

DISCUSSION

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The four papers presented in this session summarize the methods employed and results of a range of development and evaluation activities associated with the 1987 U.S. Census of Agriculture. While the Census of Agriculture in Canada is conducted using quite different collection methods, many of the issues touched on in these papers relate to the Canadian experience as well.

Owens, et al, explain the workings of a classification tree methodology as applied to the 1987 Census of Agriculture mail list development. The challenge that this methodology addresses is to maximize the probability that those on the list are in fact farmers. Given the mail out, mail back method of collection used, the importance of a quality list is fundamental to the success of the Census.

The importance of evaluating key procedures has been recognized by the description of planned tests of the methodology. When completed, results of these test should provide guidance for future adjustments in methods.

The problem involved in unduplicating farms from different sources are not explained in any detail. These problems may be increasing as farm organizational and operating arrangements grow more complex. This topic merits further research and probably a separate paper at a future meeting.

Gatt, et al, present the methodology of several tests of questions attempting to screen respondents for agricultural activity. The two goals of minimizing response burden by screening out non-agricultural respondents and maximizing coverage by inclusion of agricultural holdings must be reconciled.

The authors correctly point out the effect on respondent cooperation of the screening questions. These questions are the first contact with potential respondents and consequently clarity and ease of response is crucial.

McKelvey, et al, discuss the 1985 and 1986 Census tests, whose goals included tests of follow-up methods, questionnaire style and format, content issue tests, explanation of non response, and testing of keying methods. Particularly interesting is the research into reasons for nonresponse.

Wright, et al, summarize the evaluation of coverage approaches used. While very well explained rather brief mention was made of the "farm unit" problems in agriculture and thus the limitations of coverage estimates may be understated.

The authors of all four papers have done a fine job in reporting on the excellent program of testing and evaluating methods and results of the 1987 Census of Agriculture. However, I suggest that more effort on measuring nonsampling response errors is needed. While coverage of farms is a key concern, it has been pointed out that with small farms missed more often than larger ones, coverage implications for other census estimates may be smaller than the undercoverage of number of farms. Response errors, however in some cases, may be having much more significant impacts on data quality. More qualitative or cognitive testing methods may be justified to address these problems in more detail.