

# OMB Guidance on Nonresponse for Household Surveys

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*The views expressed in this presentation are those of the author  
and do not represent changes in OMB policy.*



# Nonresponse in Federal Government Household Surveys

- More and more difficult to contact and obtain cooperation from general public
- Increasing resources and efforts required to improve or maintain response rates
- RDD surveys appear to be hardest hit



# Survey Response Rates in the Past Two Decades

- OMB “Rule of Thumb” in 80’s and 90’s was 80% response rate
- OMB research in 1980’s showed Median response rate of about 90% across all business surveys by major statistical agencies
- In 1980’s & 1990’s many Federal surveys achieved rates  $>90\%$



# OMB Research on Response Rates in late 1990's

- In 2002, Lu examined 199 surveys
  - Surveys were approved by OMB in 1998
  - Research focused on collections for general purpose statistics
- Results:
  - Mean actual response rate 82.2%, Median 84.7%
  - 2/3 achieved response rates  $> 80\%$
  - 1/5 achieved response rates  $< 70\%$



# Why is OMB Developing New Guidance?

- Conditions changing fast
  - RDD, Web Surveys
- Agencies are seeking clear guidance
  - one size does not fit all
  - focus on nonresponse bias
- Emphasis on data quality



# Two Complementary Initiatives

- OMB update and revision of ‘old’ Statistical Policy Directives
  - E.g., race, Metro Areas
- Proposed Standards for Statistical Surveys
  - Developed by FCSM subcommittee
- Development of ‘new’ guidance specific to surveys submitted to OMB for approval under PRA
- Draft Questions and Answers when designing surveys and other information collections that use statistical methods



# OMB Draft Guidance

- Q&A Audience is all Federal agencies conducting and sponsoring collections of information that use statistical methods (broadly defined)
  - Assumes little knowledge of clearance process, survey methodology, and statistics
- Standards more geared to technical professionals in each area



# Development

- FCSM subcommittee has been updating and revising Statistical Policy Directives 1&2
  - Standards for Statistical Surveys and Publication of Statistics
  - Last issued in 1978
- OMB created Q&A's building off earlier "Frequently Asked Statistical Questions" and input from OMB desk officers



# Nonresponse Issues Addressed in both Documents

- Role of Nonresponse in Survey Design
- Calculation of Response Rates
- Acceptable Response Rates
- Ways to Improve Response Rates
- How to Assess Nonresponse Bias



# Why are Response Rates Important?

- Data quality and field performance indicator
- Low response rates can be an indicator of potential problems such as
  - Nonresponse bias
  - Variance estimate may be understated



# Role of Nonresponse in Survey Design

- The survey must be designed to achieve high response rates, commensurate with the importance of survey uses, to ensure that survey results are representative of the target population...
  - Prior to data collection, identify expected unit response rates at each stage of data collection, based on content, use, mode, and type of survey.
  - Plan a nonresponse bias analysis if the expected unit response rate is below 80 percent.



# Role of Nonresponse in Survey Design

- Develop protocols to monitor data collection activities, with strategies to correct identified problems.
  - implement quality and performance measurement and process control systems to monitor data collection activities
  - Use internal reporting systems that provide reporting of response rates and the reasons for nonresponse throughout the data collection.



# Role of Nonresponse in Survey Design

– If response rates are low and it is impossible to conduct more extensive procedures for the full sample:

- Select a random subsample of nonrespondents selected for the more intensive data collection method.
- Determine a set of required response items to obtain when a respondent is unwilling to fully cooperate.



# How Should Response Rates be Calculated?

- Agencies must be clear on how they are calculating response rates
- Response rates must be computed using standard formulas to measure the proportion of the eligible sample that is represented by the responding units in each study.
  - Calculate all response rates, unweighted and weighted, based with on the probability of selection, or, in the case of establishment surveys, based on the proportion the establishment represents of the total industry.



# Nonresponse Analysis and Response Rate calculation

- Formulas provided
- Another FCSM subcommittee drafting report on recommended formulas that will supercede these



# What are Acceptable Response Rates?

- Surveys collecting “influential information” (see Information Quality Guidelines) should achieve high response rates
- Agencies need to consider how they will use the data and how the methods chosen will achieve acceptable response rates and data quality



# What are Acceptable Response Rates?

- Provide expected response rates and
  - Description of how response rate determined
  - Description of steps to maximize the response rate
- If <80%:
  - Plan to evaluate potential nonresponse bias
- Generally, collections projecting <60% will not be approved, especially if purpose is to provide estimates generalizable to the population.



# Is OMB More Reluctant now to Approve RDD Surveys?

- No, but ...
- We share concerns about falling response rates
- For Federal RDD collections, Agencies need to justify selection of RDD method and how response rates will be maximized.



# How can Response Rates be Improved?

- General and some mode-specific suggestions:
  - Send Advance letters
  - Promote awareness of survey
  - Use multiple modes
  - Design the questionnaire to be user-friendly
  - Use more contact attempts
  - Build rapport with respondents
  - Train interviewers to convert refusals
  - Lengthen the field period
  - Experiment with incentives



# When to Conduct a Nonresponse Bias Analysis

- If the overall unit response rate is less than 80 percent, conduct nonresponse analysis using unit responses rates and assess whether the data are missing at random.
- For multi-stage collections, analyze each stage with particular attention to the “problem” stages.



# Examining Potential Nonresponse Bias

- Nonresponse bias analyses should include:
  - Comparing Response rates by different subgroups
  - Comparing nonrespondents and respondents on frame variables
  - Comparing respondents to known characteristics of the population from an external source
  - Comparing initial refusers with initial respondents



# Examining Potential Nonresponse Bias

- Subsampling nonrespondents for more extensive follow-up efforts
  - permits a description of nonrespondents' characteristics, and allows for possible weight adjustments
- Collecting critical items from reluctant respondents
  - Also permits a comparison with characteristics of complete respondents.



# Planned Activities

- Interagency Council on Statistical Policy reviewing both documents
- Broader agency, peer, and public review to follow
- ASA session in August
- FCSM Statistical Policy Seminar in December



# More information

## OMB Website

[www.whitehouse.gov/omb](http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb)

Go to “Statistical Programs and Standards”

## Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology

[www.fcsm.gov](http://www.fcsm.gov)

## OMB regulations for PRA, 5 CFR 1320:

[www.access.gpo.gov/nara/cfr/waisidx\\_03/5cfr1320\\_03.html](http://www.access.gpo.gov/nara/cfr/waisidx_03/5cfr1320_03.html)



# FCSM Subcommittee Members

- Al Tupek, Census (Chair)
- William Arends, NASS
- Jay Casselberry, EIA
- Kevin Cecco, IRS
- Steven H. Cohen, BLS
- Patrick Flannagan, BTS
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