

DISCUSSION

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My discussion relates primarily to the two papers on the review process for continuing household surveys (Sunderhauf) and on informational needs for demographic survey design (Cahoon et al.). One thing that I want to reinforce was touched on by the first speaker--namely, what a problem of shrinking resources we are confronting here in the world of continuing surveys. I think the full impact of the feeding frenzy on the domestic budget that has been taking place on the Hill for the last year has not been fully felt yet. Some of the kinds of things that have been reviewed by our speakers this morning are going to be very central to planning for both continuing household surveys and for one-time surveys. It is clear that one-time surveys are going to have a harder time competing for ever-scarcer resources.

It is also clear from the presentations this morning by Sunderhauf and by Cahoon, that there is a problem of fragmentation among the sponsoring agencies. Sponsors have their own criteria for what they are trying to accomplish, and it is not obvious that you can reconcile across agencies to produce a set of uniform requirements to reflect these multiple objectives. I believe that what the Office of Federal Statistical Policy and Standards (OFSPS) has been trying to do in terms of getting a crosscutting review is nonetheless extremely important. I do feel though that the primitive state of the art that we recognized ten or more years ago in identifying data needs and in establishing criteria for assessing the relative importance of the data you are trying to collect has not advanced very much. We may have advanced more technically, however, and in some of the methodologies now used in sorting out the policy planning process. The OFSPS review questions do at least provide a common framework. This is a big step in the right direction, and I do feel that OFSPS should be commended on it. We must recognize in all this that sponsors have a deep-seated fear of **dependency on a "foreign agency"** such as the Census Bureau. In the case of piggybacking on the Current Population Survey or the upcoming Survey of Income and Program Participation, the specific worry of a secondary sponsor would be whether their needs are taken properly into account versus the needs of the major sponsors for the ongoing survey effort. What is highlighted by both papers is that the problem of sustained, long-range planning and development is both fragile and extremely difficult.

The dialogue with the sponsors by both OFSPS and Census seems to be carried on very professionally. I am worried, however, that much of the discussion is from technical specialist to technical specialist. I have been very much concerned with trying to get "policymakers" involved in the design of surveys and what you often get as a response

is, "Tell us what you can collect, and we will then tell you how we can use it," or "We have a vague idea of what we would like to have for modeling purposes now, but we haven't the slightest idea what we will need six years from now." This is a very important fact of life between data developers and data users. I do not wish to suggest that we can do a lot better than we are doing, since I think we are already stretching human capacity. But we must recognize that we are not necessarily really achieving what is clearly there to be achieved; namely, reconciling the policy issues as to what would be a complete portfolio of continuing household surveys that would serve these multiple interlocking uses. Not that the issues haven't been identified: Sunderhauf's issues on matching, on timeliness and flexibility and, of course, his pervasive one on confidentiality are very much with us.

I was disturbed to hear that the timeliness question and also, the flexibility question are somehow or other being deferred until we are somewhat nearer to launching the redesigned surveys. My worry is that by the time we get close to the survey launch there is no time left for redesign or to take anything major into account. What you can do near launch time is only fine tuning at best. The flexibility issue is central. This relates to the question of multiple objectives, and I don't claim that we can do vastly better than we already have. I think the statistical community is doing a good job in the face of the kinds of complexity and constraints it faces. Starting with the primary problems, the major ones now are budgetary constraints, but there are other kinds of mandated requirements that drive an agency to undertake survey activities that they need not conduct if they could adopt a more rational and reconciled survey program.

Also, we do seem to put so much emphasis on sampling variance when the name of the game is really in response variance and other kinds of nonsampling error. I realize there have been a lot of committees--working, technical committees--and we've made some progress in this area, but there is by no means an accepted body of knowledge about what to do about nonsampling error, how to characterize it and the like. When you have different objectives for a survey, not all objectives are created equal. When you get two or three sponsors involved in a survey every one of them has their main thing that they want to accomplish. It's sometimes "one agency, one vote" on some of these issues. What is needed is a more sophisticated scheme for optimization.

The speakers are to be commended for a useful review of some important issues in the redesign of household surveys.