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Symposium 2008:
Data Collection: Challenges, Achievements and New Directions

Opening remarks

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Opening remarks

François Maranda [1]

Good morning,

On behalf of Statistics Canada, I would like to welcome you all, friends and colleagues, to Symposium 2008. This is the 24th International Symposium organized by Statistics Canada on survey methodology.

Some of you are familiar with this Symposium, and we are glad to have you back. Others are joining us for the first time, and I would like to extend our most cordial welcome to you.

One of the goals of the annual Symposium is to bring together people from a variety of backgrounds to share their views, experience and expertise on current and emerging methodological issues. This year, the discussions focus on a very important, and constantly changing and evolving aspect of the statistical process – data collection.

Some people have dismissed data collection as a discipline not in need of extensive methodological study, but we shall see over the next three days that this is not the case. Statistical agencies from around the world face common challenges such as reducing respondent burden, increased collection costs in face of declining budgets and adapting to the use of new technologies for data collection. Survey methodologists have an important role to play in developing solutions to these issues which are operationally feasible, cost-effective and statistically sound.

As in all statistical organizations, Statistics Canada's data collection methods and organization have changed significantly over time. From the establishment of the Dominion Bureau of Statistics in 1918 until the Second World War, all of the Agency's collection activities were centralized out of its offices in Ottawa. In 1945, five regional offices were established across the country to conduct the newly developed Labour Force Survey. In 1971, collection for the Census changed from face-to-face collection by a Census enumerator to self-enumeration by the household. Also in the 1970s, there was a push to make better use of administrative data in order to reduce respondent burden and costs for both household and business surveys.

In 1986 the Questionnaire Design Resource Centre was established to advise subject matter divisions on best practices when developing questionnaires for surveys, and this group now plays a central role in the Agency's collection activities. In the past 20 years technology has played a significant role in the evolution of data collection. Statistics Canada's first Computer Assisted Telephone interviews (CATI) took place in 1988, followed by the first Computer Assisted Personal interviews (CAPI) in 1993. The 2006 Census was our first, and certainly not last, large-scale collection done with an internet option. Undoubtedly there are many more changes and innovations to come in the upcoming years.

The title of this year's symposium includes three important terms related to data collection, namely Challenges, Achievements and New Directions. I would like to take a few minutes to discuss each of these three key terms.

Data collection presents continuing and ever-changing challenges to which a statistical organization must adapt. The willingness of respondents to respond to surveys and their concerns with confidentiality and privacy mean that we must be more efficient in how we collect the data, what we collect and what we do with it. Administrative data offers an alternative source of information, but it must be studied and well-understood before using it for statistical purposes. Information can now be collected via numerous modes, but this can lead to mode effects. One of the workshops held yesterday discussed this issue in detail.

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We have already found viable solutions to many data collection challenges from the past. We should take time to celebrate these achievements and to collectively learn from our successes (and occasional failures) so that we may be able to apply the resulting findings and best practices to our own daily work. At Statistics Canada we have had numerous advances in recent years such as the use of internet response for the 2006 Census, expanded operational research, the increased use of new technologies for data collection and improvements in respondent relations. We will hear about these and other subjects throughout the symposium.

Finally, we must always be looking at the future and what new directions we will need to address. Our vision must be as broad as possible, covering not only collection modes and tools, but also content. Clearly, we must address the technical ways that we collect data, whether it is by internet, handheld devices or other means that most of us have not yet envisioned. But, this is not enough. We must also anticipate and be ready to react to new subject matters which in the past were either not relevant or considered too sensitive to discuss and be prepared to use alternative methods to collect this information.

The symposium will touch upon these subjects and many more. Among the topics that will be presented are questionnaire design and testing, data collection from children, managing collection and respondents, the use of paradata to support active collection management, the use of new technologies for data collection and many others. With such a variety of important topics, I am confident that decision makers, researchers and statisticians from government agencies, public and private survey organizations, and universities can all feel included and find it useful.

At this year's Symposium, we will hear presentations by participants from 14 different countries. In addition we have visitors from numerous other countries. This Symposium is truly international. I'm sure we will learn a lot from each other and I hope you will enjoy your stay in Canada.

Yesterday there were three well attended full-day workshops: the first on the psychology of survey response, the second on mixed mode surveys and the third on using paradata for non-response weighting. Over the next three days, we will hear talks on a wide variety of topics related to data collection and its crucial role in the production of reliable information. In addition to the talks, there will be poster presentations during the breaks on Thursday. I hope you will take the time to view these posters and discuss issues with the authors.

And now, before I declare this 24th Symposium officially open, I would like to thank the Organizing Committee, the session organizers and chair-person, the presenters, and all the volunteers who have made this event possible. I would like to pay particular tribute to the leaders of yesterday's workshops – Roger Tourangeau from the University of Maryland, Edith de Leeuw from Utrecht University in the Netherlands and Jean-Francois Beaumont from Statistics Canada – for their important contribution to this Symposium.

My sincere thanks to each of you.

Traditionally we have started the Symposium with the keynote address. However this year's address will take place tomorrow morning when Robert Groves from the University of Michigan discusses "Dynamic Survey Design Managed by Modeled Paradata". Instead this morning we will hear the Waksberg Award winner's address. The Waksberg award was established in 2001 in tribute to Joseph Waksberg. It honours the achievement of a prominent survey researcher who has made many important contributions to survey methodology. Listed on the screens are all the recipients of the Waksberg Award since it was introduced in 2001. As you can see, it is a very impressive list.

At this time, I would like to invite Professor Jon Rao to the stage to introduce the 2008 Waksberg Award winner.