

Diversity, Complexity, and Change:
Family and Living Arrangements Measures in the 2014 SIPP Panel¹

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Introduction

The study of family complexity within the social sciences is often hindered by insufficient data (see Guzzo, 2014, for a discussion).³ Large, national datasets often lack sufficient information on respondent's fertility histories or household relationships. Moreover, cross-sectional datasets do not capture the ways in which families shift and change over time. Although many researchers have done excellent work on family complexity despite data limitations, the desire for more complete information has been a running theme of much of the recent literature on this topic (e.g., Cancian, Meyer, and Cook, 2011; Klerman, 2007; Guzzo and Furstenberg, 2007).

In this paper, we present information about a new source of data on family complexity, the 2014 panel of the Survey of Income and Program Participation, or SIPP. The SIPP is not a new dataset, but was overhauled prior to the 2014 panel, and has gained many important new measures addressing the nuances of family complexity. Our intention is that this paper will introduce data users to the new SIPP, and provide the research community with sufficient information about these data to enable family complexity research that may not have been previously feasible.

Background

Since 2006, the U.S. Census Bureau has spent significant effort reengineering the SIPP. The SIPP has existed in various forms since 1984, when it debuted as a paper-based personal-interview survey. The survey design called for a longitudinal panel survey, with the capacity to measure monthly dynamics in household economic well being, program receipt, and family context. Based on the research of the Income Survey Development Program (ISDP), the SIPP design oriented around interviews occurring every four months (three times per year) for the duration of the panel. In 1984, the first SIPP panel began as a paper survey with this design, and continued with overlapping panel starts through the 1993 SIPP panel. With the 1996 panel, the survey moved to a computer-assisted personal interview (CAPI) design, and from overlapping to abutting panels; however, the basic survey design and content did not change.

In 2006, budgetary conditions threatened the cancellation of the SIPP program. Given this, the Census Bureau, with significant support from the SIPP stakeholder community, began the re-engineering process that resulted in the redesigned 2014 SIPP instrument. Due to both budgetary constraints and concerns about respondent burden, the SIPP Survey Team decided that the best

¹ This work is released to inform interested parties of ongoing research and to encourage discussion of work in progress. Any views or opinions expressed in the paper are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of the U.S. Census Bureau.

² Rose Kreider and Alison Fields, of the US Census Bureau, were also involved in the preparation of this paper.

³ Family complexity is used to refer to multiple partner fertility (having children with multiple partners), cohabitation, stepfamilies, families spread across residences, and other family forms that are outside a simple, coresidential, nuclear family with married parents (see Carlson and Meyer, 2014, for an in-depth discussion).

approach was to redesign the survey from the ground up. One of the fundamental changes was a switch to annual interviews, revisiting sample households once per year instead of every four months. Given this change, respondents are now expected to recall events that may have happened at any point during the previous year. This extension to the recall period was enabled by the introduction of an Event History Calendar (EHC) to the SIPP (Fields and Callegaro, 2007), which facilitates recall over the lengthier gaps between interviews. Additionally, the EHC design allows for a style of conversational interviewing that had previously been impossible; using the new instrument, the Field Representative (FR) can now discuss different domains in the respondent's life in the order in which the respondent wishes to discuss them (Belli, 1998).

Moving to an annual interview allowed us to fold the disparate parts of the old SIPP interview into a single instrument. SIPP stakeholders were engaged to refine the content and focus SIPP to meet critical needs. Previously, the survey had a set of "core" questions, which were asked during each interview (i.e., every four months).⁴ Additionally, each wave then had additional questions on specific topics, contained in a series of "topical modules."⁵ The new instrument contains both the "core" and the "topical module" questions.

From conversations with stakeholders, it became immediately clear that SIPP has a diverse user community, and that data users were invested in not losing content under the redesign. Given this, much of the prior SIPP content was retained in some form. For example, the household relationship topical module, which asked about the detailed relationships among household members, was previously asked only once near the beginning of a panel. This type of detailed family relationship information was identified as some of the unique and high value content in the SIPP design. Given this, the 2014 SIPP panel includes detailed relationship matrices for every month of the reference period and for each wave of data collection. Similarly, fertility information was previously limited to a single topical module, administered to women. These data provided important benchmarks, but were also deemed too limited. The 2014 panel instead asks each adult household member about their fertility, identifies multipartner fertility, and by using dependent data, updates this information as needed in each subsequent wave's interview.

It is our hope that data from the 2014 SIPP panel, both variables retained from previous iterations of the SIPP and variables that are new under the redesign, will be instrumental in future research on the topics of families, households, and relationships therein.⁶ The following sections provide a more detailed overview of these data within the new SIPP instrument.

⁴ Core questions are typically asked at the start of the interview. At the beginning of each household visit, the Census Bureau interviewer completes or updates a roster listing all household members, verifies basic demographic information about each person, and checks certain facts about the household. Core questions covering key areas of SIPP follow the initial questions and include Demographics; Labor Force; General Income; Assets; Health Insurance; Education; and Program Participation.

⁵ See http://www.census.gov/sipp/top_mod/topical.html for the list of SIPP topical content.

⁶ A content crosswalk, comparing data available in earlier SIPP panels to that available in the 2014 SIPP, will be available with the data on the SIPP website: <http://www.census.gov/sipp/>.

Family and Household Measures within the SIPP

Relationships:

In prior iterations of the SIPP, information on relationships between household members came from four places: the relationship of each individual to the reference person, parent pointers (which identify the parent or parents of the respondent), spouse pointers (which identify the spouse of the respondent), and from the Wave 2 household relationship topical module.⁷ In the 2014 SIPP instrument, we have expanded on these data. Each month now includes a detailed relationship matrix, and both the spouse and parent pointers have become more broadly defined. We have also gained information on cohabiting partners. These more expansive data will enable detailed measures of relationships within the household in all months of the reference period.

For example, the number of relationships identified in the monthly relationship-to-reference-person question has been increased in the 2014 SIPP. This category expansion facilitates creating a monthly household relationship matrix, providing more information about other relatives and partners in the household. The household relationship matrix topical module collected in the 2008 SIPP panel showed 31 answer categories of relationships, which identified detailed relationships among all household members, but only at one point in time for the panel. In 2014, although we do not have the Wave 2 relationship module, using information about who is in the household each month, relationship to reference person, spouse pointers, parent pointers, parent type, marital status, marital history, cohabitation, type 2 relationships, and lists of biological children from the fertility section, we identify and produce a detailed monthly relationship matrix with 19 detailed categories for every month of the panel.

Through the addition of new categories, we also gained the ability to examine the dynamics of these relationships in a way that has not been possible in the past. We added aunt/uncle, niece/nephew, and in-law categories (mother/father-in-law, daughter/son-in-law, and brother/sister-in-law), and split the husband/wife/spouse category and the boyfriend/girlfriend/partner category into same sex and opposite sex versions (i.e., opposite sex spouse, same sex spouse, opposite sex partner, same sex partner). Although these changes will also soon be incorporated into the American Community Survey data collection, we are the first nationally representative survey to show these data this way.

Concomitant with the change to the spouse/partner answer category on the relationship question, we changed the parent pointers that store the person number of the record holder's coresident parent(s) into gender-neutral versions of these items. In previous years (and in all other census surveys that use parent pointers) we asked respondents first if they had a mother in the household, and then if there was a father in the household. Under this formulation, same-sex parents could only identify one of the partners as a parent. In the 2014 SIPP, the survey asks all respondents whether they have a parent in the household, and, if they say yes to a first parent, whether they have a second parent in the household, and the responses collected are not constrained by the gender of either parent.

⁷ The reference person is the person (or one of the people) in whose name the house is rented or owned. If there are multiple owners or renters, the first person listed is deemed the "reference person."

The monthly spouse pointers were retained. Marital status is available for each month, and a basic marital history is also collected. The marital history questions include times married, year of first marriage, year of current marriage for those married at interview, and measures of ever widowed and ever divorced. We also added monthly cohabitation pointers, with additional details identifying registered domestic partnerships and civil unions. Furthermore, although a detailed marital history topical module was not retained, it will be available from the SSA Supplement on Retirement, Pensions, and Related Content (including disability) sponsored by the Social Security Administration.

The 2014 SIPP also includes information about the natality and mortality of non-coresident parents. That is, of all respondents not living with two biological parents, we additionally ask for the birth date and birth place (country of origin) of their parent or parents (these data are collected elsewhere in the instrument for any parent residing in the household). We further ask whether the non-coresident parent or parents are deceased, and if so, when they died. These data provide additional information that is useful to examine parental availability during childhood, extrahousehold resources, and provide further information about family networks and obligations.

Fertility:

The new SIPP instrument now collects a complete fertility history for all respondents aged 15 and older. We ask for children ever born/biologically fathered, and year of birth for all children, as well as a small amount of information about the other biological parent of respondents' children.⁸ These data yield a number of new measures, including multiple partner fertility, information on childbearing unions, as well as fertility information on a larger segment of the population than has previously been collected in a national survey.

For example, for the first time in a nationally representative federal survey, the 2014 SIPP will collect information about multipartner fertility. First, the survey includes a direct question about multiple partner fertility: "Do all of your biological children share the same biological mother/father?" Additionally, for all children reported by a respondent, the fertility sequence also groups children by shared other parent. This information is collected regardless of whether the children and/or other parent are coresident in the interviewed household. These data will allow the measurement of not only multiple partner fertility, but also half and full sibling relationships within and across households. This is a significant improvement in the ability to accurately consider the complexity and diversity in parent-child and sibling family relationships.

Moreover, information about the other parent is collected regardless of whether the respondent has multiple partner fertility. This information about the childbearing partnerships associated with each adults' children will allow researchers to see whether currently partnered adults also

⁸ Prior to the 2014 panel, the SIPP Fertility History Topical Module collected the number of children ever born for both men and women, but no additional information for men. Additionally, fertility questions were not asked of any never-married males under the age of 18. Women 15 and up who have had children were asked the month and year of their first and last births, and the residence of those children. These data were collected once in each panel.

have children in common.^{9,10} For adults not living with any children, this will mean that we can know whether, for example, the three children that a wife reports having had are the same three children that her husband reports; previous data would only allow speculation as to whether any or all of those children were shared.

The 2014 SIPP additionally includes information about men's fertility. Although past iterations of the SIPP instrument have included some information on men's fertility, the 2014 SIPP panel is the first time that the SIPP has collected complete fertility histories for respondents of both sexes, which will yield parallel information for men and women. This will allow not only a more complete picture of men's fertility, but will also permit gendered comparisons of family complexity and intra-household dynamics. By including this parallel data for both men and women, these data will additionally permit analyses of the validity of male fertility data, which has often been deemed unreliable (see, for example, Rendall et al., 1999). By cross-walking women's total fertility with men's and exploring administrative records validations, we will be better able to parameterize errors in the measurement of men's fertility and adjust future work accordingly.

Residential Dynamics:

The longer reference period in the 2014 SIPP is counterbalanced using an Event History Calendar (EHC). The EHC is a calendar tool used to aid respondents' recall of events, and provides a visual representation of the time and key topics which the respondent may be working to recall. In conjunction with marital, job, and programmatic changes throughout the year, the EHC also allows the collection of up to five different residence spells (and the transitions between them) for each person in the household. This enables the Census Bureau to identify people who move more than once during a single year period and to capture the timing of these moves in relation to other changes observed in the EHC. The instrument also collects detailed information about each residence, and about the household members at each residence.

In addition to the geographic and household characteristics, the reason for moving is captured for each residential move for each person in the household. These data further inform measures of family complexity; for example, employment related moves are separated from moves related to the formation or dissolution of a family. The lengthening of the reference period also allows the Census Bureau to capture residence in group quarters, or residence abroad, during the year. Depending on the ability to protect respondent confidentiality, data may also be available to evaluate the characteristics associated with household members transitioning into and out of group quarters situations during the reference year, as well as into or out of the country.

⁹ Note that the fertility questions capture shared fertility only between opposite sex partners; due to instrument and database limitations, as well as concerns about personally identifiable information, we do not currently allow same sex couples to mutually identify as biological parents in the fertility section of the instrument.

¹⁰ While the traditional SIPP fertility topical module provided details about a woman's fertility even if the children were not in the household, it did not identify anything about children from common partnerships if the children were not coresident with both parents at the time of the interview.

The SIPP Instrument and the Study of Complexity

The design goals for the new SIPP instrument are focused on offering policymakers and researchers data that can be used to provide nationally representative estimates for the evaluation of annual and sub-annual dynamics of income, the movements into and out of government transfer programs, the effect on family and social context of individuals and households, and their interactions. The first National Academies SIPP report emphasized that SIPP should remain flexible to respond to changing requirements associated with measuring the household economic situation of the population (see recommendation 2-1 of Citro and Kalton, 1993); the changes enacted in the 2014 SIPP panel demonstrate adherence to that goal.¹¹

These changes to SIPP also reflect a commitment to continued efforts to improve the data collected in the Federal Statistical System. In four Federal ‘Counting Couples’ conferences, dating from 2001 to 2011, the convened panel of experts recommended several points of opportunity for improving data on families and relationships in Federal data collections (see, for example, the recommendations listed in Federal Interagency Forum, 2001, and National Center for Family and Marriage Research, 2012). The changes to the SIPP for the 2014 panel address several of the recommendations from these expert reviews of marriage, cohabitation, relationship, and family dynamics data and data gaps. Through the detailed data collected on relationships, residential dynamics, and expanded fertility information, the 2014 SIPP will provide a significantly improved source of longitudinal information about each interviewed household member over the course of four years. These new data offer a rich source of information to study the dynamic nature of family living arrangements and relationships, and further the mission to provide this information on its own merit and in a data system that allows household economic situations to be more clearly understood.

¹¹ This recommendation reads: “The National Academies recommend that SIPP focus on the two primary goals of providing improved information on the distribution of income and other economic resources for people and families and on eligibility for and participation in government assistance programs. Within these two goals most attention should be paid to improving the information for people who are economically at risk. A third important but subordinate goal is for SIPP to have a capability to respond to current policy needs for data in topical areas that are related to the core subjects of SIPP.”

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