

July 28, 2022

Memorandum for: Reviewer of 1220-0100

CC: Patrick Carey

From: Jim Borbely
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Subject: Nonsubstantive change request for Modifications to the CPS COVID-19 questions

Beginning in May 2020, the Current Population Survey (CPS), conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), was approved for an emergency Information Collection Request (ICR) to add five questions to the Current Population Survey (CPS). These questions collect data on how the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) and attempts to constrain spread of the illness affect the labor market. After receiving the emergency clearance, a shortened version of the COVID questions was included in the 2020 basic OMB clearance package that received approval to collect data through November 2023. The purpose of this request is to obtain clearance to continue data collection with a modified series of COVID-19 questions starting in October 2022. Question modifications are being proposed to improve their relevancy at this stage of the pandemic. The modified questions will reduce respondent burden for the CPS.

Current CPS COVID-19 Questions

Below are the COVID-19-related questions currently asked as a part of the Current Population Survey (CPS). Note that interviewer instructions, which are shown in parentheses after the question, appear on the screen for interviewers but are not read to respondents.

Intro

I now have a few questions related to work activities affected by the coronavirus-COVID-19 pandemic. Efforts to contain the coronavirus have included business and school closures, social distancing, and other disruptions. The following questions refer to the last 4 weeks. By the last 4 weeks I mean the 4-week period ending last Saturday.

Telework - asked about all employed persons age 16 and over

1. At any time in the LAST 4 WEEKS, did (you/name) telework or work at home for pay BECAUSE OF THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC?

(Enter No if person worked entirely from home before the coronavirus pandemic)

0 Yes

0 No

Workplace closures/cutbacks – asked about all persons age 16 and over

2. At any time in the LAST 4 WEEKS, were (you/name) unable to work because (your/his/her) EMPLOYER CLOSED OR LOST BUSINESS due to the coronavirus pandemic?

(Enter Yes for the self-employed who lost work or customers because of the coronavirus pandemic)

0 Yes (go to 3)

0 No (go to 4)

3. Did (you/name) receive any pay from (your/his/her) EMPLOYER for the hours (you/he/she) DID NOT work in last 4 weeks?

(Enter No if self-employed and received no pay from customers)

0 Yes

0 No

Job search – asked about persons age 16 and over who are not in the labor force

4. Did the coronavirus pandemic prevent (you/name) from looking for work in the LAST 4 WEEKS?

0 Yes

0 No

These data were tied to the key measures produced by the CPS, including the national unemployment rate and the labor force participation rate. These are among the first labor market indicators to appear each month, so having these questions on COVID-19 included on the CPS has provided a timely picture on the impact of the virus on the labor market. See Attachment K for an example of the monthly estimates BLS produces with these data.

Proposal to modify questions

BLS proposes modifying the COVID-19 questions to improve their relevancy. Much of the population is now vaccinated and social distancing and other measures to reduce transmission of the disease are less prevalent now than when the questions were implemented. Earlier in the pandemic, many workplaces were shut down and teleworking became more widespread. While some workers have returned to their employers' worksites, others continue to work at home or to work a hybrid schedule that allows them to work both at their employer's worksite and at their home. BLS proposes modifications to the COVID-19 questions to measure the prevalence of telework and work done at home and how this compares to February 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic had not significantly affected U.S. labor markets. These modified questions will continue the effort to understand the impact of the pandemic on the labor market and the use of telework.

Proposed Modified COVID-19 Questions

BLS proposes that the following questions replace the current COVID-19 questions on the CPS:

Universe: This section is asked of all employed persons who worked last week.

Introduction

I now have some questions related to how the COVID-19 pandemic affected where people work.

1. At any time LAST WEEK did [you/Name] telework or work at home for pay?
0 Yes AND if the person's total work hours last week were greater than or equal to one hour THEN GO TO 2; ELSE GO TO 3
0 No GO TO 3

2. LAST WEEK, [you/NAME] worked [fill: person's total work hours last week] hours [fill for multiple jobholders: total, at all jobs]. How many of these hours did [you/Name] telework or work at home for pay? (On-screen interviewer instruction: Multiple jobholders should include telework hours on all jobs combined. Enter 99 for workers who teleworked 100 or more hours.)
|_|_| hours GO TO 3

3. Did [you/Name] telework or work at home for pay in February 2020 before the COVID-19 pandemic started?
(On-screen interviewer instruction: Enter No if the person was not employed in February 2020.)
0 Yes If Question 1 = Yes THEN GO TO 4; ELSE END
0 No END

4. LAST WEEK, did [you/Name] do more, less, or the same amount of telework or work at home for pay as in February 2020 (before the COVID-19 pandemic)?
0 More
0 Less
0 About the same

Cognitive Testing of the Modified COVID-19 Pandemic Questions in the CPS

The cognitive test and online study results showed that participants understood the questions well and were able to provide answers to them. Participants were mostly able to recall the information needed to arrive at their answers (e.g., their work schedule and hours just prior to the pandemic), as this was a memorable and especially vivid time for them. However, the cognitive interviews, which allow for richer qualitative data collection, indicated that some participants had minor recall issues. These were mainly for participants who worked multiple jobs or changed jobs frequently (e.g., freelance or gig work), but these participants were still able to

think about their responses and arrive at answers they felt were accurate. Based on this testing, the researchers recommended that interviewer training emphasize the need to remind multiple jobholders to include telework hours on all jobs combined to help increase data quality. Additionally, when collecting total telework hours, the researchers recommended that interviewers apply the same concept used for the collection of total work hours. BLS plans to implement these recommendations in interviewer training on the modified questions. See Attachment L for the cognitive testing report for these modified questions.

The estimated length of the labor force portion of each interview is 8.1 minutes (7.6 minutes for the monthly labor force questions and 0.5 minute for the modified COVID-19 pandemic questions). The burden for the current COVID-19 questions was estimated to be 1.0 minute per household because it was asked of all respondents in the household, regardless of labor force status. This estimate has been reduced to 0.5 minute per household because the new telework questions will only be asked of persons who were employed and worked during the reference week.

Uses of the new data

Measuring the prevalence of workers' ability to telework or work at home is of great interest. Data users frequently request these data, but the current COVID-19 questions provide information about telework only in the conditional context, "because of the pandemic." The modified questions will allow BLS to produce estimates of the percentage of workers who telework or work at home, the work hours they perform at home, and to further provide this information by various demographic and labor force characteristics. Additionally, the modified COVID-19 questions will provide a measure of how workers' telework experience changed compared with a period immediately preceding the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. Information about the characteristics of workers who telework or work at home would have utility for policy makers, business leaders, people planning their careers, and others. Collecting these data monthly will provide valuable information about the stability of these work arrangements. BLS plans to produce monthly tabulations of data collected with the modified questions.