The Washington Economic Survey

The Washington Economic Survey was conducted in Washington state in October-December 2009 by the Social and Economic Sciences Research Center at Washington State University. The questionnaire, entitled “Are You Better or Worse Off than a Year Ago: A Study of How Households throughout Washington May Have Been Affected by Changes in the Economy,” included questions about how households had been impacted by the economic downturn beginning in September 2008. The target population was all households in the state of Washington. The survey utilized both mail and web modes. The study also included some methodological experiments, which resulted in several treatment groups that received somewhat different materials.

A random sample of 3,900 residential (non-commercial) addresses in Washington was obtained from the United States Postal Service’s Delivery Sequence File (DSF). The sample was stratified so that 50% of households were from urban counties and the other 50% were from rural counties. The sample excluded vacant and seasonal addresses to ensure all recipients would be full-time residents of the state. This sample was divided between six experimental treatment groups for purposes of methodological testing. Therefore, some treatments encouraged response via web while others encouraged response via mail. Across all contacts, recipients were told that the adult in the household with the most knowledge of the household’s economic situation since September 2008 should be the person to complete the questionnaire.

This study used a total of four postal mail contacts. The first contact was a pre-notice letter informing sampled households of their inclusion in the upcoming study. This letter was printed on university letterhead and was sent in a #10 white envelope. The second mailing consisted of a survey invitation/questionnaire packet. In all treatments, this mailing contained a letter (on university letterhead) requesting participation in the study and a token cash incentive of $5. For some treatments, this letter included instructions for completing the online survey, with no mention of a mail/paper option, while other treatments were only given the option of responding by mail using an enclosed paper questionnaire (an 8.5 x 11-inch booklet) and a 9 x 12-inch self-sealing, tan stamped return envelope. These mailings were enclosed in a 10 x 13-inch brown clasp envelope. The third mailing was a thank you/reminder letter. It was a half-sheet letter on university letterhead, enclosed within a 6.5 x 9.5-inch self-sealing tan envelope. In the final contact, a final letter (on university letterhead) and paper questionnaires were sent to all nonrespondents in all treatments. These mailings also included a 9 x 12-inch self sealing tan return envelope. In some treatments, these mailings were sent in a 10 x 13-inch tan self-sealing envelope. Other treatments utilized a USPS priority mail envelope.

All mailings were addressed to the “Resident” of the city or town of the postal address, because the DSF does not include names. A variety of visual design elements, including color photographs of the familiar Washington landmarks and natural features, and official university logos and stationery, were employed to increase the appeal of the mailings and personalize the materials in the absence of names. The paper and web versions of the questionnaire were designed to resemble each other as much as possible. They utilized the same colors, images, and layout. On the paper questionnaire, each question was encased in its own shaded region to mimic the page-by-page construction of the web questionnaire.

The response rates varied across the various treatment groups, ranging from 48% to 68%.

Methodological findings about this study can be found in the following: