

Survey Non-Response Procedures in Cross-National Perspective: The 2005 ISSP Non-Response Survey

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A survey of data-collection and non-response procedures used on surveys conducted as part of the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) reveals considerable variation across countries. Of several standard techniques to increase response rates only call-backs were in general use. Leaving letters, books, etc. and interviewers bonuses were utilized in only a bare majority of surveys and an introductory telephone call, the use of converters, and respondent incentives were not used in most surveys. In part, differences in procedures occurred because countries disagreed about their effectiveness. In other cases, techniques were not used simply because countries were not used to these methods.

Keywords: Interviewers, incentives, paradata, survey climate

Introduction

Survey or unit non-response is a major component of total survey error (Groves and Couper 1998; Smith 2005) and non-response has been rising over time in most countries (de Heer 1999; de Heer and Israels 1992; de Leeuw and de Heer 2002; Groves and Couper 1998; Smith 1995; Synodinos and Yamada 2000). Many studies have examined the causes of non-response and tested procedures for reducing it (e.g. Arzheimer and Klein 1999; de Leeuw and Hox 2004; Diaz de Rada 2001a, 2001b; Dillman 2000; Groves and Couper 1998; Groves, Dillman, Eltinge and Little 2002; Singer, Van Hoewyk and Maher 1998; Warriner et al. 1996). Among the many studies of non-response a sub-set have examined cross-national differences in response rates (Couper and de Leeuw 2003; de Heer 1999; de Heer and Israels 1992; de Leeuw and de Heer 2002; Groves and Couper 1998; Hox and de Leeuw 2002; Johnson et al. 2002; Stoop 2005). They have documented that there are appreciable differences in non-response rates across countries. These differences relate to four factors:

1. differences in laws (e.g. some government surveys being mandatory in some countries, but not others; legal restrictions on using certain records for sampling, privacy regulations)
2. differences in study design (e.g. target population, respondent selection procedure, mode, survey content, field period, use of incentives)
3. differences in interviewing staff (e.g. experience, demographic composition, attitudes and behaviors of, training and supervision of)

4. survey-climate (i.e. general social values relating to surveys in particular or survey-related norms such as cooperativeness, privacy expectations, trust in others).¹

International Social Survey Program Non-Response Survey (ISSP-NRS)

This article extends our understanding of cross-national differences in response rates by focusing on the second and third of these factors, differences in study design and interviewers. In early 2005 a study was launched asking about practices related to non-response in surveys carried out as part of the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) (see www.issp.org). The ISSP is a cross-national collaboration that has conducted annual surveys since 1985. ISSP surveys are probability samples of adults in each respective country. The ISSP Non-Response Committee asked all ISSP members to complete a questionnaire via email or by accessing a web-site (see Appendix: ISSP Non-Response Questionnaire). A total of 38 responses were obtained from 37 of the 38 active ISSP members (two responses were received from one country in which two institutes alternate in conducting the ISSP).² Specific questions were directed towards the

¹ Another reason for differences in reported response rates is inconsistencies in calculating these. For the procedures used by the American Association for Public Opinion Research and the World Association for Public Opinion Research, see Standard Definitions: Final Dispositions of Case Codes and Outcome Rates in Survey at <http://www.aapor.org/pdfs/standarddefs.4.pdf> See also, Lynn, Beerten, Laiho and Martin (2001).

² The ISSP countries participating in the survey were Australia, Austria, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Flanders, France, Germany, Great Britain, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Korea (South), Latvia, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, the Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, the United States, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

most recent ISSP survey they had conducted and more general questions were based on ISSP and other major, general-population surveys that the ISSP members have carried out. In 29 countries data collection used face-to-face interviewing and in 9 countries postal surveys were conducted. Much of the analysis examines these two modes separately. Table 1 shows procedures that were used to increase response rates (mostly in face-to-face surveys).

Table 1: Procedures used to increase response

| | |
|-------------------------------|-----|
| Call-Backs* | 90% |
| Left Letters, Booklets, etc.* | 59% |
| Intro Letter/Booklet* | 55% |
| Interviewer Bonuses* | 52% |
| Intro Telephone Call* | 45% |
| Uses Converters* | 35% |
| Incentives to Respondents | 24% |

* Applies only to face-to-face surveys; n=29-38

Only one procedure, call backs, is used by almost all countries (90%). Most (58%) used call backs for both refusal conversion and to contact respondents, but 42% used them only for non-contacts. Letters, booklets, or other printed materials are left with respondents when no contact is made by 59% and an introductory letter or booklet was mailed to respondents before an initial, face-to-face contact was attempted by 55%. Interviewer bonuses were utilized by 52%. 32% employed interviewer bonuses for meeting a target number of completed cases, 25% for taking difficult assignments, 21% for some other reason, and 14% for converting refusals. 45% used an introductory telephone call before an initial, face-to-face contact (but only 31% used this approach more than rarely). 35% used converters (i.e. "specially trained or expert interviewers ... to work temporary refusals"), but just 40% of them did so frequently. Lastly, 24% of both all surveys and face-to-face surveys used respondent incentives. Of those using respondent incentives 40% offered them only selectively, not to everyone, 78% provided the same incentive to everyone offered an incentive, and 60% gave only gifts as an incentive and the rest combined gifts with cash incentives (Table 2). The gifts given ranged notably from country-to-country and included pens, flowers, meals, umbrellas, chocolate bars, postage stamps, book coupons, night lights, and a chance to win a prize in a lottery among respondents. Finally, 67% of those using incentives offered them upon first contact, while others used them later on more as a converting device (Table 2).

Summing across the seven techniques in Table 1, six or more of the procedures were used by 10% of the countries, 5 by 17%, 4 by 28%, 3 by 14%, 2 by 17%, and 1 by 14% (no country used none of the procedures). Two techniques were used to assess what procedures were considered as most effective in achieving the best-possible, response rate in face-to-face surveys. First, an open-ended question asked what was "the most effective strategies or tactics for maximizing your response rate." As Table 3 shows, inter-

Table 2: Use of incentives among surveys using incentives

| | |
|--|-----|
| Offered Only Selectively, Not to All | 40% |
| Standard/Same Incentive to All | 78% |
| Incentive is Gift, Not Cash | 60% |
| Incentive Offered/Given at First Contact | 67% |

n=9

viewer training was the top mention. It was followed by good interviewer behavior. This included interviewers following their instructions correctly, positive interaction with and treatment of respondents, and having good morale and motivation. Next, each mentioned six times were having experienced interviewers, respondent incentives, and using advance letters. Then with five mentions was the supervision of interviewers which included both making sure that they carried out their assignments correctly and motivating interviewers to succeed. Call backs were mentioned by four and the related having a longer field period by two. The last multiple mentions with three each were interviewer bonuses, optimizing contact time (hour of the day/day of the week), having surveys with interesting content, and having shorter questionnaires.

Table 3: Open-ended Mentions on Face-to-Face Surveys of "Most Effective Strategies or Tactics for Maximizing Your Response Rate"

| | |
|----------------------------------|----|
| Interviewer Training | 11 |
| Good Interviewer Behavior | 8 |
| Having Experienced Interviewers | 6 |
| Advanced Letter | 6 |
| Respondent Incentives | 6 |
| Interviewer Supervision | 5 |
| Call Backs | 4 |
| Interesting Content of Survey | 3 |
| Interviewer Bonuses | 3 |
| Sorter Questionnaire | 3 |
| Time of Contact | 3 |
| Longer Field Period | 2 |
| Smaller Interviewer Workloads | 1 |
| Right Introduction | 1 |
| Center Office Support | 1 |
| Involvement of Study Director-PI | 1 |

n=29 (totals more than 29 due to multiple mentions)

Second, a closed-ended item asked how useful certain procedures were to "achieve a high response rate". Table 4 shows that more supervision of interviewers was seen as the most helpful (54% very useful).

This was followed by more interviewer training (50%), more call backs (45%), shorter questionnaires (41%), letters and booklets (32%), longer field periods (31%), respondent incentives (21%), interviewer bonuses (17%), and using converters (10%). Incentives, bonuses, and converters were rated low in part because they were not employed by many countries (35-45%). If one examines their ratings among those using each procedure, the ratings of these increase (in-

Table 4: Rated Effectiveness of Various Measures to Increase Response Rates in Face-to-Face Surveys

| | % Very Useful |
|----------------------------------|---------------|
| More Supervision of Interviewers | 54% |
| More Interviewer Training | 50% |
| More Call Backs per Case | 45% |
| Shorter Questionnaires | 41% |
| Letters, Booklets, etc. | 32% |
| Longer Field Periods | 31% |
| Respondent Incentives | 21% |
| Interviewer Bonuses | 17% |
| Use of Converters | 10% |

n=29

centives 33%, bonuses 26%, and converters 19%), but they still occupy three of the bottom four positions.

The two approaches cover somewhat different ground. The open-ended item obviously can cover topics not mentioned among the listed procedures. This difference is most apparent with the references to interviewer behavior which was not covered by the list. Other such examples include timing of contacts, content of studies, smaller workloads, etc. The approaches agree on the importance of training and supervising interviewers which rank at or near the top in both instances. Call backs however fare better on the closed-ended item than the open-ended and the use of incentives is more prominent among the open-ended than among the close-ended.

An open-ended question asked for a description of the "training that interviewers received to help them in making contacts, gaining cooperation, and converting temporary refusals." While much rich information was obtained, its contents varied greatly from country-to-country. All countries mentioned training sessions, but only eight give the length of training (from 2 hours to 2 days). After formal training sessions, the most frequently cited aspect was supervising the work of interviewers. This included such procedures as having supervisors or experienced interviewers accompanying new interviewers into the field, weekly reports, and monitoring of the outcome of each and every interviewer assignment. Next most often mentioned was that many interviewers had prior experience.

Table 5: Type of Interviewers (Face-to-Face Surveys)

| | Full-time Professional | Part-time Professional | Student | Other |
|--------|------------------------|------------------------|---------|-------|
| None | 55.6 | 22.2 | 37.0 | 85.2 |
| 1-24% | 11.1 | 14.8 | 29.7 | 3.7 |
| 25-49% | 11.1 | 22.2 | 11.1 | 7.4 |
| 50-99% | 14.8 | 14.8 | 11.1 | 0.0 |
| 100% | 7.4 | 25.9 | 7.4 | 3.7 |

% of all Interviewers; n=29

As Table 5 shows, there is considerable spread in the type of people employed as interviewers. Averaging across

Table 6: Use of Mixed Modes in Postal Surveys

| | |
|--|-----|
| Using Telephone to Contact Respondents | 33% |
| Completing Some Interviews via Telephone | 11% |
| Using In-Person Visit to Contact Respondents | 0% |
| Completing Some Interviews In-Person | 0% |

n=9

countries, part-time professionals make up 49%, students are 23%, full-time professionals are 21%, and others are 7%. (The others are mostly people not in the labor force who are interviewing possibly as temporary work. It is unclear if they are full- or part-time, but few would appear to be students.) However, the actual mix of interviewer types varies greatly across countries with about a quarter of the countries using no part-time professionals and another quarter employing all part-timers. Likewise, over half of all countries have no full-time professionals, while almost a quarter have full-timers making up half or more of their staff. Similarly, over a third of countries use no student interviewers, while almost a fifth have a majority of interviewers who are students. These differences reflect the affiliations of the ISSP members (e.g. whether university-based or not), whether or not they have their own field staff or sub-contract with others, national labor-force conditions, local traditions, and other matters.

For postal surveys, a major variable involving the level of effort and thus affecting the response rate is the number of mailed contacts. These average 4 and range from 2 to 7. In all but one country there is a combination of re-sending questionnaires and mailing reminders (usually postcards). There are also differences in the intervals between mailings, but typically they are about one to two weeks. Another approach for increasing postal response is to adopt a mixed-mode design using telephone and/or in-person contacts along with the mailings to increase response. As Table 6 indicates, some telephone follow-up is used in a third of the postal surveys (but only 11% do so frequently) and 11% even conduct some interviews via the phone. None use in-person contacts.

Summary and Conclusion

On both face-to-face and postal ISSP surveys there is considerable variation across countries in the procedures used to collect data. Sometimes different techniques are used (or not used) because of different judgments about their utility. This most clearly shows up in different ratings of the effectiveness of various procedures for enhancing response rates as indicated by both the open- and closed-ended questions on this issue. In other cases the differences probably reflect variation in organizational and/or national practices. That is, countries tend to do what they are used to doing. Additionally, countries sometimes would like to do more, but cannot because they lack enough resources to do so. The ISSP-NRS did not inquire about financial matters, but how this affected design came up in a number of the general remarks. For example, one country noted, "Of course, incentives can be helpful, but their costs are seldom covered by the

budgets” and another observed that the most helpful thing would be to have ”more money to contract an agency with better interviewers, etc.”

To further this research we plan to repeat the ISSP-NRS during future rounds of the ISSP and to expand questions into various new areas such as the experience level of interviewers and to collect more details on certain aspects of interviewer training and supervision.

We also intend to relate survey procedures to outcomes (especially response rates). However, one needs to be cautious in this regard. First, the variation in design features across countries does not represent randomized treatments. Countries that use more procedures (e.g. incentives, bonuses, more mailings) may employ these because interviewing is more difficult in their countries. Thus, if difficult conditions lead to more efforts, then those countries undertaking greater efforts may not have higher response rates. They would, however, presumably have higher response rates than if they did not employ the additional procedures.

Second, it is widely believed, and existing research tends to support the theory, that ‘survey climate’ varies across countries (de Heer and Moritz 1997; Groves and Couper 1992; Harkness 1999; Stoop 2004). ‘Survey climate’ has been conceptualized as ”societal-level conditions that facilitate or mitigate survey participation in a particular society” (Groves and Couper 1998:155) and as ”public willingness to participate in surveys” (Harkness 1999). But without some survey-independent data directly measuring aspects of survey climate, it will be hard to sort out cross-national differences due to survey procedures and other factors from those resulting from socio-cultural factors related to ‘survey climate’.

One should not rely on designs that assume that whatever differences exist in response rates after survey methods have been standardized are the result of ‘survey climate’. Any resorting to a residual approach for establishing a relationship is inherently indirect, imprecise, and uncertain. First, true standardization of design and level of effort is very difficult to actually achieve across countries (Philippens and Billiet 2004; Stoop 2005). Even a high degree of apparent similarity on design and execution will contain a great deal of actual differences in survey methodology and implementation. Second, even given an achieved, high level of survey-methods standardization, the observed cross-national differences in response rates merely relate to some characteristics associated with countries and ‘survey climate’ is merely one of several plausible explanations for such differences (others being differences in laws, postal systems, and labor-market conditions). Finally, even if the differences could be reasonably related to ‘survey climate’, and not other country-level variables, that would reveal little until one could specify what mattered under the umbrella of ‘survey climate’. Survey climate could refer either to factors closely and directly related to surveys such as confidence in the reliability of survey or acceptance of confidentiality pledges from interviewers or to less immediate factors such as a generalized sense of privacy, trust in people, and norms of cooperation. Until the specifics could be ascertained,

‘survey climate’ would be too broad a concept to be useful from either a theoretical or applied standpoint.

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Appendix: ISSP Non-Response Questionnaire

Please answer these questions for the most recent ISSP module you have archived:

Q0. In what country did you do the ISSP?

Q1. What is the most recent ISSP module you have archived?

| | |
|------------------------------|---|
| Citizenship | 1 |
| National Identity | 2 |
| Other (Please specify) _____ | 3 |

Q2. What is the module fielded as part of a larger survey or as a study on its own?
(Note: Two ISSP modules fielded together wouldn't count as being part of a larger survey)

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Part of a larger survey | 1 |
| Stand alone | 2 |

Q3. About how long did the whole survey take, the ISSP questions, the demographics and any other questions?

_____ minutes

Q4. Were incentives offered to respondents?

| | |
|-----|-----------------|
| Yes | 1 |
| No | 2 (SKIP TO Q5.) |

IF Q4. = YES, ASK:

a. Were incentives offered to all respondents?

| | |
|-----|---|
| Yes | 1 |
| No | 2 |

b. When incentives were offered, was a standard incentive offered to all offered an incentive?

| | |
|-----|---|
| Yes | 1 |
| No | 2 |

- c. What kind of incentives were offered?
(Note: Count as gifts even those of token value, but do not count brochures or booklets that describe or introduce the survey or your organization)

| | |
|---------------|---|
| Cash only | 1 |
| Gift only | 2 |
| Cash and Gift | 3 |
| Cash or Gift | 4 |

IF CASH USED, ASK:

- i. When a cash incentive was offered, what was the average amount?

_____ (in local currency)

IF GIFTS USED, ASK:

- ii. When gifts were offered as an incentive, what did you give? Please specify below.

- iii. What was the average value of gifts given?

_____ (in local currency)

- d. Were incentives offered to everyone or only used selectively, e.g. to help convert refusals?

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| Offered to all | 1 |
| Offered to some | 2 |

- e. When were incentives first offered?

| | |
|--|---|
| To all from the initial contact | 1 |
| To all, but only after one or more contacts | 2 |
| To some, but only after one or more contacts | 3 |
| Other (Please specify) _____ | 4 |

- Q5. When you are pretesting or developing questionnaires, do the lead researchers/principal investigators ever conduct test interviews?

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| Yes, always | 1 |
| Yes, sometimes | 2 |
| Yes, but rarely | 3 |
| No, never | 4 |

- Q6. What mode was used in this survey?

(Note: If more than one mode was used, please indicate what was used for more cases)

| | |
|---|------------------|
| Face-to-face interview | 1 |
| Face-to-face in part, but ISSP module used self-completion while interviewer waited | 2 |
| Face-to-face in part, but ISSP module used self-completion leave behind/drop-off | 3 |
| Postal survey | 4 (SKIP TO Q17.) |

Q7. Were call backs used to convert temporary refusals, to reach non-contacts, or for both reasons?

| | |
|------------------------|---|
| For refusal conversion | 1 |
| For non-contacts | 2 |
| For both reasons | 3 |
| Call backs not used | 4 |

Q8. Did you give bonuses to interviewers for any of the following reasons?

| | Yes | No |
|--|-----|----|
| a. For converting refusals | 1 | 2 |
| b. For meeting a target number of completed case | 1 | 2 |
| c. For taking difficult assignments | 1 | 2 |
| d. For some other reasons | 1 | 2 |

Q9. Did you use specially trained or expert interviewers sometimes called converters to work temporary refusals?

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Yes, frequently | 1 |
| Yes, but not frequently | 2 |
| No | 3 |

Q10. Did you mail an introductory letter or booklet to respondents/households before an interviewer attempts initial face-to-face contact?

| | |
|-----|---|
| Yes | 1 |
| No | 2 |

Q11. Did you make a telephone call to respondents/households before an interviewer attempted initial face-to-face contact?

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| Yes, usually | 1 |
| Yes, sometimes | 2 |
| Yes, but rarely | 3 |
| No | 4 |

Q12. About what proportion of your interviewers were in each of the following categories:

- a. Full-time, professional interviewers _____
- b. Part-time, non-student interviewers _____
- c. Student interviewers _____
- d. All other interviewers _____

Please specify what is covered in d:

Q13. Did you have letters, booklets, or other printed material that you left at households either when no contact was made or to help persuade a temporary refusal to cooperate?

- Yes 1
- No 2

Q14. Please describe the training that interviewers received to help them in making contact, gaining cooperation and converting temporary refusals:

(Note: Q15. and Q16. refer to the ISSP and other major, general population-surveys that you conduct)

Q15. In general, what do you find to be the most effective strategies or tactics for maximizing your response rate?

Q16. According to your experience, in general how effective do you rate the following procedures in helping to achieve a high response rate?

| | Very useful | Somewhat useful | Not very useful | Not at all useful | Don't use/do |
|-------------------------------------|-------------|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------|--------------|
| a. Respondent incentives | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| b. Interviewer bonuses | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| c. Longer field periods | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| d. More interviewer training | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| e. Use of converters | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| f. More callbacks per case | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| g. More supervision of interviewers | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| h. Letters, booklets, etc. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |
| i. Shorter questionnaires | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 |

DONE IF FACE-TO-FACE SURVEY

Q17. Please describe each step of your postal survey design. How many mailings did you make? What was sent with each mailing (e.g. questionnaire, reminder postcard, letter)? What amount of time lapsed between each mailing?

Q18. Did you make any phone calls to try and contact respondents and urge them to complete and mail back the questionnaire?

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| Yes, frequently | 1 |
| Yes, sometimes | 2 |
| Yes, but rarely | 3 |
| No | 4 |

Q19. Did you complete any interviews over the phone?

| | |
|-----|---|
| Yes | 1 |
| No | 2 |

Q20. Did you make any in-person visits to try and contact respondents and urge them to complete and mail back the questionnaire?

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| Yes, frequently | 1 |
| Yes, sometimes | 2 |
| Yes, but rarely | 3 |
| No | 4 |

Q21. Did you complete any interviews in-person?

| | |
|-----|---|
| Yes | 1 |
| No | 2 |

DONE IF POSTAL SURVEY