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COMMENTS ON ATUS 2017-19

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Much of the justification for the ATUS has been the unique information it provides on the types and locations of non-market activities. These are important and have underlain most of the research that has used the ATUS 2003-15. At least as important, however, the ATUS also provides a unique set of information that can allow us to do a better job of estimating such crucial economic statistics as labor productivity, both in levels and in its cyclical variation. Because the ATUS collects information on what workers are doing at the workplace, it allows us to adjust reported workhours, both in the CPS and the CES, to account for variations in effort across space and time. This allows us to obtain better measures of output per unit of worker effort—the proper measure of labor productivity—and thus to get a better idea of how productivity varies cyclically and with demographic characteristics, which seems crucial for thinking about macroeconomic policy.

A central issue in understanding a panoply of government programs is how workers' effort responds to changes in the incentives to work. Programs such as Social Security, unemployment and worker's compensation, and others, create incentives that alter decisions about how much labor to supply to the market. The most common way of gauging these responses generally is to compare differences in hours of work to differences in wages per hour. In nearly all of this vast area of research hours of work are taken as those recalled for a recent week, month or year. These suffer from recall bias, which may generate erroneous estimates of the impact of incentives on labor supply. For all respondents the ATUS provides these usual hours measures AND short-recall measures of time spent working, recorded in time diaries and thus required, along with the respondent's other activities, to exhaust a 24-hour day. Using the diary measure generates different inferences about the responsiveness of labor supply to incentives. The ATUS thus can uniquely provide better estimates of how people's work time responds to incentives than any other set of data in the American statistical system.

The proposed one-year Leave Module is a useful complement to the Leave Module of 2011. While information on leave policy and actuality is available elsewhere, having this information together with data on how people spend their non-work time is uniquely possible with the ATUS. This unique combination is important if for no other reason than that it allows us to learn how leave policy interacts with such activities as child and eldercare, and domestic household activities. This is thus a unique vehicle with which to answer some important questions underlying policy.