

A Report on the
2005 ISSP Non-Response Survey

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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; Wattiner, et al., 1996).

Among the many studies of non-response a sub-set have examined cross-national differences in response rates (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). 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, 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), and 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).

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

This report extends our understanding of cross-national differences in response rates by focusing on the second of these factors, differences in study design. 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). ISSP surveys are probability samples of adults in each respective country. All ISSP members were asked 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). Specific questions were directed towards the 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). 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).

Altogether across the seven techniques in Table 1, six of the procedures were used by 10% of the countries, 5 by 17%, 4 by 28%, 3 by 17%, 2 by 17%, and 1 by 14% (no country used either none or all 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, interviewer 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.

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 (incentives 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.

As Table 5 shows, there is considerable spread in the type of people used as interviewers. Averaging across 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 to 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 to increasing postal response is to adopt a mixed-mode design using telephone and/or in-person contacts 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 difference 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 country. 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. But without some independent data measuring aspects of survey climate, both proximate such as attitudes towards surveys and less immediate such as trust in people and norms of cooperation, it will be hard to sort out cross-national differences due to survey procedures from those resulting from socio-cultural factors.

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

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

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
Other (all mentioned once): Smaller Interviewer Workloads/Right Introduction/ Center Office Support/Involvement of Study Director-PI	1

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

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

Table 5

Type of Interviewers (Face-to-Face Surveys)

(% of All Interviewers)

	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

N=29

Table 6

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

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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 archived?

Citizenship	1
National Identity	2
Other (Please specify)	3

Q2. Was this module fielded as part of a larger survey or as a study on its own?

NOTE: TWO ISSP MODULES FIELDDED TOGETHER WOULD COUNT AS BEING PART OF A LARGER SURVEY.

Part of 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 Q.5)

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?

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 |

Q.5 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?

IF MORE THAN ONE MODE USED, PLEASE INDICATED WHAT WAS USED FOR MOST 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?

Qs. 15 & 16 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 call backs 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