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Contents

[Background and Study Rationale 3](#_Toc402190790)

[Cognitive Interviews 3](#_Toc402190791)

[Survey Items 4](#_Toc402190792)

[Sample and Recruitment Plans 4](#_Toc402190793)

[Data Collection Process 5](#_Toc402190794)

[Analysis Plans 5](#_Toc402190795)

[Consultations Outside the Agency 5](#_Toc402190796)

[Assurance of Confidentiality 6](#_Toc402190797)

[Estimation of Hourly Burden 6](#_Toc402190798)

[Estimate of Costs for Recruiting and Paying Respondents 7](#_Toc402190799)

[Estimate of Cost Burden and Cost to Federal Government 7](#_Toc402190800)

[Schedule 7](#_Toc402190801)

## This material is being submitted under the generic National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) clearance agreement (OMB #1850-0803), which provides for NCES to conduct various procedures (such as cognitive interviews, focus groups, etc.) to allow NCES to continue to develop, test, and improve its data collection methodologies.

## Background and Study Rationale

The School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS), a nationally representative survey of elementary and secondary public schools, is one of the nation’s primary sources of school-level data on crime and safety. Managed by the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), SSOCS has been administered five times—covering the 1999–2000, 2003–04, 2005–06, 2007–08, and 2009–10 school years.

SSOCS is unique in that it is the only recurring federal survey collecting detailed information on the incidence, frequency, seriousness, and nature of violence affecting students and school personnel, as well as other indices of school safety from the schools’ perspective. As such, SSOCS fills an important gap in data collected by NCES and other agencies. Topics covered by SSOCS include school programs and practices, parent and community involvement, school security staff, staff training, limitations on crime prevention, the type and frequency of crime and violence, and the types of disciplinary problems and actions used in schools.

Conducted via mail, principals or other school personnel designated by the principal as the person “the most knowledgeable about school crime and policies to provide a safe environment” are asked to complete hardcopy SSOCS questionnaires. With re-mailings and extensive telephone follow-up, completed questionnaires are received from about 2,650 public schools with weighted unit response rates generally averaging around 80 percent.

An updated SSOCS questionnaire, including two new items on school-wide discipline policies and staff trainings related to bullying, received OMB approval for a spring 2012 administration, but due to funding issues the collection was never fielded. With new funding available through the National Institute for Justice (NIJ), SSOCS will be conducted again in the spring of the 2015–16 school year. To the greatest extent possible, NCES would like to retain items contained in earlier collections to preserve trend lines. That said, some items should be modified to stay relevant, and new items should be considered to address new and emerging issues and interests.

As part of the SSOCS 2015–16 item development process, a portion of the new and modified survey items will be tested on target participants through cognitive interviews in the winter of 2014 to uncover comprehension issues and to measure overall understanding of the content surveyed. This document describes the types of testing we plan to conduct, the number of items to be tested, sample and the recruitment of participants, the data collection process, the hourly burden, and the cost of the testing.

### Cognitive Interviews

In cognitive interviews, an interviewer uses a structured protocol in a one-on-one interview drawing on methods from cognitive science. The cognitive interviews will investigate the cognitive processes that respondents use to answer survey questions. In particular, these interviews will identify problems of ambiguity or misunderstanding in question wording. The main goal within this task is to ensure that all items included in the final survey are easily understood by respondents, with their interpretations consistently aligned with the concepts being measured.

The cognitive interviewing methods will consist of two key components: think-aloud interviewing and verbal probing techniques (these two methods are also known as concurrent and retrospective recall probing, respectively). With think-aloud interviewing, respondents are explicitly instructed to think aloud (i.e., describe what they are thinking) as they work through items. With verbal probing techniques, the interviewer asks probing questions, as necessary, to clarify points that are not evident from the “think-aloud” process, or to explore additional issues that have been identified a priori as being of particular interest. Cognitive interview studies produce qualitative data in the form of verbalizations made by participants during the think-aloud phase and in response to the interviewer probes. Both the think-aloud approach and probing techniques will be applied to all participants during the cognitive interviews.

### Survey Items

Based on our review of previous cognitive interviews conducted for SSOCS, the number of survey items to be tested, and conversations with staff experienced with cognitive interviewing, we have concluded that the ideal length of the cognitive interview should last (and not exceed) 90 minutes in order to ensure appropriate measures of respondent burden and quality of feedback. NCES and its contractor for the SSOCS, the American Institutes for Research (AIR), estimate that approximately 40 items total will be tested and given the degree of item modification and section length, priority for the cognitive interviews will focus around the School Security Staff and School Mental Health Services sections. New items from these two sections will be tested across the full 20 participants, while additional new and modified items from other sections, such as School Practices and Programs, Staff Training, and Number of Incidents, will be tested across 10 participants each so as to maximize the amount of content covered per interview. It is important to note that the research from the cognitive interviews will be iterative in that question wording and design may change during the testing period in response to early findings.

## Sample and Recruitment Plans

NCES has contracted AIR to conduct the SSOCS cognitive laboratory testing in December 2014 and January 2015. Participants will include elementary, middle, and high school principals or persons designated by principals as “the person most knowledgeable about school crime and policies to provide a safe environment.” They will be recruited primarily from the District of Columbia, Chicago, and Boston metropolitan areas (near AIR offices) to maximize scheduling and interviewing efficiency and flexibility.

On behalf of NCES, AIR will recruit approximately 20 participants representing a range of characteristics (including schools in urban and suburban areas, schools serving different grade levels, and with varying enrollment sizes). Please note that although the sample will include a mix of characteristics, the results will not explicitly measure differences by these characteristics. As there are a large number of new items that will require cognitive testing, The new items will be divided into two versions with approximately 20 items each. Ten participants will receive the first set of items, and ten participants will receive the second set.

We will use multiple outreach methods and resources, such as contacts with schools and community organizations, marketing research companies, and newspaper/internet ads to recruit participants. E-mails and phone calls will be used to contact the potential participants. Interested participants will be screened to ensure they are eligible for participation in the interviews. For the selected participants, AIR will confirm the interview date, time, and location via e-mail and phone. Participants will complete consent forms at the time of the interview and as a thank you for their time and participation, they will receive a $25 gift card for interviews conducted remotely (via telephone or video conference) or a $40 gift card for interviews conducted in person.

## Data Collection Process

The cognitive interviews will take place in a variety of locations and through a range of modes. Interviews will be conducted primarily in the District of Columbia, Chicago, and Boston areas with facilities including (but not limited to) urban, suburban, and town schools in small, medium, and large districts. Participants will be given the option to participate in the interviews in person or remotely via telephone or video conference. The availability of remote participation options will serve to encourage participation through the most flexible of means. In most cases, in-person interviews will be conducted within schools; however, in some cases participants may be invited to AIR offices where interviews will be conducted or testing may take place in another appropriate environment (depending on scheduling and the participants).

Given the diversity of locations across the country in which the cognitive interviews will be held, NCES and AIR expect that those who participate will better represent the target population of schools from SSOCS than participants sampled from the same region or city. To adequately test the survey instrument without introducing selection bias, it is also necessary to distribute the interviews across schools that represent a diverse cross section of the general population given their socio-demographic characteristics (i.e., racial makeup, percent eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, etc.).

### Analysis Plans

For the cognitive interview data collections, the key unit of analysis is the item. Items will be analyzed across participants. The types of data collected about the items will include:

* think-aloud verbal reports;
* responses to generic questions about respondents’ interpretation of the item;
* responses to targeted questions specific to an item; and
* additional comments volunteered by participants or observations noted by interviewers.

The deliverable from the analyses of the cognitive interviews will be a report which will contain results for each item and a brief summary of results. This will include information from NCES’ contractor (AIR) as collected in interviewer notes. The general analysis approach will be to compile the different types of data to facilitate identification of patterns of responses or issues for specific items. This overall approach will help to ensure that the data are analyzed in a thorough and systematic way that enhances the identification of problems with items or tasks and provides recommendations for addressing them.

## Consultations Outside the Agency

NCES has an ongoing consultation with federal partners from the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) and the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS). Along with NCES, these partners are members of the Comprehensive School Safety Initiative Group established by NIJ. Since funding to conduct SSOCS again in the spring of the 2015–16 school year is available through the NIJ, these partners shared some priority areas that they recommend for SSOCS development. In August and September of 2014, federal partners participated in two meetings to discuss the redesign of the 2015–16 SSOCS questionnaire.

NCES has also been in consultation with a Technical Review Panel (TRP) comprised of some of the nation’s top experts in school crime, school safety, and mental health services in schools. The panel members provided insight from the perspective of researchers using the SSOCS data and from the perspective of the activities of schools. In August and September of 2014, TRP members participated in two meetings to discuss the content of the 2015–16 SSOCS questionnaire.

Both the federal partners and TRP members were given the opportunity to review and refine items proposed by NCES and AIR for modifications to existing SSOCS items, additions within the current scope of SSOCS, items proposed to address new and emerging issues and interests, and proposed new items on school mental health services to address NIJ priorities.

## Assurance of Confidentiality

Participation is voluntary and respondents will sign a consent form before interviews are conducted. Participants will be notified that their participation is voluntary and that their answers may be used only for research purposes and may not be disclosed, or used, in identifiable form for any other purpose except as required by law [Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002, (20 U.S.C. §9573)]. The consent form states the following: “I have read the attached consent form for the School Survey on Crime and Safety and associated activities; all of my questions have been answered. The above document describing the voluntary nature, response confidentiality, and procedures for this research study has been explained to me. I agree to participate.”

The interviews will be audio-recorded solely for research purposes. The only identification included in the audio files will be the participant ID. The recorded files will be secured for the duration of the study – with access limited to key AIR project staff – and will be destroyed after the final report is submitted.

## Estimation of Hourly Burden

NCES and AIR expect the cognitive interviews to last approximately 90 minutes in length. With approximately 20 participants recruited for the cognitive interviews, this will result in a maximum of 30 burden hours for the interviews. The initial contact and screening of potential participants is estimated at 3 minutes, or 0.05 hours. We anticipate 12 screening interviews will be needed to identify one eligible participant (thus an estimated 240 screenings to yield 20 participants). This will result in 12 hours of burden for the screener and an estimated total of 42 hours of respondent burden for this research.

NCES’s contractor (AIR) will be responsible for recruiting and screening cognitive interview participants. In the event that there are not enough eligible participants recruited, AIR will utilize the services of marketing research companies in order to meet the target number of participants.

Table 1. Estimation of hourly burden for SSOCS cognitive interviews

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Number of Respondents | Number of Responses | Burden Hours per Respondent | Total Burden Hours |
| Recruitment (initial contact & screening) | 240 | 240 | 0.05 | 12 |
| Cognitive Interviews | 20 | 20 | 1.5 | 30 |
| Total | 240 | 260 | - | 42 |

## Estimate of Costs for Recruiting and Paying Respondents

Marketing research companies, such as Shugoll, charge a management fee, in addition to a recruitment fee, for every participant obtained through its network.

To encourage their participation and to thank them for their time and effort, all participants will be offered an incentive. Participants will be offered a $25 gift card for interviews conducted remotely (via telephone or video conference) or a $40 gift card for interviews conducted in person.

## Estimate of Cost Burden and Cost to Federal Government

The estimated cost to the federal government for the cognitive interviews, including development of a detailed protocol, a revised data collection instrument, the justification package, recruitment, data collection, data analysis, and preparation of a report on findings is $82,000.

## Schedule

Table 2 (below) depicts the high-level activity schedule pertaining to the cognitive interviews. Each activity includes recruitment and scheduling, data collection, analyses, and reports. In addition, the commencement of activities is contingent upon OMB approval.

Table 2. Schedule of activity milestones for SSOCS

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Activity  | Start Date | End Date |
| Recruitment & scheduling of cognitive interviews | 11/10/14 | 11/21/14 |
| Cognitive interviews (data collection) | 11/24/14 | 1/9/15 |
| Draft cognitive interview lab report | 1/12/15 | 1/16/15 |
| NCES (client) review | 1/19/15 | 1/23/15 |
| Final cognitive interview report & submission | 1/26/15 | 1/30/15 |

NOTE: Dates are slightly flexible and may change at client discretion.