

## **Discussion**

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All of the papers in this session are concerned with striking a balance between concerns about protecting the confidentiality of respondents, whether these are individuals or households, and reducing response burden. In the case of the paper by Bates and her colleagues, data are potentially shared between individuals within the same household, and this is designed to increase interviewing efficiency (and interview consistency, although, it should be noted, the consistency may be spurious, brought about by the method of interviewing used). The other two papers focus on potential data sharing among federal agencies in order to reduce the burden on business establishments of responding to multiple similar survey requests.

The Nichols and Willimack study reports on qualitative interviews with members of the corporate reporting staff in 30 large multi-unit firms in order to explore their attitudes toward reporting burden and confidentiality protection. The authors believe that, since more information is already publicly available about large businesses than about individuals, especially publicly owned businesses, information obtained about such companies may not require the same stringent confidentiality protections as those afforded information obtained about individuals.

It is also true that, unlike individuals, who are ordinarily not selected for more than one federal survey, large firms must provide information to many different agencies, and sometimes more than once to the same federal agency. Thus, in contrast to individuals, firms are both subjected to greater response burdens, and may need less confidentiality protections.

Perhaps not unexpectedly, since the interviews were framed in terms of reducing reporting burden, the qualitative interviews found respondents emphasizing reporting burden rather than confidentiality concerns. When specifically asked whether they would support data sharing among federal agencies in order to reduce burden, most were favorable to such sharing under well-specified conditions and with rigorous security and confidentiality provisions in place, *provided* it reduced reporting burden. It is noteworthy that companies also wanted to be kept informed of any changes to the agreement--e.g., additional agencies gaining access to the data--and to restrict access to the data and the purposes for which the data would be used (e.g., no access by the IRS, or by regulatory agencies).

The authors conclude with a number of ideas for reducing reporting burden, only some of which involve data sharing as traditionally conceived.

The paper by Willimack extends the work of Nichols and Willimack, reporting the results of a very interesting quantitative survey of business establishments to explore the relationship among attitudes related to data sharing, confidentiality concerns, trust in government, data sensitivity, and respondent burden. Although the response rate of 10% is so low as to make this essentially a self-selected sample, it is nevertheless interesting to compare the results to a large study of the same attitudes among the general population--the Survey of Privacy Attitudes, sponsored by the Census Bureau and carried out in Spring 2000 under contract with the University of Michigan, with field work done by the Gallup Organization (Singer et al., 2001). The survey was an RDD survey of the national adult population, with random selection of the respondent in the household. The response rate was 61%, and the sample size 1978.

Like the general population sample, Willimack's business respondents are ignorant about the Census Bureau's confidentiality practices. Some 80% of the business sample believe that federal agencies share data with other agencies; in 2000, some 40% of the public believed the Census Bureau shares data with other agencies, and another 40% were not sure. About 60% of the business sample were willing to allow one or more of the listed agencies to share data "*if data sharing were legal*"; in 2000, about two thirds of the public was willing to have another agency share data with the Census Bureau. Like the business sample, the sample of the general public was most reluctant to have data shared by the IRS.

There are other similarities between the two studies, as well. In the business sample, those who believe federal agencies cannot get data from other agencies were more willing to grant the IRS data sharing privileges. In the general population sample, those who believed the Census Bureau protects the confidentiality of its data were more willing to have other agencies share data with the Census Bureau.

More significantly, however, the variables that strongly predict willingness to share data in the business sample are the same variables that predict such willingness in the general population sample--namely, concerns about confidentiality and, especially, trust in the system (Presser, Singer, and Van Hoewyk, 2000).

The authors themselves comment on one potential reason for this similarity: They suggest that respondents were answering as *individuals* first, and as business people second (or perhaps not at all). But this similarity, coupled with the low response rate, suggests a question about the findings--namely, Did the survey get to the right people in the business establishments? If one set of people are responsible for completing federal surveys, and another set answered the survey

about confidentiality concerns, then these results may not tell us much about the reasons for nonresponse to business surveys or about business' willingness to share data in order to reduce burden.

Alternatively, the problem may be a matter of framing: Perhaps one needs to remind respondents to answer on behalf of their business, rather than in terms of their own inclinations.

And this brings us to a second important point. Like the household surveys, this one was framed largely in terms of confidentiality concerns. The answers, perhaps not surprisingly, resembled those on the household surveys, which were framed in a similar way. On the other hand, the qualitative interviews reported on by Nichols and Willimack emphasized *burden* rather than confidentiality, and the responses, understandably, focused on ways of reducing burden, rather than on concerns about confidentiality. As a result, Nichols and Willimack's respondents expressed considerable willingness to share data, albeit under certain specified conditions.

All of this is by way of suggesting that while these two studies are a very useful beginning, much more research is needed on how best to motivate businesses to participate in federal surveys. Most importantly, we need to make sure that we're talking to the right people in the business, and that they have a good understanding of the relationship between confidentiality protections and burden reduction and take both of them into account.

This brings me to the third paper, by Bates, Doyle, and Gates. The authors, and the Census Bureau, are to be complimented not only for their sensitivity to the privacy implications of dependent interviewing, but also for their investigation of the impact of the new RIP policy.

I'm going to offer just a few comments on things that struck me as I was reading the paper. It turns out that most of them have already been, or are being, addressed by the authors.

1. First, it struck me that the wording by which the respondent is asked for permission to reveal his/her information to someone else during the next interview is not very clear, especially in the AHS interview. That suspicion was strengthened by the fact that the refusal rate in SIPP, which uses what seems to be the clearer wording, is twice as high as the refusal rate in AHS. In other words, when respondents really understand what's being asked, more of them seem to be reluctant to give their consent. As a result, I was glad to hear that more cognitive research will be undertaken on this issue. But this objective might perhaps be accomplished in a more desirable and economical way by incorporating follow-up probes in an actual survey where respondents are asked for permission to use dependent interviewing, perhaps in several different ways, using different question wording. Rather than resorting to small numbers of respondents in the laboratory, this system of "random probes," as Howard Schuman called it, would permit inference to the general population.

2. Second, I'd like to comment on the statement in the paper that one consequence of the RIP policy could be to prevent sharing information obtained from proxy B about respondent A at time  $t$  with the respondent, A, at time  $t + 1$  if the proxy does not give permission. This strikes me as too draconian a measure. Rather than obtaining permission from B, notification that any information B provides about A may be shared with A at the next interview should suffice. The proxy may refuse to give information under those circumstances, of course.

3. Finally, when I looked at Table 3, I yearned for a multivariate analysis, only to learn, at the very end of the presentation, that such an analysis had indeed been performed. I would like to see the results of that analysis substituted for Table 3, or presented as an additional Table 4, even though the authors say the results stay pretty much the same.

Altogether, this is very nice work. And the three papers together provide some provocative findings adding to, and stimulating, further research in this area. In particular, it may be that the time is ripe for mounting small, inexpensive experiments to test some of the ideas stimulated by the research reported in this session.

### **References**

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