

DOC - US CENSUS BUREAU

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2:00 pm

Coordinator: Thank you for standing by. At this time, all participants are in listening only mode until the question-and-answer session of today's conference. You may press Star 1 on your phone now to join the queue for questions today. Today's conference is being recorded. If you have any objections, you may disconnect at this time. I'd now like to turn the conference over to Julie. Thank you, you may begin.

Julie Iriondo: Good afternoon, and thank you for joining us for today's webinar. I'm Julie Iriondo, Chief of the Media Relations Branch at the U.S. Census Bureau. Today, we'll walk you through the Census Bureau's plans to update the annual Social and Economic Supplement of the Current Population Survey. This is the second webinar we've held in a series about the Census Bureau's plans to modernize the Current Population Survey.

The Annual Social and Economic Supplement, also known as ASEC, provides the nation's Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance coverage statistics.

Speaking today about our preparations to update ASEC is Lisa Cheok, CPS ASEC Transition Manager in the Social, Economic, and Housing Statistics Division of the Demographic Directorate at the U.S. Census Bureau.

Immediately after our presentation, we'll have time to take some questions.

Please note, if you're watching today's webinar on YouTube, you'll need to dial into the phone line to ask a question. 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 Lisa Cheok. Lisa?

Lisa Cheok: Good afternoon. Thank you all for joining us. Today, we are covering the modernization efforts for the Annual Social and Economic Supplement known as ASEC. My name is Lisa Cheok, and I am the ASEC Transition Manager within the Social, Economic and Housing Statistics Division at the U.S. Census Bureau. Today, we will start with some background about the Current Population Survey, or CPS. Then we will discuss the Annual Social and Economic Supplement, also known as ASEC, the largest supplement to the CPS. We will then introduce our high-level project timeline for ASEC modernization and give an overview of our plan.

Finally, we'll share how you can stay up-to-date on the modernization efforts for ASEC. Future presentations will provide updates on our testing, as well as some major findings and results.

The CPS 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 CPS. Each month, Census field representatives attempt collection either in-person or by telephone for each in-sample household. This occurs over a 10-day collection period. Typically, the first interview is conducted in-person, and subsequent interviews are conducted by telephone. The 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 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 on. As part of the CPS program, we often include questions on additional topics after the basic CPS questions have been asked. These additional questions, which we call supplements, are sponsored by federal agencies with specific data needs. Supplements take advantage of the existing CPS sample design to allow a more affordable method of data collection for the sponsoring agency.

CPS supplements are conducted in the same interview as basic CPS and therefore use the same data collection mode. In 2023, we conducted ten supplements sponsored by the Census Bureau and other government agencies.

The largest of these CPS supplements is the ASEC. It is sponsored by the U.S. Census Bureau. While it is currently known as ASEC. These data have been collected in various forms since 1947 under the names Annual Demographic File and March Supplement. We collect ASEC annually in February, March, and April. An average interview including ASEC lasts 25 minutes due to its complexity and inclusion of myriad topics.

The annual sample for ASEC is approximately 95,000 households. 70,000 of these households are from the regular March CPS sample and the remaining 25,000 are oversampled cases. The oversample portion is selected to ensure accurate estimates for underrepresented populations and households with children. These cases are selected for interview from CPS cases that do not get interviewed in March, as well as those who have completed all eight of their regular CPS interviews and are asked to return for an additional interview.

Oversampled data collection is spread across all three months. A small number of cases are eligible to have their data collected outside of the normal ten-day window. Oversampled cases being interviewed outside of their normal eight interviews are not included in the monthly labor force reports, only in ASEC-related data and reports. ASEC collects information on a variety of topics, such as work experience, including weeks and hours worked during the reference year. Income from various sources, including earned income, retirement, social security, and financial assistance, among others. Non-cash benefits such as SNAP and school lunches, health coverage, health expenditures, migration over a one-year period. These data are used to produce a number of estimates, including the official poverty rate, the supplemental poverty rate, and the national health insurance coverage rate. The key estimates are released alongside detailed reports in September of each year.

We currently release three separate reports, income in the United States, health insurance coverage in the United States, and poverty in the United States. 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 ten years, response rates have gone from about 90% to about 70%.

Collection has become increasingly challenging in recent years. As an increasing number of households have moved from home phones to cell phones, it's limited our ability to link phone numbers to our particular address. And even when we have a contact number, the rise of caller ID has made it more difficult to get respondents to answer the phone. More recently, the increase in doorbell cameras, along with gated entrances, have made in-person access more difficult, too.

Of course, as you all know, 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 costs and travel costs for in-person interviews 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.

In recent years, Census and BLS have had to work together to implement collection changes to stay within appropriated funding. As you can see in the chart here, the bottom portion of the bar in blue shows the number of completed interviews by personal visit. This amount has dropped by 23.2% since the months before the pandemic due to cost-saving efforts, as personal visits are particularly expensive.

Additional savings have been found in curtailing follow-up contacts to respondents who are refused for multiple prior months. These reductions do have impacts on response rates, though, and cost pressure is expected to continue. We are routinely analyzing the survey to monitor its ability to detect meaningful change and ensure representativeness.

While the estimates from the CPS and ASEC 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 representativeness 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 efficiencies.

So, we are beginning - we are at the beginning of our efforts to modernize with most of the resources going towards introducing an Internet Self-Response Data Collection Mode, also known as ISR. 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 and cost.

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 rate and quality for the CPS. The target date for introducing the new ISR mode is 2027.

Since Census and BLS have begun developing an ISR mode for CPS, we must begin developing an ISR mode for ASEC as well. A failure to develop this would mean a loss of ASEC data on any case that was collected in the new ISR mode on basic CPS. ISR instruments need to be easy for respondents to navigate on their own, so simplification and streamlining will be needed in comparison to an interviewer-administered mode.

ASEC is a larger and more complex instrument than basic CPS and will possibly require more adaptations. The last major content update on ASEC was in 2014. In addition to the ISR mode, CPS and ASEC have additional

modernization needs. The Census Bureau is moving to new data collection systems called our Business Ecosystem. With these different technological capabilities, instrument and processing changes will be necessary on both CPS and ASEC. ASEC includes topics with known longstanding measurement challenges. Research using administrative records has shown consistent under-reporting in some topics. We are taking this development opportunity to assess our content and make impactful improvements.

To address these needs, we are working on multiple components of ASEC modernization. As mentioned, there are a few components that focus on data collection updates. First, the addition of an ISR mode. We'll be optimizing the instrument to collect data in a self-administered mode, a first for our survey. ISR will be an additional mode with much of the data still collected by Computer Assisted Personal Interviews, or CAPI. Eligibility for this mode will be determined by basic CPS procedures.

Next, there are some content updates. Questions and topics with measurement issues will be assessed and developed as needed. Some of the topics that will be developed are retirement income, health insurance coverage, and school meal reciprocity. In addition to data collection, we will also have some operational changes. We are switching our data collection software and other systems into our new Business Ecosystem. As part of this change, we will also be moving our processing systems from SAS to open source software.

The final main component is the introduction of administrative records into production. The focus for use of administrative records in production will be on improving data processing procedures, but we will also be investigating how we can use existing data to reduce respondent burden. Much of this initial research will be undertaken by the National Experimental Wellbeing Statistics project team, known as NEWS, and may later be adapted to

production methods.

The ASEC portion of the CPS modernization is a five-year project which began this fiscal year and runs through our target implementation date of February 2028. This timeline focuses on the data collection components of ASEC modernization with activities broken down by fiscal year. Our initial stage of research is ongoing and continues through FY25. Following that research, we will move into the development and initial testing phase. This work will lead us to a field test in FY27. This will be our final test before implementation begins in February 2028.

The ASEC production transition schedule is tied to the basic CPS schedule and not an independent transition. CPS intends to begin phase-in in May 2027 after the 2027 ASEC data collection is complete. This is of course an optimal timeline. Activities in future years are contingent on securing sufficient funding in addition to mapping the CPS schedule.

Our testing plan includes multiple methods. First of all, we have a contract with Research Triangle Institute, or RTI, to conduct multiple rounds of qualitative research. The contract includes exploratory interviews, two rounds of cognitive testing, and usability testing. Exploratory interviews were completed earlier this year. In these exploratory interviews, we asked respondents open-ended questions seeking insight into how respondents understand and think about income, health insurance, and select other topics. We recently received the initial results from this round.

The next component in our contracted research is cognitive interviews. In these interviews, we will be testing specific question wording and section ordering. We will have two rounds with time in between to incorporate results from round one and other testing methods. In parallel with the qualitative

research contract, we will be testing select questions via the Demographic High-Frequency Surveys Program, namely the Census Household Panel and Household Pulse Survey.

In June and July, ASEC will be doing a split questionnaire design test of questions on the Census Household Panel. This is a field test on a representative panel survey. Due to interview length restrictions, the questions had to be split onto two separate months. This will not replicate a full ASEC interview, but rather gather data on multiple versions of the questions compared against each other. This serves as a proof of concept for many of our questions types.

On a separate high-frequency survey, the Household Pulse Survey, ASEC is partnering with other survey programs to test using unfolding brackets as a backup for collecting discrete values. Household Pulse Survey's larger sample size allows us to test more treatment groups than possible on Census Household Panel. Once we have completed our qualitative testing of the questions, we'll move into the qualitative testing of the survey instrument.

Usability testing will be conducted in FY26. It is the last round of our contracted testing. This is the first time having external users test the production ISR instrument. It will identify both technical and design issues before we move to the broader field-testing.

Our field test is planned for January to April 2027 and will be our only large-scale field test. The test will replicate production to the extent possible, including both CAPI and ISR mode. Some experiments will be embedded, but it will be limited due to sample size. As the instrument is changing, our data processing procedures will need to be updated to account for this. Our first chance to test our edit updates with live data will be after usability testing.

The field test data will then be used to test the full processing system.

While much of our research is minimizing mode effects between CAPI and internet, we will also have - we also have many specific areas of interest that we are researching across our different testing opportunities. Our health insurance subject-matter experts are looking into the structure of their questions including the possibility of removing questions to focus on those that directly impact the key estimates.

The current questionnaire anchors the respondent by collecting current health coverage status before asking about the previous calendar year. We are looking into whether this holds true in a self-administered questionnaire. Another structural issue is the use of our current funnel design, which asks a series of questions that funnel into a final type of coverage versus a laundry list type, which is commonly used in other surveys.

We are currently developing strategies for testing the timing of data collection for other household members on already reported plans. We are looking into aligning our questions on coverage periods with the resulting public variables, so we are testing the response options all of the previous year and some of the previous year, as opposed to collecting information on individual months.

The migration team is looking at response categories for the reason for move question, which currently has 20 options. They are testing a version with more generic categories, reducing the count to 11. The next area of focus for migration is using known geographic data and technological capabilities to collect location data. The current instrument collects sub-state location data as write-ins. They are looking into switching to all drop-downs with the available answer categories filtered to only those applicable for that state.

Our tests for income questions include separating tips from other types of earned income. This would allow analysts to better understand the economic situation for tipped workers. ASEC collects dollar values for a large number of income sources, so the team is testing new formats that would reduce the number of screens a respondent receives.

The income section currently uses a household screener for income types before collecting subtypes of a specific income. We are testing collecting these subtypes on the main screen. This might also help reduce the number of screens a respondent sees in a completed interview.

The poverty team is looking at changes to the way we collect child care costs. It is currently collected as a lump-sum for the whole household. This test breaks it down by each child's needing care. We're also testing questions about subsidies and type of child care received. The school lunch questions will be expanded to include school breakfast.

Both of the above topics will be tested using a grid format. We are currently in the development stage for content being sent to the first round of cognitive testing. We are working closely with Census staff and the Center for Behavioral and Statistical Methods to develop questions and flow that adhere to the best practices of survey methodology.

The previously outlined testing is leading us towards a production implementation of ISR and content updates in 2028 with data collection beginning in February. The phase-in plan for production implementation will be determined by the basic CPS design and the availability of funding. Basic CPS intends to begin phase-in as early as May 2027. As a reminder, ASEC will need to have a production ISR instrument ready once basic CPS begins their implementation, as ASEC data are collected in the same interview.

The phase-in design would benefit from an expanded sample over the phase-in period. This would ensure both basic CPS and ASEC have proper bridge estimates. We plan to produce a bridge file and estimates. This may require a separate parallel data collection depending on the phase and design. As with any thorough plan, we are working on contingencies in the case of unplanned events.

We have a number of ways for you to stay up to date on ASEC modernization efforts. You can visit our ASEC modernization website. On that website and our production data website, you can sign up for our GovDelivery list to receive email updates about both ASEC modernization and production.

You can also email us your questions at demo.asec.modernization@census.gov. Also be on the lookout for future CPS modernization webinars and conference presentations. Future presentations will provide updates on our testing as well as more details on the results. Thank you. Now, I'm going to hand back to Julie.

Julie Iriondo: Thank you, Lisa. We are now ready to begin taking your questions. And joining us to help answer those questions is Hyon Shin, Assistant Division Chief of the Survey Coordination and Disclosure Avoidance Staff at the U.S. Census Bureau. Operator, can you please provide instructions on how people can submit their questions?

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

Julie Iriondo: And as we wait for...

Coordinator: Our first...

Julie Iriondo: Oh, okay. Sorry. Go ahead.

Coordinator: Our first question is from Deborah Stein from Coalition of Human Needs. Go ahead. Your line is open.

Deborah Stein: Thank you. I wonder if you could tell us when you think you'll be adding in the new standards for collecting race and ethnicity. It seems like it would be sensible to make all those changes at once to minimize discontinuities, but I don't know if that's doable.

Julie Iriondo: I can answer this question. For questions that are out of scope with this webinar. This webinar is really focused on testing related to the ASEC, but we're happy to help answer your questions. Please reach out to the Public Information Office at pio@census.gov.

Deborah Stein: Thank you.

Julie Iriondo: Operator, do we have our next question?

Coordinator: Again, as a reminder, please press Star 1 on your phone and record your name if you have a question. One moment, please.

Julie Iriondo: As we wait for some 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](https://www.census.gov). There you will find links to our newsroom and the CPS Modernization Efforts Press Kit. We are ready to begin taking questions. Operator, do we have any more

questions?

Coordinator: I show no questions at this time. Again, as a reminder, please press Star 1 on your phone and record your name if you have a question. One moment, please.

Julie Iriondo: Okay. We'll give it a couple more minutes. In the meantime, I'd like to note some of our upcoming releases. Next week, the Census Bureau will release the Computer and Internet Use Report. The report will look at access to computers and broadband internet subscriptions nationwide in 2021, and that is scheduled for release June 18. Later this month, the Census Bureau will release Vintage 2023 Population Estimates by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin. Those estimates will be released June 27.

There also is an embargo that starts June 25 for qualified members of the media. Be sure to check out the embargo page in our newsroom to register for access. And next month, we'll release our Community Resilience Estimates Summer Rankings Data Product. These tables will highlight the most socially vulnerable counties and neighborhoods in the country to hurricanes, wildfires, and strong winds. The CRE summer rankings' data product is scheduled for release July 9. Operator, do we have any callers?

Coordinator: I show no questions at this time.

Julie Iriondo: Okay. Thank you so much for joining. If you have any questions following this webinar, please reach out to the Public Information Office. We are happy to help. That contact information is on your screen, 301-763-3030, or you can email us at pio@census.gov. For more general questions, please contact our Customer Service Center. And as a reminder, you can find resources from today's webinar in the press kit in our newsroom.

I'd like to thank today's presenter and panelists, Lisa Cheok and Hyon Shin.
I'm Julie Iriondo. Thank you for joining us, and have a great rest of your day.

Coordinator: That concludes today's conference. Thank you for participating. You may
disconnect at this time.

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