

Learning by Example: Research from the Consumer Expenditure Survey for Low-Income Consumers; “Emerging” Demographics; and Foods Purchased from Vending Machines

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Abstract

The Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Expenditure Survey (CE) is the most detailed source of expenditures, demographics, income, assets, and liabilities collected by the Federal government from households. This session features expert data users from the CE program, and work by a Ph.D. candidate who is using CE data in her dissertation research. Attendees will learn how to use and obtain, at no cost, tabular and public use microdata from the CE program, with demonstrations from works in progress on spending patterns of low-income families, “emerging” demographics (such as families wherein the principal earner is female, and young adults who live with their parents), and foods purchased from vending machines. Tabular data include average annual expenditures for several standard demographic groups, while microdata include observations from individual families. Microdata are useful for researchers who want to construct tables different from those published, or to perform regression or other statistical analyses.

Objectives

The purpose of this session is to provide information about, and instruction in, the use of data from the Consumer Expenditure Survey (CE), and their utility for researchers and practitioners at all levels of career development and experience, including students; to provide examples of current research using the data, as well as guidance and suggestions on how researchers might use the data in their own work; and to answer questions and obtain comments and suggestions regarding the data from researchers currently using them in their work.

Evidence of Widely Recognized Expertise

With one exception, each presenter is an employee of the CE program at the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Each is well-versed in the uses of the data. Of these, the most experienced presenter has spoken at numerous conferences about his research using these data, and has organized and led sessions designed to inform and instruct attendees about the uses of the data. Recently, he delivered the opening plenary speech to a conference, for which he was invited specifically to describe CE data, quality, and uses; he has since been invited to serve as keynote speaker for another conference to deliver a similar presentation.

The final presenter is a Ph.D. candidate who is using these data in research for her dissertation. She presented a version of this work at the annual CE Microdata Users' Workshop (July 2013), where her work was well-received both by staff of the CE program and attendees being instructed in the uses of the data.

Overview of Content

The CE is the most detailed source of expenditure information collected from households by the Federal government. In addition, information on demographics, income, and assets and liabilities are collected. Consisting of two components, the Interview Survey and the Diary

Survey, the data are a unique and rich source of information used by researchers in specific fields, such as consumer economics and financial planning, from a wide range of professional areas, such as academia, government, and private industry.

This session features presentations of research in progress using each of the component surveys. The presenters will share insights and tips regarding use of the data, including information on how public use microdata and related products (e.g., tables and documentation) can be obtained at no cost via download from the Internet.

The session will have the following format:

- Description of data collected (expenditures, demographics, and income sources);
- Explanation of methodology for each component survey (Interview and Diary);
- Presentations of research (three using Interview data, and one using Diary data);
- Interactive discussion with the audience, including examples of how to use the microdata.

The presentations include an examination of the spending patterns of families receiving benefits from one or more government means-tested assistance programs (Interview Survey); an exploration of how expenditures persistently exceed income for low-income consumers (Interview Survey); an analysis of families with “emerging” demographic characteristics, such as those where females are the principal earners, and those where young adults live with their parents (Interview Survey); and, regarding allocation of family resources for health and nutritional well-being, a study of characteristics of consumers who purchase food from vending machines, comparing them both to those who do not make these purchases, and to those who purchase fresh fruits and vegetables (Diary Survey).

Benefit to FERMA Members

This session is expected to benefit FERMA members from a variety of backgrounds, including students (undergraduate and graduate); professors; and professionals in government or private industry, ranging from those who have never used data from the CE to expert users.

Attendees will learn about current research of general interest to them, using data from a rich and unique source of tabular and microdata to which they have access at no charge. (See “Overview of Content.”)

In addition, they will have the opportunity to establish contacts with employees of the CE program, who will share insights and tips regarding use of the data. Furthermore, the presenter who is not affiliated with the CE program can share experiences in obtaining and working with the data, program staff, participating in the annual CE Microdata Users’ Workshop, and other topics of interest.