

AN OVERVIEW OF FEDERAL GOVERNMENT SURVEY RESEARCH
as reported to Statistics Canada's
review and consultation staff, 1974-1980

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This paper provides a summary description of some of the characteristics of the proposals for new surveys submitted to Statistics Canada for review and consultation by other federal government departments. It describes which departments have been involved, gives details of the types of studies proposed and methodologies used, and deals briefly with some of the problems which the review process has uncovered.

Since 1974, I have been responsible for a group within Statistics Canada which has provided a review and consultation service for federal government departments and the Treasury Board Secretariat (TBS). Before new survey research is launched, departments must consult with our staff. We review the proposed survey design and advise the department on the extent to which it will satisfy planned objectives, on the use of appropriate statistical standards, and on compliance with TBS directives and guidelines. We have been asked to provide advice on more than 1,200 information-collection projects over the past 6 years.

We are therefore in a position to say something about the kinds of survey research being undertaken by the federal government, and my intention this morning is to provide you with a sketch of what we have observed over the years, together with some observations about some of the things we are not seeing - but perhaps should be, especially with respect to some of the points raised by Peter.

I want to qualify my remarks, so that you have a perspective for the information, I will present. First, we suffer from no illusion that the procedures in place are really effective and that reporting to us is comprehensive and complete. We know that many people within the bureaucracy are unaware of the need to consult before launching surveys.

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We know, too, that many others choose to ignore present procedures because they doubt the usefulness of the central review and approval mechanism, and feel that it will slow them down unnecessarily. They are afraid of becoming bound up in the red tape of a Treasury Board approval process, that the odds that they will be found to have evaded reporting are very long indeed, and that sanctions are minimal. We are presently working to revise procedures and increase awareness, but that is another story. My point is simply that the survey research which we see and upon which my remarks are based represents only a portion of the actual work being done. We have a project underway to try to determine the extent of underreporting, but we have no results as yet. Second, I'm sure you've heard the expression "those who can, do; those who can't, teach". We seem to be in the position of teachers rather than doers when it comes to statistical information about our consultations. We don't have very good summary information, internally, on the work we have done, and so my remarks are based upon unscientific samples, partial analyses and so on, and should not be taken as an accurate statistical analysis based upon every project submitted. I have no choice but to paint my picture with broad brush-strokes - I don't have any tiny little detail brushes available. Finally, you should bear in mind that I will be describing only new information collections launched over the past six years. These are additions to a very large base of existing collection activity. We don't have accurate information on the size of that base. My secretariat also has an inventory project underway to correct that situation, and that's another story as well. There is no doubt, however, that it is quite large relative to the increments. Our inventory now describes some 760 collections of information controlled by about 30 departments. So I'm not talking this morning about what is currently underway - the base was huge before we ever got into the coordination game - I'm only talking about a portion of what has been initiated over the past 6 years.

Having said all that, and paid my dues to objectivity, I now intend to present you with my subjective, probably biased views on how the world works, cleverly manipulating what little data I have to support the conclusions I had already reached before I even began to study it. I'm sure many of you know just what I mean.

I want to describe who does the work we've reviewed - what departments are involved, why it's done - what's it for - what uses are made of the information collected; and, how it's done - some characteristics of the work.

There are more than 50 departments and ministries of state, and perhaps 150 other government institutions in the federal government. In total, about 100 have been covered by the central reporting requirements over the past 6 years and just about half of those have sought advice on at least one project. The interesting thing is the concentration of activity. Here is a list of the top 10 departments, in terms of number of submissions:

TABLE 1

The Top Ten Departments
(making submissions to Statistics Canada's
review and consultation staff, 1974-1980)

1. Transport Canada
2. Parks Canada
3. Canadian Government Office of Tourism
4. Environment Canada
5. Employment and Immigration
6. Secretary of State
7. Health and Welfare
8. Consumer and Corporate Affairs
9. Agriculture Canada
10. Statistics Canada

The top 3 - Transport, Parks Canada and Canadian Government Office of Tourism - have accounted for about 1/3 of the total. These 10 departments account for about 70% of all submissions. Another 18% is contributed by the second ten departments, so that fewer than half of the reporting departments (about 20% of all institutions covered) account for 88% of all submissions.

What are we to make of this concentration? It seems that a very few departments make extensive use of survey research. Why not more balance? After all, virtually all institutions have responsibility for policy and programs which are candidates for planning, designing, administering and controlling based on survey research.

Perhaps it's a case of a lack of awareness of the potential usefulness of this type of research in support of decision-making. I recall a conversation, only about 5 years ago, with a senior official at TBS. Statistics Canada and Secretary of State had been asked to canvass departments for support in launching a national survey of time use. We went to TBS with the results of our consultations, and asked for additional funding for the project. The response was approximately this: "I don't know why you people feel these expensive surveys are necessary. I'm from Toronto and whenever I'm back home and want to find out what people are thinking about the government and its programs, I just drop in and ask a few of my friends at the Rosedale Tennis Club." That fellow may be a bit of a throwback, but there are lots of people still in responsible positions in the bureaucracy who do not feel the need to seek information from target populations when planning, designing, administering or controlling policy and programs. One of the challenges for the 80's will be to reach those people with the good news that more and better information means better decisions, and that leads to improved policy formulation and program delivery.

Turning to why it's done - what uses are made of the information - there appears to have been little change over the past several years. A sample of submissions examined revealed that program planning, operation or policy accounts for 37%, program evaluation for 31% and general purpose statistics for 25%. In terms of Peter's categories, this latter classification might be viewed as problem identification. A slight trend towards more program evaluation work has been noticed - this no doubt in reaction to the pressures from the auditor general, the new comptroller-general function and budgetary restraint over the past several years. To digress on that point for a moment, too many factors are at play for us to say with any assurance what the effect of budgetary restraint on survey research has been. We did notice a significant fall-off in reported submissions beginning in 1978 and continuing until this past spring. We have now recovered to our previous levels. But this period of restraint coincided with the introduction of much more complicated central approval procedures and we feel that the drop-off may represent some lack of cooperation in reporting rather than a real decline in the amount of work being done. The suppliers in the audience may be able to tell us something about their experiences over the past several years.

Visitor use and transportation studies have been most popular, as have environmental and consumer studies. Readership surveys contribute a steady 10% of the submissions received, with departments wishing to evaluate their publications.

A general impression is that surprisingly little use is made of opinion/attitude research, even though the largest portion of studies are addressed to individuals. Only about 10-15% of the studies reviewed have a significant opinion/attitude component. Little use has been made to date of the developing techniques such as focus groups. Much more could be done to analyse policy and program options through market or target population research: to determine the views of those who will ultimately be affected by changes in programs and new initiatives, before implementation. I know that this is a controversial issue - government through polling - and that there are potential abuses and hazards to be avoided. But from where I sit, bureaucrats with responsibility for developing policy and program options for the government of the day could make much more extensive use of survey research in their decision-making than they presently do. There could be a good deal more hypotheses - testing and a lot less flying by the seat of one's pants. Peter has pointed out how survey research can be used. The weakest area, in my view, is in policy and program planning and designing - describing the problem, developing and testing alternate approaches, developing programs based on objective information generated through competent survey research. As I mentioned earlier, only a few departments are hooked in to this approach. Why not many more? All have similar responsibilities.

Finally, a brief look at how the work is done. I'd like to give you a flavour for the size and type of studies carried out, without overwhelming you with a lot of statistics.

Close to 70% of surveys reported have been addressed to individuals, 20% to business. The remaining 10% are combination studies, with a small proportion of surveys of institutions.

Peter mentioned that one-time or highly focussed surveys are less useful than repetitive studies. Almost 90% of surveys reported have been planned as single-time. Only about 2% of the studies have been longitudinal.

As to costs, I should say that we have never been able to get good information on the costs involved. Departments are somewhat sensitive on this and have not been as open with their data as we would have liked. We estimate that the studies we look at cost about \$25,000 on average. (I was going to say that they were worth \$25K, but I thought better of it. I'll say something about quality later).

Mail and personal interview surveys each account for about 37% of the total. Telephone studies and drop-offs represent only about 6% each, with combinations of methods at 14%. We noticed some slight shifting from personal interviews to mail surveys in the past few years, possibly reflecting increasing concern with field costs. It's interesting that there has not been much change in the use of telephone surveys, even though technology has improved. This would seem to be an area for potential exploitation.

Almost half of the studies are contracted out for at least one or more stages of the survey process. No significant trend in this has been noted over the years.

The number of respondents has ranged from 10 businesses to 140,000 individuals. There really are no "typical" studies in this regard, though I would guess that a sample of about 1,000 individuals is perhaps the most commonly occurring.

Let me conclude my comments on how these studies are done with a few words on quality. We have not been thrilled over the years by the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which studies have been designed and carried out. There may have been some tendency (I think natural) for our staff to drift towards a position where their 'job' is perceived by them to be to generate comments and criticisms, rather than to respond objectively in each case. I call this the "three page memo" syndrome. We always seem to produce at least three pages of comments on every proposal. If it's a bad proposal, our comments are substantive; if a good one, our comments are trivial. But in all cases, there are three pages of them. Even allowing for that, however, I don't think overall that the quality of the work is particularly good. There have been notable

exceptions, of course. We find that in half the cases, substantial improvements are required in the questionnaire design. More than a third of the time, we are obliged to make comments on significant shortcomings in sample design and related methodology. Perhaps the most time-consuming problems for our consultants arise in the area of development of objectives. We find that these are often poorly defined, ambiguous, lacking precision and virtually impossible to operationalize. Suppliers in the audience are probably ready to shout, "So what else is new? Tell us something we don't know, why don't you?"

Who is to blame for shortcomings in the quality of survey research undertaken by the federal government? When we first got involved in this consultation business in 1974, our feeling was that we would probably want to spend most of our time on the seller's side of the market. Coming out of Statistics Canada's tradition of high-quality work, we were perhaps a bit smug and felt that standards in the private sector were not what they might be: poor, unsuspecting buyers in federal government departments being ripped off by unscrupulous private-sector suppliers with suspect methodologies. We quickly discovered that our time would be better spent on the buyer's side of the market. If anyone was getting ripped off, it was the supplier (once again, there are a few notable exceptions - but isn't it fun to make sweeping generalizations!).

My feeling is that weakness on the buyer side arises in large measure because information in the federal government is not yet seen as an important resource, to be managed in much the same way as dollars and person-years. We are constantly meeting clients who have had no experience in information collection: people with program responsibility who think, or have been told, that it would be a good idea to develop some information. And so they sit down and write up a list of questions that they want answered. Easy, right? Well, of course, most of us here know that it's not easy at all. We are working to have departments begin to appreciate the need to inventory their information resources, to coordinate future needs, to develop planning mechanisms, to establish focal points for control as well as technical support for those who need information but don't know how to get it. Further, we departments will profit from such an inventory to the extent that they use it as a resource for

gaining an historical perspective when planning projects which are similar to work already done. Examining previous experiences will result in avoiding pitfalls in survey design and disappointment with survey results.

Another challenge in the 80's will be to develop an awareness of the importance of information as a resource and a commitment to its effective management.

I hope that this brief overview will have given you some ideas to mull over. By way of summary, here are some of the questions which I feel are important in light of our experience in reviewing survey research over the past six years:

- Why do one-third of all submissions come from only three departments? Shouldn't there be more balance? How could that be achieved?
- Given that an effective case can be made for increased use of survey research as a means to improving decisions, especially in the areas of policy and program planning and design, how can this be done and by whom?
- How best can we promote the need for economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the management of federal government information resources? What steps can be taken to help government institutions become better buyers of survey research?

I look forward to your views on these issues.

RESUME

Ce document décrit sommairement certaines caractéristiques des projets de nouvelles enquêtes présentés à Statistique Canada pour revue et consultation par les autres ministères fédéraux. On y décrit les ministères participants en donnant des précisions sur le genre d'études proposées et les méthodes utilisées, et on passe brièvement en revue certains problèmes que le processus de révision a fait ressortir.