



Marriage and Remarriage

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I would like to thank both Zhenchao and Megan for their comments and I find many similarities in their suggestions. I will first address the basic issue of the respondent's current marital status before going on to the more complex issues of collecting marital histories and the measurement of same-sex marriages.

Marital Status

First, to clear up any misunderstandings, Census Bureau data on marital status captures the current marital condition of individuals at the time of the survey, not their living arrangements. This latter characteristic is collected from the relationship item. We do, however, use the dual concept of married, spouse present and married, spouse absent to delineate married people who are either living or not living with their spouses.

If not living with their spouses, couples can be (1) separated for reasons of marital discord-- which is how the NSFG defines this status—or (2) not living with their spouses for other reasons, such as being in the military or away in school. This dichotomy is used by many economists to examine labor force participation and the uses of different types of child care arrangements, as both behaviors are heavily influenced by the presence or absence of a spouse in the household.

There is another reason why we use this separate marital status/living arrangements approach and do not currently offer a cohabitation status response as an alternative option within the marital status item.

Federal agencies use the more traditional marital status categories in their computation of basic indicators such as out-of-wedlock birth rates, mortality rates by marital status, and projections of widows and divorced people for Social Security programs. Currently, birth and death certificates and Social Security forms do not include the category "Cohabiting."

Removing up the 15 million people out of these statuses (7 million unmarried partners) and placing them into a cohabiting status category create problems for programmatic uses of the data. The current Census Bureau nomenclature that retains the two concepts increases the flexibility of the data for usage by both public and private researchers.

All Census surveys collect the two items separately. However, we also collect information on cohabitation status in the Current Population Survey (CPS). A question added in 2007—based on a recommendation made in a previous Counting Couples Conference—that asks all people who are not married if they are living together with someone in the household as a boyfriend/girlfriend/partner. This probe increased by 1 million the number of cohabiting couples over the previous CPS estimate. This approach, feasibly executed on a laptop computer as in the CPS, has not been incorporated into the current American Community Survey (ACS) forms that rely heavily on a paper instrument mailed to the respondent.

Marital Histories

Moving now to the collection of marital histories, I would also like to correct the misimpression that the SIPP and the ACS does not collect marital history data for the spouse. It always has in the SIPP and currently does in the ACS. However, changes will occur in the collection of marital history data in the new SIPP.

Previously, the old SIPP collected up to three dates of marriage, separation, widowed, and divorce. The current plans will obtain information on the first marriage and detailed marital and cohabiting transitions that occurred in the 12 month-period prior to the interview.

Both Megan and Zhenchao regret the loss of marital history data on the SIPP and the CPS. As a reminder, even the simple marital status item was deleted from the 2010 Census.

Questionnaire space on the Census and ACS has always been at a premium and is highly competitive among federal agencies. And one must not forget that the majority of households on the Census and ACS still receive paper forms in the mail which have additional forms design and postal regulation constraints.

Same-sex Marriages

My final comments will address same-sex marriages in surveys. One of the principal reasons why everyone wants this information from surveys is that you cannot get any reasonable estimates from the traditional administrative sources. California never published counts of same sex-marriages when it performed them in 2008 and the National Center for Health Statistics only publishes total counts of marriages performed as provided by the states.

At first, you may think the biggest analytical problem one faces concerns the size of the sample. Estimates from surveys as widely varying in size as the CPS and ACS basically produce the same national estimates--about 550,000 same-sex households--and very similar distributional patterns of key demographic characteristics.¹ Although the CPS is not large enough to produce state estimates, the main problem researchers' face is not whether the numbers are good enough to be shown for individual states or counties but their accuracy even at the national level.

The 2010 Census will release in a supplemental table the numbers of same-sex couple households that identified themselves as same-sex spouses. This table has been dubbed by the media as the "Raw Data" table.

One must understand that raw data is composed of all sorts of answers, including those being generated by data capture errors. By the time of the 2010 Census, administrative records suggested that there were about 50,000 same-sex couples who were married in the United States. If one considers that even a minute 1 in a 1,000 error in the marking of the gender item

¹ Daphne Lofquist and Renee Ellis, "Comparison of Estimates of Same-Sex Couple Households from the ACS and CPS." Paper presented at The Annual Meeting of the Population Association of America, Washington, D.C. March 31-April 2, 2011

by *opposite-sex spouses* can produce over 55,000 *same-sex spouses*, one quickly grasps the problem.

It is very difficult to produce good data if the size of the population one wishes to measure is less than the error rate of the variables used to identify the population. Error rates can be sensitive to form design changes even when the questions remain the same. This happened in 2008 when the ACS changed the layout of the paper mail form and the estimate of same-sex spouses dropped from 340,000 to 150,000.

Future Work Plans

Now, what is the Census Bureau doing to address the issues brought up by Megan and Zhenchao? Over the past two years, the Census Bureau has conducted hundreds of interviews all over the country in a series of focus groups and cognitive interviews to get a better idea of how people respond to the marital status and relationship items. We are currently engaged in a long term project to incorporate these findings into the ACS and other Census Bureau surveys. But that project requires large scale testing to measure differences in old and new approaches and also potential pushback or confusion from respondents over the wording. Simple changes often produce unexpected results which require the creation of rather complex editing.

In addition to our current research agenda, we are key participants in a group formed by the Office of Management and Budget named “The Federal Interagency Working Group on Measuring Relationships in Federal Household Surveys.” This group contains representatives from more than a dozen federal agencies, many of whom are represented at this conference. The topical areas that this group will focus on are as follows:

1. The uses of relationship and marital status information by federal agencies, policy users, and the research community in general;
2. The collection of the data—items and wordings on surveys and forms.
3. Editing of the data—how data are edited if missing and they are edited for consistency.
4. Tabulation, presentation and dissemination of information—how are the data presented, and what is available on publicly released micro-data files.

It is anticipated that these activities by the Census Bureau and the OMB group will address many of the issues raised at this conference in a way that both increases the knowledge base of the research community and improves the quality of the data on marriage and living arrangements.