

September 09, 2020

Memorandum for: Reviewer of 1220-0175

CC: Dori Allard

From: Rachel Krantz-Kent
Stephanie Denton

Subject: Extending the Cash Incentive Study in the American Time Use Survey

Beginning in December 2019, the American Time Use Survey (ATUS), conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), implemented a cash incentive study. The cash incentive study is currently being collected under OMB control number 1220-0175 and was previously approved for collection through the September 2020 sample. On March 19, 2020 this study was placed on hold when the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the study. Changes in operations because of the COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in the loss of several months of data collection, and impacted the expected number of incentive cases in future sample months. The purpose of this request is to obtain clearance to continue the cash incentive study through the September 2021 sample.

ATUS Incentive Background

In the ATUS, individuals are randomly selected from a subset of households that have completed their eighth month of interviews for the Current Population Survey (CPS). A small percentage of the ATUS sample consists of households that did not provide a telephone number in their eighth CPS interview. In order to be a nationally representative survey, ATUS includes these households in its sample. These households also receive an advance mailer, but instead of providing a date when the designated person will be called, the letter asks the designated person to call the telephone center on a specified day to complete the interview. These cases are referred to as “regular incentive cases.” Prior to the December 2019 sample, the advance mailer for households that lack a telephone number included an incentive in the form of an inactivated debit card for \$40. The debit card was activated only with a PIN number provided to the respondent at the completion of the interview.

Since mid-2008, incentives were also sent to a limited number of households with telephone numbers that do not work, specifically those with telephone numbers assigned call outcome codes of “could not be completed as dialed” and “number changed, no new number given.” In mid-2011, the ATUS expanded incentive-eligible households to include those with telephone numbers that do not work; specifically, those with telephone numbers that are “not in service” or “temporarily not in service.”

Individuals who are sent incentives and are more likely to be black, of Hispanic or Latino ethnicity, to have less education, and to have lower household incomes than members of households that provide phone numbers. Because these households may differ from phone households on unobservable characteristics, including their time-use patterns, and because providing incentives to this small group is not cost prohibitive, BLS believes it is beneficial to expend additional effort and expense to secure their responses.

ATUS Cash Incentive Study Background

Due to the rising costs associated with the use of prepaid incentive cards, BLS is exploring cost-saving options that involve sending cash incentives rather than debit cards. Beginning with the December 2019 sample, with OMB approval, BLS began testing both \$5 and \$10 cash incentives. The ATUS incentive study has two goals. The first goal is to test the effectiveness of using \$0, \$5, and \$10 cash incentives, where effectiveness will be measured in terms of survey response. The second goal is to test whether a \$5 or \$10 cash incentive can boost survey response among certain underrepresented populations. In the current study, the focus is on sampled persons who are 15- to 24-years-old.

In addition to the potential increase in response rates, the cash incentives are expected to save program costs. In fiscal year 2018, ATUS debit card incentives cost the program approximately \$152,000, which included \$70,000 for backing the debit cards, as well as \$82,000 of staff time associated with managing the debit cards. The use of cash incentives is expected to save between \$56,000 (if only \$10 cash incentives are used) and \$69,500 per year (if only \$5 cash incentives are used) in costs associated with the ATUS program's use of incentives. These funds could be spent on other aspects of the survey, such as expanding incentives to target groups with the lowest survey response rates.

The costs of extending the incentive study will be funded by the money the ATUS program saves by not sending \$40 debit card incentives.

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the ATUS

The COVID-19 pandemic directly impacted the ATUS when the U.S. Census Bureau's Jeffersonville Call Center, in which interviewers conduct the ATUS, and the National Processing Center, where survey materials are printed, assembled, and mailed, were closed on March 19, 2020. The ATUS has a gap in the 2020 data from mid-March through mid-May because of this closure. The incentive study lost January, February, March, and April sample data because these samples were not fielded for their full collection periods. Once ATUS operations began again in May, additional time was needed to restart mailings; consequently, the incentive study lost the May sample data as well. In addition to disrupting the incentive study, the closure prevents the program from producing estimates representative of the year, and limits data available about people's time use during the pandemic.

Other impacts of COVID-19 are less clear. Response to the Current Population Survey (CPS), from which the ATUS sample is drawn, dropped when CPS had to suspend in-person

recruitment and interviewing during the early months of the pandemic. This may impact the representativeness of ATUS data in future sample months.

Additionally, since mid-May, a majority of ATUS interviewers have been working remotely. The system that Census uses to monitor calls and provide feedback to interviewers was not developed for remote work and, until a solution is implemented, ATUS interviewers are not being as closely monitored. This may impact data quality.

Reasons to Extend the ATUS Cash Incentive Study

The collection period for the cash incentive study was planned to last through the September 2020 sample. Because of disruptions to ATUS operations due to the COVID-19 pandemic, BLS would like to request an extension to the fielding period through the September 2021 sample. This extension is needed for two reasons:

1. The ATUS incentive study lost five sample months of data—January through May 2020—because of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on ATUS operations. As mentioned previously, the U.S. Census Bureau’s Jeffersonville Call Center in which interviewers conduct the ATUS, and the National Processing Center where survey materials are printed, assembled, and mailed, were closed on March 19, 2020. While ATUS interviews started again on May 11th, the mailed materials were not being sent at this time. The ATUS program was back on schedule with nearly all of the items it sends via the mail beginning with the June sample, including: advanced materials, reminder postcards, incentives, and expanded incentives.
2. Changes to CPS procedures have resulted in about 40 percent fewer regular incentive cases starting with the May 2020 sample. The CPS implemented new file-matching and research procedures in order to identify phone numbers for CPS sample cases. This impacted the ATUS starting with the May 2020 sample. There were about 40 percent fewer no-telephone-number cases (i.e., regular incentive cases) per month in the May-July 2020 samples compared to the average for 2019.

With forty percent fewer regular incentive cases per month, and collection extended through the September 2021 sample, ATUS would expect to have seventeen months of data to analyze. Compared to the original OMB-approved study, this would amount to about twenty-five percent fewer cases for analysis of the first goal of the study, which focuses on the effectiveness of \$0, \$5, and \$10 incentives on survey response among no-telephone number cases. Conversely, it would amount to about twenty-five percent more cases for analysis of the second goal of the study, which focuses on the effectiveness of sending incentives to 15- to 24-year olds.

If Census’ National Processing Center (NPC) and Jeffersonville Call Center are shut down again due to the COVID-19 pandemic or for another reason, then the incentive study may need to extend data collection again. As discussed previously, a majority of ATUS interviewers are now able to work remotely. This mitigates lost data due to potential facility closures, as the

interviewers will likely be able to continue calling sample that already has been introduced to the field and mailed survey materials.

In the study, \$0, \$5 and \$10 cash incentive groups are randomly assigned to each monthly sample. The analysis will compare the performances of these groups across all the sample months for which data are collected. This design allows the ATUS program to compare these groups over time, even during extenuating or unusual circumstances, such as the pandemic.

As proposed, the ATUS cash incentive study will end with the September 2021 sample, which would expire by the end of the 2021 calendar year. All data associated with the cash incentive study would appear on the regular ATUS data files, and be processed, cleaned, and ready for analysis in May 2022. BLS plans to analyze the data and develop an evidence-based proposal for how to structure ATUS incentives moving forward. The new incentive plan would be implemented upon receiving OMB approval, with a goal of doing so at the beginning of fiscal year 2023.

In the interim period, after the cash incentive study has ended but before implementation of a new incentive plan, and as discussed in the previously OMB-approved cash incentive study, ATUS plans to send \$5 cash incentives to regular and expanded incentive cases. Individuals ages 15 to 24 will not be sent an incentive unless they are identified as a regular or expanded incentive case.