

September 24, 2010 COPAFS Meeting Report

by Patricia C. Becker

Ed Spar's Report. No budgets had been passed for FY11, meaning that there would be a continuing resolution. The proposed FY11 budget has a lot of "good stuff" in it, including \$44 million for increasing and redesigning the ACS sample. Other items in the Administration's proposed budget include:

- Economic Research Service - to create SCOP (a centralized system of federal data)
- Bureau of Labor Statistics - to modernize the Consumer Expenditure Survey
- Bureau of Economic Analysis - to create a dashboard of economic indicators
- National Center for Health Statistics - to improve vital statistics

Note: the continuing resolution was passed by Congress. It funds the Census Bureau at the proposed budget level. The CR expires December 3.

Ed also mentioned the Republican National Committee's resolution to make the ACS voluntary, and said that the Census Bureau is taking it very seriously.

COPAFS is sponsoring its biennial Policy Seminar on December 14-15, holding the meeting at the Washington Convention Center. Information is at www.copafs.org.

William Wiatrowski, BLS: National Compensation Trends. BLS conducts the National Compensation Survey (NCS). It's a sample of establishments, selected within a sample of geographic areas. Within each establishment, there's also a sample of occupations. Overall, there are about 36,000 establishments in the survey; they remain in for five years, with one-fifth rotating in/out each year. The survey collects an enormous amount of detailed data on wages and benefits, and is the official source of data used by the Office of Personnel Management to compare the private sector to the federal government.

The data are fascinating. They document the changes that have taken place in recent years and decades, especially in retirement plans and in employee contributions to health care. Wiatrowski covered some of the highlights in his presentation. Overall, union membership, working for a large employer, and full-time work status lead to better benefits.

The survey's web site is <http://bls.gov/ncs/>. The powerpoints used in the presentation are available at www.copafs.org. We recommend printing them in color, as some of the more subtle changes are hard to see otherwise.

Hermann Habermann: Facilitating Innovation in the Federal Statistical System.

Habermann was formerly Chief Statistician in OMB and, more recently, Deputy Director of the Census Bureau. He is a long time observer of and participant in the federal statistical system. Now retired, his comments were his own. The statistical agency environment, he says, is changing rapidly. There are demands for more information but also resistance (e.g., the RNC resolution mentioned above). People operate on beliefs, which are not easily changed by data/information. There's a war coming. On top of this, the budget environment is going to be worse than we have imagined. The "clock speed" is ever increasing - to politicians, two years is forever and they're willing to take approximate answers. The big new thing is "data visualization."

Some specific areas in which innovation is possible:

- Integrating survey and administrative data
- Better understanding the relationship between non-response and bias

- Improving small area estimates
- Using data visualization and communication technology
- Move away from hierarchical models; integrate horizontally

And what are the barriers?

- We are not going to get a Statistics America - a single agency *ala* Statistics Canada.
- It's easier to delay than to implement change. Agencies are stuck - they don't have the resources or, really, the interest; they're too bureaucratic, and it's too hard to hire people.
- In the federal government, you don't get points for taking risks, and there are lots of demerits if things fail.
- Federal agencies can't hire non-citizens.

And the bright spots?

- SCOP is a good model of horizontal integration.
- The Census Bureau, with Bob Groves' research program, is a step in the right direction.

What to do? The most important thing is leadership. We have decent systems. Need to give OMB the ability to hire non-citizens, and ease procurement rules to create flexible projects. But this won't happen, because Congress won't permit hiring non-citizens. Get one of the larger agencies, Census or BLS, to be a center for research, although they'd still be hampered by the inability to hire and the procurement rules problems. Habermann's proposal: create a Federally Funded Research and Development Center - FFRDC. It would be a private non-profit organization that works only for the federal government. It would not be subject to the hiring and procurement rules. It would need an annual budget of \$10 to \$15 million. Peter Orzag, former OMB Director, was interested, but he's left his position.

We need creative realignment of boundaries between agencies to facilitate innovation. Agency heads do recognize that times are changing - and we need to do *something*.

Barbara O'Hare, Census Bureau/Jennifer Madans, NCHS: Survey Cost Savings for the National Health Interview Survey. At the direction of Census Director Bob Groves, a series of task forces was set up to determine how cost savings can be achieved in the bureau's reimbursable surveys. There are six of these, involving four federal agencies:

- National Health Interview Survey (NCHS)
- Consumer Expenditure Survey (BLS)
- National Crime Victimization Survey (BJS)
- Current Population Survey (BLS)
- American Housing Survey (HUD)
- National Ambulatory (and Hospital Ambulatory) Medical Care Survey (NCHS)

Each task force was set up as a short-lived, small team with representatives from Census, the sponsoring agency, and end users. The idea was to have a dialogue, working to identify the most promising opportunities to improve cost efficiency.

The overarching findings: there is a need for more detailed information in order to identify cost-cutting measures. Census corporate issues need to be addressed as well. In addition, new web tools need to be developed, including Computer Assisted Recording of Interviews (CARI), to monitor what goes on in the field. However, it's clear that Census needs to improve sharing of cost information with the

sponsoring agencies, to collect more detailed field activity data for analysis and monitoring - and then to incorporate results of the analysis into field operations, to pursue administrative records opportunities, and to commit resources to developing web data collection instruments.

Jennifer Madans discussed the options that have been developed for the NHIS. They include moving from weekly to monthly field assignments, establishing a more detailed cost accounting system, streamlining survey management responsibilities, and other aspects of the field work. One specific area concerns the NHIS address frame. The survey currently uses an expensive area sampling design. It can't use the Census Master Address File (MAF) because the MAF is protected under Title 13 and NCHS needs access to the actual addresses for its analysis - their data are confidentiality-protected under another federal law. They are considering using an external vendor, or the postal Delivery Sequence File (DSF), to replace the area sample. If the MAF were removed from Title 13, this problem would be solved. In response to a question, O'Hare said that the bureau is thinking about this issue.

Paul Voss, Group Quarters in the ACS. Voss chairs a current National Academies Panel on "Measuring Group Quarters Population in the ACS." While the panel is looking at issues of sample design and data collection procedures, the big question is: *Who would object if the panel recommended that some or all of the group quarters subpopulation were placed out of scope of the ACS?*

Little ACS GQ data are available yet, and what will come is thin. It is impossible to represent the GQ population, and its various subpopulations, correctly by small area; in fact, the sample design is designed only to represent it at the state level. There are arguments pro and con.

Pro: The bureau promised.

Some data users may need the data.

The long form traditionally provided these data.

Con: The need for GQ characteristics data is not well established.

Not much will be published for the GQ population (although PUMS users might be able to do more analysis.

There are huge problems with the data: the imputation rates are uncomfortably large and the controls are based on the population estimates.

Some small GQ facilities have already been dropped (soup kitchens, shelters).

GQ interviews cost \$89 per person covered, compared to \$13 for persons in households.

The Academies Panel is developing a survey instrument, to be freely and non-scientifically distributed, to solicit opinion on these issues.

In the discussion, both of your APDU representatives (Warren Brown and myself), argued that college dormitories and the like should be included in the household enumeration, as well as small group homes. Other GQ could be dropped. In response to a question about farm workers, Voss said that they are classified in the "other non-institutional" category, and therefore looked at only at the national level.

Concerns of COPAFS Constituencies. None were raised. This segment of the agenda may be moved away from the end of the day for future meetings.

Only the Wiatrowski presentation will be posted, as a powerpoint, at www.copafs.org. Habermann used no powerpoints, and the others were minimal.

The next COPAFS meeting is December 3.