

Data Stewardship Executive Policy Committee

DS-16: Policy on Respondent Identification and Sensitive Topics in Dependent Interviewing

PURPOSE

This policy gives guidance on ensuring the Census Bureau survey has reached the correct household before using information previously obtained to facilitate dependent interviewing in subsequent interviews. It also requires that program areas evaluate how they handle responses to questions on sensitive and very sensitive topics within households.

BACKGROUND

Dependent interviewing is a valuable tool to increase data quality and reduce respondent burden. Dependent interviewing is characterized by the survey interviewer or automated survey instrument using responses from previous interview periods or other data sources (including administrative records or commercial data) in follow up questions and subsequent interactions with the household or individual respondent. It increases data quality by facilitating longitudinal consistency and reducing the cognitive burden associated with recalling information from more distant periods. Dependent interviewing also reduces response burden, both cognitive burden and time burden, by minimizing the need to repeat a question answered in a previous interview and allowing the field representative to move on to follow-up questions. It even lessens the intrusiveness of questions on some topics. For example, a person completing a crime victimization survey would be relieved of the psychological burden of self-disclosing again an incidence of rape and instead might move directly into answering whether the crime's emotional toll had impacted her/his job.

This policy has been created proactively because of the Census Bureau's ongoing commitment to respecting respondents' privacy.

SCOPE

This policy applies to surveys and decennial censuses conducted by the Census Bureau, including reimbursable surveys, except for surveys of business establishments.

The policy applies to dependent interviewing regardless of interview mode, including but not limited to personal visits with a field representative, computer assisted telephone interviews (CATI), and computer assisted personal interviews (CAPI).

Sensitive Topics

For purposes of this policy, sensitive topics among household members include the following:

- income
- taxes

- ability to perform daily tasks
- citizenship
- and other information deemed sensitive due to specific cultural or other factors

Very Sensitive Topics

For purposes of this policy, very sensitive topics among household members include the following:

- abortion
- illegal conduct
- information damaging to financial standing, employability, or reputation
- politics
- sexual behavior
- survival of rape, molestation, incest, or domestic abuse
- use of alcohol, drugs, or other addictive products
- fertility/infant mortality
- illegal immigration status;
- information leading to social stigmatization or discrimination
- sexual orientation
- stigmatizing medical conditions
- psychological well-being or mental health
- other information deemed sensitive due to specific cultural or other factors

Note however, that the fact that a topic may be labeled as sensitive or very sensitive does not imply that questions on that topic are not allowed in dependent interviewing.

Religion:

- The Census Bureau considers the religious affiliation of individuals and households to be a uniquely sensitive topic that respondents should not be asked in demographic surveys.
- Questions on religious practice and semi-religious practice (such as, “do you volunteer in a church-affiliated soup kitchen?”) are to be assessed the same as other sensitive topics.

NOTE: Establishment surveys can ask questions about religious affiliation of establishments and business entities.

POLICY

Verifying the Respondent’s Identity

Census Bureau field representatives¹ will verify that they have reached the correct household before using information about the household gathered in previous Census Bureau interactions with the household.

- During in person and telephone interviews, that likely will entail sharing a household member's name and the address or telephone number from which data was previously gathered. For example, it would be appropriate for the interviewer to ask, "Am I speaking with <respondent's name>?" and "Have I reached you at <respondent's telephone number or street address>?"
- For automated survey instruments, the verification might take the form of having the respondent enter a personal identification number when returning to complete an Internet questionnaire.

¹ The term “field representatives” refers here also to interviewers at Census Bureau call centers.

Evaluation of Surveys' Handling of Information on Sensitive Topics Within a Household Among the Household's Members

Each program area will conduct a review of existing or proposed survey questions and identify sensitive topics or very sensitive topics included in the survey. The program area then will evaluate how it handles sharing data with other household members and associated threats to within-household confidentiality, as well as what if any prior response data can be shared with non-household member proxies. In addition, reimbursable survey program areas will consult with their survey sponsor when conducting this review and analysis. (See Checklist for a Survey's Handling of Sensitive Topics in Dependent Interviewing.)

Program areas with questions on their handling of within-household confidentiality can contact the Policy Coordination Office.

The program area will document the findings of its review as well as its specific handling procedures in the survey's program files.

EFFECTIVE DATE

This policy is effective upon signature.

LEGAL AUTHORITIES

Title 13, U.S.C.

IMPLEMENTATION

Individual program areas have responsibility for implementing this policy. Within six weeks of the signing of this policy, each program area will hold a meeting to evaluate its handling of within household confidentiality.

Program areas will implement any necessary changes identified from that meeting by the next major redesign of the survey or census operation.

RELATED DOCUMENTS

Checklist for a Survey's Handling of Sensitive Topics in Dependent Interviewing

POLICY OWNER

The Policy Coordination Office.

SIGNATURE

By Direction:  Date: 12/15/14
Nancy A. Potok
Deputy Director and Chief Operating Officer
U.S. Census Bureau

Summary Information	
Policy Title:	Policy on Respondent Identification and Sensitive Topics in Dependent Interviewing
Date Signed:	
Policy Owner:	Policy Coordination Office
Office Responsible for Implementation:	Program Areas
Office Responsible for Dissemination:	Policy Coordination Office
Stakeholder Vetting:	DMD, PCO, ACSO, CARRA, SEHSD, ADDP, DSSD, PPRC, the Respondent Advocate's Office, the Census Bureau Legal Office