DOC - US CENSUS BUREAU

Moderator: Julie Iriondo
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1:00 pm

Coordinator: Hello and thank you all for standing by. At this time, I would like to inform all participants that your lines are on a listen-only mode until the question and answer session of today's conference. This call is also being recorded. If you have any objections, you may disconnect at this time. I will now turn the call over to Julie Iriondo. Thank you. You may begin.

Julie Iriondo: Thank you, Operator. Good afternoon and thank you for joining us for today's virtual event. I'm Julie Iriondo, Chief of the Media Relations Branch in the Public Information Office at the U.S. Census Bureau. This morning we announced a joint effort between the Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics, also known as BLS, to modernize the Current Population Survey and propose plans to implement changes to ensure sustainability. This afternoon's webinar will take a close look at CPS modernization efforts and we'll have time to answer your questions at the end of the presentation. For today's webinar, I'm joined by Nicholas Johnson, Division Chief of Labor Force Statistics with BLS, and Kyra Linse, Survey Director of the Current Population Survey and American Time Use Survey team with the Census Bureau. Immediately after the presentation, we will begin taking your questions.

Apologies. Please note that if you're watching today's webinar on YouTube, you'll need to dial into the phone line to ask a question. And that number is

listed on your screen now. And if you already know what you'd like to ask, you can join the phone queue right now. You can do so by dialing Star 1. Without further ado, I'll now turn it over to Nicholas Johnson, our first presenter. Nicholas?

Nicholas Johnson: Good afternoon and welcome to the Joint Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics webinar on the modernization of the Current Population Survey, the CPS. Thank you all for joining us. My name is Nicholas Johnson and I am the CPS Program Manager from BLS. I'll be joined by my census colleague, Kyra Linse, who is the Survey Director for the CPS.

Today we're going to discuss some early efforts that both agencies are pursuing to help ensure the long-term sustainability of the CPS. We'll start with some background about how CPS data are collected, discuss current collection challenges and the need for modernization. We'll be introducing plans for a self-administered Web collection instrument and discuss some broader goals for CPS modernization.

The CPS is a monthly survey that is jointly sponsored by BLS and the Census Bureau. It serves as a source for key labor force statistics including the unemployment rate, labor force participation rate and the employment population ratio. The survey includes about 70,000 households per month of which about 60,000 are eligible for the CPS. Each month census field representatives attend collections either in person or by telephone for each in-sample household. This occurs over a 10-day collection period each month.

Typically the first interview is conducted in person and subsequent interviews are conducted by telephone. Interviews range from 10 to 30 minutes long, including supplements, with the first month typically being the longest. This can vary by the size of the household though. A particular household will be

contacted for eight months out of a 16-month period with four months on, followed by an eight-month break, and finishing with four more months off.

The CPS response rate has been declining since 2013. There was an initial period in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic when collection operations were disrupted. But even as collection returned to normal, the pace of response rate decline accelerated. In 10 years, response rates have gone from about 90% to about 70%. Of course, CPS is not alone. This is a challenge faced by nearly every survey. Whether in government or the private sector, both here and around the globe.

The additional challenge is that not only are response rates declining, but collection costs are increasing. Labor and travel costs are major components of total collection costs and continue to increase. And with additional contacts needed to reach respondents, the CPS will continue to face headwinds in survey collection. We are routinely analyzing the survey to monitor its ability to detect meaningful change and ensure representativeness. While the labor force estimates on the CPS remain highly reliable, it's important to recognize that a continuing trend of declining response rates will lead to wider confidence intervals, making it more difficult to detect meaningful changes. And while we haven't yet detected ongoing concerns about the representatives of the survey, the risk of this will rise with lower response rates.

Both agencies are in strong agreement that work to modernize the survey must begin now in order to ensure the long-term sustainability of the CPS. As a first step, we plan to address the trend of declining response rates. To do so, we need to identify ways to reduce respondent burden and reach respondents who are otherwise unwilling to report. We'll also need to manage survey costs if we're going to be able to maintain existing sample size. To do so, it will be

critical to improve our operational data collection efficiency. I'm going to hand it off to Kyra to discuss our initial plans to modernize data collection.

Kyra Linse: Thanks, Nick. I am Kyra Linse from the Census Bureau and I will be going over our plans for the next few years. So we are beginning our efforts to modernize with most of the resources going towards introducing the Web Data Collection Mode, also known as Internet Self-Response. The goals of this mode are many. To reduce respondent burden by allowing more choices on how and when to answer, reaching respondents who are not interested in interviews with our interviewers, and hopefully at least slowing down the growth in costs. We also want our trained interviewers to have more time to focus on cases that are more difficult to get. We hope all of this together will improve response rates and the quality of the CPS.

This is a five-year project that began last year in the initial research, development and testing phase. As this is a survey that sees a national economic indicator, we want to take the time to review and test as thoroughly as possible while balancing the real-life need to get this into survey production environment as soon as possible. We are taking the first two years of development and smaller testing on survey design to begin with. After which we will be moving on to field experiments and field tests. Once we are satisfied that the testing has not found any major issues, we feel we have a good - excuse me, and we feel we have a good production plan, we will move on to phasing in this change. Of course, this is the optimal timeline.

Any findings that need to be addressed before moving on to the next phase in testing will need to be addressed to make sure that each test is successful and that delay - and thus could delay the schedules. The activities planned for fiscal year '25 through fiscal year '27 are contingent on funding availability. And the final level of appropriations for both agencies will dictate how much

we can accomplish in the exact time frame. Testing will be tailored to funding received and may delay the schedule, change the scope or order of testing.

We plan on reviewing and testing the new modes for many years. The goal of testing is threefold. Of course the accuracy of reporting. We want to make sure the respondents understand the questions as worded and comfortably answer them correctly. The second is to make sure any of this mode does not accidentally skew the reporting of any estimates. This means comparing responses in testing to production and researching possible mode effects on all the processing, such as (pleading). If a mode effect is determined, then we would want to adjust to minimize those effects as much as possible and we would also want to be able to report to our data users what those effects are. The third is to test the best way to also implement this mode into data collection, including contact methods and timing of switching modes. Based on research so far, we were working on the following for the questionnaire.

We are looking to keep the core of the CPS the same and are not real - reevaluating whole questions. Instead, we are reviewing what minor wording changes are needed in order to accommodate self-reporting. The exception to this is there are some questions that interviewers are trained to code based on the respondent's answers. We are reviewing how to ask those questions to the respondent so they can provide enough information for coding after the fact. We are also reviewing the questionnaire in many ways to make sure the respondent can understand the questions without any interviewer help.

There are many steps to testing a review. We started with expert reviews of the current survey instrument and identified possible areas of concern based on knowledge from other surveys and other research done in the field. Census has also developed some standards over the years for some questions and screens, we will incorporate those. Crowdsourcing is asking questions to a

non-probability sample of respondents who agree to help with research. We recreated an online version of the CPS with follow-up questions embedded in the instrument. Two versions were tested of multiple design features. This allowed us to quickly identify problem questions or designs.

Cognitive testing is a review of the instrument with the respondent to provide background on how they interpreted the question and why they answered like they did. It is useful to understand the mindsets of the respondents so that we know if they are answering differently than we would expect. In addition to identifying questions that respondents are naturally needed help with over the years, we did focus groups with our interviewers. We hope all of these reviews will minimize corrections during the field test.

Usability testing is more about reviewing the mode as a whole. This is monitoring the respondent to see how they answer the questions on their own. The goal is to make sure the respondent can follow the directions, understand how to answer and find help as needed. This is only as good as the answers, as long as the answers are accurate. So we follow up to make sure the answers they report on their own is the intended answer. In addition, especially for CPS due to it being longitudinal, we want to make sure the respondent can sign in, survey month to over month and easily get back in without any barriers.

All the testing I have described before now is really pre-testing that is part of development. Once we feel we have done our best to eliminate known roadblocks, we created a plan for best results. It needs to be tested in the field. While we would love to run a completely parallel CPS with a new mode for all testing, that is not realistic due to funding and resources. We have broken the live field test into two components. The first field test will be focused on experiments involving the Web collection mode. The overall goal is to test the

Web collection mode will be successful and the best way to support it. We will run experiments on sample to make decisions we cannot make without the feedback from the data collection. These are things like contact strategies, wording in the instrument, how to best encourage the uptake of the Web collection mode.

After reviewing the results of that test, the second test will be a small version of what we think production should look like. Again, we will not have the money, resources, or time to do a full parallel production, but this will be a smaller sample and a shortened longitudinal test. The goal of this test is to confirm our choices in the design but also to focus on data review for mode effects. The results of this test will define what we think will be the best practices. Even then, this is a large change, but we will not just change over all at once for production. Instead we plan to phase in the new design and phase out the old design in order to mitigate the risk to data. If at any point you do not feel like the data you're collecting through web collection mode is successful testing would be paused to attempt to correct the issue before moving to the next stage. There is always the chance the Web collection mode would not be put into production if we deemed it non-appropriate.

This update to CPS also affects our largest supplement, the Annual Social Economic Supplement, ASEC, along with all of our other supplement. All supplements need to be reviewed and transitioned to Web Instruments. This is a large list as we have about 15 active supplements currently. As the goal is to transition CPS as quickly as possible, there may be some impacts on supplements as we transition, but we will do our best to minimize those impacts. For ASEC, we are using this transition as a way to do more research beyond just transition to Web collection mode. We are also reviewing respondent burden and administrative records. We plan on presenting plans

for ASEC and research results for this review as part of this webinar series at a later date.

We have mentioned a few times now the optimal timeline and one issue is testing finding issues that delay the process. But we wanted to outline what we see as some of the major challenges beyond that. The first thing of course is making sure we have the best quality data. Identifying all mode effects can be difficult in smaller samples and often plans to minimize those mode effects need more testing. Due to the tight timeline and resources needed, this will be a challenge to identify mode effects and may require more testing than originally planned to minimize them. This leads to another challenge we foresee, the types - these types of ambitious changes have a cost and will be challenging to execute with current appropriated funds. We will need to be flexible with plans based on available funding.

Third, we are timing adding a Web collection mode to the availability of a new enterprise data collection system at Census. So the testing and launch are linked to the systems development testing as well. As for data collection, we see two main challenges. Get respondents to answer Web collection most quickly so we do not need to send interviewers and for respondents to select Web collection mode as their preferred mode. This would require our interviewers helping promote Web collection mode as the best way to respond.

Now I'll hand it over back to Nick.

Nicholas Johnson: Thank you Kyra, for walking us to the initial plan for a CPS Web Collection Instrument. While plans for modernization are still in the early stages, we know that this effort will extend beyond simply introducing a Web Collection Mode. Both agencies are cooperating to identify other areas of research to

improve the survey. We will consider the use of adaptive design to more efficiently prioritize cases for collection. We will review sampling and weighting design to identify methods to improve the accuracy of the data. We will pursue research projects that use administrative data to determine if these sources could increase the accuracy of data or reduce respondent burden.

Census and BLS will continue to work together to identify and review appropriate avenues to modernize the survey and ensure its long-term sustainability. We appreciate the opportunity to provide this introduction on our early thoughts for moving forward and hope that you continue to follow along as these plans continue to develop. To continue to follow updates as we progress towards a more complete vision for this modernization, please look to the Census and BLS CPS sites. The pages listed on this slide are now available and provide information on the topics we discussed today. We'd love to hear your feedback. Please feel free to reach out to demo.cps@census.gov. Thank you. Back to you, Julie.

Julie Iriondo: Thanks, Nicholas and Kyra. We are now ready to begin taking your questions. Operator, can you please provide instructions on how people can submit their questions?

Coordinator: Thank you. At this time, if you would like to ask a question, please ensure that your phone is un-muted, press Star 1, state your name and organization or outlet clearly when prompted. Please hold a moment while we wait for questions to come in.

Julie Iriondo: Thank you, Operator. As we wait for some of the questions to come in, I'd like to highlight a few resources for today's release. They can be found via our homepage on census.gov. There you will find links to our newsroom and the CPS Modernization Efforts Press Kit. Please note that the resources will be

added as soon as they are available. Okay. We are ready to begin taking questions. Operator, do we have our first question?

Coordinator: Our first question comes from Mike Schneider of the Associated Press. Sir, your line is open.

Mike Snyder: Hi. Thank you all for having this. I guess my question is for Kyra. I was just hoping you could put this change in the context of other surveys. Is CPS more or less catching up with other programs like the American Community Survey in moving towards an Internet-based and self-reporting and is there anything you can learn from, say other programs that have done this before? I mean, I guess, also if you all are kind of late to this party, why? Is it because there was an advantage in having an interviewer ask these questions on a monthly basis? Thank you.

Kyra Linse: Thank you for your question. I appreciate it. Yes. Many surveys have moved to this data collection methodology as it has proven successful. ACS is one of the surveys that we are using in our research and review. Up until now, yes, we felt it was important in the first month to explain some of the concepts of what we're trying to collect, especially if a person is in a more diverse employment situation.

Julie Iriondo: Thank you for that question. Operator, do we have our next question?

Coordinator: Thank you. Our next question comes from James Leonard of the Town of Buffalo. Your line is open.

James Leonard: Yeah, I'm wondering what you have in mind. I know with all the time, funding, and efforts that was placed to, you know, toward accomplishing the 2020 census. We came out worse than we ever have. We had a very poor

response rate and our population according to Census dropped over 300 and that's not at all represented by our school enrollment or our housing and utility billing. And so I know we tried several different ways to, you know, get people to respond and explain how important it was, and we really didn't get anywhere. And I'm wondering, you know, I know it's not only here that that happened. And do you have some things you've considered to improve that situation?

Julie Iriondo: Kyra, would you like to take this one?

Kyra Linse: Sure. So, yes. We're aware the Census had some issues with getting response. But we're a sample survey, so we select specific (unintelligible) to receive. And this is part of why our response rate, as Nick outlined, is falling. And so this is one of the many ways we're hoping to increase response by making it easier for the household when chosen to do the interview on their own time without having to coordinate with an interviewer. We are also reviewing materials at all times and reviewing other ways to reach out as part of our data collection methodology. That is a continuous research we're always doing.

Julie Iriondo: Thank you for your question.

James Leonard: Thank you.

Julie Iriondo: Operator, do we have a question or do we have a follow-up?

Coordinator: Thank you. Our next question comes from Elaine Sorensen, Department of Health and Human Services. Your line is open.

Elaine Sorenson: Hi. I just wanted to confirm - well a couple of questions to confirm that the intent is for the Web based survey to be entirely done by the household

without any interviewer contact. Is that - that's I heard you say that it's fully Web-based? Is that right?

Kyra Linse: It will still be a mix of CAPI and Internet. If they do not answer by Internet, we still plan on following up with an interviewer.

Elaine Sorenson: So if they don't complete the Web-based survey, you'll follow up? Is that what you're saying?

Kyra Linse: Yes. That is the plan.

Elaine Sorenson: Okay. So you will follow up. Okay. Because I was going to say, especially on the supplements they are quite long and I'm just wondering about drop-off and that kind of thing that - will people stick with? Part of the problem with the supplements is that they come after the core CPS and the core CPS is long itself and then they're asked to do yet another long survey and so sticking with it is always a challenge. So the intent is to do follow-up if they break off or?

Kyra Linse: That hasn't been decided yet, but we'll be doing...

Elaine Sorenson: Okay.

Kyra Linse: ...and that's sort of some of the points of the testing is to see...

Elaine Sorenson: Okay.

Kyra Linse: ...what kind of break-off we have.

Elaine Sorenson: Thank you.

Julie Iriondo: Thank you for that question. Operator, do we have our next question?

Coordinator: Thank you. As a reminder, if you would like to ask a question, please press Star 1 on your phone. Please ensure that your phone is un-muted and state your name and organization clearly when prompted. The next question comes from Laura Schlachter of AmeriCorps. Your line is open.

Laura Schlachter: Thank you so much for the information. I'm curious about any other anticipated effects on supplements, in particular regarding (unintelligible). Can you list two specific (unintelligible) and measurements? Things like that.

Julie Iriondo: I'm so sorry Laura. It sounds like we're having some technical issues. Can you please repeat your question?

Laura Schlachter: I'm so sorry. Thank you. Yes, I'm curious about any anticipated effects on the supplements in addition to (unintelligible) follow-up. Do you have any (anticipated) thoughts about (unintelligible) like other dimensions (unintelligible) policy?

Julie Iriondo: I believe she's asking about implications with supplements. Laura, if you can clarify that I've captured that correctly?

Laura Schlachter: Yes. Yeah, what do you see as implications for supplements in terms of cost and measurement and other policies?

Kyra Linse: I'll take that, Julie. Thank you.

Laura Schlachter: Thank you.

Kyra Linse: So, yes. We - one of the things we are concerned about is the impact on supplements and unfortunately, until we really start to test, I don't think we're going to be able to say what they are. It will be a large list for all the supplements to switch to Internet. And then - but we are hoping that just like CPS, that we will get more respondents and hence the supplements will get more respondents as well, at least the ones that are - we can't get through a CAPI interview that might be more interested in an Internet mode.

Julie Iriondo: Laura, did that answer your question?

Laura Schlachter: Yes. Thank you. And I guess I'm also wondering if you have any at this point, thoughts on (unintelligible) assistance or if (unintelligible)?

Kyra Linse: I think she said call?

Julie Iriondo: Yes.

Kyra Linse: We do not know at this time.

Laura Schlachter: All right. Thank you very much.

Julie Iriondo: Thank you for your questions. Operator, do we have our next question?

Coordinator: Thank you. Our next question comes from Jo-Ann Romano of Ipsos. Your line is open.

Jo-Ann Romano: Hi. When you collect the data, do you dedupe the respondents to make sure you don't get the answers from the same person more than once?

Kyra Linse: So we sample off the master address file which is the main list of addresses here at Census. And so all households are unduplicated so that no housing unit is sampled twice for DPS.

Jo-Ann Romano: Okay. Could I just follow that up with, is there an age requirement of who answers or do they have to be head of household or what are the requirements of who answers the survey?

Kyra Linse: Sure. We prefer head of households but they must be at least 16 years old.

Jo-Ann Romano: Okay. Thank you.

Kyra Linse: Mm-hm.

Julie Iriondo: Thank you for - Operator, do we have our next question?

Coordinator: Thank you. Our next question comes from Anwesha Majumder from the National Partnership for Women & Families. Your line is open.

Anwesha Majumder: Thank you. And thank you all for this presentation. I wanted to ask with this shift to Web-based programming if there was any thought around perhaps oversampling for groups that have traditionally had really wide confidence intervals and particularly thinking of racial groups, particularly, you know, American Indian and the last in need of groups that have generally had really wide confidence levels that haven't allowed us to report out widely, particularly when thinking about the ASEC supplement?

Julie Iriondo: Thank you. Nicholas, would you like to take this one?

Nicholas Johnson: Yes. I can handle this one. I think at this point we're very early on, and that definitely may be something that we consider. At this point, you know, we're working on testing Web and trying to identify what type of response we can get and how it may change our cost structure. And then that will allow us to research ideas, a number of ideas. I mean, we kind of want to leave no stone unturned. And, you know, oversampling could be one of them to see if, you know, under a new structure that that will be able to fit that in. But I think really we need to emphasize we're very early, you know, this is our first ,this is kind of our introduction to this and we will kind of keep everyone updated as - as we go on with additional research.

Julie Iriondo: Thank you for your question. Operator, is anyone else in the queue?

Coordinator: Thank you. Well at this time I'm showing no further questions.

Julie Iriondo: Okay. We'll wait for just another moment. We'll see if more people queue up for these and we'll take some note of our upcoming releases. On November 7th, the Census Bureau will offer a two-day embargo for qualified media to access the new population projections. These projections provide a comprehensive analysis of the nation's projected population through 2100. Population projections will be released to the public at 12:01 am, on the 9th. And on December 5, the Census Bureau will release the 2018-2022 American Community Survey five-year estimates under embargo. These estimates provide a wide range of statistics about people and housing for every community in the nation and are available down to the block level. It will be publicly released at 12:01 am on December 7. More information on these releases and more, plus how to qualify for embargo access, all available in our newsroom. Operator, do we have enough - any more questions?

Coordinator: One moment, ma'am.

Julie Iriondo: While we're waiting for our next caller, to find our newsroom on census.gov, you can click on the latest news release or you can click on news in the upper right-hand corner. From there, you will find a lot of resources including the press kit for today's webinar. Under helpful links, you will find more information about how to subscribe to our newsroom for the latest news and important information. You can also sign up for embargo access which we strongly recommend people to do in advance of our releases so you're ready to go. Operator, do we have a next question?

Coordinator: Yes. Our next question comes from (Devin Van) of UMGC. Your line is open.

(Devin Van):   Thank you. Given the volatility of the actual labor participation rate over the last five years and some of the influences on early retirement from COVID and some of the influences on people now taking another job or even a second job when they were in retirement, are you confident with how the reporting is going for, say, the age group 55 and above and in particular 65 and above, or is that an area where you think you'll be able to make some improvements?

Julie Iriondo: Nicholas?

Nicholas Johnson: So yes. You know, we - sorry. I'll take this one. We are confident in our estimates, the reliability of our estimates now. And that includes, you know, by age group. You know, I think what's important about what we're talking about today is that we're projecting, we don't know where response rate is going. But based on the trend we do know that the confidence intervals, you know, they've already widened a bit. And if that trend continues the confidence intervals will continue to widen. So it will make it a little bit more difficult to detect those changes whether it's changes over time or changes

across groups as you suggest. So that is something that we're hoping with the efforts that we're putting in now that we can reverse down the road.

(Devin Van): Okay. Thank you.

Nicholas Johnson: Thank you for your question.

Julie Iriondo: Thank you, (Devin). Operator, do we have any more questions?

Coordinator: Yes. Our next question is from (Ed Croffey) of the Asian American Civic Association. Your line is open.

(Ed Croffey): Okay. Yeah Hello. As somebody who's been doing community-level social work, community development for a bunch of decades now and who actually did a fair amount of work in the 2010 and the 2020 census. I'm concerned in the best of all possible worlds, automating this thing entirely and making it all sort of disembodied and in the Web would have been something we could have already done. But the - what used to be called hard to enumerate in two decennial censuses that I worked on. And still now, with current population survey reaching older workforce which is more and more engaged in workforce nowadays, it seems like we're going to end up having a very high miss rate if we fall back on the younger generation mode of, you know, you simply jump online and do everything. And I'm a little concerned if we dismantle something that already is producing some result going for some alternative that may actually get us a much poorer, a much greater skewing of a sample?

Julie Iriondo: Thank you for your question. Kyra? Nick?

Kyra Linse: I'll take it. Thank you for your concern. And we agree that one mode over the other is not ideal and that's why we're doing the mixed mode. So this is never intended to replace personal interview, it is in addition to. So this is our way of being able to reach a mix of respondents and the different ways that they like to respond.

Julie Iriondo: Thank you for your question. Operator, do we have any more questions?

Coordinator: Thank you. Our next question comes from Jo-Ann Romano of Ipsos. Your line is open.

Jo-Ann Romano: Yeah, hi. I have one more question. While you are doing your testing going forward, will you continue to be releasing the ASIC survey on a yearly basis?

Kyra Linse: Yes.

Jo-Ann Romano: Okay. And then I'm assuming that if you have any concerns about, I don't know, the validity of the data or if you see major changes in the results from prior years will you be publishing that on your Web site as well?

Kyra Linse: I assume you're meaning once we change over to the new method?

Jo-Ann Romano: No. Well, before you do all your testing and you continue to do, you know, release the results of the current survey as it is in the field right now, because of your concerns and the reason that you're doing testing going forward, if results look different from before, maybe in the demographic makeup or whatever, that could really skew the results. Will you be sharing that analysis on your Web site?

Kyra Linse: Yes. So every year as part of ASEC we do review the results and compare it to the year prior and we include any known issues in the report that we provide when we do the release.

Jo-Ann Romano: Okay. Thank you very much.

Julie Iriondo: Thank you for your question. Operator, do we have any - our next question? I believe that may be our final question. Operator, can you confirm?

Coordinator: At this time I'm showing no further questions.

Julie Iriondo: Okay. I'd like to thank everyone for joining today. That will be our final question. If you have additional questions after today's webinar, please contact the public information office at 301-763-3030 or email us at pio@census.gov. If you have more general questions, please contact Service Center. And as a reminder, you can find resources from today's webinar in our press kit in our newsroom. This concludes today's webinar. I'd like to thank today's presenters, Kyra Linse and Nicholas Johnson. I'm Julie Iriondo. Thank you for joining us and have a great rest of your day.

Coordinator: Thank you. This does conclude today's conference, you may disconnect at this time. Thank you, and have a good day.