

March 5, 2010 COPAFS Meeting Report

by Patricia C. Becker

Report from Ed Spar. As is customary, Ed led off the meeting. As APDU members may be aware, Kathy Wallman suffered a stroke on December 31. Ed reported that it did not affect her cognitively, and that she has been in rehab for mobility and balance issues. As of March 1, however, she was back at work at OMB and she is expected to make a full recovery. Regarding the budget, Ed distributed a handout with the figures, but opted not to discuss them; he viewed discussion at this time as premature and said that he would report in June, after Congressional hearings.

A new COPAFS web site is under development (overdue, in our opinion). As of this writing (March 18), it has still not replaced the old home page. It should be up soon, however, and definitely by the time of the June COPAFS meeting. The new site will enable COPAFS to eliminate paper distribution of some items which have routinely been available at the meetings, such as the membership list.

Ed briefly discussed the COPAFS-hosted January 8 Demographic Analysis conference, the products plan for the 2010 census (distributed on paper), release of the National Household Travel Survey, and a report on the new supplemental poverty measure. He also mentioned the upcoming release of 5-year ACS data at the census tract level. A release this fall will be based on 2000 census controls, while the 2011 release will be based on 2010 census controls. This will lead to major discontinuities in the data. The issue is scheduled for discussion at the upcoming advisory committee meetings.

COPAFS recruitment. Chair Judie Mopsik introduced Board member Seth Grimes, who described an initiative to increase COPAFS membership and distributed a brief questionnaire asking responding to identify other organizations which might benefit from joining. Attendees were asked to return the filled-out questionnaire by the end of the meeting.

Allen Beck, Bureau of Justice Statistics: data required for the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA). The 2003 PREA requires BJS to collect, report, and analyze data on prison rape annually. This is a tough job, requiring a minimal 10 percent sample of all federal, state, and county prisons, and report of results no later than June 30 each year. Many complaints have been lodged against the survey and the reports, including:

The report took too long to complete.

The report focused on large facilities, and did not include all facilities and youth.

The rates are too low. There must be something wrong with the survey.

The report fails to make it clear that the data are based on allegations.

Victimization is under-reported because victims are reluctant to report.

The report overstates the severity of allegations. Not all incidents involve rape.

Prevalence rates are based on small numbers

The report is too complex.

The report does not provide enough detail.

The report did not offer policy recommendations.

BJS failed to follow the mandatory reporting of abuse and neglect.

The report slanders staff and destroys what facilities are trying to do.

They're trying to fix these problems. It's very difficult. Measuring victimization requires a

complex series of questions, administered in a private setting, using computers with enhanced confidentiality provisions. The questions are very explicit. In the end, there are many false positives and false negatives. The work is ongoing.

David Johnson and Jason Fields, HHES, Census Bureau: Understanding Event History Calendars. An event history calendar (EHC) is a new way of collecting data, applying in this instance to the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP). David Johnson led off the discussion with a brief history of SIPP and of the reengineering effort now underway. EHCs are an integral part of that work.

The Committee on National Statistics recently completed a report on the reengineering project. The Panel was very supportive of SIPP and the contribution it makes to “evaluating and improving government programs addressed to the social and economic needs of the U.S. population.” The Panel was less supportive, however, of the EHC approach, and supports “a major program of experimentation and evaluation of the event history approach for developing suitable data on the short-run dynamics of household composition, income, employment, and program participation from a reengineered ... SIPP. The details of the Census Bureau’s plans should be disseminated to SIPP stakeholders for comments and suggestions for improvement.” That, then, is what the COPAFS presentation was all about.

The basics of SIPP include a national panel survey. The duration of each panel has ranged from 2½ to 4 years, with respondents being interviewed 3 times a year. Thus, they were asked to recall events over a four month period. Jason Fields explained that, using the EHC, the idea is to collect information covering an entire year in one interview. EHC is designed to exploit people’s memories and the links between events. They don’t have to report these events in chronological order. Testing began with a paper and pencil “proof of concept” test in 2008; a CAPI (computer assisted personal interviewing) test is in the field now. More tests are planned for 2012.

The major question: can EHC interviews collect data comparable in quality to the current SIPP? The results thus far are positive, but they have a long way to go. The current test is being conducted in 6 regional office areas covering 10 states. The staff is reviewing the results, making changes to content and design, and reviewing and revising training materials and methods. The plan is to implement the new, reengineered SIPP, in 2013.

New COPAFS Board members. Before the afternoon session began, Ralph Rector (past COPAFS Chair) announced the slate for the COPAFS board for the coming year. Don Muff and Ken Hodges will be at-large members, Linda Jacobsen will serve as secretary, and Bob Parker as Treasurer. A motion to approve these choices was seconded and approved.

Jennifer Tancreto, ACS Methods Panel Update. A number of tests are planned, ongoing, or have recently been completed. They included:

- ◆ 2009: effect of additional mailings on response rates. Different panels in the test, two weeks after the initial mailing, received a postcard reminder, a second questionnaire package, or nothing. It appears that the postcard is worth its cost, while the full questionnaire is not.
- ◆ 2009: ability of a multi-language brochure to assist non-English speaking households to respond to the ACS. The brochure was mailed in five languages (English, Spanish, Chinese, Russian, and Korean) and included a dedicated toll-free number for each. Results of this test are pending.
- ◆ 2010: ACS content test. Similar in design to the 2006 content test, it includes:

- ◆ Computer ownership and internet access (new question)
- ◆ Parental place of birth (new question)
- ◆ Revised questions on Food Stamps (now called SNAP), veteran identification and period of service, public assistance income, and wages/salary and interest/dividends income.

Field tests involve a split-panel design. They will be conducted in September to November of this year, leading to changes in the production ACS in 2013.

- ◆ 2011: ACS Internet test. This will evaluate the feasibility of an internet response option for the ACS (and the PCRS, the Puerto Rican version of the survey), and will be conducted in both English and Spanish. The test is planned for next March, with results later in the year. The powerpoint presentation showed examples of what the Internet screens might look like.
- ◆ 2012 (perhaps): ACS Content Reinterview Survey. This would study and monitor response error in ACS questions.

Keith Hall, Bureau of Labor Statistics. Hall, BLS Commissioner, provided an overview of what BLS data tell us about the current recession. It wasn't pretty. The essence of the presentation was a walk through all of BLS' data sources; it's easier to read in the powerpoint slides than to describe. The presentation concluded with a comparison to previous recessions. Job loss in the current recession has been especially severe, worse than any previous period for which they have data (going back to 1953). Unlike other recessions, there have been big hits in the service sector job sector. Normally, a recession is either lengthy but shallow, or sharp but brief. This one is both sharp and lengthy, a deep recession with only gradual job recovery. (Your reporter asked "when does a recession become a depression," but no real response was forthcoming.)

New COPAFS web site is up! As of this writing (March 24), the new www.copafs.org is up and running. All four powerpoint presentations from this meeting are there; go to March 5 meeting on the lower right section of the page. Also note that the agenda for the June meeting will be posted on the web site, likely no later than mid-May. However, we will also make it available directly to APDU members when we receive it.