



Publication of this brochure was made possible through the generous support of the  
*U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics*

Produced by the Committee on  
Privacy and Confidentiality  
of the  
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*Illustrations by Jim Elmore*

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# Surveys Surveys Surveys & Privacy Privacy Privacy

American Statistical Association  
*Committee on  
Privacy and Confidentiality*

## Why Are You Asked to Participate in Surveys?

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**M**ore and more we are being asked to take part in surveys. Surveys ask us for information about ourselves and our families — what we eat, what we wear, the cars we drive, the appliances in our homes, our education, our jobs, our health, our lifestyles, and our opinions.

A survey request may come in the mail, over the telephone, from someone knocking at the door, or from someone who meets us in the shopping mall. Or surveys can arrive by E-mail or be encountered on a website. The request may be part of a national census, a social survey, a health survey, a school survey, a marketing survey — or it may not be part of a legitimate survey at all. Legitimate surveys are typically sponsored by government agencies, foundations, universities, business organizations, or local civic groups. Surveys that are not legitimate are often sponsored by those who are really trying to sell something, who use a survey merely to get your attention.

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When you are asked to take the time to answer questions on the telephone or fill out questionnaire forms, you may wonder why

you should give information about yourself to a stranger. When should you cooperate with such requests for personal information?

Most surveys are legitimate. Many are of great importance to our nation or local community. They provide statistics that help



to improve health care delivery, nutrition programs, schools, and other public or private services. Each individual response is important. The American Statistical Association (ASA) recommends strongly that everyone cooperate with surveys if those who sponsor them can

- assure you that the information you give will be kept confidential,
- ensure that your responses will be used only for statistical purposes,
- provide you with information so that you can make an informed decision about whether or not to participate.

Each of these points is discussed in this brochure.

## Will My Response Be Kept Confidential?

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**S**urvey takers often tell you that the information you give will be kept confidential. What does this mean? In most surveys, your identity is known to the survey organizations — they usually know your name, address, or telephone number and perhaps all three. Do they need to know this much? Will they reveal your identity or your response to others?

At least temporarily, they may need to know your identity. They may need to contact you later so that supervisors can check an interviewer's work or ask for any additional needed information. Moreover, some identifying information is needed to convert the responses you give into impersonal statistical tabulations.

No legitimate survey organization will reveal your identity or your individual response. So long as your identifying information and your responses stay inside the survey organization and are used only to produce statistics, you should have no cause for concern. There are

two things, however, of which you want to be sure:

- You want the survey organization to keep your identifying information confidential. You want them to make sure the information is only used for the purpose to which you agreed. *For example*, if you

***You want the survey organization to keep your identifying information confidential.***

agreed to participate in a survey that would release information only as aggregate statistics in an anonymous format, then you don't want your name and address given to persons who would send a salesperson to call on you, or check your tax return, or involve you in a court case. You also want this information to be seen only by those involved in conducting and evaluating the survey. That is, you don't want the information to be seen by someone else because the survey organization failed to destroy questionnaires when they were no longer needed for statistical purposes or through other carelessness.

- You also want the survey organization to be very careful about releasing the survey results. If results are published in too much detail, someone else might be able to identify you and to obtain information about you. This is called statistical disclosure. *For example*, if a publication showed the average income of doctors in each county and a particular county had only one doctor, that doctor's income would be disclosed. And, if there were two doctors in the county, each could learn what the other's income was. To protect against this sort of unintended disclosure, the survey organization must carefully review all material prior to publication.

Statistical data are released as tables or microdata files. A microdata file consists of individual records, each containing responses for a single person, business establishment, or other unit. Before a microdata file is released, names, addresses, and other identifiers are removed. Additional methods are often used to protect confidentiality,

such as recoding continuous variables into categories (*e.g., exact ages are converted to 5-year age groups*), eliminating geographic identifiers for small areas, and establishing dollar cutoffs for items like income and assets so that no further amount of information is provided for units exceeding these cutoffs.

Reputable survey organizations assume an obligation to protect the confidentiality of the information provided by respondents, and they do what they believe is necessary to protect confidentiality.

Survey information collected by or for government agencies is protected by legal restrictions that say how it can and cannot be used. If government employees violate these restrictions, they can be subjected to severe penalties. Moreover, many private survey organizations adhere to confidentiality standards established by professional associations.

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*Survey organizations use a variety of means to keep your identity confidential.*

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In addition, survey organizations use a variety of means to keep your identity confidential. In some surveys, names, addresses, and other identification items are never recorded on the questionnaires. In other surveys, these items are separated from the questionnaires as soon as possible. The other information you provide is usually coded and put in a computer file. It is used together with information given by others to produce statistical summaries. Access to questionnaires and computer files is limited through physical security procedures and the use of passwords. Identity-disclosing information is concealed

through the use of special codes. Before statistics are released, they are carefully analyzed to minimize the possibility that they could somehow be used to obtain information about you.

If you have any concerns about the confidentiality of information you are asked to provide, you should discuss them with the



interviewer. If the interviewer cannot immediately answer your questions satisfactorily, he or she should be willing to refer you to someone in the survey organization who can. *You are entitled to receive assurances that the information you give will be carefully safeguarded and will not be used improperly.*

## How Will My Response Be Used?

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**A** statistician is interested only in the size and shape of the "forest" and has not the slightest professional interest in any particular "tree." Most surveys collect information from a sample of a larger

population group. If correct sampling and statistical procedures are applied, and if those in the sample respond accurately, then the responses from the sample can tell us about the characteristics or views of the entire group.

In a legitimate survey, there is no single answer that the interviewer wants to hear. The survey seeks to describe reactions, not to shape them. In the process of trying to describe a group or its attitudes, the statistician temporarily needs to know where a particular response came from. Long before the final statistical result is reached and published, however, any connection between the "what" and the "where from" should be severed. No reader of a statistical result should be able to figure out "who" contributed "what" to the result.

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*A statistician is only interested in the size and shape of the "forest," not in any particular "tree."*

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A good example of the process of trying to describe the "forest" but never the "trees" is provided by the *Consumer Expenditure Survey* collected by the Census Bureau for the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Survey interviewers visit sample homes to obtain information about the items people are currently buying. They ask how important those items are in the family budget. No one at the Census Bureau or the Bureau of Labor Statistics (or any other user of the survey results) wants to know how much Sally Jones of 333 Jefferson Street spent on videotape rentals last month.

Entire industries, however, depend on

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*Before you agree to participate in a survey you should ask a few questions.*

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knowing how much all of the households in Cleveland, and elsewhere, are spending on particular items. Even more important, the responses provided by sample households are used to compile the Consumer Price Index. As this index has changed, many wages,

pensions, and retirement benefits have been increased to compensate for higher prices. This has benefited those who responded to the survey (and many others), but no individual's response can be discovered from this or any other statistics derived from the Consumer Expenditure Survey.

## Should I Participate?

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**S**omeone asks you — by phone, mail, or in person — for personal information to help them in their survey. Should you take the time to respond? Should you participate?

In almost all surveys in which you as an individual are asked for information, you can choose whether or not to participate. The U.S. Census of Population and Housing, however, is mandatory and you are required by law to provide the information requested of you. If census takers or their supervisors should disclose confidential census information, however, the law would impose substantial penalties on them — including fines and imprisonment.

Before you agree to participate in a survey you should ask a few questions.

These questions should give you the information you need:

### ■ *Whom is this survey for?*

The survey taker should clearly identify himself or herself, the organization conducting the survey, and the organization sponsoring the survey. If this information is not volunteered, feel free to ask. If you receive a survey in the mail, a cover letter should tell you who is asking for the information. The mail request should also contain a phone number or address you can use to obtain further information. In market research surveys, however, you should understand that the survey taker may not be allowed to tell you who is sponsoring the survey because that knowledge might affect your answers, or "bias" your responses.



### ■ *What will be done with the information you give?*

The survey taker (or mail request) should tell you the purpose of the survey. There are many purposes for surveys. Some seek information needed to improve your local schools; others seek to determine the likely

winners in a forthcoming election; still others want to find out what kind of soap you prefer. Some examples of totally legitimate government and private surveys (and their purposes) are given at the end of this brochure.

■ ***What does your participation involve?***

Some surveys ask only a few questions and take a matter of minutes to complete but others can take an hour or more of your time. Moreover, some surveys are conducted at periodic intervals — a week, a year, or even longer. Their purpose is to measure change. In such surveys you will be interviewed more than once. Other surveys ask you to keep records or notes or be examined. You should be told what is expected of you, and why, at the time of the initial call or mailing.

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***Remember that your responses combined with others provide valuable insights . . .***

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■ ***Is the survey taker trying to sell you something or get you to give money?***

If so, you may be interested or uninterested, but understand that you will not be participating in a statistical survey. No organization conducting a legitimate market research survey asks its interviewers to be salespersons. They want to know whether or not you like their product, but the interviewer won't try to change your mind or get your money.

Once you have the answers to these questions, you can decide if you want to participate. If you consider the survey worthwhile, you'll probably want to help.

Please take seriously the questions you are asked and provide the best answers you can. The results of the survey will be less useful if you are careless, forgetful, or do not answer questions frankly or fully. Take your cue from the interviewer or the questionnaire. If you are told that it is okay to "guess" or "estimate," that is what you may do.

If you don't want to participate in voluntary surveys, you don't have to. If you start to participate, you don't have to answer every question. *For example*, if you decide during the survey that you don't want to provide certain information, such as the size of your bank account, don't provide it. If you find at some point you no longer wish to participate, just stop. But please think twice; remember that your responses, combined with those of others answering the survey, provide valuable insights that can affect government policy, local services, or the availability of specific items for sale in your community.

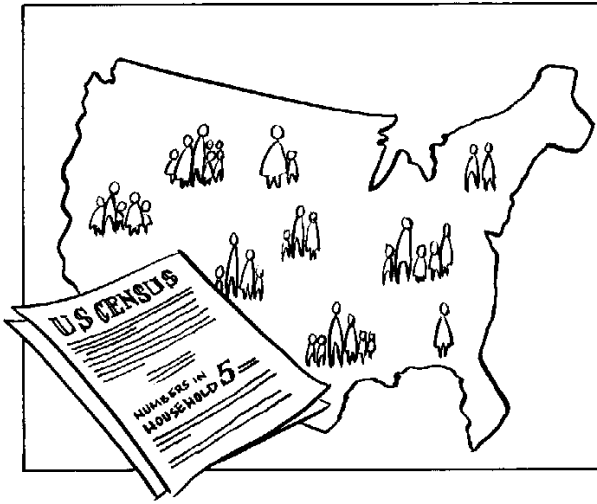
## **Examples of Surveys**

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### ***Federal Government Surveys***

The federal government conducts many surveys each year of both individuals and businesses to learn more about the well-being of the nation and its inhabitants. Here are three examples:

- **Census of Population and Housing** — The decennial census is a survey of the entire population of the United States. Each household in the country is required to respond to the basic population and housing questions. In addition, a sample of households receives a long form, containing more questions on various topics. The primary uses of



census data are for reapportioning the U.S. House of Representatives, for redistricting within states, and allocating federal funds. In addition, census results provide information on changes in the characteristics of the population, movement in and out of geographic areas, income, housing characteristics, and so forth. Both business and government use this information for long-range planning and to identify target groups for participation in special programs.

- **Consumer Expenditure Survey** — In this survey interviewers go to households to obtain information about the items people are currently buying and the importance of each in the family budget. Changes in how people spend their money are measured, taking into account expenditures for new types of goods and services, such as cable television fees, video recorders, and videotape rentals. The results affect the Consumer Price Index, which in turn affects the wages and retirement benefits of millions of people.

- **Current Population Survey** — Interviewers obtain information monthly on the employment and unemployment rates of the population. The unemployment rate measured from this survey is one of the most important indicators of the health of the economy. In addition, data are collected on earnings and other income of families and individuals. Both the employment and income data thus collected are classified and published by age, sex, race, and a variety of other characteristics. These surveys provide important measures of the economic well-being of different segments of the population and influence the direction of government economic policy.

#### *State and Local Government Surveys*

Many state and local communities conduct

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periodic general-purpose surveys that cover a wide range of topics of current social, economic, and political interest. The results tell policy makers how citizens feel about issues such as crime, growth, traffic congestion, working conditions, taxes, and schools. Virginia and Wisconsin are among the states that conduct such surveys.

Other examples include the following:

- The **State of Washington** sponsored a survey of child-care providers to determine the availability of child care



and the current rate paid by families for child-care services in Washington State.

- The **City of Chicago** collected information to evaluate the Chicago Housing Authority residents' satisfaction and management needs.
- The **State of Illinois's "Outdoor Recreation Study"** was a statewide survey to assess participation in outdoor recreation in Illinois and elsewhere.

### *Private Sector Surveys*

Businesses and politicians are important users of survey data. Survey results may cause a business to modify its products or packaging, or change its services or community relations. Results of polls are used to respond to voter opinion and direct campaigns. Some examples of such surveys are as follows:

- **Bell Atlantic** conducts surveys to determine how satisfied customers are with their telecommunications services.
- **The PaineWebber/Gallup "Index of Investor Optimism"** is a quarterly survey of investors to determine their views on a variety of financially related subjects.
- **Manufacturers** often conduct marketing surveys about their products to learn which products consumers use and why.
- Newspapers, television networks, other media, political parties, and candidates sponsor **Public Opinion Polls** to obtain voter opinion about candidates and issues both locally and nationally. The results

may have a significant effect on the selection of party candidates, on the positions they take in election campaigns, and on the attention given to particular issues by the media.

## Where Can I Get More Information?

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**Y**ou should be able to learn what you want to know about the survey from the survey organization. If the interviewer cannot answer your questions, you should ask for the name, position, and telephone number of the person in the organization who can give a full explanation.

If you still have questions about the survey, there are other sources of information. For local surveys, your local or state government may have a consumer affairs office that could help. The local Chamber of Commerce or Better Business Bureau may also have useful information about the survey organization.



**If you would like to learn more about the ASA Committee on Privacy and Confidentiality, which deals with the issues of privacy, confidentiality, informed consent, data protection, statistical methods to limit disclosure, etc., please go to the Committee's website. It can be reached through ASA's website at <http://www.amstat.org>; then click on "Committees."**



If you would like to learn more about surveys, ASA also makes other brochures available upon request in addition to *Surveys and Privacy*.

■ *Ethical Guidelines for Statistical Practice*

■ *What Is a Survey?* series:

Current pamphlets in the series include

- *What Is a Survey?*
- *How to Plan a Survey*
- *How to Collect Survey Data*
- *Judging the Quality of a Survey*
- *How to Conduct Pretesting*
- *More About Mail Surveys*
- *What Are Focus Groups?*
- *What Is a Margin of Error?*

Other pamphlets will include

- *More About Nonresponse*
- *Designing a Questionnaire*
- *Surveys: Case Studies & Exercises*



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