

DISCUSSION

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The Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology has been in existence for only a few years. When looking at the earlier publications and listening to the papers today, it is hard to realize that these are all the products of an interagency committee. The amount and quality of the output of the FCSM is gratifying. Maria Gonzalez, as the leader and moving spirit of the whole undertaking, is greatly to be commended.

This favorable view is partly a reflection of my own expectations. I do not expect a committee composed of volunteers working what time they can squeeze from their major assignments to make major theoretical contributions based on original research. Possible, but quite unlikely. What the FCSM and its subcommittees have done is to identify statistical problems of common interest to federal agencies, explore the dimensions of these issues, and recommend the directions and next steps to take in their solution.

Today we have heard reports largely concerned with procedural questions--contracting procedures, interagency agreements, number of revisions in time series, the use of telephoning in data collection. When addressing technical questions a committee of statisticians makes recommendations to its members, their colleagues in statistical agencies, or their peers outside the federal agencies. When addressing procedural questions, the subcommittees may be making suggestions or recommendations also to non-statistical agencies and to nonstatisticians with far different backgrounds, interests, and goals--contracting officers or budget examiners, for example. It thus seems worthwhile to pay particular attention to how the recommendations of the reports might be implemented.

Each of the reports described today starts out with attempts to quantify and characterize the problem or issue under investigation. Each has come up with information never before assembled. Not all questions are answered, but these surveys of the amount of contracting, the importance of interagency agreements, revision practices for specific time series and the use of telephoning in surveys all serve as a good starting point for illustrating problems and pointing to preferred practices.

The first report then proceeds to develop what might be called a manual or guidelines for federal agencies that contract for surveys with nonfederal groups. Much of the advice is addressed to sponsors that are not federal statistical bureaus, perhaps contracting offices, research or policy units, or program managers. Particular effort may be needed to get the recommendations to the appropriate spots in the agencies. Possibly some central units in OMB, the General Services Administration, or the General Accounting Office could be helpful. At one time it was hoped that the Office of Statistical Policy in the Office of Management and Budget could serve as a technical advisory group for agencies sponsoring surveys that were not equipped with their own statistical units. Resources for such a responsibility have never been appropriated. Now, given the uncertainties

of statistical coordination at OMB, the possibilities are even dimmer. The report would, however, be of interest to some OMB budget examiners as well as agency officials. I hope that after a strong effort has been made to get this report into the right hands, the Subcommittee will proceed to review other types of contracting for statistical surveys, in particular, federal-state agreements.

The work on interagency statistical agreements, a spin-off from the first subcommittee, was of particular interest to me because of my former OMB connection. It was enlightening to see the volume and variety of such agreements. The Subcommittee noted, however, it had been unable to collect much comment on policies and practices from the agencies on a written questionnaire and suggested the possibility of holding some informal discussions with agencies for this purpose. I believe such discussions should be the next step.

Such discussions might be organized into groups of similar activities. For example, one group might be large, periodic, national surveys of households. For such surveys, Census is normally the contractor, the sponsoring agencies are statistically sophisticated and have similar public information functions. These are the surveys that largely account for the Census Bureau's preeminent share in interagency agreements--the Current Population Survey with the BLS, the Health Interview Survey with NCHS, the National Crime Panel with the Bureau of Justice Statistics, and the Consumer Expenditure Survey with BLS. In such instances, practical alternatives available to the sponsoring agencies have been limited to using Census or to undertaking the survey inhouse. The Census Bureau has been chosen, sometimes with strong urging from the Office of Statistical Policy, because of its experienced field force, its statistical knowhow, and its available sampling frames.

Another type of agreement is undertaken primarily to obtain access to lists. Here the contracting agency may be an administrative unit with little statistical expertise. The sponsoring agency is more likely to be a statistical or research unit. In these instances, no alternative source of information is likely. Problems in this group of agreements may differ widely from the first.

A third discussion group might be concerned with program evaluations. Sponsors may be more policy than statistics-oriented, the projects are frequently local, and the alternative of going to the private sector to undertake the data collection and analysis is much more frequently chosen. The sponsor is frequently able to furnish lists of program participants for follow-up.

Another group of agreements would include the ad hoc surveys wanted from time to time to illuminate policy or management issues. Use of private survey organizations is quite frequent here and the recommendations of the report on Contracting for Statistical Surveys are pertinent.

Discussions with sponsors and contractors grouped somewhat along the suggested lines might point to desirable policies and practices and suggest remedies for undesirable ones. The future of interagency contracting may be affected by major funding changes for statistical activities. It may also be affected by changes in access to sampling frames should proposed legislation be enacted establishing a statistical enclave in which microdata could be shared among statistical agencies, thus providing easier access to sampling frames. The Subcommittee's report also pointed to problems of personnel ceilings and single-year funding that affect the comparative advantage of interagency agreements versus contractual arrangements with private organizations. I hope that following the discussions with the agencies a future report will have recommendations on all these points. The audience for such recommendations may well be the Office of Management and Budget and Congressional committees as well as agency contracting and budget officials.

The report on time series revision policy reviews an existing OMB directive and is thus ostensibly addressed to the Office of Statistical Policy and the statistical agencies. The report, however, should also be of interest to statisticians working outside the federal government as it calls attention to areas in which further statistical work is needed. The first is the interesting attempt to examine the needs of users and the resulting classification of users into monitors and causal analysts. I hope the report will provoke discussion and possible elaboration of this classification. I am not certain, for example, that the econometric models considered by the Subcommittee to be the chief concern of causal analysts would encompass the interests of demographers, or where one would classify those economic statisticians who rely on leading economic indicators in monitoring the state of the economy. Nevertheless, the analysis of types

of users is a welcome first step and should interest those concerned with a better understanding of the uses of statistics.

The second point which could benefit from the interest of statisticians generally is the recommendation of the Subcommittee for research into the process of benchmarking, the effects of benchmarking, and the concomitant interpolation and extrapolation procedures. Many important time series depend on benchmarking, which is a major source of revisions, yet these procedures have received relatively little attention from the statistical profession.

It is not clear whether the report on time series revisions is a final or an interim report since the recommendations are headed "Summary of Possible Recommendations." Perhaps the Subcommittee expects the FCSM itself to review the recommendations.

The work on use of telephoning in surveys is still in progress. This report, when completed, is expected to include the results of research now underway in several agencies. It seems premature to comment extensively at this time. The work of the Subcommittee should primarily interest statisticians, both in and out of government.

The Subcommittee compiled an extensive summary of the forms involving surveys and subject to OMB clearance in August 1981. The final report might include a fuller description of what is and is not included in the compilation. For example, I would expect that the category "program planning or management" may include a fair number of OMB clearances for forms that many people would not consider to be "surveys." It is not clear, for example, if OMB includes tax forms in this category or in the "regulatory and compliance" group which the Subcommittee excluded from its purview.

In summary, for all the subcommittee reports-- a good start, much effort needs to be expended to direct the recommendations to the appropriate users, and there is plenty of room for more work.