

USC Dornsife

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CENTER FOR ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RESEARCH

Understanding America Study



An unparalleled source of free longitudinal data on 15,000 U.S. respondents, covering health, finances, cognition, personality, institutional knowledge, opinions on societal issues, and much more.

And a one-stop shop for new high quality data collection.



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WELCOME TO THE

UnderStandingAmericaStudy

This brochure has two parts. If you are primarily interested in using existing data for your analysis, go to page 7.

If you want to use the UAS for new data collection, here is where you want to start.

When you tap into the power of the Understanding America Study (UAS) for your next survey-based research project, you gain access to:

- A panel of about 15,000 respondents, representative of the U.S. population, set to grow to at least 20,000 by 2025.
- High participation rates to individual surveys, typically averaging 70-80 percent.
- A versatile, quick-response data resource—ideal for studies where high frequency and fast turnaround are important.
- The ability to experiment with different types of questions, feedback, and study methodologies.
- Customized sample selections and easy-to-target special samples of interest using rich available background information.
- Survey data available daily during the field period.
- Study design and implementation support from experienced personnel engaged in data collection using multiple tools and platforms—from smartphones and smartwatches to tablets, laptops, PCs, and health monitoring devices.

FAQs

// UAS

What is the UAS panel?

The UAS is a panel maintained by the Center for Economic and Social Research (CESR) at University of Southern California (USC), consisting of approximately 15,000 panelists ages 18 and older who are regularly surveyed over the Internet in English or Spanish. All age-eligible household members are invited to participate.

The majority of panelists have their own Internet access and use their own computers or handheld devices. CESR

provides other panel members with an internet-connected tablet. This eliminates the bias found in many Internet survey panels which rely upon existing Internet users only.

Is the UAS representative of the U.S. population?

Yes. UAS panel members are recruited using Address-Based Sampling methods, so that everyone with a postal address has a chance of being invited to join the panel. Tablets are provided as needed to enable those without access to participate.

Who can use the panel for data collection?

Any researcher with questions or experiments for adults living in the United States speaking English or Spanish. Once a researcher drafts a questionnaire, it is reviewed and programmed by UAS staff. The researcher then reviews the programmed survey instrument online and offline using a variety of tools.

When the survey is ready, respondents are notified via email that a survey is waiting for them and sent a link to their personalized panel page so they may begin that survey.

What are typical participation rates?

Participation rates generally range between 70-80 percent of active panelists. This rate can vary slightly depending on the topic, time of year,

population selected, and how long a survey is kept in the field.

How are data made available?

New survey data are made available daily during data collection. Each time a respondent finishes a question, data are recorded in the survey database.

Researchers who have commissioned a survey are given access to administrative pages where all answers to non-identifiable questions can be downloaded every night. After an agreed-upon period (one week to one year), the survey is closed to new respondents and a final dataset including survey answers, background demographics, and survey weights is delivered to the researcher and/or prepared for downloading. Premium data dissemination services and reports are available at an additional cost. Collected survey data becomes available to the research community, possibly after an agreed upon embargo period.

Why use the Internet for the UAS?

Internet interviewing is particularly useful when high frequency and a fast turnaround is desired, such as for tracking opinions during elections, pandemics or other major events, as well as for eliciting responses to changes in personal circumstances. New surveys can be programmed and administered on short notice after obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for the protection

of research subjects. The time-lapse between proposing a questionnaire and getting the data (and/or descriptive tables) may be as short as one month and even shorter in special cases.

We can collect non-survey data, such as measures of physical activity, health, or air quality obtained from wearables, as well as incorporate images, sound clips, videos, and other interactive elements as survey features. Additionally, we can retrieve paradata, for example, the type of device used by the participant, completion time, and number of taps, clicks, or mouse movements.

What help can you provide when I want to develop a new survey?

In principle, we can help you develop a survey from scratch. We can help with formulating and testing questions and question format. We can test respondents' understanding of questions in qualitative interviews and focus groups. Once a final questionnaire draft has been designed, we can pretest on a small subsample to iron out any remaining issues. This is a collaborative process between you and our staff.

What kind of research can be done?

A major advantage of the UAS Internet panel, especially compared with other data collection methods, is its ability to support time-sensitive studies, large data samples, and methodological studies. Given the wealth of information available



on each panel member (see page 7), it is easy to target subgroups you may be interested in. The wide range of data already collected allows you to reduce the length of survey questionnaires as new variables can be easily linked to pre-existing longitudinal information.

Examples of the types of research projects that can be done include:

Development of survey instruments

Extensive experimentation is often needed to understand the properties of a new survey instrument and to develop an optimal design, from table display to the number of questions on a screen. The UAS' computerized nature provides an ideal environment for such developmental work.

Large-scale experiments

The Internet offers the chance to replicate laboratory experiments on a larger scale and with a population-representative sample, rather than a limited group of experimental subjects. Several such experiments have been carried out using the UAS.

Randomization

Randomization is a powerful tool in computerized surveying. We have experience with randomized controlled trial methods to measure the efficacy of interventions. We routinely implement experiments with random assignments of modules within a questionnaire, question phrasing, and response orders.

Preference elicitation

A survey elicits preferences regarding a wide array of topics, by randomly assigning respondents to different hypothetical scenarios on which their ratings or preference orders are then prompted.

Visual inputs and aids

Visual tools often help respondents understand and interpret certain questions or ease the implementation of information experiments. We accommodate the use of videos and images, graphs illustrating numerical concepts such as proportions and probabilities, as well as calendars to aid recall from past events.

Feedback and preloading

The panel nature of the UAS allows for the use of previously provided information (preloading) in the design of a questionnaire and in checking the plausibility of a given response. It also supports experiments with different types of feedback.

Collect information from wearables and other non-survey data

We have extensive experience with the use of wearables, such as activity trackers (both commercial and research grade accelerometers), wearable air quality monitors, and smartwatches. If you want to try out new devices, the UAS may be the place to do it.



Ecological Momentary Assessments (EMAs)

We have ample experience with intensive measurement bursts, in which respondents receive prompts on their phone at random times during the day and are asked brief sets of questions about their activity at that moment, how they feel, who they are with, etc. We have also combined EMAs with voice recordings at the end of the day, in which respondents provide a brief narrative about how their day went.

Add contextual data

Knowledge of respondents' addresses allows us to link any available geocoded information to the individual data files. Since those data imply a high risk of disclosure, these contextual data are available for analysis in our secure enclave.

Combine new data with existing longitudinal information

Numerous measures are collected from each respondent for analysis, including personality, cognitive functioning, financial literacy, physical and mental health, labor market status, income, assets and liabilities, and family household structure. UAS also enables researchers to leverage a rich collection of core data through the Health and Retirement Study (HRS) instrument, administered to all respondents every two years, and a variety of other surveys about health and well-being.

All this information is available for free download and can be combined with newly collected data.

What is the cost of collecting data in the UAS?

The UAS' basic survey rate is \$3 per respondent per minute survey time for the first 500 respondents, and \$2.50 a minute thereafter, and includes a \$2000 handling fee for data delivery. For example, 1,000 respondents taking a survey of 15 minutes would cost \$43,250.

This basic survey rate covers all costs, including development and maintenance costs of software; study maintenance and recruiting; tablets, help desk staff, and phone lines; Internet subscriptions;

administrative client relations; management; and incentive payments. (About one-third of the rate consists of incentive payments to respondents to maximize response rates.)

The UAS' basic survey rate assumes relatively straightforward surveys that do not require new, custom software additions. Specific programming requirements, if necessary, are priced based on programmer labor rates. Additional services, such as specialized respondent payment schedules, materials, or data analysis can also be added to your contract.



Rich longitudinal data available for easy download

The UAS currently comprises about 15,000 U.S. residents (including a 3,500-person California oversample) recruited by address-based sampling and provided with Internet-enabled tablets if needed. The UAS national sample is planned to grow to 20,000 respondents by 2025, with subsamples of Blacks, Asians, and Hispanics of at least 2,000 each, and an oversample of rural areas.

What do we collect?

Core information is collected at a two-year frequency, similar to other population representative longitudinal surveys in the U.S.. Surveys are broken up into short segments, each designed to take no more than 30 minutes. Currently, the core surveys consist of 22 modules. Respondents join the panel at different times and are invited to take the core surveys following a pre-defined sequence. This means that data from core modules are being collected continuously, as different participants answer at different times. Panel members are offered one or two surveys per month, including the core surveys and various other surveys or experiments. As of January 2024, about 600 distinctive surveys have been conducted in the UAS.

Most datasets include demographics, are publicly available for analysis, and can be linked using unique respondent identifiers. Each dataset includes weights that align

the sample to the U.S. adult population in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, age, education, and geographic location (Census regions).

Data from UAS surveys can be linked so that any researcher who proposes a new UAS survey benefits from the wealth of information already available.

How can I access the data?

UAS survey data and UAS longitudinal and process files are available for download from the UAS website (<https://uasdata.usc.edu/index.php>) for any researcher who has signed a Data User Agreement (DUA, <https://uasdata.usc.edu/page/Login>). We also provide restricted data and geocodes through the UAS enclave.

We distinguish three tiers of data security (<https://uasdata.usc.edu/page/Data+Overview>):

Tier 1: Coded data that includes no direct or indirect identifiers and no open text fields.

Tier 2: Sensitive data—e.g. political data; UAS data linked to external data at other than state level by UAS staff. No location indicators, or only blinded indicators. Does not include any direct or indirect identifiers.

Tier 3: Restricted access data—available only in the Data Linkage enclave. This includes UAS survey data linked with external program data from SSA or CMS, the NDI, social media data, location crosswalks used to link at the census track, zip code, or county level.

Table 1: Current and planned UAS core content

DESCRIPTION	NOTES
Background, household, health history, cognitive abilities	HRS sections A-D
Family, health, care and living arrangements	HRS sections E-H
Current Job Status, job history, health related work impairments	HRS sections J-M
Health insurance, healthcare usage and probabilities of events	HRS sections N-P
Income and assets	HRS sections Q-R
Wills, trusts and life insurance policies	HRS sections T-W
Financial Literacy; Personality; Understanding Probabilities; Numeracy	Various sources
Satisfaction with Life Domains; Well-being yesterday; Neighborhood quality; Income comparisons	Various sources
What Do People Know About Social Security	Developed in collaboration with SSA
Financial Services and Decision-Making	
Ways People Get Information on Retirement and Social Security	Developed in collaboration with SSA
Subjective numeracy and Consumer Financial Well-Being	
Views and Knowledge about the Social Security Disability Program	Developed in collaboration with SSA
Retirement Preparedness Index	Derived variable
Financial health Score	Derived variable

Cognition

Serial sevens, general knowledge, word recall, Probability of Cognitive Impairment score	From HRS sections
Financial literacy, numeracy	Part of survey mentioned above
Woodcock-Johnson 1/Numbers	
Woodcock-Johnson 2/Picture Vocabulary	
Woodcock-Johnson 3/Verbal Analogies	
Stop and Go Switch	
Figure Identification	

Financial Services and Decision-Making

Life history, including residential history	Various sources
Decision making	Various sources
Physical/social environment	Various sources
Mental health	Various sources
Disability	Various sources
Current and lifetime occupation; labor force status and work schedule arrangements	Various sources
Health behavior	Various sources
Childhood, education	Various sources

UAS data are timely

We share UAS data with minimal delay and as widely as possible without compromising data security and respondents' privacy. In principle, data are made available to the research community immediately after the field period of any survey.

- » This applies to all data that are funded by CESR or by grants acquired by CESR.
- » External users with their own funding are also required to follow the same policy, but limited embargo periods may be arranged.
- » The provision of data with minimal delay implies that generally no data processing takes place. Quality control (e.g., answers out of range, or inconsistent answers across questions) is part of the survey process itself.

The main exception to fast dissemination has been the construction of some longitudinal files. A prime example is the "Comprehensive File" (CF), which comprises all UAS longitudinal core information and includes derived variables (in particular, income and wealth variables) and checks for outliers in these variables.

Datasets you may like

(For more detail, visit <https://uasdata.usc.edu/page/Data+Overview>)

Comprehensive File: Contains longitudinal information on the core measures listed in Table 1.

Cognitive Comprehensive File: Contains longitudinal data on the results of cognitive tests listed in Table 1, and the UAS Probability of Cognitive Impairment Score.

EMA burst files: Contain data from various projects collecting a variety of data (Ecological Momentary Assessment (EMA), End of Day (EOD) surveys, voice recordings, and accelerometer data) at varying frequencies (several times daily, once a day, once a week, once a month).

Monthly events datasets: a set of surveys that were fielded at the start of every month among all UAS participants aged 50 or more, between June 2019 and September 2023. The surveys asked participants about certain life events in the previous calendar month, such as health or financial shocks, death of loved ones, as well as their self-assessments of health, life satisfaction, pain, hours worked, earnings and medical expenditures.

COVID-19 tracking dataset: Contains data from longitudinal tracking surveys of respondents' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first wave was fielded in March 2020. Waves were fielded every two weeks from April 2020 through February 2021 and every four weeks through July 2021. Four additional survey waves were fielded September 2021-July 2023. In addition to the national tracking survey, we also collected data specifically on Los Angeles County residents.

Who are the primary UAS staff?



ARIE KAPTEYN is director of the Center for Economic and Social Research (CESR) in the Dornsife College of Letters Arts and Sciences at USC. Previously, he was director of the Labor and Population unit at the RAND Corporation, as well as director of the American Life Panel, an Internet panel similar to UAS. Before RAND, Arie was a professor at Tilburg University in The Netherlands, where he founded and directed CentERdata (<http://www.centerdata.nl/en>), which manages the CentERpanel, the oldest existing Internet panel with a set-up like that of UAS. He is also co-principal investigator of the "Measurement and Experimentation in the Social Sciences" (MESS) project, which includes an Internet panel of 5,000 households in The Netherlands. UAS and MESS collaborate closely in conducting methodological experiments and developing new measurement methods. Arie is at kapteyn@usc.edu, and is also a founding member of the Open Probability-Based Panel Alliance (openpanelalliance.org).



BART ORRIENS is the managing IT director at CESR who specializes in the design and implementation of data collection efforts. Before coming to CESR, he worked as an information systems professional at RAND where he collaborated with researchers on a multitude of survey projects. Currently Bart is one of the lead developers of NubiS, a complete data collection tool capable of assembling data in an integrated fashion from traditional interviewing modes as well as other sources, including smartphones, tablets, or other external devices such as accelerometers, GPS devices, and blood pressure meters. He spearheads a variety of data collection projects for a broad set of clients. To get in touch with Bart, email him at orriens@usc.edu.



BAS WEERMAN is information technology director at CESR. Bas developed the technical infrastructure of the RAND American Life Panel. Prior to his work at RAND, he was affiliated with CentERdata, where he built the complete technical infrastructure of the CentERpanel. Bas currently heads the programming of g2aging.org, a resource that facilitates the use of different datasets in comparative studies. This repository of information and experience may serve as a library of survey questions for aging surveys. He is also responsible for the development of NubiS, a complete data collection tool that includes all the traditional modes of data collection like self-administered, face-to-face, and telephone interviewing. NubiS can also collect continuous information from smartphones, tablets or other external devices like accelerometers, GPS devices, blood pressure meters and other biomedical devices. He is involved as a lead developer and advisor on international household surveys throughout Europe, Asia, Latin America, and the United States. For programming inquiries, reach Bas at weerman@usc.edu.



JILL E. DARLING is survey director for the Understanding America Study. Prior to joining CESR, she served as Survey Director to the Veterans Health Administration Health Services Research and Development Center for Healthcare Innovation, Implementation, and Policy (CSHIIP). Before the VA she was Associate Director of the Los Angeles Times Poll (later Times/Bloomberg poll). Her expertise includes survey design, survey methodology, data analysis, administrative linkages, and human subjects research. Jill can work with your project team to optimize your survey from any stage of your process. She can be reached at 213.821.8901 or jilldarl@usc.edu.



MARCO ANGRISANI is a Senior Economist CESR. He has been part of the UAS team since the infancy of the study. He is currently responsible for the sampling and weighting procedures of the UAS. He has previously performed these tasks for the American Life Panel at the RAND Corporation. He has 15 years of experience working on sampling, weighting, and questionnaire design of online surveys. Marco's research agenda features different aspects of survey methodology, from sampling and weighting techniques to measurement properties of questions eliciting household income, wealth, and expenditure. If you have questions or want to explore using the UAS panel in your research, contact Marco at 213.821.2793 or angrisan@usc.edu



TANIA GUTSCHE is Co-Director of CESR and the manager of the Understanding America Study. Before coming to USC, she was Deputy Director of Labor and Population at RAND and part of the team who created the American Life Panel. She is the key contact for budget estimates, contracts, human subjects, and other questions related to planning surveys in our study. She handles the study's day-to-day operations and maintenance, as well as the needs of the respondents. If you have questions or want to explore using the UAS panel in your research, contact Tania at 213.821.1819 or tgutsche@usc.edu.

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