

## **An Overview of the General Social Survey\***

The General Social Survey (GSS) has provided a wealth of data on contemporary American society for approximately 35 years by measuring social change and trends and constants in attitudes, behaviors and attributes of the adult population. The GSS is a regular, ongoing interview survey of U.S households conducted by the National Opinion Research Center. The mission of the GSS is to make timely, high-quality, scientifically relevant data available to social science researchers. The GSS is a personal interview survey and collects information on a wide range of demographic characteristics of respondents and their parents; behavioral items such as group membership and voting; personal psychological evaluations, including measures of happiness, misanthropy, and life satisfaction; and attitudinal questions on such public issues as abortion, crime and punishment, race relations, gender roles, and spending priorities. Since 1972 the GSS has conducted 26 in-person, cross-sectional surveys of the adult household population of the U.S. Interviews have been conducted with a total of 51,020 respondents. The 1972-74 surveys used modified probability designs and the remaining surveys were completed using a full-probability sample design, producing a high-quality, representative sample of the adult population of the U.S. The GSS has a response rate of over 70 percent above that of other major social science surveys and 40-45 percentage points higher than the industry average.

### **Current GSS Design**

The basic GSS design is a repeated cross-sectional survey of a nationally representative sample of non-institutionalized adults who speak either English or Spanish. Subsampling of non-respondents is done to limit survey costs while maintaining a nationally representative sample. Each GSS formally includes an A sample and a B sample. The preferred interview mode is in-person interviews; however, a few interviews will be done by telephone in the event that an in-person contact cannot be scheduled. Each respondent is asked the replicating core of socio-demographic background items, along with replicated measurements of sociopolitical attitudes and behaviors. Many of the latter are measured by way of a “ballot” design such that each item is answered by a random 2/3 of each sample. Each GSS sample (A and B) includes an International Social Survey Program module (ISSP). Each sample is also asked to respond to several topical modules that may be supported by NSF or others, but are no longer supported by the basic grant from NSF. Some of these topical modules, however, extend across both samples in a given GSS survey.

---

\* This section summarizes materials provided by the GSS PIs in funded proposals, reports, and commentary prepared for the workshop.

## A Selective Chronology of the General Social Survey\*

1972	First GSS; subsequently conducted almost annually until 1993
	Initial sampling design was block quota/modified probability
	Many replicating core items measured on rotation design (2 years on and 1 year off)
	Board of Advisors established; remained in existence until 1983
1975	Shift to full-probability sampling design
1977	Board of Methodological Advisors added; operated until 1983
1982	First African-American oversample
	Bilateral cross-national collaboration with ALLBUS initiated
1983	Board of Overseers established
1985	Expansion of topical modules initiated
	First International Social Survey Program module; topic was the role of government
1987	Second African-American oversample
1988	Split-ballot rotation system for replicating core items adopted
1991	First auxiliary study (National Organizations Study)
1994	Shift to two-sample design with target N of 3000
	Major reduction in size of replicating core to accommodate more topical modules
	Family mobility module and affiliated sibling study
1996	Segments of replicating core on race, gender, religion refreshed to alter series tracked (until 2003)
1998	First National Congregations Study
2000	Clergy and Congregational Attendees studies
2002	Shift to computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) methods
	Second GSS-linked National Organizations Study
2004	Subsampling of non-respondents design adopted
2006	Target population expanded to include Spanish-speaking adults
	Third sample added to accommodate coverage of topical modules
	Baseline wave of data collected for first GSS panel, spanning 2006-2010
	National Voluntary Associations Study underway, linked to 2004 data
	Second National Congregations Study now in progress

### Survey Development

The GSS has six components, which include a replicating core, topical modules, cross-national modules, experiments, re-interviews, and follow-up studies. The replicating core makes up one-third of the GSS and the topical and cross-national modules the other two-thirds. Experiments are conducted in both the core and supplemental modules. Re-interview and follow-up studies are completed through additional data collections. The replicating core is the part of the GSS that the Sociology Program has continually supported over the past 35 years. The “core” consists of questions that regularly appear on the GSS. The contents of the core are periodically reviewed by the grant principal investigators and Board of Overseers (consisting of a multi-

\* Prepared by Peter Marsden for the workshop.

disciplinary group of scholars with expertise in survey and other social science research methodologies) to insure that the content remains relevant. Core questions are updated when deemed necessary by the Board of Overseers. The core is about one-third demographic information and two-thirds items that capture attitudes and behaviors. GSS content is wide ranging with 5084 variables overall in the 1972-2006 file. The topical modules are used to introduce new topics not previously investigated by the GSS and to cover existing topics in greater detail with more fully specified models. The concept for a module may originate with the PIs, the Board, or other scholars. Many prominent scholars help develop topical modules. For example, 74 researchers representing many fields from 48 universities and research institutes have served on the GSS Board and 253 social scientists in a dozen disciplines from 147 institutions have participated in the design of the first 28 topical modules.

## **The GSS Core**

The GSS is a 90-minute in-person interview. Forty-five minutes of the GSS are devoted to the core items, 15 minutes are devoted to the questions selected as part of the International Social Survey Program (ISSP), and 30 minutes are allocated to topical modules that are funded by sources other than the main NSF grant for the GSS. The socio-demographics in the core are administered to all respondents and most attitudinal and behavioral measures are administered on split-ballots with background items and a range of replicated measures of sociopolitical attitudes and behaviors. The core questions are administered as a split-ballot, with each respondent answering two-thirds of the core questions. Topical modules are focused on a wide range of substantive issues and are funded by a variety of government agencies, private foundations, and other organizations. These funds supplement the main NSF grant funding and allow the GSS to fully fund the 90 minute survey and collect a larger sample than would be possible with only NSF funds.

The GSS has a “replicating core” that emphasizes collection of data on social trends through exact replication of question wording over time. Core items fall into two major categories— socio-demographic/background measures, and replicated measurements on social and political attitudes and behaviors. Many of the latter items appear on three GSS “ballots”, each of which is administered to a random two-thirds of most GSS samples. Over the course of the project, there have been many changes in replicated items. In addition, there are “quasi-core” items that are repeatedly funded by other sources. In addition to the planned trend items included in the GSS core, there are other data series that arise through unplanned repetition of topical modules and the replication of ISSP items.

## **Recent Innovations**

The 2006 GSS has two major ongoing innovations. First, it serves as the baseline sample for the new GSS panel component, with a sub-sample of cases to be re-interviewed in 2008 and 2010. Second, the GSS core was translated into Spanish and administered in either English or Spanish as needed in 2006. This practice will continue in 2008 and 2010.

## GSS Panel Component

The GSS now includes a panel study component for the first time in order to allow the direct observation of change over time in the same individuals. The GSS switched from a repeating, cross-section design to a combined repeating cross-section and panel-component design. The 2006 GSS was the base year for the first panel. A sub-sample of 2006 GSS cases (most likely about 2000) will be selected for reinterview in 2008 and again in 2010 as part of the GSS in those years (see Table 1). The 2008 GSS will consist of a new cross-section of about 2000 plus the 2006 reinterviews. The 2010 GSS will consist of another new cross-section of about 2000, the second reinterview wave of the 2006 panel cases and the first reinterview wave of the 2008 panel cases. The 2010 GSS will be the first one to fully implement the new, combined design. In 2012 and later General Social Surveys, there will likewise be a fresh cross-section, wave two panel cases from the immediately preceding GSS, and wave three panel cases from the next earlier GSS.

### **Rotating, Three-Wave Panel/Cross Section Design**

Samples	2006 n=	2008 n=	2010 n=	2012 n=
New Cross Section	3000	2000	2000	2000
Initial Reinterview Target	2000	2000	2000	2000
Expected Wave 2 Completed Interviews	N/A	1500	1500	1500
Expected Wave 3 Completed interviews	N/A	N/A	1200	1200
Total Sample	3000	3500	4700	4700

## Spanish Language Translation

In 2006 the GSS added Spanish to its standard, English-language version. This translation allowed the GSS to expand its target population to adults living in U.S. households able to be interviewed in either English or Spanish. The addition of the Spanish language interviews “notably increased the number and proportion of Hispanics in the GSS.” In addition, the composition of the Hispanic population changed in several notable ways. The adding of Spanish-language interviews shows that Hispanics are notably less assimilated than indicated in the previous English-only samples and also differ on several other demographics. This variation across demographics is often, but not always, linked to the differences in level of assimilation across the language-use/ability groups. The analysis of non-demographics further indicates that Hispanics often significantly differ across language-use/ability groups.

Further analysis of the differences across language-use/ability groups focusing on the English and Spanish bilinguals identifies a few items on which language effects may be occurring. These will be explored further by building Spanish-wording experiments into the 2008 GSS.

## **Cross-National Research**

The GSS first spurred cross-national research by inspiring other nations to develop data collection programs modeled on the GSS, including Allgemeinen Bevölkerungsumfragen der Sozialwissenschaften (ALLBUS) in Germany, the British Social Attitudes Survey, the National Social Science Survey in Australia, the Polish GSS, and the Japanese GSS. Second, it joined with these and other programs to form the International Social Survey Program (ISSP), a collaborative program of comparative survey research. The fundamental goal of ISSP is to study important social processes in a comparative perspective by both examining differences across societies and changes within countries over time. Since 1984, ISSP has grown to 43 nations, which includes the founding four-- US, Germany, Britain, and Australia-- plus Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, China, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, the Dominican Republic, Finland, France, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, the Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, Turkey, Uruguay, and Venezuela. Data from ISSP modules on the role of government, social networks and support systems, social equality, the family, work orientation, religion, the environment, national identity, and citizenship are available from various national archives and the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) in the United States.

## **Experimentation and Re-Interview, Follow-up and Methodological Studies**

Since its inception, experiments have been included as part of the GSS and the GSS has completed numerous re-interviews and follow-up studies. Experiments are an integral part of the GSS program of methodological research, and dozens of studies have been completed as part of the replicating core and topical modules to examine most aspects of survey methods. Re-interview studies have included both methodological and substantive studies and the GSS has also served as the source for follow-up studies of employers, voluntary associations, religious organizations/leaders, and family mobility. In a continuing effort to improve data, the GSS conducts methodological research on topics such as survey error, sensitive topics, sample-frame comparability, third-person effects, contextual effects, the measurement of race and ethnicity, item non-response, cross-national comparisons, and network measurements.

## **Data Dissemination and Usage**

Since 1972 the Roper Center for Public Research has been the original point of deposit for GSS Data. Upon release, data users may immediately secure data on a CD from the Roper Center. Data, however, are also simultaneously released to ICPSR and the University of California at Berkeley Survey Documentation and Analysis (SDA) Archive where, after additional preparation, data are made publicly available for download and analysis. GSS data are also distributed by over half a dozen archives around the world. In 2007 the GSS received support from NSF to update their website. The funds are being used to create a GSS data dissemination portal which will allow researchers and the general public to browse the GSS 1972-2006

cumulative data file, run basic statistical tabulations on-line within their web browser, and select variables of interest for download into a selected statistical package format for additional analysis.

GSS data are made available to a broad-based user community. Currently, there are over 150 different versions of GSS/ISSP. Documentation comes in five major forms-- the GSS Cumulative codebook, a SPSS system file, *the GSS Report Series*, the GSS Data and Information Retrieval System (GSSDIRS), and, for the ISSP, electronic and hard-copy codebooks in English, data files, and a CD-ROM with codebooks and files, plus copies of original language questionnaires. The GSSDIRS website seems popular with users, having approximately 4,000,000 visits annually. The ISSP website is visited approximately 200,000 times a year. The user community includes researchers, college teachers, university students, business planners, media and public officials. Academic scholars who use the GSS as a data source include sociologists, political scientists, economists, statisticians and survey methodologists, anthropologists, geographers, biologists, engineers, psychologists, criminologists and legal scholars, medical/health researchers, and business administration and management scholars.

The GSS is a well used research tool and there are now 14,000 documented uses, but the detailed categorization has not been updated since 2003. In 2003, the PIs were able to document 8,662 uses of the GSS: 4,862 journal articles, 1,664 books, 1,364 scholarly papers, 568 reports, and 188 dissertations and theses. Most users (82%) were academics with college affiliations. Usage has grown over the years, increasing from 200 per annum in the late 1980s to over 600 per annum in 2003. With the exception of the Census and its Current Population Survey, the GSS is the most frequently used data set in the three leading sociology journals. The GSS has been used about as often as the total of the next six most frequently used data sets combined.

## Recommendations

The workshop participants strongly emphasized that the GSS had made many invaluable contributions to social science, to U.S. policy debates, and to public understanding of the characteristics of U.S. society. GSS time series and cross-sectional data provide the foundation for social science understanding of a wide range of issues, allowing for the tracking of changes in attitudes regarding race and ethnic relations, religious beliefs and practices, and family life. The GSS occupies a unique niche as an effective social science omnibus survey, which it has occupied for about 35 years. Its future strengths lie in being able to continue to operate as a very high quality survey of the behavior and attitudes of a representative sample of the adult U.S. population. The GSS is the “gold standard” for survey research in the U.S. and globally. Thus, the current basic structure of the GSS provides a strong foundation for moving into the future. Workshop participants recommended that the basic structure of the GSS should remain the same. However, they also offered recommendations that focus on how to move forward and enhance the GSS for the future.