

## SURVEY STANDARDS AND RESPONSE RATE DISCLOSURE<sup>1</sup>

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The Code of Professional Ethics and Practices of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) was adopted in its current form in 1968. At that time, there was mounting public criticism of polls, congressional hearings were held and proposals were put forward to regulate the industry. The code was strengthened to set standards and to provide better mechanisms for internal (rather than external) regulation and enforcement of survey standards.

AAPOR's Code establishes the following standards for minimal disclosure of information about surveys:

“Good professional practice imposes the obligation upon all public opinion researchers to include, in any report of research results, or to make available when that report is released, certain essential information about how the research was conducted. At a minimum, the following items should be disclosed:

1. Who sponsored the survey, and who conducted it.
2. The exact wording of questions asked....
3. A definition of the population under study, and a description of the sampling frame used to identify this population.
4. A clear description of the sample selection procedure....
5. Size of sample and, if applicable, completion rates and information on eligibility criteria and screening procedures.
6. A discussion of the precision of the findings....
7. Which results are based on parts of the sample, rather than on the total sample.
8. Method, location, and dates of data collection” (AAPOR, 1991, pp. 4-5).

In the past two years, questions have arisen concerning item 5. Because the term “completion rates” is not defined, it is unclear what information should be disclosed. AAPOR's Executive Council has clarified this disclosure requirement, and linked it to standard disposition codes published in Standard Definitions. The Code's requirement to disclose “completion rates” is interpreted to include:

“All of the data associated with the standard disposition codes that have been developed by the committee and approved by previous AAPOR councils. By providing information about what happened to every element in the sample, we would permit a knowledgeable consumer to calculate any of the different rates at the end of the Standard Definitions document.”

Standard Definitions thus serves to explicate, and reinforce, the disclosure requirements of the Code. Disclosure of survey outcomes is also required by the code adopted by the Council of American Survey Research Organizations (CASRO).

How effective have efforts by AAPOR (and other organizations) to set standards for disclosure of information about surveys been? Do reports of survey results routinely disclose information about survey outcomes (either in the form of completion rates, response rates, or some other set of numbers or rates)? Systematic information is scant, but the answer appears to be “no”. (For a comprehensive review of reporting of response rate information, see Smith, 1999.) Suggestive data are available from two small-scale studies which attempted to quantify the quality of reporting about surveys.

As part of the work of the National Academy of Science's Panel on Survey Measurement of Subjective Phenomena, a clipping study was conducted to explore

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<sup>1</sup>This paper was presented as part of an Invited Panel on Response Rate Disclosure sponsored by the American Association for Public Opinion Research. The panel was organized by Warren Mitofsky (Mitofsky International) and Elizabeth Martin (Census Bureau), and the panelists included Janice Ballou (The Eagleton Institute and Standards Chair of AAPOR), Paul Lavrakas (formerly Ohio State University), Elizabeth Martin, and Evans Witt (Princeton Survey Research). The paper reports the results of research and analysis undertaken by Census Bureau staff. It has undergone a Census Bureau review more limited in scope than that given to official Census Bureau publications. This report is released to inform interested parties of ongoing research and to encourage discussion of work in progress.

how newspapers reported results of polls and surveys. News items and stories pertaining to polls and surveys were clipped from 207 major newspapers during a one month period (July 1980). Table 1 shows the percent of stories (weighted by newspaper circulation) which reported key items of information required by AAPOR's minimal disclosure standards.

Table 1. Percentage of newspaper poll reports providing information to meet AAPOR Standards

Survey sponsorship	92
Agency conducting fieldwork	87
Population that was sampled	74
Size of sample	55
Dates of interviewing	50
Method of interview	25
Complete question wordings	18
Sampling error	7
Nonresponse rate/sample disposition	2

Source: Pilot study conducted by DeMaio, Marsh, and Turner and reported in Turner and Martin (1984), Table 3.1 and Appendix C.

While almost all poll reports gave information about survey sponsorship and the agency conducting the fieldwork, basic information about surveys was frequently missing. Only 2 percent of poll reports gave any information about completion rates, response rates, or disposition of sample cases. As the Panel noted, the "lack of information makes it impossible for readers to judge the quality of the data that is being offered as newsworthy evidence in the story" (Turner and Martin, 1984:69). To improve reporting about surveys, the Panel recommended that survey researchers in the United States should make collective efforts to secure the agreement of the American media to disclose appropriate details of published polls (1984:309). Since that time, AAPOR has worked with major news organizations to improve reporting of surveys. It is our impression that these efforts have been productive, and that sampling errors (in particular) are reported more routinely now than they were in July 1980, when only 7 percent of poll reports included this information. No recent data have been collected to assess whether and how newspaper reporting about surveys might have improved. However, Smith's (1999) recent review of survey reports and releases

suggests there has been little improvement in media reporting of information about response rates, at least in part because such information is not routinely released by the survey organizations themselves. He reviews poll reports and releases for 11 major organizations conducting public opinion research, and finds that "no organization routinely reported response rates as part of their standard documentation" (1999:32).

A second study is an assessment of the quality of reporting about federal surveys conducted for the Data Quality Subcommittee of the Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology. McMillen and Brady (1999) report the results of a review of publications and data releases of ten pages or less published by twelve U.S. statistical agencies during the 1990s. Retabulation of their data (see Table 2) provides some indication of the extent to which short reports about federal surveys meet AAPOR's standards for minimal disclosure. (Blank entries indicate that McMillen and Brady did not collect information about that item.)

Table 2. Percentage of government statistical short reports providing information to meet AAPOR Standards

Survey sponsorship	
Agency conducting fieldwork	
Population that was sampled	<47
Size of sample	20
Dates of interviewing	
Method of interview	10
Complete question wordings	
Sampling error	22
Nonresponse rate/sample disposition	3

Source: McMillen and Brady (1999).

It is disturbing to find that (with the exception of information about sampling error) the federal statistical surveys described in short reports in the 1990s were, if anything, less adequately described than polls and surveys described in newspaper stories in July 1980, judged against the AAPOR minimal disclosure standards. Fewer than half of the statistical reports described the population that was sampled, only 20 percent gave sample size, and 3 percent gave information about

response rates.<sup>2</sup> Another study for the FCSM found that federal surveys were better described in longer, analytic reports; even so, only 59 percent of the analytic reports gave response rate information (Atkinson, Schwanz, and Sieber, 1999). The authors found this low frequency surprising, and noted that “Knowledge of the level of survey response is important in understanding survey results,” (1999:335).

The AAPOR standards may not directly apply to federal statistical surveys, which by and large do not include public opinion measures. Federal surveys are governed by standards set by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and by the federal statistical agencies. The OMB’s “Standards for the Publication of Statistics” (1978), which apply to all federal statistical surveys, states:

“To help guard against misunderstanding and misuse of the data, full information should be available to users about sources, definitions, and methods used in collecting and compiling statistics, and their limitations.... A description of the survey design and methods...should be available....The description should include what is measured, the source(s) of information, the sampling plan if sampling is used, the method of collecting the data, the extent of nonresponse and other sources of bias, and the methods used to deal with the problem....Accuracy of the data should be stated as far as possible. This should include not only the sampling error (where probability sampling is used) but also the nature and extent of nonsampling errors” (1978:19265).

Thus, federal standards require reporting of much of the same basic information about surveys required by the AAPOR Code, including response rates.<sup>3</sup> Table 2 suggests that published short reports of federal statistical surveys do not routinely supply the information required by the OMB standards, including method of data collection, extent of nonresponse, and sampling error. This state of affairs may exist because the extensive

OMB review process is focused entirely on the approval of a survey and its instruments before it is conducted, with no review of the published results.

We believe that the AAPOR minimal disclosure standards are broadly applicable to all surveys; they cover very basic information that is needed to judge the quality of survey results. The evidence suggests, however, that minimal information about surveys is not routinely provided. In particular, information about response rates (or survey outcomes) is rarely reported. Smith concludes that “reporting of nonresponse is a rarity in the mass media and in public polls. Nonresponse is more regularly documented in academic and governmental studies, but is still sporadic at best” (1999:36). Thus, the problem appears to be industry-wide; Smith attributes it to the incomplete professionalization of survey research.

We would like to see improvements in the quality of reporting about surveys, and in particular better disclosure of survey response rates and survey outcomes. To that end, AAPOR seeks:

- assistance from statisticians and survey researchers in applying, evaluating, and providing feedback on the usability of the disposition codes and rates provided in Standard Definitions;
- collaboration with the Survey Research Methods Section in a joint effort to monitor, assess, and improve survey reporting practices.

There is precedent for the activity--the ASA sponsored and published Bailar and Lanphier’s (1978) pilot study to assess survey practices, carried out under the supervision of a committee appointed by the Survey Research Methods Section. That effort, like most efforts to assess survey quality, was a pilot study based on a small and unrepresentative sample; the full-scale study was never funded. However, we believe that if we join forces and coordinate with related efforts by commercial, academic, and government survey researchers we may be able to make progress in improving the quality of survey reporting.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Nor did most short reports lacking basic information include a reference to a technical report where the information could be found (3 percent did so).

<sup>3</sup>For principal economic indicators, OMB’s standards further require that each indicator be evaluated every three years by the agency that publishes it, with the evaluation to address “The accuracy and reliability of the series, e.g.,...the proportion and effect of nonresponses...” (1985:38934).

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<sup>4</sup>For example, the Census Bureau has developed a protocol for a standardized quality profile intended to accompany all survey microdata products and be referenced in every official report based on demographic surveys; an Interagency Household Survey Nonresponse Group is seeking to standardize nonresponse definitions for federal household surveys; see Atrostic et al., (1999),

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