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.
War Stories from the Drug Survey

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

Joseph Gfroerer
US Department of Health and Human Services (retired)
For Sue and Rachel
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Preface

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
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
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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.

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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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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

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
List of Acronyms

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

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