

## **VII. SUMMARY OF ALTERNATIVE INITIATIVES**

The following initiatives could serve as alternatives to the CPS-Florida initiative described above:

- Linking Multiple States Administrative Files (Alternative Initiative 1);
- Linking an Alternative CPS File (Alternative Initiative 2);
- Linking "Pooled" CPS Files (Alternative Initiative 3);
- Linking Additional State Program Data (Alternative Initiative 4); and
- Longitudinal Survey of State FSP Participants (Alternative Initiative 5)

The first four alternatives represent variations of the proposed link above using additional state FSP data (Alternative 1), alternative or multiple pooled data files from the CPS (Alternatives 2 and 3), or addition program data (e.g., TANF) (Alternative 4). The final initiative (Alternative 5) represents an alternative methodology for collecting dynamic FSP information at the state level.

### **A. Alternative Initiative 1: Linking Multiple States Administrative Files**

One alternative would be to link multiple state administrative extracts, rather than one state, to the CPS file. Researchers could use the multiple state files in cross-state analyses.

The USDA could use several criteria to select administrative files including use in previous data projects, frequency of data update, and linkages to other programs (particularly UI wage records). Several existing databases meet one or more of the above criteria, including California, Illinois, Massachusetts, Texas and Oregon (Hotz, et al., 1998). In each of these states, researchers, contractors, and administrators have developed relationships to use administrative databases on an ongoing basis. Such databases would be a logical starting point for negotiating agreements, given their successful use in previous research projects. In addition, as mentioned above, it is likely that the Abt (2001) study will also identify other very promising states.

The costs of adding more states should expand the costs of all of the tasks above that require accessing and manipulating state administrative data (Tasks 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, and 10). A very rough estimate for an additional state would be to sum costs across these tasks, which total to \$135,190. This estimate illustrates the potential significant costs of adding more states. For example, if eight states are linked to the CPS data, we anticipate that the initiative could cost over one million dollars.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> An added challenge in linking records across multiple states is that variation may exist across state FSP administrative systems. While federal auditing provides an incentive for each state agency to keep accurate, machine-readable records in administering the FSP, differences across state program rules and

## **B. Alternative Initiative 2: Linking an Alternative CPS File**

A second alternative could be to link an alternative monthly CPS extract to a single state administrative file. One possible alternative file could be the 2001 April CPS, which include the Food Supplement questions. Researchers could use this file to address a slightly different set of research questions than the base initiative. For example, researchers could examine the correlation between reported food insecurity (from the CPS) and long-term FSP participation (from state administrative records). The costs of matching an alternative monthly CPS file should be identical to that proposed in the base task because the issues around data access and processing are roughly similar across all monthly CPS extracts.

## **C. Alternative Initiative 3: Linking Pooled CPS Files**

A potentially more promising option to Alternative Initiative 2 is to link the available state administrative data extracts to several available CPS files. For example, the USDA could propose a link to, say, the March 1999, March 2000, and March 2001 CPS files using the same administrative data extract. The USDA and Census could "pool" the files to increase the sample sizes available for the analysis. This additional linkage could be important for subgroup analyses. For example, researchers could use the pooled files to examine outcomes for, say, the elderly. The costs of matching each additional CPS file should be identical to summarized in Tasks 9 and 10 (approximately \$50,000).

## **D. Alternative Initiative 4: Linking Additional State Program Data**

A fourth alternative is to include administrative data from other state programs such as TANF, Medicaid, Foster Care, Child Care, JOBS, Child Support, and UI wage records, in the data linkage. The DCF data system contains linkages to several files through its Florida Online Recipient Integrated Data Access System (FLORIDA).

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administration might have significant consequences on the information record in each state's administrative files. It would be important to understand whether such differences will affect the precision of the probabilistic match, perhaps making matches in some states too unreliable to use, particularly if the administrative importance of certain matching variables, such as the SSN, varies across states. In addition, it would be important to understand the comparability of any data elements *not* used in record matching but available for analysis when linked data are later used in research (e.g., benefit amount, household composition) across FSP administrative databases, particularly those related to FSP eligibility. To better coordinate the data elements used for the matching process for cross-state analyses, Census and USDA will need to develop a standardized method for developing, storing, and updating FSP administrative databases when converting them to research use. This coordination could include designing record formats to facilitate research; developing a variable imputation procedure for any missing fields; standardizing fields from different systems; writing code to summarize and/or delete duplicate records; establishing eligibility links for individuals living in FSP households; and performing final verification checks. The "cleaned" FSP administrative records would then be transferred to a standardized research file for the matching to survey records. The costs of generating this comparison depend upon multiple factors, including the comparability of existing state data systems and rules. Unfortunately, without knowledge of this comparability (or even the possible alternative states), it is difficult to generate even general estimates. We anticipate that the Abt (2001) report, however, will provide significant information on the comparability across state systems that could be important for this specific subtask.

There are two potential advantages of adding additional state program data. First, the additional data will allow the USDA and Census to address more research questions related to cross-program participation. Potentially more importantly, the USDA and Census could use UI wage history records to examine the interaction of work and program participation. Second, other entities, such as the Assistant Secretary of Planning and Evaluation (ASPE), may become interested in the more expansive match and, hence, provide additional funding (and political resources) for the initiative.

The costs of this expansion for Tasks 1 through 7 should be relatively minimal. In Task 1, the USDA may wish to expand the negotiations to other federal agencies, such as ASPE. Because the DCF keeps state program administrative data for other programs, such as TANF, in a centralized location, there should not be an expansion in costs in obtaining other state program administrative extracts. In fact, the costs of obtaining the additional data are relatively small because most states have databases that include links to several programs (UC-Data, 1999).

The costs of processing the data (Task 8), linking the data (Task 9), and assessing the reliability of the match (Task 10) for later tasks would be significantly higher. Presumably, each additional program administrative extract would cost approximately the same amount to process as the FSP extracts.<sup>19</sup> For example, if TANF records are linked, the Census would need to gain familiarity with the TANF program elements, link these elements, and assess whether the linkage “makes sense” in comparison to existing TANF benchmarks from administrative data. Consequently, a rough estimate would be to multiply the costs in each of these tasks (which total \$66,165) by the number of programs that the USDA may add to develop an “adjusted” cost estimate.

The limitation of this alternative initiative over the base initiative is that it may create more “pitfalls” for the data linkage. For example, it may be easier for the USDA and Census to start with a single program pilot and, if successful, extend this pilot to other programs. Therefore, at this early stage, one cost-neutral strategy could be to negotiate access to a broader range of state programs, but focus the initial matching efforts on just the FSP.

## **E. Alternative Initiative 5: Longitudinal Survey of State FSP Participants**

A final alternative, which represents an alternative methodology for obtaining dynamic FSP information from state FSP participants, would be to develop a longitudinal survey of FSP participants and non-participants in a select state. This survey would collect the same type of information that is available in the CPS and FSP administrative records, such as program participation, demographic and income characteristics.

Unfortunately, creating such a survey is very labor intensive and costly. Consequently, the opportunity costs of creating such a survey relative to the base initiative seem to be quite high.

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<sup>19</sup> Larger program matches, such as UI wage records, could cost significantly more because the universe of UI wage records is larger than the universe of FSP participants.