

Thoughts on the General Social Survey

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The General Social Survey is the most important and cost effective infrastructure program funded by SBE. It is important to the entire social science community for four principal reasons:

1) The GSS is the means of measurement for “perishable” social phenomena such as attitudes and values that are basic data for the study of society and social change. Much as telescopes provide the means of measuring celestial phenomena at specific dates that form the basic data for astronomy, the GSS is means by which we measure social phenomena at specific times. The measurements must take place at regular intervals, if change is to be observed, because once the time period is past, the phenomena cannot be observed. They are in this sense “perishable.” Without an instrument like the GSS, it would be impossible to study scientifically many of the most important aspects of social change.

The goal of providing these basic data imposes some requirements on those responsible for its well-being. Funding must be large enough to insure that the survey is conducted at the highest level of scientific standards. Funding must also be sufficiently long term to insure continuity of leadership, organization, execution and dissemination of the data. Governance must effectively represent the best scientific thinking and the broad user community without regard to disciplinary boundaries. Methodological work must be continually conducted to adapt to changes in language and social conditions and to take advantage of newer technologies while maintaining comparability of measurements.

2) The GSS provides a “gold standard” against which other data collections can be evaluated. It functions as a standard in two ways; 1) it provides national data against which surveys on special populations can be compared when the same questions are used; and 2) it provides a methodological standard which allows surveys that have to make compromises in the quality of data collection to make estimates of possible biases resulting from these compromises.

3) The stability and cumulative nature of the GSS design allows for the study of small groups in the population that would not otherwise be possible at any reasonable cost. These features have resulted in a large number of analyses that go beyond the principal goal of measuring social change and have enabled a vast literature on social processes that greatly enhance the cost efficiency of social research. (See for example the work of Erzo Luttmer, a political economist, on attitudes toward social welfare as a function of the proportion of local recipients from their own racial group recently reported in the N. Y. Times).

4) The GSS has served as a model for the development of similar survey programs in other countries, thus leading to the formation of an international consortium that enlarges the value of the GSS as an instrument of social research. It is now an integral part of the International Social Science Program (ISSP) and could become an even more important in the

development of international comparative social science if it is expanded to a North American GSS and more closely allied with the European Social Survey.