

Executive Summary

The National Science Foundation (NSF) began supporting the General Social Survey in the early 1970's and has continued to do so with a grant to the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) in 2005 to complete the 2006 and 2008 surveys. The GSS, along with the Panel Study of Income Dynamics and the American National Election Studies, is one of the three major infrastructure projects supported by the Division of Social and Economic Sciences. The GSS is an important survey data resource used by sociologists and other social scientists for research and teaching.

On May 2-3, 2007, the Division of Social and Economic Sciences convened a workshop on *The General Social Survey (GSS): The Next Decade and Beyond* at the National Science Foundation (NSF) in Arlington, Virginia. The Sociology Program funded and organized the workshop. The purpose of the workshop was to hold a conversation with the social science community about how best to maintain and enhance the GSS as NSF moves forward with plans for a recompetition for the conduct of the 2010 survey and beyond. Workshop participants were asked to assist the NSF in completing an assessment of the GSS as a major NSF infrastructure investment and to “assure the best use of NSF funds for supporting research and education.”

The workshop brought together twenty-one experts in survey research methodology and scholars with intimate knowledge of the GSS. These participants prepared background papers and discussed major areas of the GSS, including operations and governance, survey topics and content, conceptual and methodological innovations, collaboration and integration with other major national and international survey programs, outreach to the social science and other scholarly communities, dissemination of data and results dissemination, and other broader impacts. These background papers are included in the second section of this report. The workshop discussions and papers provided advice and generated recommendations to NSF on how to improve and strengthen the GSS as it moves into the next decade.

The report is organized in three major sections – *Background of the GSS* (and the Workshop); a descriptive *Overview of the GSS*; and a list of workshop *Recommendations*. The first section provides a brief discussion of the context from which the idea for the workshop emerged, the purpose of the workshop, and its role in the 2010 GSS recompetition. The second gives an overview (including a chronology) of the major components of the GSS. This overview covers the purpose and development of the GSS, current GSS design, survey development, the GSS core, recent innovations, cross-national research, experimentation and methodological research, and data dissemination and usage. The final section lists workshop recommendations, organized around three topics—(1) The Basic GSS, What to Maintain and Continue; (2) Governance, Survey Administration and Funding; and (3) Data Collection, Dissemination and Outreach. Additionally, the report Appendix includes the workshop agenda and papers submitted by the workshop participants.

Summary of Recommendations

Workshop participants provided a number of insightful recommendations to NSF on how best to improve and strengthen the GSS as it moves into the next decade.

The Basic GSS- What to Maintain and Continue

The GSS should remain a nationally representative survey of attitudes and intergroup relations and continue to monitor trends in attitudes and behaviors. It should maintain and further enhance its openness to the addition of new topics and questions by the social science community.

Continue to administer the GSS on a biennial cycle. Since time is the critical independent variable in administering the GSS, it should maintain the biennial schedule.

Develop plans to maintain the panel design. The panel component is a valuable addition to the GSS and allows for the measurement of individual change over time on many variables, particularly changes in attitudes, allowing the direct study of temporality and causation. The panel study also allows GSS users to study issues that could not be studied with the earlier, purely cross-sectional survey design.

Maintain GSS participation in the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) data collection program. The ISSP is an important vehicle that can be used to study important social processes in a comparative perspective by both examining differences across societies and changes within the current 43 nations over time.

Continue a timely and comprehensive release of all data. Data from the GSS, both the core and topical modules, should continue to be made available to all users at the same time and as soon as possible after collection and data cleaning.

Governance, Survey Administration and Funding

Strengthen GSS governance and the role of the Board of Overseers. Significantly enhance and strengthen the role of the GSS Board in evaluating the content of the survey, including the core and topical modules.

Enable the Board of Overseers to participate more fully in the selection and development of GSS topical modules. Topical modules provide a vehicle for innovation and should remain part of the future GSS, but the Board of Overseers should have a stronger voice in evaluating topical modules for scientific merit.

Provide support for the GSS Board of Overseers to hold a “module” competition. The quality of the GSS would be further enhanced if funds were provided to the GSS Board of Overseers to allow them to manage competitions to determine the addition of modules and questions to the

GSS. This competition would be open to social scientists who could propose topics and questions to add to the GSS.

Explore ways to realize cost savings in survey administration. The GSS should explore alternative modes of administration in order to reduce per-interview costs.

Seek innovative modes of administering the GSS. There is considerable value in maintaining the face-to-face CAPI interview process. The future GSS, however, should examine incorporating other modes of administering the survey, including a leave-behind questionnaire and internet surveys by providing internet access and even laptop computers to allow those in the sample to respond to a series of internet surveys over time.

Study the impact of the split-ballot technique on data analyses. The split-ballot administration that gives each respondent two-thirds of the core may create significant problems for analysis. The GSS should study the impact of this aspect of survey administration and, in particular, explore ways to eliminate the split-ballot of the core items.

Share the funding of the GSS across other social science and education fields. The GSS is a valuable survey data resource for disciplines other than sociology, with less than 50 percent of GSS users identifying themselves as sociologists. The GSS is heavily used as a teaching and research tool at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. NSF is encouraged to seek joint funding of the GSS more broadly across the social sciences at NSF.

Data Collection, Dissemination and Outreach

Make the GSS core more transparent to the user community and allow for changes in core items. The content of the core and how it has evolved over time should be made clearer to all potential users of the GSS. The GSS should sketch out the core set of items, but the core should be allowed to evolve over time via the interaction of the GSS Board, GSS PIs, and the user community. Also, the possibility of enlarging the core, including bringing back time series questions that were deleted in the early 1990s, should be explored.

Explore ways to enhance the data collected. The GSS should explore the possibility of oversampling minority groups in order to allow comparisons between groups. It should also consider collecting and making available to users much more “paradata/metadata,” including interviewer characteristics, the mode of administering the interview, the number of calls made to obtain the interview, characteristics of the home and neighborhood, respondent reaction times for answering questions, and spatial identifiers. These data would be released subject to full protection of respondent confidentiality, which in some cases will include special protections and restricted access as all major data projects now do.

Experiment with digital-recording of interviews. Explore ways to digitally record interviews using the computers that interviewers use to conduct the interview. Such recordings would enable studies of “how” the interview is done; these studies would help improve data quality and encourage the integration of qualitative and quantitative research.

Provide opportunities for experimentation. The GSS should encourage the embedding of both methodological and substantive experiments in the survey.

Develop “targeted” GSS dissemination activities. The current NSF funding model does not directly address the issues of data access and dissemination. Targeted NSF funding is needed for the dissemination of data, including providing web access and increasing ease of access to the data for research and teaching purposes.

Upgrade and create more user-friendly modes of dissemination. The current modes of dissemination are confusing and badly outdated. The future GSS should include a state-of-the-art dissemination system that is updated frequently, including a user-friendly website, a high quality index, easy to use search tools, thorough documentation about survey procedures, questions, and data files, simple data downloading in a variety of formats, accessible technical assistance, and simple on-line analysis tools for users.

Expand the type of data products that are publicly available. In addition to disseminating the complete dataset, the future GSS should explore making other data products available to users, such as datasets of only core items, each topical module, and each minority group. Also, any data linked to GSS data by users should become part of the GSS publicly available data, including the computer code necessary to replicate analyses.

Secure a separate budget for data dissemination. Proposals for the future GSS should include an extensive plan for data dissemination with an adequate budget, whether dissemination is to be done in-house or via a third party. Past NSF grants have not included adequate funds for outreach and dissemination.

Develop cooperative relationships with other major NSF surveys. Both the principal investigators and the Boards of other NSF-funded surveys, in particular the Panel Study of Income Dynamics and American National Election Studies, should work cooperatively to share information and technologies. They should also consider greater coordination and integration, such as common data access mechanisms and repositories, as well as using common measures for demographic variables.