USC Dornsife
Dana and David Dornsife
College of Letters, Arts and Sciences
Center for Economic and Social Research

CENTER FOR ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RESEARCH

UnderStandingAmericaStudy

A flexible resource for social science researchers

cesr.usc.edu

WELCOME TO THE

UnderStandingAmericaStudy

Quick, flexible, responsive data collection

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

- A panel of about 2,000 respondents representative of the U.S. population
- A versatile, quick-response data resource—ideal for studies where frequency and turnaround are important
- The ability to experiment with different types of questions, feedback, and study methodologies
- Raw data available daily
- High response rates, typically averaging 70-80 percent
- Study design and implementation support from experienced experts engaged in data collection using mutiple tools—from smartphones and smartwatches to tablets, laptops, PCs, and health monitoring devices
- All-platform capabilities

FAQs
// UAS

Just 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 2,000 respondents ages 18 and older who are regularly interviewed over the Internet in English or Spanish. The UAS is a household panel, which means all age-eligible household members are invited to participate.

The majority of panel members have their own Internet access and use their own computers or handheld devices. Other panel members are provided Internet access and a tablet by USC. This eliminates the bias found in many Internet survey panels who rely upon existing Internet users only.

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

Yes. UAS respondents have been recruited using Address-Based Sampling methods. A random sample was selected from across the nation, to whom we sent a pre-notification letter followed by a mail survey. On the last page of the survey, respondents were asked if they were interested in joining the UAS panel, at which point they were invited to regularly participate in online surveys.

Who can use the panel?

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 response rates?

Response rates generally range between 70-80 percent of enrolled panel members. 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 do you disseminate the data?

Raw data are made available simultaneously with collection. Each time a respondent finishes a question, data are recorded in the survey database. Researchers are given access to administrative pages where all non-identifiable questions can be downloaded. After an agreed-upon period (one week to one year), the survey is closed to new respondents and a final dataset and background demographics are delivered to the researcher and/or prepared for downloading. Premium data dissemination services and reports are available at additional cost.

Why use the Internet for the UAS?

Internet interviewing is particularly useful when frequency and fast turnaround are desired, such as for tracking opinions during elections, pandemics or other major events, as well as for eliciting responses to personal events. New interviews can be programmed and administered on short notice after obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for the protection of research subjects. We can collect non-interview data, such as measures of physical activity, as well as incorporate images, sound clips, videos, and other interactive elements as survey features. 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.

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. The UAS systems runs on the Nub*iS* platform. Nub*iS*, a complete data collection tool developed from the ground up by USC, runs on any server, PC, laptop, or netbook, as well as on Android tablets or smartphones.

Examples of research projects 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's computerized nature and its easy access to respondents provide 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 (often first-year students). Several such experiments have been carried out using the UAS. These include studies requiring interactions between panel members, such as in ultimatum games.

Randomization

Randomization is a powerful tool in computerized interviewing. We have experience with randomized, controlled trial approaches to measure the efficacy of interventions. Various experiments have been done with random assignments of question or response orders. A related application is the study of anchoring effects.

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 representation

For certain types of research, the use of images helps to improve the survey instrument. These include videos, pie charts, or other graphical means to represent probabilities, or calendars to aid recall from past events.

Feedback and preloading

In some cases, you may want to provide customized feedback to a respondent, such as the use of range checks. If a respondent claims to be born in 1720, for example, this may trigger a request to correct one's answer. Often, feedback is more subtle, if a response is logically possible but somewhat implausible. Additionally, timer popups to ensure the respondent is still contemplating his or her answer can be utilized to improve response times. Keystrokes and other data can be provided to researchers if such files would be useful to analysis.

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.

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, including from the famed Health and Retirement Study (HRS) of aging in America, along with other key studies of health and well-being.

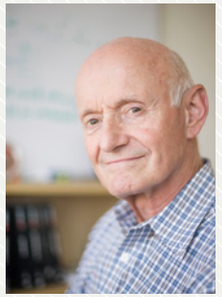
What is the cost for use of the UAS?

The basic rate is $3 per respondent per minute interview time for the first 500 respondents, $2.50 for the next 500, and $2 a minute thereafter. Each project includes handling costs of $2,000 for data delivery, production of documentation, after-project service, and related services. For example, 1,000 respondents taking an interview of 15 minutes would cost $43,250.

The fixed fee-for-service interview 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.)

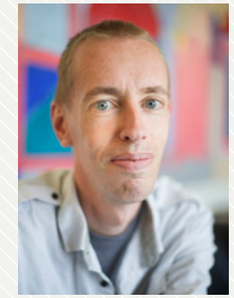
The UAS usage fee assumes relatively straightforward interviews that do not require new, custom software additions. Specific programming requirements, if necessary, are priced based on programmer labor rates. Services beyond the contract with UAS are based on hourly rates.

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.

BAS WEERMAN is information technology director at CESR. Bas developed the technical infrastructure of the RAND American Life Panel and MMIC™, a comprehensive information system that integrates various traditional modes of collecting interview data, including telephone interviewing, self-administered surveys, and personal interviewing. 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 www.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 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.



BART ORRIENS is a senior information analyst 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 Nub*iS*, 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.

TANIA GUTSCHE is managing director of CESR and the project and panel manager for the Understanding American Study. She is the key contact for budget estimates, human subjects questions, and other contractual details. She handles the panel's day-to-day operations and maintenance, as well as the needs of the respondents. Before coming to USC, she managed the American Life Panel at RAND. Her current responsibilities include managing the helpdesk and coordinating correspondence, equipment setup and delivery, and ongoing incentives for panel members. 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.

USC Dornsife
Dana and David Dornsife
College of Letters, Arts and Sciences
Center for Economic and Social Research

cesr.usc.edu