

Combating Telephone Fatigue after Multiple Waves: Testing Prepaid Incentives and a Hard Copy Questionnaire in a Telephone Survey of Youth with Disabilities and Their Parents

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1. Purpose of the Poster

Describe an experiment to test the use of prepaid incentives and a hard copy questionnaire in a longitudinal telephone survey of youth with disabilities and their parents.

2. Background of NLTS2 Study

Objectives

- Collect information on the education, activities, and development of youth with disabilities, over a 10-year period, as youth transition from high school into young adulthood.

Methods

- Telephone survey of 8,000-10,000 youth (and their parents), fielded biannually.
- Sample selected in 2000 when youth were between 13 and 16 years of age, in at least the 7th grade, and receiving some type of special education services.
- Interviews conducted in 2001, 2003, 2005, 2007 and (currently) 2009.

3. Challenges Unique to NLTS2

Special population: Sampled youth reflect full range of federal special education disability categories, including learning disabilities, speech and communication impairments, mental retardation, emotional disturbances, hearing, visual, orthopedic, or other health impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, multiple disabilities, and deaf/blindness. This has required a multi-mode approach to surveying the youth, including offering TDD and mail questionnaires for youth who are unable to answer questions by phone but could accurately respond to a written questionnaire, (e.g. youth with hearing impairments), in addition to conducting the telephone survey.

“Emotional” Topics for Parents: Qualitative feedback from interviewers and monitoring shows that some parents become frustrated and unhappy about answering questions related to their youth’s ability to obtain needed services, particularly as youth age out of the education system, receive fewer services, and the burden of coordinating and providing these same services falls more to the parents.

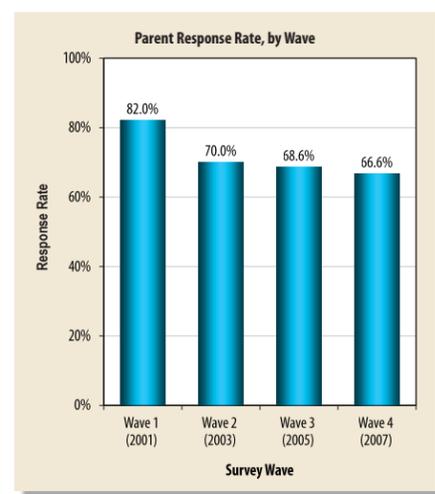
Similarly, answering questions about their youth’s post-secondary, social, and employment experiences may also be difficult for parents.

Length of Interview: Parent interviews range from 20–40 minutes, depending upon whether the youth can do an interview (parent interview is shorter if youth can do interview). After several rounds of a lengthy interview, parents know what they are going to be asked and the time commitment the interview entails.

Locating Parents and Young Adults is Challenging: The study interviews youth and parents every two years, during a period of life when youth can be particularly mobile. Youth who are transitioning away from home into/out of school or the work environment are often difficult to locate or contact. Although some live with parents, others are highly mobile. Parents often move/remarry, etc., decreasing the likelihood of locating either the parent or the youth. That this study does not have access to social security numbers further exacerbates the challenge of locating respondents.

4. Response Rate Building Measures Implemented in Waves 2 through 4

- Newsletters and postcards to parents and youth every 6 months between interviews
- Access to study website with information for parents and youth
- Advance letters to parents and youth
- \$20 incentive to both parents and youth for completing interview
- Intensive tracing efforts for pending and unlocatable cases
- Special tracing efforts for selected groups of cases to ensure adequate representation of a particular disability
- Postcard appeals to refusals and pending cases
- Email appeals to unlocatable and pending cases
- Interviewers given a list of Parent Center contacts in each state to give to parents as a resource (to learn about available services for young adults)
- Abbreviated 10-minute parent telephone interview offered as final effort to obtain data from parents, in Waves 3 and 4



5. Wave 4 Experiment: Tested Use of Prepaid Token Incentive and Hard Copy Questionnaire for Parents

Timing:

- Experiment took place from August 29, 2007–October 15, 2007, 17 weeks after the start of the Wave 4 NLTS2 interviewing period (with 8,573 parents included in the initial sample).

Method:

- Three experimental groups of 200 parents each, composed of a random sample of refusal, pending, and unlocatable cases (in equal proportions in each group) were selected from the 3,296 parents remaining in the NLTS2 sample at the time of the experiment.
- There were no significant differences in the demographics (youth’s disability category, age, gender, household income, or race/ethnicity) of those in the experimental group when compared with parents in the remaining NLTS2 sample.
- Parents in each of the three experimental groups also did not significantly differ by demographics.

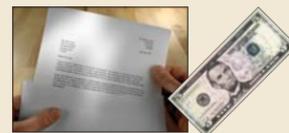
Hard Copy Questionnaire:

- The hard copy questionnaire developed for this experiment was an abbreviated version of the telephone interview.
- Due to the complexity of the interview skip logic and length, the instrument was purposely designed to capture critical items, including postsecondary education enrollment, employment, residential independence, marital, and parenting status.
- Although the questionnaire does not yield as much data as the longer telephone interview, creating an equally complex and lengthy mail questionnaire would not be realistic and would likely result in extremely low response rates.

Group 1: 200 cases mailed a letter reminding them that they will receive \$20 for completing the telephone interview



Group 2: 200 cases mailed a letter reminding them that they will receive \$20 for completing the telephone interview and enclosed \$5



Group 3: 200 cases mailed a letter reminding them that they will receive \$20 for completing the telephone interview, enclosed \$5, and a hard copy questionnaire with an offer of \$15 to complete the hard copy questionnaire instead of the telephone interview



6. Literature Review

Researchers have long noted the decline in telephone survey response rates over the last decade or more, noting particular challenges with longitudinal surveys. Experiments have focused on use of advance letters and incentives, but less so on the effectiveness of offering a mail survey option to longitudinal telephone survey nonrespondents. Key findings are summarized below.

- Curtin et al. show a steep decline in response rates from 1979 to 1996 on the RDD Survey of Consumer Attitudes, with an average annual decline of almost ¾ of a percentage point, from about 72% to 60%. Since 1996, the authors found that the decline has been steeper, averaging 1.5 percentage points a year. In the 1990s, a monetary incentive was introduced for refusals, which resulted in a slight rise in refusal conversions, but by 2000, the decline resumed.
- Singer et al. found no consistent effect on either the response rate or cooperation rate of promised incentives on the Survey of Consumer Attitudes. Similarly, advance letters without an incentive also did not appear to consistently or substantially increase the response rate. However, in an experiment where the authors enclosed a \$5 prepayment with the advance letter, there was a significant effect on both response and cooperation rates.
- Lepkowski and Couper cite the following factors as influencing response in longitudinal surveys: variation in length of time between waves, number of panel

waves, household characteristics, content of the survey, sponsoring organization, data collection organization, and mode of data collection. Repeated interview requests increase the perceived burden and decrease the likelihood of participation.

- Apodaca et al. noted that longitudinal survey response burden has two components—the first being the length of the initial interview, and the second being the “longitudinal burden,” or the perceived burden of future interviews. In an analysis of responses to the Medicare Current Beneficiary Survey (MCBS), the authors tested the impact of a statement informing the longitudinal sample that their participation would require multiple interviews and found that the effect of the perceived increased burden on survey participation “resulted in a 5 percent decrease in the response rate.” (Apodaca et al, 1998).
- In a paper reviewing strategies for reducing non-response in a longitudinal panel survey, Laurie et al. discuss the major sources of attrition in a panel survey: 1) difficulty in locating the respondents and 2) refusals due to “panel fatigue,” which is the phenomenon of respondents becoming “bored or uninterested in taking part any further or simply feel that they have ‘done enough.’” (Laurie et al, 1999). The authors conclude that maintaining high response rates requires a “complex mix of procedures and survey systems.”

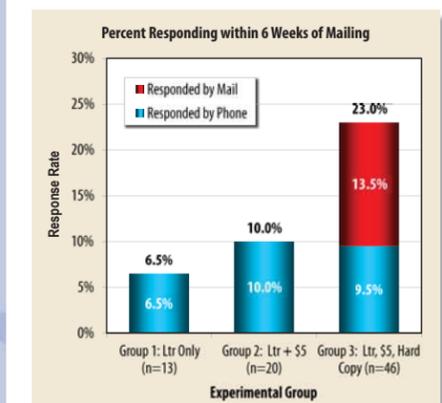
7. Research Questions

- What is the impact of a prepaid token incentive and a reminder of the full incentive (Group 2), compared with only a reminder of the full incentive (Group 1)?
- What is the impact of including a hard copy questionnaire, a prepaid token incentive and a reminder of full incentive (Group 3) vs. no prepaid incentive and no questionnaire and just a reminder of the full incentive (Group 1)?
- What is the impact of including a hard copy questionnaire, a prepaid token incentive and a reminder of full incentive (Group 3) vs. a prepaid token incentive and a reminder of full incentive (Group 2)?
- To what extent did the respondents differ from nonrespondents?
- To what extent did the different approaches reach different types of respondents?

8. Results and Discussion

Group 3 response rate was the highest:

- Parents who were provided the option of completing a mail survey along with a letter and \$5 (Group 3) were significantly more likely to respond to the mailing than were those who only received a letter (Group 1) or a letter with \$5 (Group 2).
- Within 6 weeks of the mailing, 23% of parents in Group 3 had responded, compared with 10 percent in Group 2 (p<.01) and 7 percent in Group 1 (p<.001). Response rates for Groups 1 and 2 did not differ significantly.



No difference in percent completing the phone interview:

Parents in the three experimental groups did not differ significantly in terms of the percentage choosing to complete the telephone interview—7%, 10%, and 10% (respectively). The additional 14% of parents in Group 3 who completed a mail survey accounted for the significant differences in the overall response rates between this group and the other two groups.

Mail survey option was as important as a larger incentive:

Providing this additional response mode (i.e., a hard copy questionnaire) appeared to have a similar impact as the size

of the overall incentive. Parents in Group 3 were offered \$20 to complete a phone interview and only \$15 to complete the mail questionnaire; however 14% of Group 3 parents opted to complete the mail questionnaire, compared with 10% who chose to complete the telephone interview.

No significant differences between responders and nonresponders:

Responders and nonresponders in the full experimental sample (the 3 groups combined) did not differ significantly in their demographics (youth’s disability category, age, gender, household income, or race/ethnicity), satisfaction with the youth’s school or special education services, or in the youth’s educational history (e.g., youth had ever been held back a grade, suspended, or expelled). We surmise, therefore, that “telephone fatigue” affected all parents universally, regardless of these factors.

No significant differences between responders to each of the three mailings:

Responders to the three types of mailings did not differ significantly in their demographics, satisfaction, or youth’s experiences. This lack of significant differences between responders to the different approaches might be due in part to the small number of respondents in each of the groups and the large standard errors.

Conclusions and Next Steps:

- Providing parents with alternative modes of responding has a positive impact on response rates.
- When the experimental period was completed, NLTS2 mailed questionnaires to all remaining Wave 4 parents who had not yet responded to the telephone interview. This measure yielded 387 completed surveys (almost 7% of all parent interviews).
- Clearly, some parents prefer responding by mail rather than by phone. Further research is needed to understand how the 387 mail questionnaire respondents differ from those who responded by telephone.
- This experiment did not provide a clear sense of the benefit of including a \$5 bill with the mailing. More research is needed to derive conclusions about this as well, such as possibly sending the mail questionnaire to parents without the \$5 bill enclosed.

9. For More Information

Full Reports, Executive Summaries, Fact Sheets & Data Briefs, and Data Tables are available at www.nlts2.org