STUDY SERIES (Survey Methodology #2009-08)

ACS Food Stamps Instruction Revision: Cognitive Test

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ACS Food Stamps Instruction Revision: Cognitive Test¹

Jennifer Childs, Dawn Norris, and Matthew Clifton Statistical Research Division, U.S. Census Bureau May 7, 2009

The Food Stamp Program is changing the program name to "Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program" or SNAP. This change went into effect on October 1, 2008, but is being adopted by different states at different times (and some states are not adopting it at all). There will be a transition period during which people will slowly become more familiar with the new program name, and the Census Bureau is working to identify appropriate changes to each survey's questions that measure participation in the Food Stamp Program. In the American Community Survey (ACS), the first modification to be implemented will be a respondent instruction on the self-administered form and an interviewer instruction on the interviewer-administered automated instruments. The objective of this research was to conduct cognitive interviews to test a change in instructions for the food stamps question in the American Community Survey (ACS) self-administered form. The goal was to examine respondent understanding of the instruction and ability to answer the question correctly.

Methods

In April 2009, staff from the Statistical Research Division conducted 15 semi-structured cognitive interviews. We sought to recruit respondents who either were currently, or recently had been, in the Food Stamps program or were participating in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (commonly known as WIC) or the National School Lunch Program. The latter group of participants were to represent those who might falsely answer positively to the food stamps question. We recruited respondents in Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia, and the District of Columbia so that a range of state-specific issues could be examined. We recruited respondents through local food banks so that we could identify people likely to participate in each program without expressly advertising what our topic of interest was. Table 1 shows the distribution of respondents by state and Food Stamp Program participation status.

¹ *Disclaimer:* This report is released to inform interested parties of research and to encourage discussion. Any views expressed on the methodological issues are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the U.S. Census Bureau. ² As of April 1, 2009, the USDA reports that 25 states and territories adopted (or planned to adopt) the new SNAP name, 8 decided to adopt a different new name, 3 decided to continue using the Food Stamp Program name, 9 kept a current alternate name and 8 (including the District of Columbia) were undecided (Sources: http://www.fns.usda.gov/FSP/; <a href="http://www.fns.usd

Table 1. Respondents by State and Food Stamp Program Participation

State and 1 ood Stamp 1 togram 1 articipation				
<u>State</u>	Current	<u>Past</u>	<u>Never</u> ³	
DC	3	0	1	
MD	2	0	1	
VA	0	1	3	
WV	1	2	1	

By recruiting participants from Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia and the District of Columbia, we were able to look at a variety of situations with regard to this program: DC was undecided as to a program name at the time of the interview (thus still using the "Food Stamps" program name); Maryland was in the midst of implementing a new and different program name, the Food Supplement Program, which became effective October 1 of the past year; Virginia was planning to start using the new SNAP name on October 1 of the current year (thus it had not been rolled out yet); and West Virginia started using the SNAP name on October 1 of the past year (thus respondents in this state may be familiar with this new name).

Below is the revised question text that was tested in this study. The revision is contained in the italicized note:

IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS, did anyone in this household receive Food Stamps or a
Food Stamp benefit card? Include government benefits from the Supplemental
Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Do NOT include WIC or the National School Lunch Program.
Yes No
110

All participants were observed completing a revised self-administered 2010 ACS form up until the point that they had completed the food stamps question – Q 12 of the Housing section (See Appendix A for the tested questionnaire). At that point, the interviewer engaged the respondent in a semi-scripted retrospective debriefing about his or her understanding of the question and associated instruction, as well as his or her current or past participation in any food assistance program.

With the participants' permission, cognitive interviews were tape-recorded to facilitate analysis of the results. All participants were informed that their response was voluntary and that the information they provide is confidential.

Results

Only 1 respondent recognized the new program name, SNAP. This respondent was not currently on Food Stamps, but had previously received them, and had recently applied for them again (and

³ Many of the "Never" respondents did get WIC or had children who participated in the National School Lunch program.

been turned down). Interestingly, she did not know the name from the program office, but rather from a sign she had seen in a doctor's office. This respondent was from West Virginia, the state in our study that had already made the conversion to the SNAP program name.

Though other respondents were not familiar with the program name, it did not disturb their comprehension of the question or their ability to answer it. Many respondents reported that they did not read the italic instructions, and we observed very few respondents who did more than glance at them prior to the researcher pointing them out. One respondent hypothesized that the SNAP program could be a nutritional information program offered by doctors' offices. This is potential source of misunderstanding, though it did not cause a misreport by any of our respondents.

At least one respondent misreported because of the reference period in the question.⁴ This respondent did receive food stamps within the past 12 months, but reported "no," because she was not currently receiving food stamps. She was reporting for her current situation, not for the entire past 12 months. When given the calendar, she reported the dates of receipt which included 11-12 months ago. We do not believe this had anything to do with the instruction, but rather a lack of attention to the reference period.

Of the six people who had never received food stamps, two were currently receiving WIC and four participated in the National School Lunch Program. None of these respondents were tempted to misreport. All respondents except for one also received assistance from the food banks. None of them falsely reported this other type of assistance as food stamp receipt, but one respondent reported that she might consider food bank assistance as SNAP benefits. Because this respondent does receive food stamps as well, her answer to Question 12 as it is currently worded was correct. It is unclear how the respondent would have actually reported if she had not been receiving food stamps.

The two respondents who received food stamps in Maryland did not recognize the program by its new name (as of 10/08) – the Food Supplement Program – and during probes incorrectly reported that they had never received benefits from this program. However, they still correctly answered Question 12 because they recognized that they received "Food Stamps."

One respondent who received food stamps thought Question 12 was asking whether anyone in her household participates in any type of subsistence program. She reported that she did not see the italicized sentence. Once she was directed to it during probes, she reported that she would answer "no" to Question 12 if she received only WIC but not food stamps.

⁴ It is possible that one other respondent also misreported because of the time frame. This was the respondent from West Virginia that recognized the SNAP name. She reported receiving only \$10 a month in the past but did not report when that was. Based on other information gleaned in the interview, it had to have been within the last 2 ½ years. It is possible that it was within 12 months. The interviewer did not probe specifically on the time frame of this receipt.

⁵ Two respondents received no government support, and several respondents participated in both programs.

⁶ One respondent was a worker at the food bank who participated because one of the respondents she recruited did not want to participate.

All participants were familiar with the Food Stamp Program as well as the WIC program. Some respondents did not know the National School Lunch Program by name, but recognized it when probed about the "Free and Reduced Lunch Program" at schools. One respondent reported that Question 12 was somewhat sensitive, but "not really in a bad way."

Potentially Problematic Situations

During the course of testing, we became aware of two programs similar enough in name or scope to the SNAP program to potentially cause confusion: the Commodity Supplemental Food Program and the Montgomery County, Maryland school SNAP program.

The Commodity Supplemental Food Program is a program similar to WIC and provides assistance for pregnant and breastfeeding mothers, children under 6, and elderly people at least 60 years of age. In this program, participants receive food from the agency (not vouchers or an EBT card). Thirty-two states, the District of Columbia and two American Indian Reservations participate in this program. We suspect ACS does not want reporting of this program included in this question. No respondents mentioned this, but one of our researchers saw a sign for the program at one food bank.

Montgomery County schools in Maryland have a "SNAP" program by which parents can prepay for their students' lunches from the cafeteria. Parents make a deposit into this account, and then the student accesses it via a PIN at the cashier. While no respondents mentioned this either, a Census co-worker from Montgomery County immediately thought of this when she saw the question we were testing and thought it could be confusing to Montgomery County parents.

Though these programs were not mentioned by respondents during testing, we thought it would be beneficial to report them for future reference.

Recommendations

Because we saw no respondents misreporting or evidently confused by the new instruction, we did not recommend any changes to the wording. However, we do want to recommend caution when other ACS and Census Bureau surveys begin to use the SNAP program name in survey questions. At the time of our interviews, respondents in our sample had not grasped the new program names (SNAP in WV or Food Supplement Program in MD). Respondents in our study recognized the term "Food Stamps" and seemed to be able to accurately report whether or not they received them (with the exception of the reference period problem described above).

We had a very minor recommendation about formatting based on expert review (not on findings from the cognitive test). We believe the question we tested had a suboptimal line break in the second italic instruction which breaks up the phrase "Do NOT include":

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⁷ Source: http://www.fns.usda.gov/fdd/programs/csfp/

IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS, did anyone in this household receive Food Stamps or a Food Stamp benefit card? Include government benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Do NOT include WIC or the National School Lunch Program.

We recommended changing the line break, as follows:

IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS, did anyone in this household receive Food Stamps or a Food Stamp benefit card? Include government benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

Do NOT include WIC or the National School Lunch Program.

The revision was accepted by the ACS Content Council for implementation in the 2010 ACS form.

Acknowledgements

The authors want to acknowledge Lorraine Randall for setting up interviews with the food banks in DC, MD, VA and WV within a very quick time frame for this testing. We also thank Yuling Pan, Terry DeMaio, and Stephanie Sheffield for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this report.





THE American Community Survey

Please complete this form and return it as soon as possible after receiving it in the mail.

This form asks for information about the people who are living or staying at the address on the mailing label and about the house, apartment, or mobile home located at the address on the mailing label.



If you need help or have questions about completing this form, please call **1-800-354-7271**. The telephone call is free.

Telephone Device for the Deaf (TDD): Call 1–800–582–8330. The telephone call is free.

¿NECESITA AYUDA? Si usted habla español y necesita ayuda para completar su cuestionario, llame sin cargo alguno al 1-877-833-5625. Usted también puede pedir un cuestionario en español o completar su entrevista por teléfono con un entrevistador que habla español.

For more information about the American Community Survey, visit our web site at: http://www.census.gov/acs/www/

Start Here

Please print today's date.

Month Day Year

Please print the name and telephone number of the person who is filling out this form. We may contact you if there is a question.

Last Name

First Name MI
Area Code + Number

- How many people are living or staying at this address?
 INCLUDE everyone who is living or staying here for more than 2 months.
- **INCLUDE** yourself if you are living here for more than 2 months.
- **INCLUDE** anyone else staying here who does not have another place to stay, even if they are here for 2 months or less.
- DO NOT INCLUDE anyone who is living somewhere else for more than 2 months, such as a college student living away or someone in the Armed Forces on deployment.

Number of people

Fill out pages 2, 3, and 4 for everyone, including yourself, who is living or staying at this address for more than 2 months. Then complete the rest of the form.

FORM **ACS-1(2010)KFI** (03-18-2009) Draft 1

OMB No. 0607-0810

USCENSUSBUREAU

Person 1	Person 2		
(Person 1 is the person living or staying here in whose name this house or apartment is owned, being bought, or rented. If there is no such person, start with the name of any adult living or staying here.)			
How is this person related to Person 1? Person 1 What is Person 1's sex? Mark (X) ONE box.	Husband or wife Biological son or daughter Adopted son or stepdaughter Brother or sister Father or mother Grandchild Parent-in-law What is Person 2's sex? Mark (X) ONE box.		
What is Person 1's age and what is Person 1's date of birth? Please report babies as age 0 when the child is less than 1 year old. Print numbers in boxes. Age (in years) Month Day Year of birth NOTE: Please answer BOTH Question 5 about Hispanic origin and Question 6 about race. For this survey, Hispanic origins are not race. Is Person 1 of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin No, not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano Yes, Puerto Rican Yes, Cuban Yes, another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin − Print origin, for example Argentinean, Colombian, Dominican, Nicaraguan, Salvadoran, Spaniard, and so on. Age (in years) Year of birth Print origin and origin and origin and origin and so on. No, not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin and origin and origin and origin. Yes, Cuban	Ces. Question 6 about race. For this survey, Hispanic origins are not races. Is Person 2 of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin? No, not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano Yes, Puerto Rican Yes, Cuban		
What is Person 1's race? Mark (X) one or more boxes. White Black, African Am., or Negro American Indian or Alaska Native — Print name of enrolled or principal translation. Asian Indian Chinese Korean Guamanian or Chamo Filipino Vietnamese Samoan Other Asian — Print race, for example, Hmong, Laotian, Thai, Pakistani, Cambodian, and so on.	Asian Indian		
Some other race – Print race.	Some other race – Print race.		

Person	3	Person 4
What is Person 3's name? Last Name (Please print)	irst Name MI	What is Person 4's name? Last Name (Please print) First Name MI
How is this person related to Person Husband or wife Biological son or daughter Adopted son or daughter Stepson or stepdaughter Brother or sister Father or mother Grandchild Parent-in-law What is Person 3's sex? Mark (X) ONE Male Female What is Person 3's age and what is Person 3's age a	Son-in-law or daughter-in-law Other relative Roomer or boarder Housemate or roommate Unmarried partner Foster child Other nonrelative box. erson 3's date of birth?	Husband or wife Son-in-law or daughter-in-law Other relative Roomer or boarder Housemate or roommate Unmarried partner Father or mother Father or mother Searchild Other nonrelative Other nonrelative Parent-in-law What is Person 4's sex? Mark (X) ONE box. Male Female What is Person 4's age and what is Person 4's date of birth? Please report babies as age 0 when the child is less than 1 year old. Print numbers in boxes. Age (in years) Month Day Year of birth
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Adopted son or daughter		omer or boarder	Sex Male Female	Age (in years)
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Housing

	Please answer the following questions about the house,	Answer questions 4 – 6 if this is a HOUSE OR A MOBILE HOME; otherwise, SKIP to	Does this house, apartment, or mobile home have -		
	apartment, or mobile home at the address on the mailing label.	question 7a.	a. hot and cold running water?		
			b. a flush toilet?		
	Which best describes this building? Include all apartments, flats, etc., even if vacant.	How many acres is this house or mobile home on?	c. a bathtub or shower?		
ı		☐ Less than 1 acre → SKIP to question 6	d. a sink with a faucet?		
ı	☐ A mobile home☐ A one-family house detached from any	☐ 1 to 9.9 acres	e. a stove or range?		
ı	other house	10 or more acres	f. a refrigerator?		
	 A one-family house attached to one or more houses A building with 2 apartments A building with 3 or 4 apartments 	IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS, what were the actual sales of all agricultural products from this property?	g. telephone service from which you can both make and receive calls? <i>Include cell phones.</i>		
ı	A building with 5 to 9 apartments	☐ None	How many automobiles, vans, and trucks		
ı	A building with 10 to 19 apartments	□ \$1 to \$999	of one-ton capacity or less are kept at		
ı	A building with 20 to 49 apartmentsA building with 50 or more apartments	☐ \$1,000 to \$2,499	home for use by members of this household?		
ı	Boat, RV, van, etc.	S2,500 to \$4,999	None		
ı	Boat, IIV, vall, etc.	\$5,000 to \$9,999			
		\$10,000 or more			
2	About when was this building first built?		3		
ı	2000 or later – Specify year	Is there a business (such as a store or	□ 4		
ı		barber shop) or a medical office on this property?	□ 5		
ı		☐ Yes	6 or more		
ı	1990 to 1999	□ No			
ı	1980 to 1989		0 Which FUEL is used MOST for heating this		
ı	☐ 1970 to 1979	a. How many separate rooms are in this	house, apartment, or mobile home?		
ı	1960 to 1969	house, apartment, or mobile home?	Gas: from underground pipes serving the		
ı	☐ 1950 to 1959	Rooms must be separated by built-in archways or walls that extend out at least	neighborhood		
ı	1940 to 1949	6 inches and go from floor to ceiling.	Gas: bottled, tank, or LP		
ı	1939 or earlier	INCLUDE bedrooms, kitchens, etc.	☐ Electricity ☐ Fuel oil, kerosene, etc.		
		 EXCLUDE bathrooms, porches, balconies, foyers, halls, or unfinished basements. 	Coal or coke		
3	When did PERSON 1 (listed on page 2)	Number of rooms	Wood		
ı	move into this house, apartment, or mobile home?		Solar energy		
	Month Year		Other fuel		
		b. How many of these rooms are bedrooms? Count as bedrooms those rooms you would list if this house, apartment, or mobile home were for sale or rent. If this is an efficiency/studio apartment, print "0". Number of bedrooms	☐ No fuel used		

Housing (continued)

a. LAST MONTH, what was the cost of electricity for this house, apartment, or mobile home? Last month's cost – Dollars	a Food Stamp benefit card? Include someone or IS BUY	uestions 16 – 20 if you or else in this household OWNS ING this house, apartment, or the Otherwise, SKIP to E on age.
OR Included in rent or condominium fee No charge or electricity not used D. LAST MONTH, what was the cost of gas for this house, apartment, or mobile home? Last month's cost – Dollars \$.00	house and	
OR Included in rent or condominium fee Included in electricity payment entered above No charge or gas not used	Monthly amount – Dollars THIS prop	the annual real estate taxes or perty? nount – Dollars
c. IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS, what was the cost of water and sewer for this house, apartment, or mobile home? If you have lived here less than 12 months, estimate the cost. Past 12 months' cost – Dollars OR Included in rent or condominium fee No charge	Owned by you or someone in this household with a mortgage or loan? Include home equity loans. Owned by you or someone in this household free and clear (without a mortgage or loan)? Rented?	he annual payment for fire, nd flood insurance on THIS pount – Dollars
I. IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS, what was the cost of oil, coal, kerosene, wood, etc., for this house, apartment, or mobile home? If you have lived here less than 12 months, estimate the cost. Past 12 months' cost – Dollars OR Included in rent or condominium fee		
No charge or these fuels not used	b. Does the monthly rent include any meals? Yes No	