

The NLSY97: an introduction

*The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997
follows the lives of 12- to 16-year-olds
as they make pivotal decisions
regarding education and employment*

Michael Horrigan
and
James Walker

This issue of the *Monthly Labor Review* introduces readers to the newest addition to the family of surveys sponsored by the National Longitudinal Surveys (NLS) Program of the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). Termed the NLSY97, the respondents to this survey are individuals who were aged 12 to 16 on December 31, 1996. The first set of interviews began January 1997 (hence, the NLSY97), and members of this longitudinal cohort have been interviewed on an annual basis ever since. This survey is conducted as an in-person interview, with the field interviewer entering the respondent's answers into a laptop computer—sometimes called a Computer Assisted Personal Interview (CAPI).

Designed as a longitudinal survey, the NLSY97 follows the lives of these young men and women as they make pivotal decisions as to whether they should continue their education after high school or choose an occupation and enter the world of work. We follow the progression of their lives as they become independent adults, settle into careers, form relationships, and make decisions about cohabitation, marriage, and the formation of families.

A key difference between cross-sectional surveys (such as the Current Population Survey) and longitudinal surveys (such as the NLSY97) is that annual interviews with the same individuals enable researchers to chronicle important events

that individuals experience over the course of their lifetimes. For example, the collection of data on jobs held by sample members allows the construction of a week-by-week history of every job held (and the characteristics of those jobs) since the age of 14. Knowledge of the employment history of individuals, coupled with the rich array of the socioeconomic and demographic information collected in each interview, gives researchers the ability to investigate and isolate how the choices individuals make at younger ages can affect outcomes later in life. For example, does working during the school year while in high school have a net positive or negative impact on labor market success as adults?

This issue of the *Monthly Labor Review* contains five articles that use data from the first round of interviews with the NLSY97 cohort. These articles, which are described briefly below, investigate important aspects of the early labor market experiences of these youths. The NLSY97 questionnaires, however, collect information on a much wider set of topical areas, reflecting the complexity of the lives of our respondents. The diversity of questions also reflects the interest and mission of our partners in the Federal Government. A number of Federal Government agencies have and continue to provide funding support for various questionnaire

Michael Horrigan is director of the National Longitudinal Surveys Program in the Office of Employment and Unemployment Statistics, Bureau of Labor Statistics. James Walker is professor of economics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and is principal investigator for the NLSY97. E-mail: horrigan_m@bls.gov

modules in the NLS family of surveys, including the NLSY97.

In the first round of interviews, information was collected about the youths' relationships with their parents, contact with absent parents, marital and fertility histories to date, and sexual activity. Funding support was received from the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development for these question modules. With support from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, modules were constructed that asked respondents about criminal behavior, contact with the criminal justice system, and alcohol and drug use. Areas of the youth survey that are potentially sensitive, such as sexual activity and criminal behavior, are asked in a self-administered portion of the survey in which the respondent listens to the questions on earphones and types his or her answers directly into the laptop computer.

In addition, just prior to the first round of interviews with the NLSY97 cohort, BLS conducted a survey of schools to determine the nature and extent of school-to-work programs. This survey of schools (and a follow up survey conducted in 2001) provides a valuable complement to the data on these programs reported by the NLSY97 respondents. Funding from the Departments of Education and Labor's National School-to-Work Office provided support for both the surveys of schools and for the development of a questionnaire module on School-to-Work programs that have been included in the NLSY97 first round interview.

Funding was also received from the Department of Defense to identify a sample of 18- to 23-year-olds and a separate sample of youth entering 10th–12th grades for the purpose of administering the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) examination. This test is designed to serve as the basis for constructing civilian test norms against which the scores of enlistees to the Armed Services can be compared. The ASVAB examination also was administered to the NLSY97 cohort, thereby providing an important measure of skill level at a point in time.

Finally, in this first round of the NLSY97, BLS also decided to conduct an interview with a parent or parent figure for each youth respondent. These interviews provide a tremendous amount of context for understanding the lives of our youth respondents. During the parent interview, retrospective (lifetime) information was collected from the parent about the youth respondent's health while growing up, the schools the youth attended, and the history of the youth's living arrangements. Also, the parent being interviewed was asked to report his or her own lifetime history of employment, education, training, marriages, and fertility, as well as provide the same information for his or her spouse. Question modules on family income and assets and participation in government assistance programs also were administered. Finally, many of the same "attitude" questions asked of the

youths about their parents were also asked of the parents about their children.

To begin exploring the richness of these data, the NLS program cosponsored a conference on November 18–19, 1999, with the Joint Center for Poverty Research (Northwestern University and the University of Chicago) to present findings from the first round of NLSY97 interviews. Selected papers from this conference are being published in three venues: the *Journal of Human Resources (JHR)*; a special volume of papers being published by the Russell Sage Foundation entitled *Social Awakenings: Adolescent Behavior as Adulthood Approaches*, edited by Robert T. Michael (New York, Russell Sage Press, 2001); and the articles contained in this issue of the *Review*. A listing of titles from both the *JHR* and the Russell Sage volumes gives an idea of the breadth of research that has already resulted using data from the NLSY97.¹

The NLSY97-based articles being published in this issue of the *Review* emphasize more traditional labor market topics. Mary Joyce and David Neumark, in their article, "School-to-work programs: information from two surveys," examines the degree to which youths participate in "school-to-work" programs. Based on the 1994 School to Work Opportunity Act, a variety of programs have been set up in our Nation's schools designed to help youth make the transition from school to the world of work. Although the NLSY97 cohort is still too young to investigate the impact of participation in the programs on subsequent labor market outcomes, Joyce and Neumark have been able to determine which youths were most likely to have participated in these programs.

The other articles in this issue closely examine the nature and extent of youth employment. The article by Lynn Huang, Michael Pergamit, and Jamie Shkolnik, "Youth initiation into the labor market," examines the employment experiences of 12 and 13 year olds. The NLSY97 questionnaire makes a concerted effort to collect information on work experiences of respondents when they were very young.

Donna Rothstein's article, "Youth employment in the United States," examines the prevalence of working while aged 14–16. She examines traditional employee jobs in which youths have an ongoing relationship with a particular employer, such as a restaurant or supermarket, and "freelance" jobs, where the youth is doing one or a few tasks for several people but has no "boss." Examples of freelance jobs are babysitting and yard work.

Rothstein's other article, "Youth employment during school: results from two longitudinal surveys," examines employment patterns during the school year for both the NLSY79 cohort (aged 14–21 on December 31, 1978) and the NLSY97 cohort. She also presents findings in the literature as to how the youth's working while in high school impacts his

or her life as an adult.

Rosella Gardecki's article, "Racial differences in youth employment," looks at the differences by racial group in their decisions to work while young. Part of her focus is on examining how working while young (age 14) affects the likelihood that an individual will choose to work as an older teen (age 16). She examines patterns of employment behavior on the basis of racial differences, and, at the same time, accounts for differences among youth on the basis of certain other individual characteristics (highest grade in school, participation in criminal activity, for example), family characteristics (employment status of parent(s), type of family, for example), and neighborhood and geographic factors (such as, the local unemployment rate or county poverty rate).

FUTURE DIRECTIONS OF THE SURVEY will be to continue collecting core labor market information and introduce age-appropriate specialized questionnaire modules. As of this writing, the NLSY97 has just completed the fourth round of interviews, and public-use data from the third round of interviews have recently become available. The NLSY97 is constantly intro-

ducing new questionnaire modules that reflect the changing nature of the lives of our respondents as they enter their early twenties. For example, one question module will explore whether these young adults decide to attend college, and if so, how the youth respondents arrived at their particular choice of college. As our youth respondents become parents, they will be asked questions on how they handle childcare responsibilities. We also plan a series of questions on the various relationships our respondents enter into as young adults, with an emphasis on dating, cohabitation, and the decision to marry. As we introduce these specialized modules, we will continue to ask a core set of questions on labor market experiences, education, and training. The NLSY97 is an exciting new source of longitudinal information that will provide social science researchers with a rich database to use in studying the impact of public policies. It also will provide valuable insights into the dynamic processes that influence the pathways that are taken through life. We do hope you enjoy the articles in this issue, and we look forward to seeing a new generation of research articles using this valuable source of longitudinal data. □

Notes

¹ The titles are as follows. In the *Journal of Human Resources*, volume 36, issue 4: "Measuring Poverty in the NLSY97," by Carolyn J. Hill and Robert T. Michael; "Evaluating School-to-Work Programs Using the New NLSY," by David Neumark and Mary Joyce; "The Role of Parental Allowances in Determining Youth Employment," by Sabrina Wulff Pabilonia; "Rising College Expectations Among Youth in the U.S.: A Comparison of 15 and 16 Year Olds in the 1979 and 1997 NLSY," by John Reynolds and Jennifer Pemberton; "Savings of Young Parents," by Annamaria Lusardi, Ricardo Cossa, and Erin L. Kleindorfer; "Does Head Start Yield Long-Term Benefits?" by Alison Aughinbaugh.

In *Social Awakenings: Adolescent Behavior as Adulthood Approaches*, the titles are: "A Lens on Adolescence: The 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth," by Robert T. Michael; "The Effect of Family Structure on Youth Outcomes in the NLSY97," by Charles R. Pierret; "Patterns of Nonresident-Father Involvement," by Laura M. Argus and H. Elizabeth Peters; "Parental Regulation and Adolescent Discretionary Time-

Use Decisions: Findings from the NLSY97," by Robin L. Tepper; "Family Environment and Adolescent Sexual Debut in Alternative Household Structures," by Mignon R. Moore; "Exploring Determinants of Adolescents' Early Sexual Behavior," by Robert T. Michael and Courtney Bickert; "Body Weight and the Dating and Sexual Behaviors of Young Adolescents," by John Cawley; "Adolescents' Expectations Regarding Birth Outcomes: A Comparison of the NLSY79 and NLSY97 Cohorts," by James R. Walker; "Who are Youth 'At Risk'? Expectations Evidence in the NLSY97," by Jeff Domnitz, Charles F. Manski, and Baruch Fischhoff; "Food Stamp Program Participation and Health: Estimates from the NLSY97," by Diane Gibson; "What Determines Adolescent Demand for Alcohol and Marijuana? A Comparison of Findings from the NLSY79 and the NLSY97," by Pinka Chatterji; "Changes in Gender and Racial Gaps in Adolescent Antisocial Behavior: The NLSY79 versus the NLSY97," by Yasuyo Abe; and "City Kids and Country Cousins: Rural and Urban Youths, Deviance, and Labor Market Ties," by L. Susan Williams.