

ISR CELEBRATES 60TH ANNIVERSARY WITH CAPITOL HILL BRIEFING

The Institute for Social Research (ISR) at the University of Michigan, a longtime COSSA member, celebrated its 60th Anniversary in 2009. As part of the celebration, ISR brought two of its distinguished researchers to highlight two of its major surveys in a session on Capitol Hill on September 16. The two were Richard Curtin, director of the Surveys of Consumers, and David Weir, director of the Health and Retirement Survey (HRS).

Institute Director James S. Jackson, a former member of the COSSA Board of Directors, noted that the surveys discussed in the presentations were two indicators of a myriad of important work that ISR conducts in its many facets. He mentioned the Monitoring the Future Survey that measures alcohol, drug, and tobacco use by the nation's youth directed by Lloyd Johnston that is highlighted each year by the Department of Health and Human Services.

Among the other key components of ISR are the Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR), whose former director Myron Gutmann will soon take over as the Assistant Director for the National Science Foundation's Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences Directorate (see Update, July 27, 2009). ICPSR is the world's largest archive of digital social science data. Nancy Burns directs the Center for Political Studies, which houses the American National Election Studies and the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, two data collections that explain both American and cross-national voting behavior.

The Population Studies Center, directed by David Lam, includes researchers investigating demographic changes, and archiving key population data sets. The Research Center on Group Dynamics conducts experimental studies in laboratories and in natural settings that examine human behavior in social contexts. The program is directed by L. Rowell Huesmann.

Finally, the Survey Research Center led by William Axim houses the long-running surveys noted above as well as the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) a survey listed in the National Science Foundation's 50 top research projects in its history.

Before the presentations, Rep. John Dingell (D-MI), the Dean of the House and the Michigan delegation, delivered remarks praising ISR for its important work not only for the nation, but for helping the beleaguered state of Michigan understand its problems and possible solutions to its present difficulties.

Curtin spoke about "Consumer Spending and Saving Behavior in a New Economic Era." Based on the responses in the Surveys of Consumers he suggested consumer spending will lag rather than lead the recovery from the current recession. After noting that "consumer confidence fell to a greater extent in 2008 than in any other year during the past half-century," Curtin explained that this measure has accurately gauged consumer reactions to the changing economic environment thus playing an important role in business and policy decisions. The recent declines are due to rising unemployment, declines in home and stock values, shorter work hours, and lower incomes, Curtin said.

Although the latest survey shows some regained confidence among consumers indicating that they think the "worst is over," Curtin indicated that "fundamental changes in how consumers view their economic situation and its impact on their spending will persist for some time." This led him to assert that "In the coming years, U.S. consumers will save more and spend less," as they seek to replenish losses caused by the recession.

Weir, who spoke at a COSSA Congressional Briefing on the HRS in 2004, (see Update, July 26, 2004) addressed how the financial crisis has affected older Americans. Based on an Internet Survey of the HRS

From COSSA Washington Update, Volume 28, Issue 16, September 28, 2009

sample in April-June 2009, Weir reported that most “older Americans have weathered the financial crisis relatively well,” although many now expect to work longer than they anticipated in response to questions in the regular HRS conducted in 2008.

Many older people were not affected by the housing crisis, Weir explained, because for them mortgages had already been paid off. For the elderly, the main consequence of this part of the economic downturn was felt through the troubles faced by their children. About ten percent had fallen behind in mortgage payments and others had moved back to their parents’ houses.

Other findings Weir reported included an increase in depressive symptoms during the financial crisis. Those experiencing four or more symptoms of depression increased from 11 percent to 18 percent. Yet, there was no increase in core behaviors such as drinking or church attendance. Finally, about a quarter of the sample, said they were not satisfied with their financial situation after the crisis, an increase of eight percent over the 2008 results.