

Nonforeign Area Cost-of-Living Allowances Background Survey Data Collection Procedures

Survey Description

The following information will be provided to the participants verbally or in writing. Participants who are familiar with the program and the survey may be provided with less information as appropriate.

Purpose

The Federal Government pays cost-of-living allowances (COLA) in Alaska, Hawaii, and certain U.S. territories and possessions. Living cost differences are determined by comparing costs of goods, services, housing, transportation, and other items in the allowance area with the cost of the same or similar items and services in the Washington, DC, area. The U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) is responsible for the operation of the COLA program. OPM, or its representative, conducts annual surveys to determine living cost differences. OPM conducts full-scale Background Surveys approximately once every five years to review the appropriateness of items, services, and businesses covered in the annual Price Surveys. Elements of the Background Survey may be repeated annually on a limited basis as part of the maintenance of and preparation for the annual Price Surveys.

OPM uses the Background Survey to identify the services, items, quantities, outlets, and locations that will be surveyed to collect living cost data within the allowance areas and the Washington, DC, area. The Background Survey also is used to collect information on local trade practices, consumer buying patterns, taxes and fees, and other economic characteristics related to living costs.

Data Collection

Full-scale Background Surveys are conducted approximately once every five years. OPM identifies major manufacturers, local governments, retail outlets, realty firms, and businesses providing professional services to be surveyed on the basis of business volume and local prominence. Participation is voluntary. Data are collected by telephone and/or personal interview.

Confidentiality

All data collected are used only for the purposes described above. The Government pledges to hold all micro or "raw" data collected in confidence. Names of participating businesses and institutions may be released. Names of individuals are not released. Summary data will be made available to the public only to the extent that micro data cannot be associated with data sources.

Public Burden Information

Public burden reporting for this collection of information is estimated to vary from 5 minutes to 30 minutes per response. Send comments regarding the burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Reports and Forms Management Officer, U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 1900 E Street, NW., Room CHP

500, Washington, DC, 20415; and to the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Project (3206-0199), Washington, DC, 20503.

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Interview Guidelines

Seven types of information are collected in background surveys. Information is collected on products and services, outlet availability and usage, transportation, local taxes and fees, mortgage, real estate, and other topics related to the measurement of living costs (e.g., specialized information from local chambers of commerce, colleges, and universities). The following are the typical interview questions used to collect these data.

Product or Service Information

1. As a major manufacturer/supplier of _____ (a specific product or service, e.g., women's apparel), please identify your items/services that are most popular (e.g., your 'volume sellers').
2. Which of these items are apt to be readily available in the following geographic locations: Alaska (i.e., Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Juneau); Hawaii, Guam; Puerto Rico; the Virgin Islands; and Washington, DC, and suburbs?
3. If the items or services are not universally available, are there other items or services that are of similar function, quality, quantity, size, and type and that can be substituted?
4. Is there anything else we should know about your product or service? Are there recommendations you wish to make that would help us in our data collection?

Outlet Availability and Usage (Retail)

1. What is your product or service? What is the address(es) of your establishment(s)? If you have multiple locations, which locations have the greatest sales volumes (i.e., are most utilized by consumers)?
2. What are your store/office hours? Do these vary by location?
3. Is your full line of products or services available at all locations?
4. Is there anything else we should know about your outlet(s) or recommendations you wish to make?

Transportation Information—Private and Public Services

1. What type of transportation services do you provide (e.g., taxi, bus, subway)?
2. What geographic areas do you service? Which routes are 'typical' or most heavily utilized?
3. What is your rate structure? Does it vary by time of day or season?
4. Is there anything else we should know about transportation usage and services in your area? Are there recommendations you wish to make about our data collection?

Transportation Information—Private Use and Maintenance

1. What types of driving are most common in your area? What is the annual distance driven?

2. What types roads and highways are common in your area? What are the road surfaces and conditions?

3. Are there unusual climatic or other factors that affect the fuel economy, maintenance, and depreciation of vehicles?

4. Is there anything else we should know about private transportation usage and maintenance in your area? Are there suggestions or recommendations you wish to make?

Local Taxes and Fees

1. What types of taxes, licenses, or fees does your State, territory, or local jurisdiction levy on real estate; personal property; sales (including sales of property); automobiles; utilities; or other goods, services, or transactions?
2. Who levies these taxes, licenses or fees (i.e., State, territory, county, city, other jurisdiction)?
3. What are the rates or schedules for these? How often and when are they levied? Do the rates/schedules vary by location, season, or other factors?
4. Is there anything else we should know about taxes and fees in your area? Are these suggestions or recommendations you wish to make?

Mortgage Information

1. What forms of home financing are most common in _____ (the allowance area or Washington DC metropolitan area)? (Do not include second mortgages.)
2. What are the typical conditions and limitations on loans?
3. What is the typical amount(s) of down payment required? What are the terms and rates?
4. Are there special subsidies or other practices that influence home financing in your area?
5. Looking back 6 years, what types of changes have occurred that affect home financing?
6. Is there anything else we should know about home financing in your area? Are there suggestions or recommendations you wish to make that would help us in our data collection?

Real Estate Information

1. What is the availability of housing in _____ (the allowance area or Washington DC metropolitan area)? Of principal interest is housing for typical salary and wage earners (as distinguished from retirees, tourists, or other special groups) for persons with low, moderate, and high incomes.
2. Describe the communities within your area in which persons _____ (specify occupation/income characteristics) typically live. If appropriate, identify separate communities for renters and home owners. Where are these communities located relative to the major Federal activities in the area?
3. Describe the type of housing (e.g., apartment, condominium, town house, detached house).
4. For each type of housing, what are the usual number of rooms, bedrooms, baths,