

Survey Research Adapting to a Population Increasingly Highly-Segmented, Socially-Disintegrated, and Heavily-Tracked with Transaction Data: A Modest Proposal

Robert Groves, U.S. Census Bureau

Survey nonresponse rates appear to be increasing in most of the wealthier countries of the world. This trend has led to increased costs of survey data collections. With fixed budgets, this has implied smaller respondent data sets and higher standard errors of estimates. Further, the common medium of survey data collection, the telephone, has experienced an introduction of a variety of privacy protection devices (e.g., answering machines, caller identification) that reduce access to the target population, and a growing set of the population with no traditional line telephone in their residence. Thus, mobile telephone surveys are a focus of current methodological inquiry. Similarly, the rise of the Web has launched intense methodological investigations of its human measurement potential. The new media, however, require the active participation of the respondent and thus appear to produce even greater challenges to survey participation.

Simultaneous to the growing threats to traditional methods of collecting information about large scale populations, there is a dramatic rise in new media of communication and new tools for collecting information on the population. These include nonobtrusive measurement devices, as used in television viewing and radio listening studies, but are rapidly expanding through technological developments; as used in video observation of public spaces and traffic flow; and as used in entrance and exit monitoring. They include large-scale administrative record systems, which contain person-level records on the population, but also transaction records for purchases or other behavior-based events.

The future of statistical surveys may not resemble its past. This presentation contains personal speculations about the future world of human measurement for social and economic statistical systems.

Brief Bio

President Barack Obama nominated Robert M. Groves for director of the U.S. Census Bureau on April 2, 2009, and the Senate confirmed him on July 13, 2009. He began his tenure as director, July 15, 2009. Groves had been director of the University of Michigan Survey Research Center and research professor at the Joint Program in Survey Methodology at the University of Maryland. He was elected a fellow of the American Statistical Association in 1982, elected a member of the International Statistical Institute in 1994, and named a national associate of the National Research Council, National Academy of Sciences, in 2004. He was the Census Bureau's associate director for Statistical Design, Methodology and Standards from 1990 to 1992. In 2008, he became a recipient of the prestigious Julius Shiskin Memorial Award in recognition for

contributions in the development of economic statistics. Groves has authored or co-authored seven books and more than 50 articles. His 1989 book, "Survey Errors and Survey Costs," was named one of the 50 most influential books in survey research by the American Association of Public Opinion Research. His book, "Nonresponse in Household Interview Surveys," with Mick Couper, written during his time at the bureau, received the 2008 AAPOR Book Award. Groves has a bachelor's degree from Dartmouth College and master's degrees in statistics and sociology from the University of Michigan. He also earned his doctorate at Michigan. He and his wife, Cynthia, have two college-age sons — Christopher at Purdue and Andrew at Northwestern.