Kenneth Prewitt, Director
Bureau of the Census**

SIPP Letter Reference Number Reposition this number to a less prominent space, since it is only used for identification purposes within the Census Bureau. The lower left corner would keep this number from interfering with other aspects of the letter that respondents should notice.

Supplemental Material Use

Findings:

Supplementary materials are effective props when disseminated door-side. These materials are used at all points of the first contact, depending on FR style and degree of reluctance among respondents. They include an 8 ½ by 11 glossy "portfolio," or folder, which contains an assortment of end-product data reports, a general SIPP brochure, and a confidentiality brochure (now being re-written). One focus group mentioned their materials contained a "flier," which was titled "The Other Census Bureau." These

particular FRs did not care for the connotation associated with the title, which they felt was misleading and seemed to convey two separate organizations.

When presented to respondents by FRs, these props are effective. Supplementary material probably has much more impact in person, since they are often used as “credentials” to aid in convincing respondents of the Census Bureau’s, FR’s and the survey’s legitimacy. FRs like these materials and rely on them to demonstrate not only legitimacy, but they are also used to prove that some type of “end product” actually results. FRs feel these materials often go unread; however, they also recognize the impressive characteristics of eye-catching, concrete products they can leave in the hands of their respondents. FRs often said they felt the presence of the portfolio, reports, and brochures at the very least showed respondents that thought went into this survey process—which reinforces respondents’ perceptions of sponsor’s and FR’s legitimacy.

Recommendations:

These materials will probably be more effective if left under the control of the interviewer, and not mailed with the introductory letter. For respondents sensitive to government waste, brochures may confirm this suspicion.

FRs thought the general SIPP brochure was the best piece of supplemental material, because it gave respondents an idea of all the information collected by this survey. Some FRs suggested that the general SIPP brochure be reformatted from a folded pamphlet to a regularly sized, glossy flier. They thought this would increase the likelihood that respondents would notice it. In addition, they felt the font could be larger, due to the large numbers of respondents who have difficulty seeing printed words.

Conclusions

The recommendations presented in this report are based upon findings from the first phase of this project—the focus groups, which represent FRs experiences with respondents in the field. In the next phase of this research project, we expect to learn directly from respondents about how they interpret and react to the SIPP advance letter.

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