

SSA's Office of Research, Evaluation & Statistics (ORES)

COPAFS Meeting
June 4, 2021
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Associate Commissioner



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Discussion Topics for Today

How we are dealing with...

1. ORES Budget
2. ORES Staffing
3. Data Collection During COVID
4. Federal Statistical Agency Innovations



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Budget...

- ORES employee salaries are funded through SSA's Limitation on Administrative Expenses budget
- We also have a separate research budget that we use to fund:
 - Our extramural research grant program
 - Blanket Purchase Agreement for research and analysis (supporting evidence-based decision-making)
 - Data processing modernization for research and statistics
 - Inter-agency survey data collections and other collaborations
 - Simulation model development
 - Other contract support services
- FY2021 ORES Research Budget ~ \$23.7 million (est.)



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Staffing

Challenge

ORES is a small statistical unit, with our 68 employees spread across a number of specialty roles:

- Researchers (Economist/Social Science Research Analyst)
- Social Insurance Program Specialists
- Information Technology Specialists/Data Developers
- Math Statistician
- Editor/Print Production Specialists
- Program and Management Analysts (technical/administrative)

Response

We also have extramural research and contractor support to supplement capacity



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During the COVID-19 Pandemic

- ORES dataset development, research and statistics continue (www.ssa.gov/policy)
- Expanded the scope and representation of our Program Data Disclosure Review Board.
- Planning to refresh our public use files available on our external website.
- Migrating legacy COBOL code which we use to extract data to generate our research and statistics master files to agile data collection tools and Enterprise Data-Warehouse (EDW) source files



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During the COVID-19 Pandemic

- Worked with external partners that have implemented changes for surveys during the pandemic
 - Health and Retirement Study – In person to telephone surveys
- New collection/uses of data during the pandemic, including adding questions about COVID
 - Census Household Pulse Survey
 - Understanding America Study
- Continue retirement and disability research through our Retirement and Disability Research Consortium (RDRC) and research umbrella contract including quick turnaround research on the implications of COVID on disability and retirement applications
 - <https://www.ssa.gov/policy/extramural/> - For extramural research resources, including RDRC links and Research Focal Areas



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Federal Statistical Agency Innovations

Background research on improving the *Social Security Statement*

- The parts of the *Statement* people read
 - The majority of Understanding America Study (UAS) 2016 survey respondents (60-70%) reported reviewing their benefits information and earnings records
 - Only around 30% report reading the general information provided
- The public's understanding of our programs
 - 2016 UAS survey respondents understand taxes paid by employers/employees, who is entitled to benefits, and that claiming affects their benefit amounts
 - Did not do as well on questions on the early eligibility age, full retirement age, and how benefits are calculated



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Federal Statistical Agency Innovations

- Reviewed expert recommendations on ways to improve the *Statement*
 - Larger font, more white space and bolding, use graphs/charts and more color
 - Provide only required/necessary information, show benefit estimates for additional ages, links to online information/tools, customize information by age groups, make language clear and easy to understand
- Conducted usability and cognitive testing on *Statement* prototypes and supplemental fact sheets
 - Engaged with a total of 70 individuals (45 for cognitive and 25 for usability)
 - Preliminary feedback suggests that participants liked the general format/layout and flow of the documents, straightforward information that was written in plain language, and links to additional information



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Statement improvements

- The streamlined two-page *Statement* will be accompanied by supplemental fact sheets customized for each person's age group and earnings situation
 - Four age groups: Young and Mid-Career Ages 18-48, Pre-Claiming Ages 49-60, Claiming Ages 61-69, and Ages 70+
 - Four earnings situations: New Workers, Workers Not Fully Insured, Intermittent Workers, and Workers with Non-Covered Earnings
 - Medicare fact sheet for those Ages 62+
- Phased release:
 - February 13, 2021 – Released fact sheets online in *my* Social Security
 - May 1, 2021 – Soft launch of redesigned *Statement* online in *my* Social Security
 - Later in 2021 – Supplemental fact sheets will accompany the redesigned mailed *Statement* in English and Spanish
 - Fact sheets can be viewed at: www.ssa.gov/myaccount/statement.html



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Federal Statistical Agency Innovations

Using Census Household Pulse Survey (HPS) and Understanding America Survey (UAS):

- Provides rapid response data on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the need for benefits, especially among minority and vulnerable populations.
- Evaluating trends in benefit applications during the pandemic, including applications for Social Security benefits (Retirement, Disability, and Survivors), Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits, and Medicare benefits.
- UAS provides more detailed trends on use of assistance programs, including SSA programs and Medicare and Medicaid and is surveying people who have answered surveys on program knowledge and communication preferences.

The picture today:

- While the recession has reduced typical income sources, the expected increase in claiming or intent to claim still has not materialized.
- Minorities in many ways are more adversely affected and relying on 'last resort' types of income;
 - Hispanics are a clear outlier on most of the questions
 - Black and Other Race seem to track fairly closely in most things—but in terms of sources of money, a higher proportion of Other has regular income.



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Federal Statistical Agency Innovations

Supporting SSA's response to Executive Order 13985 -- Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government

- Adding a new webpage of currently available research, statistics, and data on race/ethnicity
- Adding a new focal area for our research consortium
- Updating public use files that provide race and ethnicity information on the file population
- Analyzing the distributional effects of racial inequities
- Examining barriers to employment and career opportunities
- Expanding research grant and contract opportunities for researchers from underserved communities
- Expanding use of program data on race/ethnicity...



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Expand use of program data on race/ethnicity:

- Determine which segments of our populations have adequate race/ethnicity data (such as those born in 1990 or earlier)
- Publish statistics and research on those segments as soon as possible
- Explore how to enhance the existing data to make it usable for the all population segments:
 - Statistical imputation based on other data
 - Extrapolation from existing program data
 - Expanding matches of program data to surveys
 - Reconciling errors, conflicts, changing categories over time in the data



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ORES Resources

We invite you to...

- Follow our research and statistics webpage_ (www.ssa.gov/policy) for the latest publications
- Track our extramural research outcomes_ (www.ssa.gov/policy/extramural/index.html)



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Questions?



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