

Conducting a Feasibility Study for a Nationally-Consistent, State-Level Survey of Child and Family Well-Being Under New Welfare Policies

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Welfare reform has generated a great deal of interest in studying low-income households. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act directed the Census Bureau to conduct a national study to monitor the effects of welfare reform on families and children. While the Survey of Program Dynamics (SPD) will inform Congress about the impacts of welfare reform policies on the national level, no mechanism is in place to provide state-based and sub-state information to those who now have the major responsibility for shaping and implementing social welfare policy. With partial support from the Census Bureau, Iowa State University has recently completed a feasibility study to develop methodologies for expanding the SPD to provide state-level data; and to develop and test questions that could be incorporated into the SPD or the Survey of Income and Program Participation.

Methods

The initial task was to construct a series of questions on topics not covered in the national SPD instrument and examine the steps required to integrate such state-level questions with the national survey. Based on findings from state and community case studies and a qualitative study of welfare families, a series of key welfare reform issues were identified. The core SPD instrument was augmented by questions that are of particular interest in Iowa: transportation, health, food security, economic hardship, substance and domestic abuse, social supports, and attitudes toward the welfare system.

A second task was to investigate the use of state welfare participant databases as a sampling frame to augment traditional area sample frames. A database of Iowa's Family Investment Program (formerly AFDC) and food stamp recipients was created in April 1998 and represents participants as of March 1998. A two-stage cluster sample was selected from the database. In the first stage of sampling, a stratified sample of 10 counties was selected; a sample of cases was then selected from each sample county. To ensure that all areas of Iowa were represented within the sample, the state was divided into seven strata and counties were selected from the strata. The target number of completed interviews was 100. A total of 125 cases was selected under the assumption that not all cases would be identified as eligible and agree to be interviewed. Personal interviews were conducted in July - October, 1998. Each respondent received a \$20 gift certificate from a local grocery store.

Results and Implications

While the SPD questionnaire allows researchers to obtain detailed income and program participation information, the level of respondent burden and interviewer burden is quite high for the segment of the population of interest. Many important localized questions could not be included because of concerns about interview length (ranging from an average interview time of 2 hours to 3-4 hours for large families). Alternative strategies that retain a core set of SPD questions would allow a broader set of locally relevant questions to be incorporated into a survey instrument.

Early results indicate that using administrative databases to select a sample is an effective but potentially costly way to reach low-income households. Of the 125 cases selected, 97 were located and 68 agreed to be interviewed. Aggressive tracking, due to gaps in the database and the fact that the households are mobile, and excellent incentives and refusal conversion efforts are needed to enhance response rates. In addition, the use of a mixed mode approach relying on telephone and in-person interviews may be an effective way to reduce the high cost of surveying low-income households.

Endnotes

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