

INTRODUCTION

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The Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) is a major continuing survey, begun in 1983, conducted by the Bureau of the Census of a sample of U.S. households concerning their economic well-being.

To briefly sketch the design of SIPP (see Kasprzyk, 1988, for more information) sample members are interviewed at 4-month intervals (waves) over a period of 32 months. A new sample (panel) is introduced each year, so that panels overlap. The first panel was introduced in October 1983 and included about 21,000 households. Subsequent panels have been introduced in February each year. Because of budget restrictions, the sample size has varied from 12,500 to 23,500 households (and some panels have had fewer than 8 interview waves).

The sample for each panel includes adults 15 years of age and older who were living in the household at the time of the first interview and who are followed if they move to new addresses. Data are collected for children under 15 and other adults who join the household during the life of a panel only so long as they reside with an original sample adult.

In somewhat more detail, the goals of SIPP and the design features that resulted from these choices of goals were:

- To improve the reporting of family and personal income, both cash and in-kind, by source – by asking more questions and by obtaining reports more frequently than once a year;
- To obtain detailed information, comparable to administrative data, on participants in government social welfare programs (e.g., food stamps and Medicare) and on the dynamics of participation over time – by asking for monthly information at each interview, with detailed questions and relevant

explanatory variables, and by following the same people to observe program entries and exits;

- To obtain information necessary to determine program eligibility, including data on assets, and to characterize participants (including multiprogram participants) in comparison with eligible non-participants;

- To maintain the quality of annual income and poverty statistics and other cross-sectional estimates developed from the longitudinal SIPP data – by starting a new SIPP panel every year;

- To improve both participant and income-by-source information – by comparing survey reports with various administrative files; and

- To provide an opportunity to obtain timely information on emerging concerns of social policy, broadly defined – by including special sections of questions (topical modules) on subjects of current policy interest, for example, disability, child support, day care, health status, and use of health care.

The SIPP questionnaire has two main sections. The core section includes questions about income sources and amounts, program participation, and labor force activity that are asked at every 4-month interview wave. The topical module section includes questions that are asked only once or twice in a panel. Fixed topical modules that are asked in each panel include assets and liabilities, income taxes paid, annual income, program eligibility, and personal histories. A large number of other topics, including child care expenses, health status and use of health care, housing costs and financing, and child support, compete for space in variable topical modules.

Looking ahead to SIPP's second decade, the Census Bureau has initiated an evaluation of all aspects of the survey program to determine how well it is meeting its goals and what changes could enhance the usefulness of the data and improve the survey operations. In 1995 the Census Bureau will introduce a new sample design for SIPP based on the results of the 1990 census. At that time, it will be convenient to make other desired changes in the survey design and content.

As part of the evaluation process, the Census Bureau asked the Committee on National Statistics (CNSTAT) at the National Research Council to appoint a study panel to review all aspects of SIPP and make recommendations by summer 1992 to feed into the 1995 redesign.¹ This panel was asked to pay particu-

1. The work of this panel, which began in spring 1990, represents a second phase of effort related to SIPP on the part of CNSTAT. In the fall of 1988, the Statistical Policy Office of the U.S. Office of Management and Budget, together with the Census Bureau, asked CNSTAT to conduct an interim assessment of SIPP. CNSTAT appointed a subcommittee of its members to prepare a report by summer of 1989. This report (Committee on National Statistics, 1989) documented an extensive and growing array of uses of SIPP data by federal agency analysts and was basically supportive of the SIPP program, although it identified some areas for improvement.

lar attention to ways in which the utility of the longitudinal data from SIPP could be improved and in which data from SIPP and other related surveys and administrative records could be used to improve the nation's statistical series on the distribution of income.

Knowing that SIPP had already provided invaluable data for a wide range of studies, the panel sought input from users representing different subject interests. The panel sponsored a Conference on the Future of SIPP in April 1991 in which policy analysts and researchers were asked to prepare papers that: (1) described the important research questions in their topic area; (2) assessed the contributions of SIPP in the area to date and its advantages and disadvantages compared with other relevant data sources; and (3) suggested and assigned priorities to design and content changes to SIPP that would make the data more useful for analysis in the future.

Martin David prepared an overview paper for the conference, outlining possible alternative designs for SIPP. Glen Cain and Marilyn Manser each looked at the future of SIPP for analyzing labor force behavior; while Michele Adler and Mitchell LaPlante each considered the uses of SIPP for health and disability research. Martha Hill assessed the role of SIPP for analyzing interactions of family composition and income change generally; while Karen Holden focused on SIPP's uses for analysis of the elderly, and Rachel Connelly, Sharon McGroder, and Linda Mellgren each looked at using SIPP for analyzing policy issues related to children. Rebecca Blank and Patricia Ruggles addressed using SIPP to understand poverty and economic need; while Harold Watts looked at the role of SIPP for analyzing extended measures of well-being. Robert Moffitt and Roberton Williams each focused on the role of SIPP in studying program participation; while Pat Doyle considered the future of SIPP for modeling program eligibility. Finally, Timothy Smeeding addressed priorities for improving income data from survey and administrative records generally and, in particular, the role for SIPP.

The study panel believes the papers provide a wealth of useful information on the role of SIPP vis-à-vis other data sources for socioeconomic analysis in a wide range of topic areas. They also contain many ideas for changes that could further improve the usefulness of the SIPP. The reader should note that the authors sometimes agree on recommended changes – notably the need to provide adequate sample size – but just as often they disagree. For example, suggested design changes range from extending the length of SIPP panels to 5 years (and introducing them less frequently) to conducting a very large cross-section sample each year and selecting a subsample to follow up for a 2-year period. Suggested content changes also vary widely.

The study panel is currently wrestling with the issue of what kinds of changes

to recommend for SIPP, knowing that no set of changes can satisfy all users. Its report will be delivered to the Census Bureau in summer 1992. Meanwhile, the panel is most pleased to sponsor publication of the set of conference papers. They are highly informative and present many intriguing ideas that should be of interest to the broad community engaged in socioeconomic analysis and research.

Note

The members of the Panel to Evaluate the Survey of Income and Program Participation, in addition to the chairman, Graham Kalton of Westat, Inc., include:

Paul P. Biemer, Research Triangle Institute
Gordon J. Brackstone, Statistics Canada
Clifford C. Clogg, The Pennsylvania State University
Martin H. David, University of Wisconsin
Greg J. Duncan, University of Michigan
Ralph E. Folsom, Jr., Research Triangle Institute
Robert M. Hauser, University of Wisconsin
V. Joseph Hotz, University of Chicago
Randall Jay Olsen, The Ohio State University
Patricia Ruggles, The Urban Institute

References

- Committee on National Statistics (1989). *The Survey of Income and Program Participation – An Interim Assessment*. Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. National Research Council. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.
- Kasprzyk, Daniel (1988). *The Survey of Income and Program Participation: An Overview and Discussion of Research Issues*. SIPP Working Paper No. 8830. Bureau of the Census, Washington, D.C.