

DISCUSSION

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Kasprzyk's paper reviews design issues in SIPP, covering a wide range of topics from questionnaire design to protocols for following movers, from longitudinal concepts to dissemination issues. The paper has crisp, clear statements on these issues. It has a useful set of references to Census and other papers on most of the topics covered. It has useful information about pretests undertaken and pretest findings that informed design decisions in SIPP. In all, it is an excellent paper--an important source of information about the surveys' design and about tradeoffs and decisions made in its implementation. I highly recommend the paper to anyone interested in SIPP.

The paper summarizes ten years of SIPP-ISDP activity; my discussion is, of course, a critique of the paper, not of that ten year effort. An extended field test, the Income Survey Development Program (ISDP), began in 1975. The many methodological issues explored in the ISDP are thoughtfully reviewed by Kasprzyk. An effective use of the split ballot, using bounded recall in some instances and using prompts about change in status since the last interview, with updates if changes occurred, provide an excellent opportunity for methodological study. Kasprzyk provides a good discussion of proxy responses and the tradeoffs involved in various interview modes. While the field test results suggested that a three-month recall period was preferable to a six-month recall, SIPP uses a four-month period, reflecting budgetary pressures. The paper conveys a serious attempt to learn from the field test, and the impression is a strong one that SIPP is informed and strengthened by that field test, showing sensitivity to methodological issues.

This fine paper would be strengthened by a little more emphasis on some of the inadequacies of the survey, including the following points.

(1) Although the design calls for retaining those who move out of the household, Kasprzyk reports that only 80% of movers between waves 1 and 2 of the 1983 panel were traced. That constitutes a substantial loss of an important group and is an area of real concern. The paper might have given more emphasis to this problem.

(2) Regarding imputations for missing data, Kasprzyk makes no mention of the possibility of multiple imputations. I am persuaded by recent work by Donald Rubin that multiple imputations would improve the data set. Kasprzyk's paper would be a stronger one if he addressed the issue of multiple imputations of the missing information.

(3) Kasprzyk discusses the Census Bureau's longitudinal household concept, defined by a set

of rules. I am not persuaded that the "household" has merit as a longitudinal concept in this "person-based sample." At a point in time, surely, it is important to know the size, structure, and composition of the household in order to interpret the value of income and other resources to the person and to the group living together. This is because of factors such as pooling of resources and scale economies. This makes the household an important static concept, but not necessarily important from a dynamic or longitudinal perspective. The "family" is a more important longitudinal concept because of enduring ties, obligations, and an interdependence of well-being. If there is another enduring unit that has validity in a longitudinal context, I think it is an economic unit, not the traditional Census organizational unit of the household. The economic unit may include those living in the household or outside it with whom the individual shares resources or exchanges resources of time or money for direct satisfaction. The concern for the household, longitudinally, in SIPP and in Kasprzyk's paper is misdirected, in my judgment.

(4) Closely related to the point above, I think there is excessive concern for governmental sources of income and inadequate concern for private flows of resources to the subjects of the survey. There are 25 categories of income from government programs and transfer schemes and only one wimpy category in the survey for "money from relatives or friends." The title of the survey admittedly includes "program participation," but information about the economic unit, if any, in which the subject operates cannot be adequately explored with this data despite the great detail about certain income sources. This imbalance is unfortunate.

(5) While SIPP provides much information useful for the study of short-run fluctuations in income by source, it is surprisingly myopic about life cycle income or longer-run dynamic aspects of income. The survey has little information about previous income history or subsequent expectations or plans; it starts up at a point in time, provides fine-grained detail for a two-and-a-half year period and ends as abruptly as it begins. The left censoring of the income flow prior to the survey date is particularly problematic for many types of analyses.

One final comment: the Census Bureau in general, and Kasprzyk and McMillan in particular, deserve thanks for their energetic efforts to make SIPP data available to us all quickly, and easily. Great efforts have been made to acquaint the research community with SIPP and its potential; Dan and David, especially, deserve much credit and our collective thanks.