

What is the Consumer Expenditure Survey?

The Consumer Expenditure Survey (CE) data, collected by the U.S. Census Bureau, are comprised of two surveys: the *Quarterly Interview Survey* and the *Diary Survey*. These surveys provide nationally representative data on the buying habits of American consumers, including data on their expenditures, income, and consumer unit characteristics (both families and single consumers). The CE attempts to collect data from an adult household member; however, if no adult is available, any household member at least 16 years of age completes the survey. The 2009 CE reports spending for 120,847 households.

The *Quarterly Interview Survey* is designed to capture expenditures on large items. In this survey, each consumer unit is interviewed every three months over five calendar quarters. In the initial interview, the majority of information collected is on demographic and family characteristics as well as an inventory of each consumer unit's major durable goods. The remaining interviews primarily focus on expenditure and employment information. Finally, the fifth interview includes a supplemental section to account for changes in assets and liabilities over the one-year period.

The *Diary Survey* is designed to capture expenditures on regularly purchased, small-scale items. The diary requires respondents to record all of their purchases for two consecutive one-week periods.

What are the significant changes after the 2004 CE?

CE income tables prior to 2004 only report data for complete income reporters. To be considered a complete reporter, the respondent has to provide a value for at least one major source of income. In 2004, the CE tables began incorporating multiple imputation techniques concerning missing data on income questions; this change resulted in more accurate comparisons of income across various characteristics.

What does the CE offer family researchers?

The CE provides detailed data on household spending. Both the *Quarterly Interview Surveys* and the *Diary Surveys* collect some family information such as household membership, work status of household members, and socioeconomic characteristics of both the respondent and the respondent's spouse. These data can be used to compare both type and amount of expenditures across different family forms and household characteristics. The CE allows family researchers to examine the resources allocated to various familial costs including childcare, assistance to elderly or impaired relatives, etc. The CE also collects data on child support and alimony payments to nonresident children and former spouses living in a different household.

In addition, the CE provides detailed information on the transfer of resources across biological ties spanning multiple households. Data on these transfers range from expenditures on childcare to expenditures in later life. The CE also collects data on many types of resource transfers, including money for educational expenses, housing costs, food expenditures, and a host of other types of expenses. A detailed summary of these variables can be found in the NCFMR Question Crosswalk on *Instrumental Support* in Family Ties Across Households (<http://ncfmr.bgsu.edu/page97068.html>).

How do I use the CE?

The CE Microdata CD-ROMS are available for purchase. These CD-ROMS include data from both interview and diary methods. Cost varies depending on the data being requested and ranges from \$145 to \$180. Data collected prior to 1996 are only available in ASCII text format. Data collected from 1996-2006 are available in a SAS or ASCII text format. Finally, data collected from 2007 to the present are available in SAS, SPSS, STATA, and ASCII formats.

The order form for requesting CE data is available at <http://www.bls.gov/cex/csxmicro.htm>. All data requests must be mailed to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

In addition to purchasing data, the CE provides free reports highlighting household expenditures and income (<http://www.bls.gov/cex/csxreport.htm>). *Annual reports* integrate data from both the interview and diary designs and highlight average income and expenditures across different household/consumer characteristics. The *biennial report* is similar to the *annual report*, but it shows average expenditures and income for a two-year interval. The *anthology reports* focus primarily on methodological and analytical changes in the CE over time, giving data users further insight. Additional information concerning these reports is available at <http://www.bls.gov/cex/csxreport.htm#twoyear>.

Where can I learn more?

The CE provides an FAQ's webpage concerning various key points (<http://www.bls.gov/cex/csxfaq.htm>). In addition, the CE provides four points of contact for additional technical information including telephone, fax, mail, and email at <http://www.bls.gov/cex/csxcont.htm>.