

## War Stories from the Drug Survey

The primary data driver behind US drug policy is the National Survey on Drug Use and Health. This insider history traces the evolution of the survey and how the survey has interacted with the political and social climate of the country, from its origins during the Vietnam War to its role in the war on drugs. The book includes firsthand accounts that explain how the data were used and misused by political leaders, why changes were made in the survey design, and what challenges researchers faced in communicating statistical principles to policymakers and leaders. It also makes recommendations for managing survey data collection and reporting in the context of political pressures and technological advances.

Survey research students and practitioners will learn practical lessons about questionnaire design, mode effects, sampling, nonresponse, weighting, editing, imputation, statistical significance, and confidentiality. The book also includes common-language explanations of key terms and processes to help data users understand the point of view of survey statisticians.

JOSEPH GFROERER was responsible for analysis and supervision of the National Survey on Drug Use and Health for more than three decades as a statistician at the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). A widely recognized expert in methods for substance use surveys, he authored dozens of peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters and hundreds of government reports on survey methodology and substance use epidemiology. A member of the American Statistical Association for more than thirty-five years, he has received numerous awards from NIDA, SAMHSA, the White House, and the American Public Health Association for his work on the survey.

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-12270-3 — War Stories from the Drug Survey  
Joseph Gfroerer  
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# War Stories from the Drug Survey

*How Culture, Politics, and Statistics Shaped the  
National Survey on Drug Use and Health*

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Joseph Gfroerer

US Department of Health and Human Services (retired)



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UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-12270-3 — War Stories from the Drug Survey  
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## CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom  
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,  
New Delhi – 110025, India  
79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

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[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)  
Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781107122703](http://www.cambridge.org/9781107122703)  
DOI: 10.1017/9781316388563

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First published 2019

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Gfroerer, Joseph C., 1954- author.

Title: War stories from the drug survey : how culture, politics, and statistics shaped the national survey on drug use and health / Joseph Gfroerer.

Description: 1 Edition. | New York : Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018026583 | ISBN 9781107122703 (hardback) | ISBN 9781107553453 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: National Survey on Drug Use and Health (U.S.) | Health surveys—United States. | Drug control—United States. | BISAC: SOCIAL SCIENCE / Statistics.

Classification: LCC HV5825 .G48 2018 | DDC 362.290973—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018026583>

ISBN 978-1-107-12270-3 Hardback

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For Sue and Rachel

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## Preface

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In the fall of 2013, I decided to end my federal career after thirty-seven years as a statistician in the US Department of Health and Human Services. During my final months before retiring in January 2014, it occurred to me that the project I had worked on for the past thirty years, the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), had an interesting history, including amusing stories and valuable lessons for statisticians and government leaders. But the stories were not only about statistics and survey research; they were also about management, how government operates, politics, personalities, and the nation's drug abuse policies. I felt that this history would be of interest to a broad audience, not just survey researchers. I also knew that these stories from years ago were still relevant because they were often used as examples and justification to guide current decision-making, or simply to explain why the survey was the way it was. I realized that the only way this history would be appreciated and preserved was for me to write the story. My direct involvement in the survey since the early 1980s, including serving as the lead federal official responsible for managing the project from 1988 through 2013, gives me a unique perspective on the survey's history. I had saved much of the survey's documentation in my paper and electronic files, and also in my head. With the aid of the collection of published and unpublished reports, internal memos, notes from meetings, and interviews with other people involved in the survey, I was able to construct a complete chronicle of the survey. Most of it is based on my firsthand knowledge of the events described. Keeping in mind the wide range of people who may be interested in learning about how surveys are conducted, drug policy, and government, I have kept complex statistical discussions to a minimum. There are no formulas in the book, just simple explanations of some key statistical concepts.

My initial work on the survey was at the National Institute on Drug Abuse, conducting analysis with the data files from the 1974–79 surveys. I participated in planning for the design of the 1985 survey. I became alternate project officer in 1983, and project officer in 1988. With full

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responsibility for managing the survey contract, and little staff support, it was necessary to become familiar with every aspect of the project. As the survey grew in size and importance, and moved to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, I was able to gradually recruit and hire staff with a wide range of survey-related expertise to build a strong, diverse team to manage the project. The survey team has faced many difficult management, design, and analysis problems. The solutions we implemented often worked but sometimes failed. These experiences serve as lessons that can guide statisticians and survey managers in their work, and suggest factors that are associated with survey success. I am pleased to share these experiences with other statisticians and managers of surveys, to help them make sound decisions when they face similar challenges.

Joseph Gfroerer  
Frederick, Maryland  
August 2018

## Acknowledgments

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Special thanks go to Joe Gustin, who helped manage the survey contract from 1989 until 2006. He brought his passion for history to work with him, which triggered his idea to draft a report on the early history of the survey, focusing on contracting and contractors. The information he gathered, including documentation and interviews with early NSDUH leaders Herb Abelson, Louise Richards, Joan Rittenhouse, and others, was invaluable in writing the first few chapters of this book.

I thank Tim Johnson for his encouragement and advice to me as I developed the concept of the book and the proposal I submitted to the publisher. He also reviewed my initial drafts of early chapters.

I am hugely indebted to Jonaki Bose for the time she devoted to reviewing drafts of this book. She reviewed every chapter (sometimes second and third drafts), providing valuable technical comments and suggestions that without a doubt improved the book.

Others who helped by reviewing drafts of portions of the book, locating and sending me reference documents, and talking to me about their experiences with the survey include Edgar Adams, Peggy Barker, Ann Blanken, John Carnevale, Judy Droitcour, John Gfroerer, Sarra Hedden, Art Hughes, Joel Kennet, Anna Marsh, Grace Medley, Dicy Painter, Coleen Sanderson, Len Saxe, Peter Tice, Tom Virag, Mark Weber, and Terry Zobeck.

I would also like to thank all of the great staff that worked under me on the survey from 1988 to 2014, when I retired. All were dedicated and productive, and the survey's successes are due to their work. The project benefited greatly from staff who stayed with the survey for a long time, building their in-depth knowledge of the survey and institutional memory. I list them all here, grouped by the length of time they worked on the NSDUH team, as of 2017. Peggy Barker, Joe Gustin, Art Hughes, Joel Kennet, Dicy Painter, and Doug Wright all devoted fifteen or more years to the NSDUH. Jonaki Bose, Joan Epstein, and Pradip Muhuri contributed more than ten years. Those with fewer than ten years on the team were Marc Brodsky, Jim Colliver, Lisa Colpe, Janet Greenblatt,

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Beth Han, Lana Harrison, Sarra Hedden, Mike Jones, Andrea Kopstein, Sharon Larson, Rachel Lipari, Grace Medley, Jeanne Moorman, Ken Petronis, Kathy Piscopo, Maria Rivero, Lucilla Tan, and Pete Tice. In addition, the success of the survey would not have been possible without the great work of RTI's contract managers, task leaders, statisticians, survey methodologists, programmers, field supervisors, field interviewers, and others. There are too many to name, but special thanks go to Tom Virag, who served as RTI's project manager on the main survey contract from 1988 until he retired in 2014. I also appreciated the excellent work of the NORC staff on the NSDUH analysis contract.

My greatest thanks go to my wife Sue, who was supportive of my frequent weeknight and weekend work and the on-call nature of my responsibility for overseeing NSDUH during my HHS career and in the early years of my "retirement." She reviewed drafts of every chapter, and the book was made more readable because of her editing skills and her non-statistician perspective.



## Acronyms

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ACASI	audio computer-assisted self-interviewing
ADAMHA	Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration
ASPE	Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, HHS
CAI	computer-assisted interviewing
CAPI	computer-assisted personal interviewing
CBHSQ	Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality
CDC	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
CIPSEA	Confidential Information Protection and Statistical Efficiency Act
CMHS	Center for Mental Health Services, SAMHSA
CODAP	Client Oriented Data Acquisition Process
CSAP	Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, SAMHSA
CSAT	Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, SAMHSA
DAWN	Drug Abuse Warning Network
DC-MADS	DC Metropolitan Area Drug Study
DDID	Division of Data and Information Development, NIDA
DEA	Drug Enforcement Administration, Department of Justice
DEPR	Division of Epidemiology and Prevention Research, NIDA
DESA	Division of Epidemiology and Statistical Analysis, NIDA
DMPA	Division of Medical and Professional Affairs, NIDA
DPS	Division of Population Surveys, OAS
DUF	Drug Use Forecasting
FI	field interviewer
FTE	full time equivalent
GAO	General Accounting Office
GWU	George Washington University
HEW	Department of Health, Education and Welfare

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HHS	Department of Health and Human Services
ISR	Institute for Survey Research, Temple University
LA	listing area
MHSS	Mental Health Surveillance Study
MTF	Monitoring the Future study
NCHS	National Center for Health Statistics
NDATUS	National Drug and Alcoholism Treatment Unit Survey
NFIA	National Families in Action
NHIS	National Health Interview Survey
NHSDA	National Household Survey on Drug Abuse
NIAAA	National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism
NIDA	National Institute on Drug Abuse
NIH	National Institutes of Health
NIJ	National Institute of Justice
NIMH	National Institute of Mental Health
NOMS	National Outcome Measures
NORML	National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws
NSDA	National Survey on Drug Abuse
NSDUH	National Survey on Drug Use and Health
OAS	Office of Applied Studies
ODAP	Office of Drug Abuse Policy
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
ONDCP	Office of National Drug Control Policy
PAPI	paper-and-pencil interviewing
PART	Program Assessment Rating Tool
PDFA	Partnership for a Drug Free America
PRIDE	Parents' Resource Institute on Drug Education
PSU	primary sampling unit
RAC	Response Analysis Corporation
R-DAS	Restricted Use Data Analysis System
RFP	Request for Proposal
RTI	Research Triangle Institute (RTI International)
SAE	small area estimation
SAMHSA	Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
SAODAP	Special Action Office for Drug Abuse Prevention
SAPT	Substance Abuse Prevention and Treatment
SBIRT	Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment
SED	serious emotional disturbance

List of Acronyms

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SMI	serious mental illness
SPG	Special Projects Group
SSDP	State Systems Development Program
SSR	state sampling region
TEDS	Treatment Episode Data Set
YARM	yet another redesign meeting

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-12270-3 — War Stories from the Drug Survey  
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