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National Opinion Research Center

The National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago is the oldest and largest university-based, survey-research institute in the United States (www.norc.org). It was founded at the University of Denver in 1941 by Harry Field and has been located at the University of Chicago since 1947. NORC’s mission is “to conduct high quality, social science research in the public interest.”

In pursuing its goal of high quality NORC has been a pioneer in the development of survey-research methodology. Seminal works by NORC authors includes the research of Herbert Hyman on interviewing, Norman Bradburn and Seymour Sudman on response effects, and Roger Tourangeau and Kenneth Rasinski on both context effects and more broadly on measurement error in their book with Lance Rips, The Psychology of Survey Response, that won the 2006 annual book award of the American Association for Public Opinion Research.

In serving the public interest, NORC conducts all its research in the public domain. This includes both basic research for academics and applied research for the government and others. In particular NORC has been the originator and leader in many areas of research. These include the following firsts:

1) national survey on intergroup relations in 1942 and a time series on this topic extending down to the present,
2) national study of occupational prestige in 1947 (with subsequent updates in 1963-65 and 1989,
3) national criminal victimization study in 1966,
4) city-wide probability sample of the homeless in Chicago in the 1980s, and
5) nationally-representative, hypernetwork samples of employers in 1991 and

National Data Program for the Social Sciences

The National Data Program for the Social Sciences (NDPSS) is the longest-running project at NORC (www.gss.norc.org). It started in 1971 with core funding from the National Science Foundation (NSF) where it is the largest and longest-term project of NSF's Sociology Program.

The NDPSS is directed by James A. Davis (NORC/University of Chicago), Tom W. Smith (NORC/University of Chicago), and Peter V. Marsden (Harvard University). It is advised by a Board of Overseers consisting of prominent social scientists.

This program has had two main goals:

To conduct basic scientific research on the structure and development of American society in comparative perspective.

To distribute up-to-date, important, high-quality data to social scientists, students, policy makers, and others.

This research is carried out by a data collection program designed to both monitor social change within the United States and to compare the United States to other nations.

Data on societal change in the United States is collected as part of the General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS has been conducted 26 times since 1972. It is the only full-probability, personal-interview survey designed to monitor changes in both social characteristics and attitudes currently being conducted in the United States. Over 1,000 trends have been tracked since 1972. In addition, since the GSS adopted questions from earlier surveys, trends can be followed for up to 70 years.

Among the topics covered are civil liberties, crime and violence, intergroup tolerance, morality, national spending priorities, psychological well-being, social mobility, and stress and traumatic events.

Cross-national data are collected as part of the International Social Survey Program (ISSP). ISSP was established in 1984 by NORC and other social science institutes in Australia, Great Britain, and West Germany. The ISSP collaboration has now grown to include 43 nations (the founding four plus Austria, Belgium, Brazil,
Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, China, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Cyprus, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Finland, France, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea (South), Latvia, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, the Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, Turkey, Uruguay, and Venezuela). ISSP conducts an annual study on a rotating series of topics and is the largest program of cross-national research in the social sciences (www.issp.org).

The GSS data sets are distributed to interested scholars and applied researchers as soon as the surveys are processed through the major survey archives in the United States and Europe. It is widely utilized by academia, government, and the private sector:

- Over 14,000 scholarly publications have used the GSS. In the social sciences only the US Census is used as a data source more frequently than the GSS.
- Each year over 250,000 college students utilize the GSS in classes.
- Governmental users include the Library of Congress, the Departments of Commerce, Defense, Education, and Justice, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the White House.
- Corporate users include AT&T, General Electric, Hallmark, IBM, Procter and Gamble, Prudential Insurance, and Sears.
- Newspapers, magazines, and broadcast media in North America, Asia, and Europe frequently cite the GSS.
- Our web site, the General Social Survey Data and Information Retrieval System, has over 300,000 visits a month.

In addition to its programs of basic research and data distribution, the program has carried out an extensive range of methodological research designed both to advance survey methods in general and to insure that the GSS data are of the highest possible quality. Over 110 papers have been published in the GSS Methodological Report series.

The GSS and its PIs have received awards from the American Association for Public Opinion Research, the American Sociological Association, the Eastern Sociological Society, the World Association for Public Opinion Research, and American Demographics and Science magazines.
Cross-national Survey Research at NORC

NORC directed one of the most important, early cross-national studies, Civic Culture by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba in 1959. For the last three decades most NORC comparative research has been connected to the NDPSS. First, the American GSS inspired the creation of similar data monitoring and distribution programs in Britain (British Social Attitudes Survey), Germany (ALLBUS), Australia (National Social Science Survey and later the Australian Social Attitudes Survey), Poland (the Polish GSS), Taiwan (Social Change Study), Japan (Japanese GSS), and Korea (Korean GSS). Second, as noted above, the NDPSS was a co-founder of the ISSP and headed its secretariat in 1997-2003. Third, with support from the National Institutes of Health, the International Mental Health Stigma Study is currently being fielded in 16 countries. Finally, NORC and the NDPSS are trying to establish a North American Social Survey as a partner with the European Social Survey which started in 2002.

Japan has been an important partner in several of these cross-national studies. The Broadcasting Culture Research Institute of NHK has participated in the ISSP since 1993. The Regional Studies Institute at Osaka University of Commerce in collaboration with the Institute of Social Science at the University of Tokyo has conducted the Japanese GSS since 2000. In addition, Japan has been a founding member of the ISSP-related East Asian Social Survey involving China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan.

In a globalizing world the rationale for cross-national research is clear and compelling. In order to truly understand any society - Japan, America or wherever, one needs to view every society in comparative perspective. In particular when studying societal change, a cross-national perspective is essential. Enough trends have a global component so societal change can not be understood if countries are examined in isolation as if they were closed systems. One needs to assess when global, regional, or national factors are operating and only a comparative perspective can sort out which is the case. Thus, even studying what turns out to be nation-specific patterns benefit from cross-national data since only then can global and regional factors be ruled out. In sum, for every society to understand itself, it needs to understand others.