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Dear Nicole Bouchet,

As a career statistician doing research in public policy and social science, I strongly support the continuation of the American Time Use Survey (ATUS) without reduction in scope, questions asked, or sample size. ATUS is the only comprehensive source of data on how people in the U.S. spend their time. This survey is essential for research on time use and provides crucial measures of quality of life that are not available anywhere else. Data from this survey are important for understanding well-being and have wide application to a variety of fields including economics, public health, social science, family policy, social behavior, business and marketing, sociology, transportation safety, and gerontology.

ATUS can be used to understand how much Americans are working, how much they spend their time with family and friends, and how much time they spend traveling, doing household work, performing childcare, volunteering, eating, and sleeping. ATUS can tell us if time use in various activities differs by age, sex, household income, race, ethnicity, or by state or county of residence. Since time use surveys are routinely collected by most OECD countries and since such data are generally comparable across countries, data from ATUS can also be used in economics, public health, and social science research comparing the United States to other countries or in research that requires a multi-nation panel. Researchers in the United States in a variety of different fields ranging from economics to public health to social science rely on the ATUS to provide unique and detailed data that cannot be found elsewhere. If ATUS were to be discontinued, it would put U.S. researchers at a disadvantage. Since time use data are collected in many developed countries, including China, discontinuation or diminution of the ATUS could place researchers studying the U.S. (most of which are U.S.-based researchers) at a competitive disadvantage compared to researchers studying other countries. And because U.S. research often is performed at the service of the general population (i.e. research in public health benefits the health of the population, economic research benefits the economic well-being of the population, etc.), discontinuation of the ATUS could also place the beneficiaries of U.S. research—the American people—at a comparative disadvantage as well.

In my own work, I have used ATUS to measure how the average number of hours Americans spend alone daily has changed over the past 20+ years. The series shows how social isolation has changed for Americans over time. Since social isolation and loneliness often go together (particularly when people spend more than 75% of their time socially isolated),¹ we can use this social isolation measure derived from the ATUS as a proxy for loneliness. Currently, there is no nationally representative survey data on loneliness that goes back further than 2022. As a result, the ATUS is the *only* nationally representative data that we have to measure long-term historical trends on social isolation and loneliness for the entire U.S. population.

¹ Danvers AF, Efinger LD, Mehl MR, Helm PJ, Raison CL, Polsinelli AJ, Moseley SA, Sbarra DA. Loneliness and time alone in everyday life: A descriptive-exploratory study of subjective and objective social isolation. *Journal of Research in Personality*. 2023 Dec 1;107:104426.

And this is just one example. The ATUS provides a unique and rich dataset that is crucial for research and for understanding how Americans are faring. One could never give an exhaustive list of what the ATUS is useful for because new research and discoveries are happening all the time using the data from this survey in new and innovative ways. But to mention just a few examples, ATUS has been used to:

- estimate how much households are willing to substitute time for money through shopping and home production, which provides key insights into the shopping habits of consumers and how much they are willing to pay for goods relative to the time they invest in purchasing them;²
- study the sleep patterns of Americans and identify activities that compete with the ability of Americans to get sufficient sleep;³
- show which occupations and industries were laborers more likely to work from home during the Covid-19 pandemic and quantify the average number of hours worked from home by industry.⁴
- study the effect family structure has on the amount of time parents spend in childcare, resulting in a series of findings that 1) single-parents spend more time in childcare than married or cohabiting couples, 2) the time invested in childcare does not differ substantially for married and cohabiting couples, and 3) single-parents in the U.S. spend more time in childcare than single-parent in the U.K.⁵
- find that households that spend more money on food also spend more time buying and preparing food;⁶
- study the allocation of household work, childcare, and leisure time between married spouses;⁷
- study the effect that switching between income from paid work and household production has on the combined valuation of income from both earnings and household production.⁸

ATUS is imminently important to the U.S. Department of Labor (“Department”) as this survey provides crucial information about how Americans spend their time working, what times of the day, and with whom they work. While other data collected by the Bureau of Labor Statistics tells the Department how much laborers earn, ATUS tells the Department how much time they spend earning, including time spent on work-related activities like commuting to place of work. ATUS is crucial to enhancing traditional measures of productivity. ATUS is also essential for measuring the value of unpaid work such as household work, caregiving, and volunteering. ATUS is also important for the work of other federal departments and agencies. For example, the Bureau of Transportation Statistics has used ATUS data to measure exposure to vehicle accident risk. The Economic Research Service at the Department of Agriculture has also used ATUS data to examine eating and drinking patterns and how they relate to a person's overall health.

I encourage you not to change the current methodology for data collection for the ATUS. Automated collection techniques would produce worse results in data collection, would substantially increase nonresponse bias, would decrease coverage, and would substantially reduce survey completion rates. Resorting to other forms of information technology to collect information would substantially harm the

² Aguiar M, Hurst E. Life-cycle prices and production. *American Economic Review*. 2007 Dec 1;97(5):1533-59.

³ Basner M, Fomberstein KM, Razavi FM, Banks S, William JH, Rosa RR, Dinges DF. American time use survey: sleep time and its relationship to waking activities. *Sleep*. 2007 Sep 1;30(9):1085-95.

⁴ Hensvik L, Le Barbanchon T, Rathelot R. Which jobs are done from home? Evidence from the American Time Use Survey. IZA Discussion Papers; 2020.

⁵ Kalenkoski CM, Ribar DC, Stratton LS. The effect of family structure on parents' child care time in the United States and the United Kingdom. *Review of Economics of the Household*. 2007 Dec;5(4):353-84.

⁶ Hamermesh DS. Direct estimates of household production. *Economics Letters*. 2008 Jan 1;98(1):31-4.

⁷ Connelly R, Kimmel J. Spousal influences on parents' non-market time choices. *Review of Economics of the Household*. 2009 Dec;7(4):361-94.

⁸ Frazis H, Stewart J. How does household production affect earnings inequality? Evidence from the American time use survey. Working Paper; 2006.

quality of the data collected. The only way to get accurate and reliable data on time use is to ask sampled respondents directly. Using other forms of information technology would necessarily involve a great deal of data imputation, and this would substantially diminish the quality and usefulness of the data.

The ATUS equips policymakers, researchers, journalists, community and business leaders, and the public with a critical and irreplaceable resource to understand and support uses of time that promote social and economic well-being for communities and individuals across the United States. I encourage you to continue collection of the ATUS.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Jonathan Abbamonte

Policy Analyst
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The Heritage Foundation⁹

⁹ Affiliation information provided solely for informational purposes; I submit this comment in my personal capacity.