

BLS ATUS Module Policy
November 2017

Background about the American Time Use Survey

The American Time Use Survey (ATUS) is a Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) survey about how people living in the United States spend their time. This information is collected as part of a time diary, in which respondents report how they spent their time from 4 a.m. on the day before the interview until 4 a.m. on the day of the interview. In addition to the time diary, information about household composition, labor force status, school enrollment, and eldercare also is collected. The sample is drawn from households that have completed the Current Population Survey (CPS). Demographic and other information about ATUS respondents and their households is available from the CPS.

The ATUS is a phone survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau on nearly every day of the year. One individual from each sample household is asked to participate in the one-time survey. In 2015-16, the survey's response rate was about 48 percent, yielding an average of 10,700 interviews per year.

BLS has reserved space at the end of the survey to accommodate questions on special, usually time-use related, topics. This document outlines module criteria and a process for submitting module proposals. The purpose of the document is to clarify module requirements and processes for BLS, the U.S. Census Bureau, and module sponsors.

1. Module Criteria

The following module criteria were developed by the BLS ATUS staff in consultation with the U.S. Census Bureau. They draw in part on the experience of the CPS program with regard to CPS supplements.

- A. The subject matter:
 - Must be in the public interest and appropriate for inclusion in a government survey. The questions should be of a factual nature, rather than gathering opinions.
 - Must be compatible with the basic ATUS. For example, the diary methodology will not be altered or re-asked as part of a module.
 - Must not be sensitive. This criterion is imprecise, and its interpretation has changed over time. Religious affiliation is an example of a subject currently considered sensitive.

- B. Modules may only include interviews of the ATUS respondent. Interviews of other household members are out of scope.

- C. It must be possible to meet the objectives of the inquiry through the survey.
 - It must be possible to translate the module's objectives into meaningful questions that will result in quality data. Only questions for which there is a reasonable

expectation that respondents will be able to supply the required information should be asked.

- The inquiry must be suitable for a phone interview conducted using Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing technology.
- D. The inquiry must not have an adverse impact on ATUS or on the image of the BLS or the U.S. Census Bureau. Specifically, the inquiry must:
- Not damage the ability to solicit a complete diary of the respondent's activities or to conduct follow-up summary questions (the core of the ATUS).
 - Not be so removed from the subject of the survey or the missions of the BLS or the Census Bureau that it damages survey or institutional legitimacy.
- E. The inquiry must not unduly burden the respondents.
- The time required to conduct the module must not average more than 5 minutes in length for all module respondents.
 - While some respondents may be asked more questions than others, the maximum time required to conduct the module should not exceed 10 minutes.
- F. Proposed questions must have been pretested and must be shown to have been effective for soliciting information to address module purpose(s).
- The pretesting should attempt to demonstrate that there are not serious sources of measurement error and that possible sources of bias have been minimized. The pretesting also needs to consider the context effects of following the ATUS.
 - The BLS recommends that the sponsor conducts (or pays to conduct) cognitive interviews testing each question. Other testing methods may also meet the testing requirement.
- G. The cost of the supplement must be borne by the sponsor, regardless of the nature of the request or the relationship of the sponsor to the ongoing ATUS. Costs will cover both BLS's and the U.S. Census Bureau's involvement in the implementation of the module.
- H. There is a one-year minimum fielding period for ATUS modules. This period must follow the calendar year.
- I. The release of the module data is governed by OMB Statistical Policy Directive 4: Release and Dissemination of Statistical Products Produced by Federal Statistical Agencies.
- J. While the BLS may reject proposed supplement questions and topics, it cannot give final approval of questions or modules. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB), through its Statistical Policy Division, reviews the proposed module to make certain it meets government-wide standards regarding the need for the data and the appropriateness of the design and ensures that the survey instruments, strategy, and response burden are acceptable. They may not allow some questions, or even whole modules, that had been approved by the BLS. The risk of this occurring is minimized by consulting with OMB

early in the development process if there is some question about the appropriateness or validity of the proposed questions.

K. Only data that abides by the U.S. Census Bureau's legislation (Title 13) will be released.

2. Informal meetings

Any federal agency, 501(c)(3) organization, 501(c)(1) organization, or consortium of groups that includes at least one of these organizations may conduct an ATUS module. Representatives of the interested group should contact the BLS ATUS program at 202-691-6339 or ATUSInfo@bls.gov to set up an informal meeting before developing a proposal. The purpose of this meeting is to ensure that all parties reach early agreement that a module proposal is worth pursuing. Continued informal consultation is expected throughout the development process.

3. Proposal contents

Groups interested in sponsoring a module to the ATUS must submit a proposal to ATUS via e-mail at ATUSInfo@bls.gov. Before doing so, please be sure to review the entire module policy and consult with BLS. The proposal must include the following elements:

- The purpose and analytical objectives of the module, including research questions to be addressed.
- A description of probable data uses and users.
- Draft table shells (showing column and row labels) or other means of showing the desired type of output.
- Information about the questions proposed for the module and, if developed, a draft questionnaire.
- A plan for developing and testing questions if either has not been done.
- If completed, testing results for the proposed questions.
- Estimated length of the module in terms of the average minutes per interview.
- The year(s) desired for the fielding period.
- Information about the sponsoring organization, including contact information and legal status.

3. Submission process

Proposals shall be submitted via e-mail to ATUSInfo@bls.gov. The proposal should be submitted at least a year and a half prior to the calendar year in which the sponsor would like data collection to begin. This allows time for the OMB clearance process, as well as for questionnaire development and testing. This time is required to allow for the development of a quality module. Rushing survey development may result in questions that do not provide truly useful data or that do not perform as expected.

4. Review process

BLS management, in consultation with the U.S. Census Bureau, will review the proposed module and decide upon its compliance with the above policies and its feasibility as a module on the survey. Where helpful, subject area experts may also be consulted.

BLS will respond to the sponsor in a mutually agreed-upon time frame to discuss feasibility, timing, and costs.

5. Contracts and payments for modules

Contracts will need to be signed between the sponsor and the BLS, and payments made, in each fiscal year (ending on September 30th) that BLS performs work on the project. Payments are due before any work will be done on the project.

A one-year module typically requires production work to be done across three consecutive fiscal years, with the largest payment due in the first year. An additional agreement would be necessary to cover the development and testing of the questionnaire should the sponsor hire BLS to perform this work.

6. Module costs

The cost of modules will be discussed during the development of a contract with the module sponsor. In nearly all cases, sponsors will transfer funds to cover the costs of applying for OMB clearance, programming and testing of the collection software, interviewer training and monitoring, developing data processing requirements, data collection, data review and cleaning, and the development and publication of public use files and associated documentation.

In some cases, BLS will develop and test the module questionnaire and publish a news release highlighting module results. When this work is performed by BLS, the sponsor will be required to cover the associated costs. Additional costs, such as those associated with response rate analyses, may also be included.

7. Release of data

Public release of the data will be governed by OMB Statistical Policy Directive 4. BLS will publish module data files and associated documentation after the data have been cleaned, confidential items have been removed, and the main ATUS data files, corresponding to information collected at the time of the module, have been released.

In some cases, prior to the scheduled public release of the module data, BLS will provide the sponsor with pre-release access to the data. The ability of BLS to share the pre-release data with the sponsor depends on several factors, including the sponsor's need to access pre-release data, the subject matter of the module, and the legal authority of the sponsor. Whether or not pre-release module data will be shared with the sponsor will be determined on a case-by-case basis, and in all cases requires a written agreement between the sponsor and BLS.

8. What happens after a module proposal is accepted?

After an agreement is signed and funds are transferred to BLS, the following work is done:

- A. The questionnaire for the module must be developed, tested, and finalized. This may involve several drafts and multiple iterations of testing. Any questions that are considered sensitive or possibly inappropriate for the ATUS may be referred to the BLS-Census Executive Guidance Group for a decision on whether they will be allowed. (This work is typically done in February to May, in the year prior to the start of data collection.)
- B. Specifications for the collection software will be drafted, and the collection software will be programmed and tested. (This work is done in June to August, in the year prior to the start of data collection.)
- C. Information about the proposed data collection is prepared, reviewed, and submitted to OMB for clearance. It usually takes 6-7 months to complete the OMB clearance process, which must be completed prior to the implementation of a module. This process must begin early enough so that there is time to modify the collection software if OMB should so require. (Work on an ATUS OMB clearance package typically begins in June of the year prior to the start of data collection.)
- D. Interviewer training about the module is developed and conducted. (This work is typically done in November to December, just prior to the start of data collection in January.)
- E. Module data are collected for the specified fielding period.
- F. Specifications for the data files are developed. Plans for imputing variable values and variable recodes are developed.
- G. Data are processed, reviewed, cleaned, edited, and weighted.
- H. Public use data files and documentation about the module are produced.
- I. Depending on various factors, BLS may share the pre-release public use data files with the sponsor for analysis.
- J. Depending on the subject matter, BLS will prepare tables and an analysis of the data, and publish them as a news release.