

The General Social Survey and Its Impact in Sociology and Other Social Sciences

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The General Social Survey (GSS) serves as the *Omnibus Survey* for the entire social science (especially the sociological) community. It has a core set of questions repeated every administration and many topical sets of questions added for a given administration and then retired, sometimes to be used again. It uses the highest quality (read most expensive) methods, including personal interviews and full probability samples, to elicit data from a sample of the adult non-institutionalized population. Many, many researchers use the GSS either as the major focus of their work or as a secondary source of data to put their analyses in context. It has spurred the development of comparative surveys in a host of countries. It has been subject to many methodological experiments, including split-half questions and a wide variety of others. Furthermore, it has achieved a position of the preeminent survey for use in sociology classes in methods that occur early in the career of many undergraduates.

The impact of the GSS on sociology and social science has been massive, enduring and irreplaceable, but the fact that it is an omnibus survey, originally developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s also accounts for its significant limitations. Many of which, in my opinion cannot be remedied by any methodological or redesign "fix." At the same time, the core uses of the survey remain very relevant; even some 35 years after the GSS first went into the field. Put another way, some of the most recent proposals for the continuation of the GSS, seems to call for changing the leopard's spots, so that the GSS in certain ways matches some of the animals now in the survey jungle, for instance the National Educational Longitudinal Survey, the Early Childhood Longitudinal Surveys from Birth and from Kindergarten, the Survey of Adolescent Health, the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, the National Survey of Drug Abuse, the Chicago Neighborhood Survey, etc.

The fundamental strength and weakness of the GSS is that it is a full probability sample of roughly 3,000 United States adults and asks them a wide array of questions on a large number of topics, some of which remain the same and some of which change from administration to administration. This makes it possible to do a number of things that no other survey instrument allows:

- 1) Track changing patterns of behavior over time, e.g. sexual activity, religious affiliation, etc.
- 2) Track changing patterns of societal attitudes over time, e.g., political views on a wide array of subjects, including redistribution, role of women, religion, etc.
- 3) Compare responses from the GSS to responses to similar surveys from other nations through ISSP.

- 4) Relate the core variables to answers to questions on a wide variety of the specific topical modules, added to the survey from administration to administration.

At the same time, the GSS has significant limitations, which means that other topics and other sorts of analyses are more properly investigated by other surveys and other data collection efforts. The fundamental limitation in the GSS is its small sample size of 3,000 and the fact that it is (and was designed to be) a cross-sectional survey of the United States population. This fact means that the GSS is not as good an instrument for the following:

- 1) Assess patterns for sub-groups either geographically or by particular race of ethnic group. When one compares the GSS with the CPS (about 110,000 respondents in 78,000 households) for instance, or with the Census (14 million) or the American Community Survey (about 3 million released for 2005) it becomes plain that the GSS asks more and perhaps better questions than standard Census surveys, but of many fewer respondents. Analyses for specific cities, areas or neighborhoods are not possible using the GSS.
- 2) Track change at the individual level over time. Even with the retrospective and prospective panels proposed for the GSS it is the case that the GSS would not have anywhere the number of respondents that more topical longitudinal surveys have, such as the ECLS-K (roughly 20,000 usable cases for five waves), the NELS-88 (about 25,000 cases), ADDHEALTH or the other large-scale longitudinal surveys. These surveys, and others, have the drawback for generalization to the whole population of being limited to one or a few cohorts and focused on a given topic, e.g. education, health. However, for these specific (and important) uses the GSS is no match.
- 3) Bringing in contextual or spatial variables. The lodestar study here, of course, is the *Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods*, which has rich contextual data collected by surveys in a sample of neighborhoods. Though the addition of some contextual variables from the US Census might be useful, it is also the case that contextual variables should also include a spatial and other component. Furthermore, the same limitation discussed above applies here: since it is a sample of the entire United States population, the effect of contextual variables in a given location may turn out to be somewhat difficult to grasp. A multi-multi-million dollar study such as the Chicago neighborhood study may be necessary to analyze the effects of context on a variety of outcomes, including the correlates of crime.

Thus, the niche for the GSS is as an effective social science omnibus survey. It is the niche that it has occupied for some 35 years, as the type of research done in social science radically changed. New methods for data collection and analysis were developed, including a wide array of methods to analyze longitudinal and contextual data. Many new survey operations were launched to collect exactly the sort of data revolving around a given topic. It is not surprising that those planning the GSS would want to participate in these newer approaches. Nor is there anything fundamentally wrong with attempting to do so. However, given the heritage of the

GSS it is especially important that it continue to function within its own niche and provide the sorts of data that it is best at providing: a very high quality survey of the behavior and attitudes of a representative sample of the adult United States population.

In a similar vein, over the years the GSS has conducted a series of experiments with the instrument. It is also important that any such experiments be directly related to the core mission of the survey.

I realize the temptation, after 35 years of conducting such a survey, to try to add bells and whistles: e.g. rotating panel, contextual variables, and more methodological experiments. My recommendation would be to judge the continued support for the GSS in terms of its core mission and not to deviate very much from that mission, since in that role it has been invaluable to the social sciences, both in terms of research and education, and also in terms of dissemination of social science to the wider world.

In my own work with the *New York Times*, we have used the GSS on numerous occasions, including the following:

1. To assess changing views of inequality
2. To look at the social status and attitudes of various religious adherents, especially evangelicals
3. To see if attitudes of those living in small towns are different from those living elsewhere
4. To understand who defines themselves as middle class
5. To look at changing views of women's role, as well as a number of other uses

The GSS is without peer in allowing one to assess attitude and behavior changes and relate them to demographic or other characteristics. It staked out this role in 1972 and this should be its role in the future.