

# Data Stewardship Executive Policy Committee

---

## DS-16: Checklist for a Survey’s Handling of Sensitive Topics and Very Sensitive Topics in Dependent Interviewing

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

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

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, drug, or other addictive products
- fertility/infant mortality
- illegal immigration status
- information leading to social stigmatization or discrimination
- psychological well-being or mental health
- sexual orientation
- stigmatizing medical conditions
- 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 very sensitive topics.

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

## Checklist

1. Do the survey's procedures<sup>1</sup> verify that the correct household has been reached before using any information from prior interviews and third party sources?

Yes, proceed to question 2.

No, procedures must be changed to protect respondents' confidentiality.

2. Is the survey's use of dependent interviewing confined to verifying household roster information including name, age, date of birth, gender, and relationship to head of household?

Yes, document the surveys' procedures for protecting respondent's confidentiality when sharing information with other members of the respondent's household.

No, proceed to question 3.

3. Is the survey's use of dependent interviewing confined to the basic household roster information in question 2 and questions on additional demographic details such as race, ethnicity, ancestry, national origin, journey to work, housing, educational attainment, occupation, and veterans status?

NOTE: the lists in Questions 3 and 4 are not all inclusive.

Yes, document the surveys' procedures for protecting respondent's confidentiality when sharing information with other members of the respondent's household.

No, proceed to question 4.

4. Is the survey's use of dependent interviewing confined to the basic information in questions 2 and 3 and questions on sensitive topics such as income, taxes, citizenship, and basic questions on the ability to perform daily tasks and other basic demographic information?

Yes,

- a. document the surveys' procedures for protecting respondent's confidentiality when sharing non-sensitive information with other members of the respondent's household
- b. For sensitive information, survey and program directors must ensure appropriate methods are used to protect respondent's sensitive information and other basic

---

<sup>1</sup> These include but are not limited to census coverage measurement, non-response follow-up, failed edit follow-up, supplemental surveys, follow up surveys, and quality control checks.

demographic information. (See list above.) For example, the methods used may be more stringent if the questions on income are more detailed such as questions on income from government programs. Appropriate methods might include training interviewers not to indiscriminately verify all information with another member of the household if the responses included such income. Document the surveys' procedures for protecting respondent's confidentiality when sharing sensitive information with other members of the respondent's household.

No, proceed to question 5.

5. Does the survey ask questions on very sensitive topics? (See list above.)

Yes, proceed to question 6.

No, Follow 4a and 4b.

6. Are appropriate procedures in place to protect the respondent's within-household confidentiality?

If this is a reimbursable survey, the within-household confidentiality protections of the sponsor must also be followed where they are more stringent.

Such procedures may include.

--Audio computer assisted self-interview (ACASI) instrument that "reads" the question to the respondent through headphones to increase privacy. Respondents can listen to questions and look at the instrument on a computer screen at the same time and respond in private.

--Returning only to the original respondent to verify or follow-up on questions the answers to which are deemed sensitive topics.

--Asking the original respondent's consent to share their information with other members of their household.

--Having the interviewer ask the respondent if he or she wants to continue the interview in a more private space.

--Having the interviewer ask again with whom he/she is speaking and asking if other people have entered the room and then asking again about continuing the interview in a more private space.

--Repeating the privacy statements when it is clear that respondents or respondent's attitudes have changed mid-interview.

Yes, document the surveys' procedures for protecting respondent's confidentiality when sharing information of any type, including sensitive and very sensitive topics with other members of the respondent's household.

No, if the survey is passing forward a respondents' information on sensitive or very sensitive topics, document as a memo what the survey's procedures are to protect respondent's confidentiality when sharing that information within the household. Take that memo to the Data Stewardship Executive Policy Committee for its consideration.