



# Board of Scientific Counselors National Center for Health Statistics Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

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January 26, 2009

Edward J. Sondik, Ph.D.  
Director  
National Center for Health Statistics  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
3311 Toledo Road, Room 7209  
Hyattsville, Maryland 20782

Dear Ed:

The Board of Scientific Counselors (BSC) of the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) is pleased to submit our commissioned review of the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS). As you know, this review is a part of the BSC's on-going review program that commissions experts in the field to review the major data collection and program activities of NCHS and provide specific recommendations for data collection and dissemination. The review panel was chaired by Professor Robert Hummer of the University of Texas. The other review panel members are listed in Appendix A. The commitment of these individuals to the review process has been outstanding.

We highlight below key recommendations of the review panel that the BSC views as important – a full list is contained in the full report, which is attached. We hope you will take their recommendations into serious consideration as you plan for the future of the NHIS.

1. The Panel states that NHIS is considered the gold standard for large, in-person household health surveys and the Panel's first over-arching recommendation is that the survey be continued. The Panel emphasized that the current capabilities of the survey should be enhanced rather than diluted in any way.
2. NCHS should embark on a Strategic Planning Process that involves stakeholders; determines the core mission of NHIS; includes a core survey design to meet that mission; and a plan to meet the NHIS core mission within the on-going NCHS appropriation (i.e. without funding from other agencies). As a part of this process the panel recommends that NHIS solicit the advice of an ongoing advisory panel that is distinct from the BSC and which involves users and stakeholders of the NHIS.



3. The Division of the Health Interview Survey (DHIS) needs to invest extensively in methodological research to support the survey's redesign and to inform decisions made on all aspects of survey operations and data dissemination. DHIS is advised to draw on external expertise when needed and to link that expertise closely with internal staff in order to direct the methodological research to the specific needs of NHIS. This research in turn can inform the following essential activities: NHIS survey redesign; possible addition of biomarkers to the NHIS; and continued data linkages with Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, and mortality records to increase the analytical power and value of the NHIS data.
  
4. In addition, the panel recommended that the staff develop methods necessary to produce state-level estimates and report state-level estimates to enhance the use of the NHIS data.

Finally, the Review Panel noted that although NHIS is an important and valuable survey, there are critical decisions that NCHS must make to keep the survey viable and effective. An important part of this decision-making process should come from better communication with stakeholders and potential partners together with a rigorous program of methodological research.

The BSC is pleased with the report and the careful consideration given to the many issues that are facing NCHS today. We welcome your comments and look forward to continued dialogue on improving and strengthening the NHIS.

On behalf of the Board of Scientific Counselors, I respectfully submit this report.

Sincerely,

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Irma T. Elo, Ph.D.  
Chair, BSC of the NCHS