

February 1, 2022

Agency Information Collection Activities; Submission to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) for Review and Approval; Comment Request; Ask U.S. Panel

A Notice by the Census Bureau on 12/07/2021

The Understanding America Study has been founded in 2015 by the Center for Economic and Social Research (CESR) at the University of Southern California. The aim of the study is to conduct high quality academic and policy research. The study is used by academics and policy makers around the U.S.

The U.S. Census Bureau (Bureau) is soliciting public comments on its proposed “Ask U.S. Panel,” which is being developed by the Bureau through a cooperative agreement to track public opinion on topics of interest to federal agencies and their partners, and to conduct experimentation on question wording and methodological approaches. The goal of the Federal Register Notice (FRN) is to: “a) Evaluate whether the proposed information collection is necessary for the proper function of the Department/Bureau, including whether the information will have practical utility; b) Evaluate the accuracy of [the] estimated time and cost burden for this proposed collection, including the validity of the methodology and assumptions used; c) Evaluate ways to enhance the quality, utility and clarity of the information to be collected; and, d) Minimize the reporting burden on those who are to respond, including the use of automated collection techniques or other forms of information technology.”

CESR appreciates the opportunity to comment, and we applaud the Bureau’s recent innovations in its programs. However, we have concerns on several levels regarding the development of this panel. The work described in the FRN appears to be duplicative of surveys that already exist in the private sector. This raises questions about the need for the Ask U.S. Panel as a government developed program and its associated increase to respondent burden. Furthermore, the methodology under development by the Bureau is rapidly evolving, and its shifting nature could have significant impacts on the cost and potential success of this effort. The Bureau should provide more information as to how they have addressed the methodological complexities associated with designing, building, and executing a panel that will meet OMB quality standards. The complexities of a robust, panel design and implementation are such that the associated costs could significantly increase in the years ahead. Based on the highlighted concerns, we question the accuracy of the time and cost burden, the validity of the methodology, and the quality and utility of the information that will ultimately be collected.

As proposed, the Ask U.S. Panel is duplicative of multiple similar products already available in the marketplace and from which it could obtain similar products and services at significantly lower cost and on a more immediate timeframe. We note that the types of surveys that the Bureau appears to be developing through its cooperative agreement are already offered by multiple companies – including the Understanding America Study and other probability-based panels such as those developed and maintained by Ipsos, Gallup, and NORC independently – and such studies may be purchased for as little as \$100,000. The use of a probability-based nationwide nationally representative panel for tracking public opinion would add value to government programs. However, this function exists in the private sector and is readily available at a significantly reduced cost (as the government would pay only for the marginal costs associated with the specific studies and not the costs associated with the development, maintenance, and



support of a panel). Accordingly, the Bureau is investing resources to acquire access to services that are more efficiently obtained at a competitive price in the commercial marketplace.

Additionally, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Circular A-76 requires federal agencies to conduct an assessment of whether an activity is inherently governmental or commercial. Given that there are existing panels in the private sector, and that the Bureau has previously used one developed by Gallup for similar work, more information is needed to better understand the determinants of the cost comparison analysis conducted and the rationale for the determination that this work is inherently governmental and should no longer be completed with the existing offerings in the marketplace.

The methodology being implemented by the Bureau is evolving, and more work will be needed to ensure the validity of the methodology and the utility of the proposed data collection. Over recent years the Bureau has undertaken an approach of rapid implementation of new data products and data collection programs (including as discussed in the FRN rapid-response surveys). We applaud the Bureau's recent innovations in these areas but suggest that caution and more work may be necessary to ensure the resulting data products meet its intended use and that the Bureau is transparent with its users on the best fit for each of its products. For example, the Bureau historically has done an excellent job in explaining to its users the distinctions between the population estimates program and the American Community Survey. Through the Bureau's extensive documentation, discussions, and information users are well positioned to understand when to use the survey data (to assess characteristics) compared with when to use the population estimates (to assess levels). This type of education and explanation is also needed for the proposed panel as the appropriate uses are dependent on the design and the products proposed. Recent Census Bureau experiences and the Bureau's public presentations on the Ask U.S. Panel indicate that the methodology is rapidly evolving and thus the distinctions needed to ensure a quality product that is used appropriately may not yet be available.

In addition, in the FRN the Bureau specifies that "oversamples of specific populations of interest, including households who face food insecurity and households who speak Spanish as a first language" will be included but does not provide information as to how these oversamples will be drawn. The Bureau also stated in the FRN that the panel will be used to track "public opinion on a variety of topics." Without more detailed information on the purpose and source of the samples and the types of information that will be collected in the surveys, the Bureau creates the perception of transparency with this FRN but does not provide enough information to adequately assess the quality or to enable the public to provide comment. To illustrate, if the oversamples are drawn through supplementation of commercial data there would be additional considerations on duplication with private sector efforts, or if the oversamples are based on internal Census Bureau data there may be additional confidentiality considerations that are warranted.

Lastly, the FRN specifies that the panel "may be used to collect nationwide rapid-respond data to address emerging data needs," and in the Bureau's FY 2022 budget request¹, as well as a recent presentation before the Washington Statistical Society², the Bureau indicates that they intend to expand upon the Household Pulse Survey (HPS) and the Small Business Pulse Survey (SBPS) with new "rapid response" data products and services capable of producing "near real-time data." It is important to note that while the HPS and the SBPS were met with initial successes, there are potential shortcomings that will need to be addressed. For

¹ See U.S. Census Bureau's Budget Justification FY 2022 at 43-44.3

² Washington Statistical Society, "WSS Panel: Ask U.S Panel," April 5, 2021

example, recent analyses discussed in *Nature*,³ and *The Harvard Gazette*,⁴ indicate that the HPS significantly overestimated Covid-19 vaccine uptake by as much as 14 percentage points when compared to statistics compiled by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which are based on data from multiple sources, including immunization information systems, the Vaccine Administration Management System, and direct data submission from federal agencies and pharmacies.⁵ This recent experience demonstrates the danger of rapidly implementing a program and the need for thoughtful and transparent discussion on the methodology. This suggests that more information from the Bureau is needed in order to better understand how the Ask U.S. Panel methodology is being further developed, and whether it is an effective approach for meeting its established goals.

The Bureau underestimates the respondent burden and cost estimates of the Ask U.S. Panel. The FRN states that the participants in the panel will be surveyed up to once a month for as much as three years. Maintenance of a rigorous panel of this nature can be onerous, and it is not clear whether the mechanisms the Bureau has in place will successfully ensure adequate response through the duration of the panel. In fact, the FRN is silent on the planned procedures to monitor and mitigate panel attrition and what its approach to refreshing the panel respondents would involve. This could be perceived as a lack of understanding of the complexities associated with designing, recruiting, and retaining a panel of this size and complexity and is an underestimate of burden. Based on our experience with similar efforts, NORC estimates that it likely would cost at least \$25 million to build an online panel capable of meeting the stated goals in the FRN, with annual maintenance being similarly expensive and could be as much as \$2 million per year.

Finally, a similar concern stems from the use of a cooperative agreement to fulfill this work. By using a cooperative agreement, under which the intellectual property developed is owned not by the federal government but by the awardee, the Bureau is using taxpayer funds to establish a panel that can be used by a company in the private sector for its own work long after the work of the government is complete. As described in the Department of Commerce Financial Assistance Standard Terms and Conditions (December 26, 2014, § D.03.a), the awardee “owns any work produced or purchased under a Federal award.” Thus, any company entering into this agreement is free to continue to utilize the intellectual property developed under the cooperative agreement after the agreement expires. As such, it is unclear to us whether the goals of the Paperwork Reduction Act to minimize the public’s reporting burden are in fact being upheld throughout the existence of the panel proposed by the Census Bureau, particularly when, as discussed above, similar probability-based panels are already available to the government at reasonable cost. Also, it is not clear whether the government’s use of this proposed panel would indeed be a best value approach to this work by the Census Bureau and other federal agencies.

Conclusion. While the Census Bureau is to be lauded for its recent innovations, this announcement raises serious concerns regarding the cost, the methodology, the goals, and the long-term implications of its proposed Ask U.S. Panel. We respectfully suggest that the Census Bureau consider whether existing products in the marketplace more effectively meet the needs of the Bureau and its partners. If the Bureau

³ Bradley, V.C., Kuriwaki, S., Isakov, M. *et al.* Unrepresentative big surveys significantly overestimated US vaccine uptake. *Nature* **600**, 695–700 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-021-04198-4>

⁴ Powell, Alvin, 2 Early Vaccination Surveys Worse Than Worthless Thanks to ‘Big Data’ Paradox, Analysts Say. *The Harvard Gazette*, December 8, 2021.

⁵ See <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/imz-managers/coverage/adultvaxview/pubs-resources/covid19-coverage-estimates-comparison.html> for more information.

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decides to continue, we encourage it to be fully transparent on how future iterations of this product are designed and developed in a way that is consistent with the brand of the Census Bureau for high quality data and to take necessary steps to decrease respondent burden. The high profile of products from the federal statistical system requires the Bureau to proceed at a pace that ensures a thoughtful, transparent, and well-designed program be developed. Failure to do so could call into question the accuracy not only of Census Bureau data, but that of its partner federal agencies.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Arie Kapteyn', with a long, sweeping horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Arie Kapteyn
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