

# The General Social Survey



2021 GSS  
(Cross-section  
Study)

METHODOLOGICAL  
PRIMER  
Release 1



 **NORC** at the  
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# INTRODUCTION

## Introduction to the General Social Survey (GSS)

The General Social Survey (GSS) has been tracking trends in public opinion since 1972. To keep every aspect of the survey as comparable as possible, the GSS generally minimizes changes to its design over time. This includes maintaining the same sampling approach over long periods of time and not altering question wording for questions that have been previously asked on the GSS. The goal is always the same: enabling the cleanest comparison to show changes in public opinion in the United States.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, what is referred to as the 2021 GSS—which collected data from December 2020 to May 2021—implemented significant methodological changes for the safety of both respondents and interviewers. Since its inception, the GSS has conducted data collection via in-person interviews as its primary mode of data collection. The pandemic forced the GSS to change this design, moving from in-person to address-based sampling and a push-to-web methodology, with the bulk of the interview conducted online via a self-administered questionnaire.

The GSS provides vital opinion data to the research community at a critical time in U.S. history. While the data will contribute to our understanding of society, any changes in public opinion seen in the 2021 GSS data could be due to either changes in actual opinion and/or changes the GSS made in the methodology to adapt to COVID-19. We caution that when users employ 2021 GSS data to examine trends over time, they carefully consider if changes in the GSS methodology may be impacting the analysis. In the future, the GSS will continue to study differences due to mode of data collection. If you plan to use 2021 GSS Cross-section data, we recommend including the following statement in all article and reports:



We recommend our users include the one of the following statements when reporting on the GSS 2021 Cross-section data:

### **Total Survey Error Summary Perspective for the 2021 GSS Cross-section:**

Changes in opinions, attitudes, and behaviors observed in 2021 relative to historical trends may be due to actual change in concept over time and/or may have resulted from methodological changes made to the survey methodology during the COVID-19 global pandemic.

### **Suggested Statement to Include in Articles and Reports That Use GSS Data**

To safeguard the health of staff and respondents during the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2021 GSS data collection used a mail-to-web methodology instead of its traditional in-person interviews. Research and interpretation done using the data should take extra care to ensure the analysis reflects actual changes in public opinion and is not unduly influenced by the change in data collection methods. For more information on the 2021 GSS methodology and its implications, please visit <https://gss.norc.org/Get-The-Data>



## MAJOR CHANGES IN THE 2021 GSS

The 2021 GSS public use file documentation and codebook provide details of the methodological changes and adaptations that were necessary to transition the GSS survey from in person to a web survey. We encourage users to review the codebook, and we have included important highlights here.

### Mode Changes

The 2021 GSS Cross-section used an address-based sample, push-to-web survey design, rather than the traditional face-to-face interviews. There are three main differences between the 2021 GSS and previous rounds, as a result:

- The 2021 GSS uses primarily mail-based communication only, rather than both mail and interviewer communication.
- Within households, the 2021 GSS asks for the person with the most recent birthday, rather than a random person in the household.
- The interview itself is an online questionnaire, rather than a face-to-face interview and conversation with a trained interviewer.

### Differential Non-response

The 2021 GSS had a lower response rate than previous rounds of the GSS, which may have led to differential non-response for some population groups. For example, review of the unweighted data show that for several subpopulation groups, completed responses were less, proportionally, than their counterparts in 2018. Examples of these subpopulation groups include people below the age of 30, people without high school degrees, and Black respondents.

To help adjust for differential non-response, the 2021 GSS Cross-section data include weights that are post-stratified to weighted proportions to equal 2019 American Community Survey Census Bureau control totals for region of the country, marital status, race, ethnicity, education, gender, and age. We recommend using these weights for all analysis of the 2021 GSS Cross-section data.

### Don't Know and No Answer Responses

In previous rounds of the GSS, respondents could always refuse to answer a question or say that they simply did not know the answer to a question, regardless of the choices that interviewers gave them. GSS interviewers had specific training and could always record these answers appropriately. The 2021 GSS had no interviewers in the web mode and thus could not record any responses that were not explicitly offered to respondents. To mitigate the impact of this change in mode, no item on the GSS shows “No Answer” as a valid response, unless the module sponsor requested that it be included. Similarly, attitude and opinion questions—ones that asked for beliefs, feelings, or attitudes—did not show “Don't know” responses. However, factual questions about things like occupation, income, or family background did include “Don't know” responses, as respondents might genuinely not know the information.



In addition, we allowed respondents in the 2021 GSS to skip instead of a “No answer” and “Don’t know” response. This “Skipped on web” indicates that the respondent saw the question but clicked past it without answering.

## Volunteered Responses

Similar to the “Don’t Know” and “No Answer” responses, in the traditionally face-to-face mode (which was not used in 2021), respondents frequently told interviewers responses that were not originally included in the options they were given (like saying something was “just right” rather than “too harsh” or “not harsh enough”). Instead of eliminating these volunteered responses entirely, the 2021 GSS included an experiment that tested two different forms of each question with a volunteered response on select variables. Both new variables are marked with a suffix when compared to the normal GSS version, indicating their experimental nature. The variable marked with a -V suffix included the volunteered response on the screen, while the variable marked with a -NV suffix (for “Not volunteered”) removed the volunteered response entirely. Initial review of the data suggest that the experimental condition is likely to make a difference in the results. For a list of all variables affected, see the 2021 GSS codebook.

## Grids

As the GSS is typically a face-to-face study, we included an experiment for two sets of questions to test a new presentation for some GSS questions. Several questions that share a theme and response options were listed on the screen together (a grid), so that respondents could give their answer to three or four questions at the same time. We tested both the grid format as well as the traditional format of the questions in this experiment. Items asked in a grid have a -G suffix. The GSS abortion items and suicide items are the two sets of questions that were tested.

## Sex

In the past, GSS respondents have not been asked to self-report their sex. Instead, the GSS used a combination of interviewer observation and household rosters for the variable SEX, our standard male/female variable. In 2021, as neither household roster nor interviewer observation were available, respondents were directly asked two questions: their sex assigned at birth and their current gender identity. These two items, SEXBIRTH1 and SEXNOW1, are now the standard way of measuring sex in the GSS.

## Reference Year

Some of the traditional items in the GSS ask people to recall information about “last year,” such as the variable INCOME. As the 2021 GSS data collection spanned in the field 2020 and 2021; the “last year” wording would have made interpretation harder. Thus, the GSS asked respondents specifically about the year of 2019, rather than “last year.” This helped ensure that all respondents thought about the same period of time when answering questions.