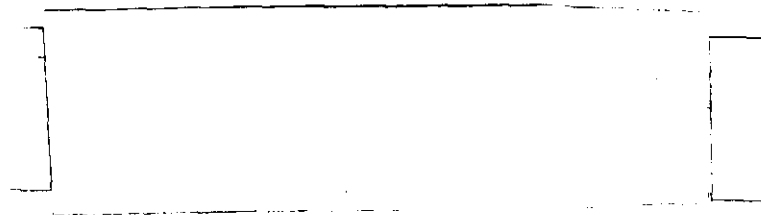


RESPONSE RATES ON THE 1975-1978
GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEYS WITH COMPARISONS TO
THE OMNIBUS SURVEYS OF THE
SURVEY RESEARCH CENTER, 1972-1976

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In the best of all possible worlds, interviews would be successfully conducted with all targeted respondents. In actuality, a significant proportion of respondents cannot be interviewed. As a result, interviews are conducted with, and survey research is based upon, only an available, willing, and able sub-sample. If non-response is associated with variables under investigation, this can cause decided biases in the analysis.¹ For this reason, this paper discusses the response rate on the General Social Surveys (GSS) conducted by the National Opinion Research Center, examines the reasons for non-response and compares the GSS figures with comparable data from the omnibus surveys of the Survey Research Center (SRC), University of Michigan.

The General Social Surveys are household surveys of the non-institutionalized English-speaking population of the continental United States, 18 years of age or older. In 1972, 1973, and 1974 multi-stage probability sampling with quotas at the block level was used. In 1975 and 1976 a transitional design was employed with half the sample using the block quota technique as previously and half using multi-stage area probability sampling with preselected respondents (i.e., full probability).²

¹The literature on response rates in surveys is voluminous. See the following for overviews of this material, J. Scott Armstrong and Terry S. Overton, "Estimating Nonresponse Bias in Mail Surveys," Journal of Marketing Research, XIV (Aug., 1977), 396-402; Wayne W. Daniel, "Nonresponse in Sociological Surveys: A Review of Some Methods of Handling the Problem," Sociological Methods and Research, III (Feb., 1975), 291-307; and Darnell Felix Hawkins, "Nonresponse in Detroit Area Study Surveys: A Ten Year Analysis," Working Papers in Methodology, No. 8 (Chapel Hill: Institute for Research in Social Science, 1977), pp. 1-24.

²For a discussion of this experimental design see C. Bruce Stephenson, "A Comparison of Full-Probability and Probability-with-Quotas Sampling Techniques in the General Social Survey," GSS Technical Report No. 5 (Chicago: NORC, 1978).

In 1977 and 1978 the full probability procedure was used for the entire sample. Under the full probability procedure households are randomly chosen from a previously conducted listing of dwelling units in the sample segment.³ This selection of listed dwelling units makes up the original sample. From this number, listings are dropped if they 1) turn out not to be dwelling units (e.g., business or demolished units), 2) are vacant dwelling units, 3) fall out of sample (outside the geographic bounds of the segment or unworkable for some other technical reason), or 4) contain no eligible respondents (no household members 18 years of age or older or language problems). New listings are added if there is a new or previously unlisted dwelling unit either at the address of the selected dwelling unit (e.g., if the house has a basement apartment in addition to the prelisted main dwelling unit) or between the selected dwelling unit and the next unit on the listing (e.g., a new house constructed next to the selected dwelling unit). The addition of these new dwelling units to the original sample and the deletion of the other listings equal the net sample of eligible households.

Attempts are then made to conduct interviews in all the households in the net sample. The first step is to fill out a household enumeration form or screener with a knowledgeable household member 18 years of age or older. This lists household members in order to randomly select one adult

³For details of the sample design see Benjamin King and Carol Richards, "1972 NORC National Probability Sample," (Chicago: NORC, 1972) and "Sampling Instructions: Area Probability Sample," (Chicago: NORC, Revised September 1973).

The details for listing are described in "Field Count Instructions," (Chicago: NORC, Sept., 1972); "How to List for an Area Probability Sample," (Chicago: NORC, March, 1978); and "How to List Individual Quarter within Group Quarters Structures," (Chicago: NORC, March, 1978).

as the respondent. Once the respondent is identified, the next step is to complete the interview with that individual.⁴

Not infrequently circumstances intervene to prevent the completion of an interview with an eligible respondent. These range from explicit and overt refusals ("Get out of here and don't come back!") to milder discouragements ("I'm too busy; don't bother me.") These temporary refusals are referred to the interviewer's supervisor and are usually followed up by a conversion effort by letter or telephone and a visit by another interviewer. Only after the supervisor decides that there is no realistic hope of conversion is the respondent classed as a final refusal. Another common cause of non-response is unavailability. Commonly, either no one will be home when the first visit is made or someone will be present to complete the screener, and thereby determine who is the target respondent, but that respondent will not be present. Attempts are made to make contact with the household or the respondent by repeated call-backs (a minimum of four), telephone follow-ups (when the number is known), obtaining information from neighbors or other household members about the whereabouts and best time for contacting the residents/respondent, and by other means. Generally speaking, attempts to reach an unavailable household or respondent continue until either information is obtained that the household members/respondent cannot be reached during the field period or the field period ends. Finally, a number of interviews are unattainable because of miscellaneous reasons, such as illness, disabilities, etc.⁵

⁴For details on the field procedures used in locating designated dwelling units, adding new dwelling units, completing the household enumeration form, and determining the proper respondent, see "General Social Survey Interviewer Procedural Manual," (Chicago: NORC, 1978).

⁵The general guidelines for handling refusals and not-at-homes are described in the "General Social Survey Interviewer Procedural Manual" and in various training manuals such as "A Brush-up on Interviewing Techniques." (Chicago: NORC, 1972).

Turning to Table 1, we see how the GSSs have managed to work their way through the obstacles outlined above. We see that the eligibility rate has averaged 88 percent. This rate affects the size of the original sample that must be drawn in order to achieve a desired sample size but has no impact on the content of the final sample. Of more importance is the response and non-response rates. As Table 1 indicates, about 25 percent of the designated respondents are not interviewed. This non-response occurs for several reasons. On the GSSs, by far the most common reason is outright refusals. Either the respondent or some other household member refuses to complete the household enumeration form or consent to the interview. Over the four full probability GSS's, the refusal rate has averaged .186 (including a few break-offs).

The next most common reason for non-response is unavailability. This has averaged a rate of .037 for the three GSSs for which figures are available. Unavailable cases consist of two types, households in which no adult member is ever contacted to complete a screener and households in which a screener is completed, but the designated respondent is never available for an interview. Approximately two-thirds of the unavailable cases are of the former type and one-third are of the latter. The remaining non-respondents fall into a residual other category that has had an average rate of .028. They consist mostly of respondents who are either ill during the field period or with a chronic or permanent mental or physical condition serious enough to preclude an interview (e.g., severe cases of senility, mental retardation, or mental illness). Also included in these figures are miscellaneous reasons such as deaths, evasive cases not clearly refusals, and cases unrelated to respondents or other household members (listings never attempted, interviews reported but never received, invalid interviews, etc.). In brief, on the GSSs, the response rate has consistently hovered around the

75 percent level. Its complement, the non-response rate, consists largely of explicit refusals who have resisted conversion attempts (.186), a much smaller number of unreachables--even after repeated attempts (.037), and a residual group consisting mostly of ill or uninterviewable respondents (.028).

In Table 2, the eligibility and response rates on the GSSs are compared to figures from the omnibus surveys conducted by the Survey Research Center, University of Michigan (also included is one non-omnibus survey, SRC468151). The eligibility rate for the GSS's averaged .906 (pooled estimate)¹ while the two SRC surveys with comparable figures averaged about .880. These rates have little substantive importance, since they have no impact on the final content of cases. Of greater importance is the response rate. On the GSSs the pooled response rate has been .751 and the omnibus SRC surveys had a nearly identical average of .749. Neither house showed any detectable trends in the response rate across time. This extremely close similarity in response rates hides some differences, however. When non-response is broken down by cause into refusal, unavailability, and other non-interview rates, some variation appears between GSS and SRC. The refusal rate for GSS was .186, but on the two SRC surveys for which information is available, the rate was about .147. In turn, while the unavailable rate was .037 for GSS, it was .062 for the two SRC surveys. The other rate was an almost identical .028 and .025 for the respective houses. To put these figures in a more comparable perspective, we can express the categories of non-response as a proportion of all non-response. For the GSSs refusals made up .741, unavailables .147, and others .112, while for the SRC survey it was .628 refusals, .265 unavailables, and .107 others. It is uncertain whether these differences are the result of different field procedures or merely different classification procedures. However, the large differences in the distribution of non-response on SRC468151 between the

¹This figure includes language problems as eligible households to make the rate comparable to the SRC figures. It thus differs from the GSS rates cited above.

the SRC and Census sub-samples (where classification methods and interviewer instructions were standardized) suggests that differences in either institutional affiliation or training procedures can cause large differences in the distribution of non-responses (See Table 3).

In sum, on standard sociological surveys such as the GSS and SRC omnibus surveys, non-response routinely averages about 25 percent. This rate is stable both across houses and across time. The major cause of non-response is explicit refusals (even after conversion attempts). Next in importance are unavailables (even after repeated contact attempts). Finally, there is a small residual group of other, miscellaneous non-responses (illness, uninterviewable, etc.). The mixture of non-responses appears to differ between the GSSs and SRCs surveys, although their relative rank is identical. Because of the potential for non-response bias, researchers should keep these rates in mind when working with surveys like the GSS and SRC omnibus surveys.

TABLE 1

NON-RESPONSE RATES ON THE 1975-1978 GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEYS

Disposition of Cases	Surveys				
	1975	1976	1977	1978	
A. Original Sample	1102	1113	2317	2344	
B. -Out of Sample	11	16	0	20	
C. -Not a Dwelling Unit	} 116	43	126	93	
D. -Vacant		74	217	190	
E. -Language Problem	27	33	54	59	
F. +New Dwelling Unit	<u>24</u>	<u>44</u>	<u>79</u>	<u>102</u>	
G. Net Sample	972	991	1999	2084	
H. Completed Cases	735	744	1530	1532	
I. Refusals	162	} 206	339	} 417	
J. Break-offs	2		7		
K. No One Home to Complete Screener	22	} 41	54	48	
L. R Unavailable Entire Field Period	13		26	22	
M. Ill	12		43	21	
N. Other	<u>26</u>			<u>44</u>	
G. Net Sample	972	991	1999	2084	
Eligibility Rate (G/A)	.882	.890	.863	.889	<u>Pooled^a</u> .880
Response Rate (H/G)	.756	.751	.765	.735	.751
Refusal Rate (I+J/G)	.169	.208	.173	.200	.186
Unavailable Rate (K+L/G)	.036		.040	.034	.037 ^b
Other Rate (M+N/G)	.039		.022	.031	.028 ^b

--Not Available

^aA constant model fits the four proportions (i.e., the observed proportions did not significantly vary from their pooled or averaged proportion). For details of this test see D. Garth Taylor, "Procedures for Evaluating Trends in Qualitative Indicators," in Studies of Social Change Since 1948, NORC Report No. 127A, edited by James A. Davis (Chicago: NORC, 1976).

^bBased on three available years.

TABLE 2

COMPARISON OF ELIGIBILITY AND RESPONSE RATES BETWEEN
THE GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEYS
AND SELECTED SURVEY RESEARCH CENTER (SRC) SURVEYS

Surveys	Eligibility Rate ^a	Response Rate ^b
SRC466153 (Spring '72)	--	.765
SRC466155 (Winter '73)	--	.735
SRC468662 (Spring '73)	--	.745
SRC468573 (Fall '73)	--	.756
SRC468553 (Spring '74)	--	.761
GSS75 (March '75)	.907	.756
SRC468603 (Fall '75)	--	.730
GSS76 (March '76)	.920	.751
SRC468683 (Spring '76)	.877	.749
SRC468151 (Oct. '76) ^c	.885	.791
GSS77 (March '77)	.886	.765
GSS78 (March '78)	.914	.735

Source:^d Memorandum, To: Anthony Turner, U.S. Bureau of Census and P. 468151 Staff, From: SRC Field Staff. RE: Response Rate Report, Apr. 26, 1977 and Memorandum To: Omnibus Steering Committee, From: Field Office - John Scott, RE: Response to P. 468683, July 13, 1977.

^aTo make GSS figures correspond to SRC figures, language problems (item E in Table 1) were not subtracted from the original sample. Thus, these eligibility rates for GSS are $A - (B+C+D-E)/A$.

^bExcluding language problems from SRC468683 raised its response rate from .744 to .749. To roughly bring the other response rates into line, .005 was added to the response rates for the SRC surveys given in the sources cited above.

^cThese figures represent the combined figures for sub-samples conducted by SRC and the Bureau of the Census (BC). The eligibility rates were respectively .874 and .896 and the response rates were .786 and .853.

^dThese were provided by John Scott and Stanley Presser of the Survey Research Center. John Scott also provided helpful comments on comparability between SRC and GSS classification schemes.

TABLE 3

CLASSIFICATION OF NONRESPONSE: GSS AND SRC

Surveys	Refusal Rate	Unavail- ability Rate	Other
GSS75 (Mar. '75)	.169	.036	.039
GSS76 (Mar. '76)	.208	--	--
SRC468683 (Spring '76)	.155	.071	.026
SRC468151 (Oct. '76) - SRC	.138	.052	.024
" (Oct. '76) - BC	.060	.066	.021
GSS77	.173	.040	.034
GSS78	.200	.034	.031

Source: See Table 2

Note: The SRC and GSS nonresponses have been grouped together in the most comparable manner possible. It was impossible, however, to fully reconcile the categorizations used by each house. As a result the figures will vary somewhat because of these unreconciled differences in classifications.