

General Social Survey

Jodie Smylie and colleagues, 2016

The General Social Survey (GSS) is a biennial, nationally representative survey that has been conducted by NORC to monitor societal change and study the growing complexity of American society since 1972. Funded in large part by the National Science Foundation, the GSS is NORC's longest running project, and one of its most influential. Except for U.S. Census data, the GSS is the most frequently analyzed source of information in the social sciences. GSS data are used in numerous newspaper, magazine, and journal articles, by legislators, policy makers, and educators. The GSS is also a major teaching tool in colleges and universities: more than 27,000 journal articles, books, reports, and Ph.D. dissertations are based on the GSS, and about 400,000 students use the GSS in their classes each year.

The GSS is the only full-probability, personal-interview survey designed to monitor changes in both social characteristics and attitudes currently being conducted in the United States. Over 1,000 trends have been tracked since 1972 by the GSS. Since the GSS adopted questions from earlier surveys, trends can be followed for up to 75 years. Among the topics covered are civil liberties, crime and violence, intergroup tolerance, morality, national spending priorities, psychological well-being, social mobility, and stress and traumatic events. Altogether the GSS is the single best source for sociological and attitudinal trend data covering the United States.

Survey questions in the "GSS replicating core" are regularly administered as part of each GSS. Core items include background information about respondents (such as age, sex, education, and region of residence), measures of attitudes (such as views about gender roles and confidence in institutions), and behaviors (such as attendance at religious services and voting in the most recent U.S. Presidential election). Since 1988, the GSS has also collected data on sexual behavior (such as number of sex partners, frequency of intercourse, and extramarital relationships). Items are very occasionally added to or removed from the GSS core.

In addition to the GSS core, other researchers are invited to participate in the GSS. In 2014, additional questions addressed social inequality, quality of working life, work and family balance, political participation, social isolation, social identity, and generosity. GSS questions have included such items as national spending priorities, crime and punishment, race relations, quality of life, and confidence in institutions. A number of innovations, such as the expansion of observational paradata collection for both GSS responders and non-respondents and the linkage of social network data with survey data, are planned for the 2016 round of the GSS, which is ongoing and scheduled for release in 2017. This overview of the GSS covers research highlights of the GSS as of the 2014 round.

A number of auxiliary studies to the GSS have been conducted using hypernetworking samples gathered using the GSS. The National Organizations Study, conducted in 1991 and 2002, built its national sample of employers by asking the scientifically-selected sample of GSS respondents for information on their place of employment. The National Voluntary Associations Study, conducted in 2006, also gathered its sample from the GSS by asking respondents about the voluntary associations in which they took part. Three waves of the National Congregations Study were conducted in 1998, 2002, 2006, and 2012 using a national sample of religious congregations built from information collected from GSS respondents about their places of worship.

GSS OBJECTIVES

The General Social Survey is a primary component of the National Data Program for the Social Sciences (NDPSS). The NDPSS is a social indicators, infrastructure, and data dissemination program supported by the National Science Foundation. This program has three main purposes:

- Gather data to monitor and explain trends, changes, and constants in attitudes, behaviors, and attributes as well as examine the structure, development, and functioning of society in general as well as the role of various sub-groups.
- Compare the United States to other societies to place American society in comparative perspective and develop cross-national models of human society.
- Make up-to-date, important, high-quality data easily accessible to scholars, students, policy makers, and others with minimal cost and waiting.

NDPSS data are collected through the General Social Survey (GSS) and its allied surveys in the International Social Survey Program (ISSP).

ISSP

In 1984, NORC was one of four founding members of the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) with social science institutes in Australia, Germany and Great Britain. Since 1985, the ISSP has included 60 nations. The ISSP is the largest program of cross-national research in the social sciences.

The ISSP mounts a program of collaborative international comparative survey research. It develops an annual international module, administered in national surveys that take place in participating countries; all participating countries also collect data on a set of core demographic items. The ISSP fields this identical battery of questions in participating countries and in total has interviewed over 1,000,000 people.

The U.S. version of the annual ISSP module is administered as part of the GSS; two international modules have been included in each GSS since 1994, so that all ISSP modules have been fielded in the United States.

GSS SURVEY DESIGN

The target population of the GSS is adults (18+) living in households in the United States. From 1972 to 2004, participation in the GSS was limited to respondents who were able to do interviews in English, but since 2006, the GSS interview has been translated into and administered in Spanish, so that both English- and Spanish-speaking U.S. residents are currently included in the target population.

The GSS sample is drawn using an area probability design. Using NORC's sample frame of United States addresses, a mix

of urban, suburban, and rural National Frame Areas (NFAs) are scientifically selected to represent the nation. Segments are selected from these NFAs and addresses are selected from within each segment. All cases are released to interviewers at the beginning of data collection.

Interviewers are instructed to visit every address in their assignment within two weeks of the start of data collection to determine the eligibility of each sampled address. An eligible address is that of a housing unit occupied with residents who speak either English or Spanish. Interviewers attempt contact with each eligible household to roster eligible household members and use a Kish method to identify a selected respondent for the household.

Beginning in 2004, the GSS began to use a two-stage sub-sampling design for nonresponse. Cases from which no response has been obtained after the initial stage of the field period (lasting approximately ten weeks) are subsampled and resources are focused on gaining cooperation from this subset. The cases that are selected to continue fielding are reassigned to interviewers and are fielded to the end of data collection. In total, data collection lasts for approximately twenty weeks or more. The vast majority of GSS data is obtained in face-to-face interviews.

The survey was conducted every year from 1972 to 1994 (except in 1979, 1981, and 1992). Since 1994, it has been conducted every other year. The survey takes about 90 minutes to administer. As of 2014, 30 national samples with 59,599 respondents and 5,900+ variables have been collected.

From 2008 through 2014, the GSS sample additionally included one to two rotating panel samples consisting of cases interviewed in a previous round of the survey.

LIMITATIONS AND ANALYSIS OF THE STUDY

A number of details about the sample of the GSS must be considered when analyzing the data and applying weights.

- The 1982 and 1987 GSSs included oversamples of black respondents. To adjust statistical results for this oversampling, one may either exclude cases in the black oversamples or weight statistical results using specialized weights.
- Only one adult per household is interviewed, so persons living in large households have lower probabilities of selection. For person-level variables, weighting statistical results in proportion to the number of persons aged 18 or over in the household can compensate for this.
- Responses from persons in the sub-sample beginning in 2004 must be weighted up in order to represent all of those who had not responded by the time the subsample was drawn.

In addition to considerations that need to be made regarding weighting of the GSS data, data quality issues such as non-response bias may limit the representativeness of the survey data.

IMPACT OF THE GSS

The GSS and ISSP data sets are distributed to interested scholars and applied researchers as soon as the surveys are processed through the major survey archives in the United States and Europe. It is widely utilized by academia, government, and the private sector:

- Over 27,000 scholarly publications have used the GSS and over 1,000 have been appearing annually in recent years.
- In the social sciences, only the US Census is used as a data source more frequently than the GSS.
- Each year over 400,000 college students use the GSS in classes. Several innovative programs to teach sociology through hands-on analysis of real data have been developed around the GSS.
- The GSS Data Explorer, an online tool that allows users to search GSS information, test hypotheses, and look for interesting correlations directly on the NORC website, was released in 2015. This web portal is intended to become a model for data dissemination of other NORC studies and improves accessibility of GSS data online.
- Governmental users of the GSS include the Library of Congress, the Departments of Commerce, Defense, Education, and Justice, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the White House.
- Corporate users of the GSS include AT&T, General Electric, Hallmark, IBM, Procter and Gamble, Prudential Insurance, and Sears.
- Newspapers, magazines, and broadcast media in North America, Asia, and Europe frequently cite the GSS.
- The GSS and its PIs have received awards from the American Association for Public Opinion Research, the American Sociological Association, the Eastern Sociological Society, the Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research, the World Association for Public Opinion Research, and American Demographics and Science magazines.

ABOUT NORC

NORC at the University of Chicago is an independent research organization headquartered in downtown Chicago with additional offices on the University of Chicago's campus, the DC Metro area, Atlanta, Boston, and San Francisco. NORC also supports a nationwide field staff as well as international research operations. With clients throughout the world, NORC collaborates with government agencies, foundations, educational institutions, nonprofit organizations, and businesses to provide data and analysis that support informed decision-making in key areas, including health care, education, economics, crime, justice, and energy. NORC's decades of leadership and experience in data collection, analysis, and dissemination—coupled with deep subject matter expertise—provide the foundation for effective solutions.