THE SURVEY OF INCOME AND
PROGRAM PARTICIPATION

# EVALUATION OF TRAINING MATERIALS AND METHODS FOR THE SURVEY OF INCOME AND PROGRAM PARTICIPATION

No. 16

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U. S. Department of Commerce BUREAU OF THE CENSUS

# Survey of Income and Program Participation

EVALUATION OF TRAINING MATERIALS
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THE SURVEY OF INCOME AND PROGRAM
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No. 8608 — 16

by
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## INTRODUCTION

This report was completed by a consultant with extensive experience in survey operations and interviewer training. It is the result of an evaluation of training methods and materials for the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP). This evaluation was commissioned as part of the effort to insure that the interviewer training meets goals and needs of the survey. It is believed that SIPP can benefit from the experience of other similar survey operations. To perform this evaluation Population Division of the Census Bureau contracted with Mimi Holt, a survey research consultant. Ms. Holt reviewed training materials, including the interviewer manuals, self-study guides, and verbatim training guides; she attended two interviewer training sessions; and she observed interviewing in the field. Her evaluation and recommendations were made on the basis of these experiences.

## EVALUATION

The SIPP is a complex survey, and training materials are correspondingly complex. Demands on interviewers are significant. The methods and materials developed for training of SIPP interviewers are detailed, relevant, and comprehensive.

Ms. Holt has suggested a number of recommendations which can be incorporated into current materials. Such changes to current training should have the effects of improving interviewer performance and, ultimately, increasing staff stability.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Interviewer's Manual--If intended to be the major reference for interviewers, the manual should be incorporated more fully into training. Training materials should contain assignments of specific readings in the manual; specific page references in the manual should be contained in training materials (self-studies and training guides) for material covered in training; self-studies and training materials should be redundant with material covered in manual.

In order to make the manual more accessible for reference purposes, the table of contents and index should be significantly expanded. To reduce general bulk of the manual and the amount of redundant text, definitions and explanations (for example, asset types) should be given in the text and again in the glossary. Later references to the item should direct users to the initial definition or to the glossary. The manual itself should use less text and contain more illustrations and specimen forms. Those illustrations should be placed as near as possible to the referent text.

In each section the "usual" procedures should be outlined first and then the exceptions and special situations should be treated.

Content of Training--More emphasis should be placed on the substance rather than mechanics of the interviewers job. Proportionately too much time is spent covering the clerical aspects of the interviewers job--filling the form--and too little in preparing the interviewers to discriminate between a complete, useful answer to a question (such as duties on the job) and one that cannot be used (for example, how to code specific occupations).

Format of Training--Training should be less trainer expositive and more interactive. Training should contain more tasks, question and answer segments, mock interviews. Mock interviews should be more demanding; containing problematical situations that require interviewer interpretation and application of survey specifications.

Materials Distribution--More timely materials distribution is required. Interviewers should receive all relevant material before group training occurs, preferably at the time when self-study materials are distributed. Revisions should be identified as to whether they contain actual procedural changes, additional procedures, or are simply clerical corrections.

Feedback--Interviewers should have more information about the progress of the survey and the use of survey results. Evaluation reports should contain positive as well as negative feedback in terms of general interviewers' performance as well as individual interviewer's performance.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## A. Overview

This report is intended to provide a detailed evaluation of the materials and methods used to train field interviewers to conduct the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), a major multi-panel longitudinal survey administered by the Bureau of the Census. Without doubt, SIPP is one of the more complex household surveys ever fielded. The procedural and instructional materials developed for interviewer training are correspondingly complex.

The comments and recommendations contained in the bulk of this report are based on exposure to the SIPP training materials and presentations listed below:

- review of the 1985 Panel Interviewer's Manual (SIPP 5010);
- review of self studies for Replacement Interviewers (SIPP 4040), on Movers' Procedures (SIPP 4044-A), on Overview Items (SIPP 5050), and on Waves 5 (SIPP 4540) and 6 (SIPP 4640);
- review of training guides for Replacement Interviewers (SIPP 4043), for Wave 4 Replacement Interviewers (SIPP 4043.5), for May 1985 Refresher Training--1984 Wave 6 and 1985 Wave 2 (SIPP 4641), and for August 1985 Refresher Training--1984 Wave 7 and 1985 Wave 3 (SIPP 4741);
- observation of the May and August 1985 refresher training sessions in Atlanta and Raleigh, respectively;
- informal discussions with interviewers and supervisors during the May and August 1985 training sessions;
- review of Census Bureau staff trip reports concerning the May and August 1985 refresher training sessions;
- discussions on August 20, 1985, with Census Bureau staff responsible for development of training materials and field manuals and for on-going management of the survey;
- observation of a SIPP interview on October 3, 1985.

Due to schedule conflicts, the author was unable to attend a complete new (replacement) interviewer training session or to observe the on-the-job training conducted for new interviewers immediately following their classroom training. It is understood, however, that the on-the-job training conducted by a supervisory field representative is a critical component of interviewer training for SIPP and other Census Bureau surveys.

## B. Scope of the Report

This report is not intended to present a page-by-page critique of all SIPP procedural and instructional documents. Rather, it is intended to document positive and negative findings by an independent reviewer with relevant experience in preparing procedural and instructional materials and in designing and conducting training programs for interviewers and supervisors for large national household surveys. The opinions and recommendations presented herein are solely attributable to the author and, inevitably, they may reflect professional preferences that have evolved over time from exposure to survey research activities in several private survey research organizations.

The body of this report addresses the materials developed for reference and self study by interviewers and for use by trainers in conducting interviewer sessions, as well as the training techniques specified by the training guides and a number of related practical considerations--time and budget constraints, interviewer motivation and retention, effects of the survey design on interviewers and respondents, and similar issues that are directly or peripherally related to the training of interviewers.

## 2. INTERVIEWER REFERENCE MATERIALS

### A. The SIPP Interviewer's Manual (SIPP 5010)

#### 1. Overview

The principal reference document provided SIPP interviewers is the SIPP Interviewer's Manual. Interviewers who have assignments for both the 1984 and 1985 panels are provided with a copy of the manual for each panel. While the manuals are identical in organization, their content varies as the procedures for the two panels vary.

According to Census Bureau staff, the manual is regarded as a reference for the interviewers' use in resolving problems or questions that arise during interviews. Interviewers are not expected to read the entire manual; rather, they use it as a student might consult a dictionary or encyclopedia, extracting specific information needed to complete a particular task or to resolve a problem encountered in the field.

#### 2. Content

A review of the content of the manual reveals a detailed and comprehensive set of relevant information, procedures, and definitions. The level and completeness of the information provided is certainly a hallmark of Census Bureau manuals, which set high standards that are rarely achieved by other survey organizations.

Without doubt, the manual probably covers 90 to 95 percent of the situations that an interviewer might encounter in the field. Given the role of the manual as a reference document, the major problem an interviewer may face in consulting the manual is in deciding where to look to resolve a problem. (For example, procedures for movers are presented in Chapters D3, D4, and D5, yet the index cites only three page references, all in Chapter D3.)

Specific comments on the organization, content, and format of the manual were given in the preliminary report* prepared under this procurement and they are not iterated here, except as recommendations for changes are made in the following section.

#### 3. Evaluation and Recommendations

From the perspective of technical accuracy and completeness, one can only commend the writers who prepare the SIPP Interviewer's Manual. Any negative comments about the manual can be based only on its

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*Mimi Holt, "Preliminary Report on Training Materials for the Survey of Income and Program Participation," July 24, 1985.

utility in providing easily accessible information to an interviewer who needs a specific piece of information. The recommendations that follow are offered as possible ways to enhance the usefulness of the manual to its intended users, the interviewers.

- Both the Table of Contents and the Index (Part [illegible]) should be expanded to much greater levels of detail. Also, [illegible] sections or chapters (not individual pages) are added to the manual, their content should be incorporated in the Table of Contents and the Index.

- As individual pages are revised, a key should be included to identify (1) exactly what text has been revised or added and (2) whether the revision reflects a <u>change</u> in procedure versus an <u>added</u> procedure or piece of information. Presently, the only indicator on a replacement page is the date of revision. Unless one compares the original and replacement pages line-by-line, one does not know what has been changed and/or added. The key could be quite simple--new text could be denoted by a vertical series of asterisks in the right margin, while original text that has been revised could be indicated by a different symbol.

- When specimen forms, Control Card, or Questionnaire sections are reproduced in the Manual, their usefulness to the reader would be much greater if they were filled in rather than left blank. Part C of the manual (Additional Instructions for Listing, Updating and Other Coverage Procedures) contains excellent examples of completed forms or sections of forms that show the interviewer exactly how to mark the forms. This technique should be used throughout the manual, particularly for the Control Card (Chapter D3), which is a very complex form that is described in 75 pages of text with very few illustrations.

- Whenever possible, procedural instructions should be presented in a step-by-step manner, with exceptions and unusual situations dealt with after the usual procedure has been described. This recommendation is particularly relevant to material on sampling and Control Card procedures.

- In the specifications for the SIPP questionnaire items (Chapters E2 through E11), several refinements could make this voluminous material more useful to the interviewer.

  (1) For each questionnaire item, include a facsimile of the complete item, with all response choices and skip instructions. The volume of text could be reduced in many cases since the entire item would be displayed, obviating the need for text such as "mark the 'no' box and skip to item 5a."

(2) Precede the individual item specifications with an expanded version of pages E1-2 through E1-5, where recording conventions are described and illustrated. For example, if all amounts of income are to be recorded in Part A, General Amounts, to the nearest dollar, this procedure should be established as a consistent convention, rather than being repeated for virtually every item in Part A.

(3) In the specifications for Control Card and questionnaire items, a great deal of definitional or explanatory text is provided for many items. Part of the text is to inform the interviewer of the intent and context of the question, while part is to help him/her secure a responsive answer. Where information is given that can or should be used in probing to secure a responsive answer, it would be helpful to specify the appropriate probes to be asked. For example, "What color is the check you receive?"; "Do you receive a W-2 form that shows the amount of your unemployment benefits?"; "Are the names of all your children (under 18) listed on your Medicaid card?"; "Do you file Schedule C or Schedule E with the IRS to report your business income and expenses?".

(4) Define critical terms <u>once</u> within the specifications and once in a glossary that is arranged alphabetically (rather than by ISS number, as is done in Chapter F1). Federal Supplemental Security Income is defined in full on pages E3-31 and E3-45, as well as in the Glossary in Part F (and yet again in the Overview Items self study). Similarly, all assets are defined in full in Chapter E3, in the Glossary, and again in a handout (F2-1 through F2-4, issued 9/85). Once the term has been defined in full, text references for related items should direct the reader to the initial definition or to the glossary.

## B. Interviewer Self Studies

### 1. Overview

The interviewer self studies are a critical component of the SIPP training materials. They are used in two ways: (1) to prepare the interviewer in advance of scheduled classroom training and (2) to provide complete procedural information for a wave when no classroom training is scheduled.

The self studies are designed for independent completion by the interviewer, although the interviewers are instructed to contact their supervisor to clarify questions or concerns. Time authorized for completion of wave-specific self studies reviewed for this report ranged from 3 to 4 hours. The replacement interviewer self study, by virtue of its broader coverage, requires 8 hours to complete.

2. **Content**

The self studies contain a number of lessons, with a revi exercise for the interviewer to complete at the end of each l son. An answer key is provided for each review exercise. A f l review exercise is included in some self studies. The r ac ent interviewer self study is accompanied by a taped practi in view and marked Control Card and questionnaire for the int viewer to follow as he/she listens to the tape. Other self st es include practice interview scripts for the interviewer to u in marking relevant sections of the questionnaire, particula the topical modules.

Most lessons within the self studies focus on a particular topic or concept. Many lessons devote a good bit of space to format and content differences in the Control Cards and questionnaires for the 1984 and 1985 panels.

3. **Evaluation and Recommendations**

Overall, the five self studies reviewed for this report were generally well-written and clear. For the most part, their style is logical and easy to follow, and most of the exercise items appropriately reinforce key procedures and definitions.

One particular area may deserve consideration with regard to the purpose, content, and use of the self studies. The lack of integration between the material covered in the self studies and material presented in the Interviewer's Manual may detract from the utility of the manual as the definitive reference document it is intended to be. While the interviewer is instructed to have the manual available during completion of the self study, there are very few occasions when the interviewer is given a specific manual page reference and instructed to read or even become aware of manual content. In the Wave 5 Self Study, for example, the following statement appears on page 2-1: "Your manual provides an explanation and instructions for each question presented in the topical modules." No chapter or page reference is given, nor is it suggested that the interviewer turn to the manual to become acquainted with the relevant material. Further, there is an indication that the self study contains more detail (cf. p. 2-1 of SIPP 4540, paragraph 1) than the manual. The same type of text appears on p. 2-1 of the Wave 6 Self Study (SIPP 540), with regard to the topical modules.

It is assumed that the self study does not contai ateria that is not also included in the Interviewer's Manual. et, t e self studies consistently appear to repeat material co d in detail in the manual. It would seem helpful in fostering th interviewers' familiarity with the manual as a reference docume to rely on the text therein, rather than rewriting procedures or s ifications for the self study. In no case is the interviewer instructed to retain the self studies for reference, although there is much useful and essential information in them. In other survey organizations, self

studies are regarded as teaching aids that have transitory value. Once completed, they are dispensable since they are not an integral part of a survey's procedural documentation. It is not clear that the SIPP self studies are equally dispensable.

Following are some specific recommendations that could improve the SIPP self studies and help make them stronger as instructional tools.

- The present system of sequential numbering of most (but not all) paragraphs within a lesson is sometimes distracting, since many readers anticipate a change in topic or focus when the numbers change. If the purpose of the numbered paragraphs is to facilitate reference from the exercise answer keys back to the text, then "frame numbers" should be consistently included in the answer keys. (In the five self studies reviewed for this report, "frame numbers" were used in the answer keys in two of six exercises in SIPP 4044-A and three of nine exercises in SIPP 5050. "Frame numbers" were not used at all in the other three self studies.) Also, all paragraphs could be numbered in parentheses in the left margin, a procedure that would retain the ability to cite text in answer keys without implying a sequence in free-form text.

- If the object of many of the exercises is to teach the interviewer how to mark Control Card and questionnaire items, excerpts of the actual instrument items should be included for the interviewer to mark.

- When Control Card excerpts are included in the self studies to illustrate updating procedures, it would seem more helpful to the interviewer if the excerpts were marked. In the self study on Movers' Procedures, the examples on pages 21-26 are aided considerably by the marked Control Card excerpts. Conversely, Lesson 8 in the self study on Overview Items is harder to follow since only two of the Control Card excerpts are marked to illustrate update procedures discussed in the text.

- In the wave-specific self studies, it is suggested that the initial lesson contain a summary of the interviewer's tasks in completing an interview, along with relevant information on person numbers, reference dates, etc.

- The self studies could easily be used to provide additional information on and practice in areas where recurring interviewer errors have been documented in the Regional Offices. Where systematic errors continue to occur on critical core questions or on Control Card items, it would seem useful to include a lesson in the self study on the problem items. Inclusion of such a review lesson would insure that all interviewers were apprised of continuing systematic errors in a consistent manner.

- Inclusion of practice interview scripts in the self studies is an excellent teaching method. It is recommended that this practice be used whenever possible so that the interviewers can follow a new module from start to finish. Development of scripts for Control Card updates necessitated by movers or changes in household composition is also recommended as a means to lead the interviewer through these very complex procedures.

- In the self study exercises, more items should be included that require discriminant judgments by the interviewer, rather than what check item to mark and where to go next. Some examples of items of this type are included in the Wave 5 self study, Lesson 4, items 5 and 6 on page 4-3, where the emphasis is on correct interpretation of responses rather than pure mechanics of the instrument.

## 3. TRAINING GUIDES

### A. Overview

The SIPP training guides provide a verbatim script for trainers to use in conducting the interviewer training sessions. They include a suggested training schedule, with time allocations for all topics, instructions to the trainer, and an inventory of materials required by the trainer and the trainees, as well as the verbatim training presentations.

According to Census Bureau staff, timing requirements for the presentations are determined through rehearsals with a panel of interviewers. Such rehearsals also help focus the presentations and identify unclear examples or errors in the material covered. This process is both desirable and necessary to insure that the material in the guide meets scheduling constraints and content objectives for the session.

One of the obvious virtues of the verbatim training guide was illustrated by a situation that arose at the Atlanta Refresher Training Session in May 1985. The designated trainer was a member of the Regional Office staff. Shortly before the session began, she learned of a death in her family. The two supervisory field representatives were able to conduct the first day of the session with a minimum of difficulty and uncertainty, due to the availability of the verbatim guide.

### B. Content

As noted in the preceding section, the guides contain a verbatim script for the trainer, as well as instructions for the logistics of the session. The individual presentations (or Chapters) within the guide contain some or all of the following components:

- expository material for the trainer;
- instructions to the trainer for initiating group discussions, for timing discussions, for monitoring small-group work, for eliciting questions on general and specific topics, and for distributing needed materials;
- questions to be answered by the trainees, plus the acceptable or correct answer to each;
- scripts for mock interviews that include the questionnaire item, response, and correct way to mark the item;
- answer keys for classroom review exercises and some self study review tests;
- required and/or suggested topics, to be presented by the supervisor, on administrative matters not directly related to interview content.

The style of the guides is conversational and straight-forward. The tone is generally positive and supportive of the interviewers' efforts.

## C. Evaluation and Recommendations

The training guides are generally good from the perspec es utility to the trainers and coverage of the material requir fo given session. If there is a criticism of the content of guid s, it is that the guides emphasize trainer exposition a he principal instructional mode. While it is clearly expedient t have the trainer explain material, the interviewers ultimately have o implement the procedures being explained to them. Most people learn by doing a task rather than hearing how to do it. Particularly where tasks involve clerical accuracy--transcribing data, marking check items, following skip patterns, and the like--interviewers seem to be more confident when they can mark an instrument and see how it works rather than hearing how it works. When changes in the core questionnaire or new topical modules are introduced, it is suggested that time be allotted for a straight-forward run-through of the new material via a mock interview. (Pages B-29 through B-44 of the August 1985 Guide for Refresher Training illustrate a good presentation of this type, where short mock interviews are interspersed with brief trainer comments and questions for trainees to answer.)

The SIPP training guides contain a limited number of questions that the trainer poses to the trainees. Many of these questions require the trainee to explain what he or she would do in a particular hypothetical situation. Such questions are good, in that they require interviewer interpretation of procedures and specifications. This technique should be used more often, as it (1) increases trainee participation in the session, (2) expands the trainees' understanding of practical applications of procedural instructions, and (3) assures better attention by the trainees when they know they may be called upon to respond to the question. In general, it is recommended that more material be covered in question and answer format. In particular, short-answer questions on "What should you mark?", "What does (TERM) mean?", "What code do you assign?", "Where do you go next?", and the like should be used as an alternative to trainer exposition.

The use of written classroom exercises to be completed independently by the trainees was limited to the May 1985 Refresher Training observed in preparation of this report. The "Workbook Exercises" are valuable, because they can provide a clear indication to the trainer of individual and group weaknesses with the material covered. Further, they are an active rather than passive learning method for trainees. When p ssible, short written exercises should be used to give trainees experi ce with applying survey procedures to realistic practice situations.

As an aid to the trainer, it would seem helpful to include marginal references to the page(s) in the Interviewer's Manual where the material under discussion is covered. There were several questions in the May and August 1985 training sessions that could not be answered from the guide or the trainer's knowledge of the procedure. In several instances, time was lost while trainer and trainees tried to find the answer in the manual. In a few cases, the questions were deferred or the interviewer was told to check the manual later. It is suggested that the manual could become a more useful reference in training if the trainer could direct the trainees to specific pages in the manual where they might find the answers to many of their questions.

## 4. TRAINING SESSIONS

### A. Overview

Formal classroom training sessions are conducted for all new (replacement) SIPP interviewers and for veteran interviewers for most waves of the survey. The length of classroom training for replacement interviewers is three days, followed by two days of on-the-job training with a supervisor. For a particular wave, classroom training ranges from one to two days. Interviewer self study normally precedes a classroom training session.

The comments and recommendations in a later section of this chapter are based on observation of the May and August 1985 Refresher Training Sessions in Atlanta and Raleigh, respectively. Training observation reports prepared by Census Bureau staff (E. Davey, DSD; E. McArthur, POP; and C. Bowie, DSD) on these sessions were reviewed.

### B. General Impressions

There are many positive features of the classroom training sessions. Generally, they are conducted by experienced trainers who manage time, trainees, and reams of material well. The sessions are business-like, with trainees generally being prepared, punctual, and attentive. The timing requirements specified in the training guide are usually met for each topic, and there is little lost time during the session.

Both the May and August sessions began with positive feedback to the interviewers on the progress of the survey and urgings to continue the good work. Interviewers were asked to share positive and negative situations they had experienced in the previous wave and to "ventilate" a bit about aspects of the survey or their job that were bothering them. This type of opening seemed to put both groups of interviewers at ease and to foster a sense of unity among them. Following these opening discussions, specific topics germane to the respective waves were covered in accordance with the material in the training guides. Some problems that arose during each training session are summarized below.

#### 1. May Refresher Training Session, Atlanta, May 30-31, 1985

- In the section on noninterviews, the situations given on pages B-6 through B-8 of the training guide were highly redundant with those already discussed on pages B-4 and B-5. The second time around, there was not much to add to strategies already discussed. (N.B. on page B-7, situation 3, the "young woman" evoked a good bit of discussion--is she a sample person, a member of the baseball team, an occupant of the apartment, etc.?)

- On pages C-2 and C-4 of the training guide, interviewers were asked to tell about their experiences with the Wave 6 Topical Modules. Again, the second discussion was very limited, since the initial discussion covered most relevant topics.

- During the discussion on the Wave 6 Topical Modules, the interviewers stated their concern about the inclusion of certain questions (e.g., the employer ID number) that they were unable to justify to respondents. They specifically asked why the employer ID number was needed and how it would be used. The trainer was not able to respond to the query because she did not know.

- There was general confusion among trainer and trainees about manual revisions on 1985 Panel Movers' Procedures and who had them, who did not, and what represented the latest version. Apparently, some trainers had received revised pages prior to training while others had not. (Problems with timely receipt of materials are addressed in Chapter 5.)

- While the workbook exercises (SIPP 4641.1) were helpful, the reduced copies of the Control Card included therein were almost too small for trainees to read or mark.

- The presentation on Transcription and the Wave 2 Questionnaire required Flashcard V, which had not been received by over half of the trainees. Copies were hastily made so that the information could be reviewed.

- The chart on Control Card procedures for movers (pages D5-7 and D5-8 in the 1985 manual) created problems for most of the interviewers because there was no explanation of how to read and use it. Also, the reduced print was hard for some to read.

- Large segments of manual pages were given to the interviewers with no mention of the nature or significance of revisions or changes therein. (For example, all 86 pages of Chapter E3 were to be replaced.) Several interviewers, particularly two who were new to the survey, were concerned that they had no indication of what changes were contained in the replacement pages and what procedures or specifications were affected.

- In the presentation on Reconstructing Rosters (pages F-1 through F-9 in the training guide), the trainer first explained this complicated procedure and then directed the interviewers to read the manual pages where the instructions were given. The explanation probably would have been more meaningful if the interviewers had first read the manual reference and then heard the verbal explanation.

- The presentation on Added Households and Special Entered/Left Codes (Chapter G in the training guide) was difficult because the interviewers did not have Flashcards W and X. The discussion of special codes was particularly difficult since the trainees had nothing concrete at which to look. The interviewers requested a manual page reference, but it was not available to the trainer.

2. **August Refresher Training Session, Raleigh, August 29, 1985**

- The discussion of terms describing assets, with the question and answer format (Chapter B in the training guide), was generally good. The interviewers questioned the minimum deposit amount ($2,500 vs. $1,000) specified for money market deposit accounts and the maturity (10 years vs. 7 1/2 years vs. no defined term) for E and EE bonds.

- A question about day laborers on farms arose with regard to question 3 (page 18, SIPP 5300), which asks "What was the total number of employees working for this business?" The interviewer who raised the question was anticipating the upcoming interview with a farmer who used large numbers of migrant workers over a three to four month harvest period. She indicated that as many as 100 different workers might have worked on the farm during the reference period, although the total number of workers on a given day was probably only 10 or 15. After some discussion, but no effort to check the specifications for the item in the manual, the trainer advised her to count all of the workers. It is not clear that this decision was a correct one, although the item specifications (1985 Manual, page E4-29) do not address this type of situation.

- In all of the mock interviews during this session, amounts given by respondents were invariably rounded off to the nearest hundred or thousand dollars. (E.g., total business debt of "about $10,000," savings account balance of "$7,500," dividend check for "$200," stock with a market value of "$10,000," etc.) While such values are easy for interviewers to deal with in a training context, use of rounded values does not foster an emphasis on securing more precise responses. If respondent-rounded responses are presented in training as being acceptable, interviewers will, understandably, accept the same kind of responses in interviews.

- With regard to responses supplied in the training guide for the mock interviews, some of the values given were unrealistic (E.g., $55,000 for a mobile home, excluding the site), but the trainer changed them to more realistic responses.

- The training presentation on the Feedback Form would have been simpler had the relationship between the numbered items 1-12 on the form been more clearly linked to the required pretranscription items. Even though they were instructed to use Attachment B to the Feedback Form instructions (SIPP Interviewer Memorandum No. 85-16), several of the interviewers wanted to mark <u>all</u> of the cited questionnaire items. One of the interviewers finally said "Look on the form for the dollar entries and then check the chart to see where you have to mark." The mock interview on the Feedback Form was complicated by the on-going provision of information about the respondent's presumed responses to the interview (cf. pages D-14 and D-15 in

the training guide), plus the fact that the rental property shown on the Feedback Form (a $60,000 beach house) had not appreciated in value in the year since the Wave 4 interview.

- The videotape presentation by William Butz was positively received by the interviewers, who indicated that it was reassuring to get a pat on the back. The only negative reaction came from one interviewer who said "He's really putting the whole responsibility (for the success of SIPP) on us."

- Flashcard V was not available to the interviewers for the presentation on Longitudinal Households. The second mock interview (training guide pages E-11 through E-13) was rough since not enough "set-up" information was provided on the Gibson brothers, specifically how Hank, person 201, had been the reference person at the Wave 2 interview, but Bob, person 101, had apparently not moved until after the Wave 2 interview.

- The "Missing Wave" procedures were explained rather than practiced, although time was available in the session for a mock interview. The interviewers new to the study for the 1985 Panel seemed to want some "hands on" work with the section.

- The inclusion of a guest speaker (Dr. Helen Koo) on the uses of SIPP data was a positive addition to the session.

## C. Evaluation and Recommendations

As noted earlier in this chapter, there are many positive features of the SIPP training sessions. Commendable efforts are made to improve interviewer morale through positive feedback and support of the interviewers during the learning process. Interviewers are given ample opportunities to express their concerns and frustrations, and trainers and supervisors are quite willing to share experiences and strategies that are of value to the interviewers in performing their tasks. A strong sense of professional pride in being a Census interviewer and working on a difficult study such as SIPP is very much evident among the majority of the interviewers. Trainers, supervisors, and veteran interviewers seem sensitive and responsive to the needs of new interviewers as well as others who learn at a slower pace.

The effectiveness of the training sessions could be enhanced through implementation of the following recommendations:

- Revised manual pages, new flashcards, and any other materials required during training should reach the interviewers at least one week prior to their scheduled training session. If a self study is required prior to the session, the materials cited above should accompany the self study.

- Trainer explanations of how to mark the Control Card or the questionnaire would be more meaningful if either handouts or transparencies on an overhead projector were used to <u>show</u> proper recording procedures.

- When manual material is to be read in class by the trainees, it may be more logical to have the trainees read first and then hear explanatory remarks by the trainer, rather than vice versa.

- When new or revised procedures are discussed, the trainer should always have the specific manual page reference(s) to give the trainees (rather than "If you have any problems, refer to your manual.").

- When interviewers ask questions about definitions or interpretation of item specifications, it would seem appropriate for the trainer to direct the trainees to the relevant section of the manual to see if the answer can be found there. This technique reinforces the use of the manual as a reference document and further familiarizes the interviewers with its organization and content.

- In rare cases where the trainer does not know the answer to a question, a procedure should be developed for him/her to call an appropriate resource person to secure an answer to be conveyed to the class. (As an example, the query about the rationale for asking for employer ID number in the Wave 6 Topical Module was not resolved during the May training.)

- In mock interviews, the simulated responses should be realistic and they should convey the level of precision sought during the actual interviews. Probing techniques to secure more exact amounts should be incorporated in the mock interviews if the interviewers are expected to implement them.

- Whenever possible, practice sessions (mock interviews) should be included on new and/or revised instrument sections, particularly when new interviewers are present.

- Special presentations such as the Butz videotape and the guest speaker at the August training session should be continued. The interviewers seem eager to hear about the progress of the survey and any results that may be available. Some summary statistics on the magnitude of the interviewing task, if available, might be of interest. (For example: During Wave 7 of the 1984 Panel, 611 interviewers drove over X miles in 274 PSUs to interview Y households with over Z thousand people in them. The shortest interview lasted A minutes; the longest, over B hours. In the largest household, C sample persons were interviewed. To date, over D percent of the 1984 sample persons have moved at least once during the survey.)

- Trainers should use blackboards (or flip charts on easels) to record relevant manual page numbers for the class and to note the particulars for mock interviews (E.g., name of respondent, person number, date of interview, and other pertinent data). The training guide can specify the particulars to be recorded. Trainees can then see at a glance what they need to know and not have to worry about remembering the information given verbally.

- More active participation by the trainees should be incorporated in the sessions. Classroom exercises and mock interviews, question and answer sessions, practice interviewing in pairs, and similar active teaching techniques break the monotony of trainer lectures.

## 5. PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

### A. Overview

On any survey, regardless of scope or size, decisions must be m as a result of budget and resource constraints. These decisions ma ffect one or more aspects of the survey, both singly and in comb ation. Typically, sample sizes may be smaller than desired due to field sts in conducting interviews; similarly, telephone interviews may b used in lieu of personal contacts; also, some data of analytic interest may be omitted from the questionnaire because of length of interview constraints.

With regard to the SIPP training materials and methods, there are any number of constraints that affect both the quality and quantity of the training provided the interviewers. Budget considerations are the most obvious ones, but survey design decisions also affect not only training procedures and content, but also interviewer morale and motivation, respondent participation, and the quality of the data ultimately collected. Some comments on these topics are offered in the remaining sections of this chapter.

### B. Training Content Issues

There are three specific areas with regard to the content of training materials and sessions that may merit discussion: (1) differences in procedures and instruments between the 1984 and 1985 panels; (2) the balance between "mechanics" and substance; and (3) the amount of information available to the interviewers about the survey's objectives and progress.

#### 1. Differences in Panel Procedures and Instruments

The issue of differences in procedures and instruments for the two panels now in the field will be magnified with the introduction of the 1986 panel. At present, a good bit of space in self studies and the Interviewer's Manual is occupied with text and instrument excerpts illustrating differences in Control Card and questionnaire items, codes, and the like. Likewise, training time is allocated to review differences in the two panels. The emphasis on differences may or may not be as helpful to the interviewers as an acknowledgment that there are differences, many them minor, and that their responsibility is to complete the docum ts for a given panel according to the procedures for that panel. Some examples from the self study for Overview Items (SIPP 5050) lustrate some information on changes to which it may not be nec sary to devote text or time.

> Page 1-1: The interviewer is advised that "asterisks" are deleted" from 1985 Control Card item numbers.

Page 1-3: The information in items 6 and 8 about format changes (changed position of captions and deletion of lines) doesn't affect the use of the document.

Page 1-4: Item 12 duplicates much of the information in the Interviewer's Manual about how to record names in 19a. The change is limited to the added blocks on each line.

Page 1-6: Item 19 again describes a format change that does not affect the use of the instrument.

When differences in Control Card or questionnaire items are significant in terms of content, it would seem helpful to include exhibits of each version of the item, marked to illustrate the same situation. This approach would show the interviewer that the same situation may be coded or marked differently on the two items, given a change in code categories or addition of a question. The significance of the changes is often not digested until the interviewer uses the instrument. A side-by-side comparison may be more meaningful than describing how one version differs from the other.

As noted earlier, addition of the 1986 panel will further compound this issue. New interviewers who are recruited for the 1986 panel will be even more at a disadvantage because they will have three sets of instruments and procedures to master, assuming that they may also receive assignments of cases for the previous panels. In future training materials and sessions, it may become necessary to make a much clearer distinction between the panels and their corresponding waves and to rely less on "carry-over" knowledge of the interviewers.

2. **"Mechanics" vs. Substance**

In self studies and training sessions, a great deal of emphasis is placed on what to code and how to mark items--the "mechanics" of the instruments. While clerical accuracy is obviously critical, there are times when the clerical tasks of marking boxes correctly, entering codes or amounts one character to a block, transcribing data, etc. get what seems to be an unwarranted share of training time. This observation is based on a review of the self studies and observation of the two training sessions, where the emphasis was often on the clerical aspect of the interviewer's job rather than the substantive role the interviewer plays in evaluating responses and probing to secure a responsive (rather than simply codable) answer. For example, in the May Refresher Training Guide, a total of one-half hour was devoted to the Wave 6 Topical Modules, while two hours were devoted to Movers' Procedures. (Interviewers had completed a self study on the Wave 6 Topical Modules in April before Wave 6 interviewing began in May. However, they had also completed a self study on Movers' Procedures prior to the May training.) Admittedly, the procedures for movers are complicated and necessary

to maintain the integrity of the panels, but it is not clear that they merit the share of time they were given. More time spent on the Topical Modules might have revealed problems intervie rs were having that did not surface in the brief discussion.

Most of the mock interviews that are used in training are le and straight-forward. Very few responses are given that requi robing or careful evaluation by the interviewer. The inte ewers' substantive skills could be sharpened by the inclusi of more difficult mock interviews and practice sessions on s this a complete, responsive answer? If not, what else do you n to know and how would you probe?" Even for the veteran i viewers, refresher training on core questions could enhance their skills and accuracy.

Another means of conveying substance is a round-table discussion of unusual responses to certain items or problems the interviewers had in securing a responsive answer. Because interviewers work alone, they sometimes feel that they are the only person who has a particular problem. Most welcome the opportunity to share their experiences, and there is value in having interviewers identify problems rather than having the trainer or supervisor focus on what is perceived as problematical. Open discussions about questionnaire items sometimes reveal wide-spread misperceptions or misinterpretations of procedures or specifications that might not otherwise be detected.

3. **Information on Survey Objectives and Progress**

The SIPP interviewers have a difficult job and they know it. They are asking respondents to provide detailed information about personal matters during the course of eight or nine interviews. The interviewers concur that Wave 6 is the "killer." Even the most cooperative respondents begin to wish that they had never opened the door that first time. By this time, the interviewers feel that they have run out of ammunition to use to secure even one more interview.

The interviewers want as much information as they can get about the objectives of the survey, the uses of the data, the rationale for especially sensitive items, and some affirmation to the respondents that their participation means something in the grand scheme of things. On several other large longitudinal surveys (i.e., The National Longitudinal Survey of the High School ass of 1972, the National Medical Care Expenditure Survey, and the tional Medical Care Utilization and Expenditure Survey) simple s ary statistics were compiled and given to interviewers and r pondents to illustrate (1) the way the respondents' answers ar sed, (2) the types of information that will be available to policy ers nd (3) the simple fact that something is being done with ll t e data collected. The interviewers often used these summaries to show the respondents how their individual answers fit into demographic profile or other classification (E.g., students work g full-time vs. those enrolled in a 4-year college, people with an overnight hospital stay during the first three months of the year, people with

prior military service, or whatever might be of interest to the particular respondent). Provision of data of this type to interviewers and respondents helps to authenticate the interviewers' request for yet another interview and it also confirms to the respondents that what they are doing ultimately gets processed and used. Stated more simply, the interviewer gives information to the respondent for a change, rather than always taking it.

It is understood that some materials have been provided to interviewers--for example, SIPP Interviewer's Memorandum No. 85-15 includes copies of articles related to SIPP or SIPP information and copies of SIPP Data News bulletins are also available to interviewers. Information of this type should be distributed routinely because it enhances the interviewers' knowledge of the uses of the survey data and it provides concrete evidence that results are forthcoming.

## C. Interviewer Morale and Motivation

Not much information appears in the survey literature on the care and feeding of interviewers, although it is a topic that deserves careful attention. On a longitudinal survey, in particular, there is a compelling need to maintain a stable, motivated field force. The costs of replacing an interviewer are considerable, and the loss of two or three interviewers in the same area can effectively stop the survey cold.

Most interviewers work for reasons other than producing income, although some are dependent on the rather meager wages that are typically paid interviewers. A few interviewers are "marking time" between more lucrative or permanent jobs, but, for the most part, an interviewing staff is a group of people, predominantly women, who have no qualms about knocking on the doors of strangers and asking them questions about their most personal behaviors and affairs. Interviewers rely on their interpersonal skills and their convictions that they are involved in a worthwhile undertaking to convince sometimes suspicious or hostile people that they have a patriotic/altruistic/moral obligation to participate in the present survey. Most of the time, the interviewers succeed in this task.

SIPP places demands on the interviewing staff that far exceed those of other on-going Census Bureau surveys. The Control Card and questionnaire are complex, and they change at every wave. The interviewer has to "sell" him/herself eight or nine times to multiple respondents in the same household. When the respondents begin asking "How many more times are you going to ask me these same questions?", the interviewer begins to question the reasonableness of what he/she is doing.

Census Bureau surveys have traditionally enjoyed high response rates produced by well-trained, highly-motivated staffs of field interviewers. However, previous surveys have not required the level of interviewer or respondent commitment that SIPP does. The reasons for interviewer attrition are obvious ones on SIPP and on other surveys and they are not iterated here. Some suggestions follow about ways to maintain and increase interviewer morale and motivation to stay with the survey.

(Some of these techniques are likely being used, but the author of this report has not specifically requested information about this area of the management of the survey.)

- In routine correspondence to interviewers, include at least one positive note about interviewer performance. For example, Type A noninterviews are holding steady/slightly lower; the number of questionnaire items marked "refused" has gone down significantly as you have worked to gain your respondents' confidence; thanks to your hard work, we are tracking 98 percent of all movers; your time sheets show that you are working efficiently; or whatever good news there is that can be shared.

- Feedback to interviewers on their performance should include not only an indication of what they are doing wrong, but also what they are doing right. Ideally, error reports should contain the total number of items edited or checked, as well as the number found in error. A hand-written note from an editor to the effect that a difficult interview was completed perfectly can lift sagging spirits.

- Acknowledge that mistakes occur at every level and that interviewers are often asked to compensate for the mistakes of others. (This recommendation is particularly applicable to errors in instruments and other "official" materials issued to the interviewers.)

- Solicit suggestions from the interviewers on how the supervisor, Regional Office, or Washington office can help them do their job better. When feasible suggestions are received, implement them, and give credit to the interviewer(s) who suggested them.

- Recognize outstanding performance by interviewers and assure that their efforts are commended, at minimum, by supervisors and Regional Office staff.

- Continue the supportive role of the supervisors and trainers in classroom sessions. Encourage supervisors and trainers to relay interviewers' concerns to the Regional and Washington offices.

- Keep interviewers informed of the progress of the survey and their role in it. Publicize information on national and regional completion rates so that interviewers can see how they are doing in comparison to others. Positive competition is often stimulating.

## D. Respondent Motivation and Retention

As noted earlier in this chapter, participation in SIPP requires a more extensive commitment of time and energy from respondents than most longitudinal surveys, by virtue of total number of interviews, if nothing

else. Incentive payments, which are often used in surveys to secure cooperation or to compensate respondents for keeping diaries or otherwise complying with special data collection requests, are not being used. Intrinsic motivation to participate is limited to some feeling that one is contributing to the accuracy and completeness of a valid scientific study or, in some cases, to a simple feeling of gratification that an interviewer comes periodically to visit and that attention is being paid to someone whose everyday life offers few diversions.

The respondent's sole link to the survey is through the interviewer. A number of interviewers commented in one of the training sessions that some of their respondents were staying in the survey primarily out of loyalty to them. Such may well be the case, since the respondents are essentially honoring a commitment they made to another person--not to the Census Bureau nor to the survey per se. The respondent/interviewer relationship is obviously critical to the success of the survey, and the nature of this relationship is highly variable across respondents and interviewers.

Feedback from interviewers and supervisors should be sought on techniques that are used to secure continued cooperation. The emphasis here is not so much on conversion of noninterviews, but on establishing and maintaining positive relationships with generally cooperative respondents. That is, what are the interactions that make it possible for the interviewer to complete the interview? The interviewers seem to feel that many respondents are refusing to continue with the interviews because of the duration of the survey (eight or nine interviews over 2 1/2 years) and the redundancy of the interviews. While SIPP is designed to measure change, the economic situation of many respondents--particularly elderly and low income people--is remarkably stable. Several interviewers indicated that they sometimes administered the topical modules to respondents first, to show that some new questions were included in the interview. While this approach may or may not conform to the survey specifications, it at least appears to help the interviewer secure an interview that might otherwise have been lost.

In both training sessions, interviewers advocated having thank you letters prepared for respondents. Preferably, the letters would be sent to the interviewers, who could add their own note, thus making the letters more personal to the respondents. If such a procedure has not been implemented, it could certainly be tried, even on an experimental basis, to see if thank you letters would have any effect on respondent retention.

As suggested in Section B.3 of this chapter, summary statistics could be provided to interviewers to share with respondents.

In two large national longitudinal health care surveys, respondents were provided calendars on which to record medical visits, days of disability, and other health events that would be asked about in subsequent interviews. According to the interviewers' accounts, the calendars had a very positive public relations effect, above and beyond providing more accurate data for subsequent interviews. Even respondents who did not record health events on their calendars seemed pleased to have them,

because they were a "gift." Some consideration should be given to providing respondents with some type of "gift" as evidence of their importance to the study.

## E. Materials Distribution

The task of keeping a large field staff supplied with all needed reference and interviewing materials is not an insignificant aspect of the management of any survey. Timely distribution of materials and supplies is, however, essential if the survey schedule and field staff morale are to be maintained. As noted in Chapter 4, there were at least minor problems in both training sessions that were caused by late shipment of materials to interviewers (revised manual pages and new flashcards).

When the interviewers do not receive supplies or assignments, they can't do their jobs, yet deadlines are rarely relaxed. Some resentment and loss of morale are inevitable, because the interviewer has lost what little control he/she has over personal and work schedules. Some interviewers grit their teeth, but go out and work marathon hours to compensate for delays beyond their control, as they are expected to do. Other interviewers respond in kind--"Since the stuff was late getting to me, why should I kill myself to get it back on time?"

The coordinated management of people and materials is critical to the successful completion of survey activities. When the interviewers do not receive their materials in a timely manner, they are handicapped in preparing for training or completing their assignments. Careful attention must be paid to mailing schedules and delivery differentials (e.g., East Coast vs. West Coast) to insure that interviewers receive materials when they are needed.