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High Response Rates for Low-Income Population In-Person Surveys

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In this paper we will look at the context of interviewing low-income populations and the unique challenges presented to survey practitioners. Within that context, we will explore what data collection approaches can increase the likelihood of success in the pursuit of high response rates while staying within the limits of a project's budget and schedule. Finally, we will make some recommendations for future efforts in this arena.

THE CONTEXT

In the *Best Practices* booklet published by the American Association of Public Opinion Research (1997a) 1 of the 12 named "best practices" is to maximize cooperation or response rates within the limits of ethical treatment of human subjects (p. 5). In surveys concentrated on low-income populations, high response rates are especially important. In the past few years, there has been a great deal of interest in finding out what is happening to people after they leave the welfare rolls. Outside of the usual concern about nonrespondents causing a potential bias, there is often the need to stratify populations by their relationship to welfare systems. For example, though those that leave welfare are of great interest, so are the stayers, as are potential applicants diverted from programs or those who do not apply. If samples are to be large enough to make meaningful comparisons among groups, then nonresponse must be kept to a minimum.

Low-income populations are of special interest to survey practitioners. Whether one is doing a survey of employment, crime victimizations, health conditions, or health insurance status, the low-income population has an abundance of people who are having difficulty. In its most recent report on poverty, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that people who worked at any time during 1998 had a lower poverty rate than nonworkers (6.3 percent compared with 21.1 percent). The Census Bureau also recently reported that 16.3 percent of all people in the United States were without health insurance for the entire year of 1998, but that 32.3 percent of poor people were in that category (Campbell, 1999).

Of interest to the survey community are the statistics cited by Federal Communications Commission Chairman Reed Hundt about access to communication services in the United States. Of households on food stamps, roughly 30 percent have telephone service. In 1993, 27 percent of households with children and below the poverty line did not have phone service. About 12 percent of unemployed adults did not have phone service.

This lack of telephone service shows the importance of expanding the mode of data collection for low-income persons beyond telephone surveys. Nonresponse rates by income type show that refusals are lowest for low-income populations (Groves and Couper, 1998). However, those who are not contacted in surveys are clustered among those who are in the low-income groups. Groves and Couper show that in areas of high population density, more than 6 percent of the population were not contacted. In central cities, 7.2 percent were not contacted. When homeownership was below 48.5 percent, 4.9 percent were not contacted. In areas where minorities made up more than 8 percent of the population, the noncontact rate was 3.6 percent or higher. Therefore, when looking at income distributions, the high end would be underrepresented primarily because of refusals and the low income would be underrepresented because of noncontacts. If the low-income population is approached only by telephone, the nonresponse rates would be even higher because of the lower incidence of telephones among this population.

In-person efforts will be critical to achieving high response rates for people who have no usual residence, those who move frequently, those who have no telephones, and those who need some immediate gratification before they agree to be interviewed. Often, concepts and ideas can be explained easier when face to face.

The low-income populations of interest in surveys present some special challenges. They are often hard to find. Though they may have lived at a fixed address at one time, low-income people move often, mostly within the same neighborhood, but not always. Sometimes they live in regular housing until their money runs out, then live on the streets until the next influx of money. A survey organization must be prepared to spend resources locating respondents. Low-income respondents are often suspicious of strangers and the government. Often they do not want to be found. Names are not always given freely, nor are responses to where people can be found. In National Opinion Research Center (NORC) surveys, a common problem is that it is hard to make and keep appointments with potential respondents.

In addition, because of high immigration in the past 15 years, many people in the population do not speak English. In many surveys, people who do not speak English or Spanish are excluded. However, in surveys of low-income populations, these people with language barriers may be extremely important. Thus, a survey organization must be ready to find interviewers who speak the needed languages, and have a facility for translating questionnaires. Using a questionnaire translated into other languages brings additional problems. The translated version needs pretesting to make sure that the correct meaning is used and that the basic concepts have not been lost. To make these situations work, it is important to collaborate with the ethnic communities and enlist their help. This collaboration also can be helpful in gaining access to the communities so that respondents will cooperate. Some interesting work at the Census Bureau in a series of ethnographic studies (de la Puente, 1995) shows how a difference in meaning that affects responses can occur when there is not collaboration.

These special issues that arise in interviewing low-income populations all have appropriate solutions. Which of these solutions can be applied for a given survey will be dependent on budget, schedule, and Institutional Review Board (IRB) and Office of Management and Budget (OMB) constraints. NORC has conducted several studies of low-income populations and has been successful in interviewing them. This paper reviews the methods leading to success.

All the surveys referenced for this paper are list samples. (Note that the D.C. Networks Study used targeted chain referral sampling to build its list sample.) Five NORC surveys will be referenced to illustrate methods for finding and interviewing these populations. Response rates for the five surveys were all 75 percent or above. Indeed, in follow-up surveys of the same populations, rates higher than 90 percent were achieved in most instances.

To be most relevant for State grantees who are conducting or planning to conduct surveys of low-income and welfare populations, studies with the following characteristics are discussed: respondents are primarily from low-income and/or welfare populations; the sample is clustered within one area rather than being national; paper and pencil interviewing (PAPI) is the mode for all but one of the studies, which is computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI); extensive locating is required; and respondents are offered an incentive for participation. Note that the issues related to survey materials being available in multiple languages will not be addressed in this paper; only one of the studies referenced here offered Spanish-language materials, New York Minority Youth.

Each of the five studies used to illustrate NORC's approach to obtaining high response rates with low-income populations is based on a list sample and involves follow-up interviews. These seem most appropriate for people who wish to survey low-income and welfare populations. The lists came from a variety of sources, one of them compiled in the mid-1960s (Woodlawn Studies). List samples illustrate the importance of good methods of locating respondents, many of whom have moved. Each of the studies is confined to a specific area. Though

PAPI was used for four of the five studies, CAPI was used for one (D.C. Networks Study). The rationale behind the use of PAPI was either cost or speed. Some people fear that carrying laptops into areas where low-income people live is too dangerous, but NORC has not experienced problems. Laptop surveys in big cities are routinely conducted year-round. (Table 3-1 provides some basic information about the studies we will reference in the paper as: the Seattle Study, the Woodlawn Studies, the New York Minority Youth Study, and the D.C. Networks Study.)

NORC has adopted the following protocol outline for obtaining high response rates. It includes measures we have developed to: (1) locate and contact the sample; (2) staff and train interviewers; (3) optimize field support and communications; and (4) control budget and quality.

The following is a compilation of input regarding this topic from NORC's top field management team members who were actively involved in carrying out these studies successfully.

THE SAMPLE

List

Ideally, the sample list will be up to date, comprehensive, and accurate. However, most often it contains aged information provided by the client based on administrative records. The standard information—including full name, most recent address and phone number, and date of birth—can be enhanced by researching other ancillary information. This includes maiden name for women, driver's license or state identification number, employers, schools or training programs attended, military service, prison records, and persons likely to know where the sample member can be found (a parent, grandparent, close friend, or neighbor). Once obtained, it is essential that this augmenting information and its source be documented accurately for future reference.

Advance Letter

The initial correspondence to the respondent is a critical step toward gaining cooperation. It sets the tone of the survey and must compel participation. The advance letter should be straightforward and brief. Proprietary terms and legal jargon should be avoided. The letter explains the study and certifies that the interview: (1) will be strictly confidential; (2) is voluntary; and (3) will be conducted by a properly identified and trained interviewer. If a respondent fee will be provided it should be mentioned, and if such a fee can be exempt from income reporting by virtue of the client obtaining a waiver, that should be mentioned too. (A respondent fee is strongly recommended as a method of assuring maximum response rates.) A toll-free telephone number is supplied in the letter to permit the respondent to ask questions and/or set up an interview.

TABLE 3-1 Listing of Representative Surveys of Low-Income Population

Study Name and Dates of Data Collection Activities	Location	Sample	Questionnaire Length	Percentage of Response Rates	Respondent Incentives	Mode
Seattle Study 1996-1999	King County, Washington	571 for baseline list sample	45-60 minutes	75 baseline 90-97 on each of four follow-ups	$40-interview $5-urine specimen	PAPI
Woodlawn Study 1992-1993	Lived in Woodlawn neighborhood of Chicago in 1966 and 1967	1,242 African American respondents list sample	90 minutes (avg.)	85	$25	PAPI, some telephone interviews
Woodlawn Mothers 1996-1997	Subsample of mothers of original 1966-67 sample	1,026 African American mothers list sample	90 minutes (avg.)	79	$25	PAPI, some telephone interviews
New York Minority Youth 1994-1996	East Harlem area of New York City; respondents were 7th-10th graders in 1990	1,330 youth, 666 mothers; African American and Puerto Rican list sample	75 minutes-youth 75 minutes-mother	92	$25-youth $25-mother	PAPI
D.C. Networks Study 1997-present	Washington, D.C., area	500 cases; targeted chain referral sampling for baseline, now list sample	90-120 minutes (CAPI) 30-180 minutes (ethnographic)	86 baseline 82 and 62 on follow-ups one and two	$20-CAPI $20-ethnographic interview	CAPI and ethnographic interviews

The advance letter serves another valuable purpose: to update preliminary locating information. The envelope is marked "Address Service Requested." This statement will result in the post office providing information about the address/person; if the post office forwards the mail to another address, it will provide notification of that new address. For all other mail that does not go directly to the addressee, the mail is sent back with the reason for return, such as a missing apartment number, transposed street numbers, or lack of forwarding address. If one prefers that the letter not be forwarded, the envelope can be marked "Do Not Forward" and it will be returned, allowing it to be remailed to the correct address. Names and addresses from returned letters can be submitted in batch mode through the National Change of Address if time allows. Recent experience shows that this latter approach is more useful when the sample is quite outdated, namely 5 years or more. When time and budget allow, it also helps to work the "un-locatables" through centralized database searches. The sample file should be updated with any leads obtained through this prefield stage; releasing the sample to interviewers without having made the updates will result in extra costs caused by duplicated efforts.

Community Authority Contacts

Informing and/or gaining the support of influential community leaders can be pivotal to the success of the survey. Letters to the local police, Better Business Bureau, ethnic leaders in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) or Hispanic Council, housing authorities, and others serve two important purposes. They provide a sense of security to the interviewer, who then knows that appropriate officials have been notified. Respondents can be shown the letter as a reenforcement measure. The leaders, in turn, often supply essential strategic information regarding places to avoid, whether an escort is justified, and safest times to interview. The letter to community authorities should explain the survey, in addition to how and by whom the interviews will be conducted. It assures them that interviewers will wear photo identification badges.

Locating

NORC has established and maintains a locating protocol that documents, in order of cost, the basic steps involved in locating people. The locating effort, critical to any project's success, is influenced by budget, schedule, IRB and/or OMB constraints, and the locating skills of the project's assigned staff. Therefore, emphasis is placed on centralizing the process before employing the more costly means of in-field locating. Depending on available resources, the centralization of locating can be in a central/home office or in the field (if locating experts equipped with computers that can access the relevant databases and the Internet are available). Centralizing this locating effort allows efficient access to the resources to do the preliminary work of checking phone directories, mailing addresses, contact names, employers, and other information. Field staff are then called on to personally visit the last known address and talk to neighbors, the mail carrier, and others. Interviewers document the results of each locating step on a Record of Calls. Many projects provide the field interviewers with a job aid, referred to as a Locating Checklist. It identifies the steps to be taken by the field in locating a respondent, listing the steps in order of cost. This greatly reduces duplication of effort.

The Seattle Study Experience

The respondents in the Seattle Study were first interviewed in their final month of eligibility for drug-addicted or alcoholic Supplemental Security Income (SSI). The baseline sample information included the identity of a payee to whom the prospective respondent's SSI check was sent. Because many of the payees were agency staff, the interviewers often were able to work directly with the payee to determine when the respondent would be coming in to pick up the check. The agency often let the interviewer have space to interview the respondent at the time of that visit.

However, because of the nature of the sample, there were large numbers of respondents who were homeless. The field manager obtained a list of all the agencies that serviced the homeless and went in person to each place with a list of names. Interviewers made daily visits to many of these locations and eventually found many respondents. The field staff worked diligently to identify the extensive homeless network in the area; they asked homeless people questions such as where they slept, where they got their meals, and where they kept their belongings. This effort proved beneficial during the baseline interview as well as during the follow-ups, which were done at 6-month intervals to examine the effects of the program's termination on former recipients. During this process, the field staff found it is important to learn a respondent's "street" name, because many of them do not go by their legal, given names out in the community. Field staff on this study believed it would be helpful, if possible, to obtain IRB/OMB approval for the interviewer to take a snapshot of the respondent that could be used during subsequent locating efforts.

Also, because all the respondents were in the study because their alcohol- and/or drug-related SSI benefits had been discontinued, another potential locating source was expected to be area taverns. The field manager in charge organized night-time locating trips into the areas of Seattle where the homeless gather. Two or three field interviewers would travel with the field manager into the core area of the city searching for respondents among those waiting in line for entrance into a shelter for the night, or among those patrons in the taverns and bars frequented by street people. These "pub crawls," as the field interviewers called them, were very helpful in locating homeless respondents.

Prisons and jails were another valuable source for locating respondents. On the Seattle Study, a census of all the jails was available. Interviewers checked the list regularly looking for names that matched the pending sample list. Some interviewers were able to obtain special IDs after agreeing to a background check done by the jail. These IDs allowed the interviewers to come and go just as lawyers do, and their visits did not impact on the respondent's allowed number of visitations. To access prisons, in some cases, the client for the Seattle Study had to complete the requisite paperwork before the interviewers could approach incarcerated respondents. On the D.C. Networks Study, a significant effort was made to gain access to the prison system by working closely with the D.C. Department of Corrections. One experienced field person on that study who was particularly effective was a private investigator before joining the interviewer and field management staff at NORC. Protocols related to working in jails and prisons vary considerably by state, so it is important to determine the kinds of access that interviewers will be allowed at the outset of the data collection period. Many states now have a Web site and/or telephone number for locating inmates.

On the Woodlawn Studies in which the original respondents were first graders enrolled in elementary school in an inner-city, predominantly African American urban neighborhood in 1966 and 1967, the locating challenges were enormous. The client had made interim contacts with some respondents, but much of the sample information was very old, so the field staff relied on intensive locating efforts in the neighborhood. They went to the neighborhood and tried to locate the oldest residents on the block, visited neighborhood churches to talk with long-time members, called people with the same last name living in the place of birth to look for relatives of the respondent, and mailed letters to every old address and every new address they found. With regard to the last step, they mailed again and again if not returned by the post office; their persistence often paid off as many respondents moved back to their hometown during the course of the fieldwork.

On the New York Minority Youth Study, a useful locating resource was the schools that respondents had attended. Because the baseline data were collected in the school setting, the client contacted the schools to obtain permission to contact them for locating information. The follow-up interviews were with a sample of inner-city African American and Puerto Rican adolescents and their mothers. Prison contacting was also helpful for this population.

On the D.C. Networks Study, where 62 percent of the respondents have a monthly income of $500 or less, 63 percent have been drug injectors for more than 21 years, and only 50 percent have lived in an apartment or house during the past 6 months—the locating challenges for follow-up have been intense. This is a study in which two outreach workers who are "street wise" and know a lot about the locations where drugs are sold and used, identify respondents in the streets and bring them into the site office to be interviewed. The experienced field staff on the study (four interviewers, a locating expert, and a field site manager) also work on the case, locating by phone or in the field, but they leave the locating in "drug areas" to the outreach workers.

TABLE 3-2 Locating Methods Used

Locating Effort/Source	Seattle Study	Woodlawn Studies	N.Y. Minority Youth	D.C. Networks Study
Probation/parole officers	x			x
Doormen/guards at building complexes				x
Known contacts, such as family members, case workers	x	x	x	x
Last known address	x	x	x	x
Jails/detention centers/prisons	x	x	x	x
Halfway houses	x			x
Clinics	x			x
Hospitals, regular and rehabilitation	x			x
Drug treatment centers	x			x
Known geographical areas for drug purchase/use	x			x
Homeless shelters	x			x
Schools			x	x
Churches	x	x		
Food banks	x			
Old neighborhood	x	x	x	x
Needle exchanges	x			

Table 3-2 indicates some of the specific locating resources that were used during these representative studies.

STAFFING AND TRAINING

Data Collection Plan

Optimum results are more likely to be achieved when the data collection plan reflects both the theoretical underpinnings of the client's research goals and data needs and the best practices of the data collection contractor. Such a plan should be preapproved by the client and precisely match the resources available. This avoids any misunderstanding of what can reasonably be provided by the contractor within the time and budget allowed. Also, as the work proceeds it is important to be in close contact with the client, to share successes and obstacles encountered. Contingency planning within the constraints of the research goals must be addressed in a timely manner.

For example, the Seattle Study was tasked to begin on short notice, with no flexibility on the start date. It had to be started before the respondent's SSI benefits ended, then completed as quickly as possible. A data collection plan was rapidly developed and approved by all parties, thus avoiding any ensuing disagreements regarding production results.

On the Woodlawn Studies, the client was very supportive and even helped with gaining access to some records for locating purposes. She met with the field staff whenever she was in Chicago if her schedule permitted. When production was low, she remained optimistic and reminded the staff how important their efforts were to her research. The sense of team camaraderie on these projects has been unrivaled on other studies and contributed to an outcome that was satisfactory to the client, even though more time than originally projected was needed to reach the final completion rates of 85 percent on the Woodlawn Study and 79 percent on the Woodlawn Mothers.

Recruitment

Key to assigning interviewers who are appropriate to low-income and welfare populations is the recognition that unique attributes are needed. Not all interviewers, even experienced ones, are equally effective in this environment. Screening prospective interviewers begins in the help wanted ad. It must specifically state that the job entails interviewing low income persons in their residences or elsewhere out in the field. The fact that the work will require some evenings and weekends must be understood. Supplying this information beforehand will avoid any misconceptions that may occur later.

During the job interview, it is important that applicants be evaluated on their ability to be nonjudgmental in the situations to which they may be exposed. If the content of the questionnaire is sensitive, it is useful to show candidates a sample of the questions. Some candidates will eliminate themselves, knowing they would be uncomfortable asking these kinds of questions. Successful candidates, both experienced and new to interviewing, will be comfortable with the gaining cooperation aspect of the job. When conducting exit interviews with interviewers who have left a project, one of the frequently mentioned reasons for leaving relates to the "door-to-door sales" aspect of interviewing; they often did not realize how difficult that preinterview step could be and were not up for the challenge or the rejection that can be associated with slammed doors or hung-up phones.

NORC experience with studies involving hard-to-reach populations and/or sensitive topics supports the findings by Groves and Couper that experienced interviewers are more adept at gaining cooperation than inexperienced interviewers. Those who thrive in the interviewing environment see these situations as personal challenges to which they apply their skills gained from earlier experiences.

> To select an approach to use, the interviewer must judge the fit of the respondent to other respondent types experienced in the past (either through descriptions in training or actual interaction with them). We believe that experienced interviewers tend to achieve higher levels of cooperation because they carry with them a larger number of combinations of behaviors proven to be effective for one or more types of householders. (Groves and Couper, 1988:36)

On the D.C. Networks Study, all the interviewers have had experience working in difficult neighborhoods or previous studies in the D.C. area. The experienced locating specialist has been helping them to gain access to prisons and has been doing a great deal of street locating.

Training

Interviewers must be well versed in basic interviewing techniques, including reading questions as worded, neutral probing, "training" the respondent, and confidentiality. At NORC, these basic topics are covered in an eight hour general interviewing techniques training session, which is required of all interviewers new to NORC. In the recent literature on obtaining high response rates, Sullivan et al. (1966) put forth a retention protocol for conducting longitudinal studies with mobile populations that includes three phases, the first of which is relevant to training. In Phase I of their retention protocol (which relates to setting the stage for future contacts with the respondents) Sullivan et al. refer to the importance of establishing trust between the researcher and the respondent (1996:266). To accomplish this, interviewers need to be able to convey to respondents why the survey is needed and how it might impact others in similar circumstances, stress confidentiality of data, and so on. Ensuring that interviewers understand these basics is important to the quality of the data being collected.

Project-specific training then focuses on the purpose of the study, the questionnaire, the informed consent procedure, gaining cooperation, sensitivity, safety, production goals, and other areas. When a project has unique protocols for locating, such as in a study of battered women conducted by Sullivan and colleagues, this is the forum where such procedures would be covered. They had the respondent sign "a Release of Information form indicating that she gave her permission to the alternate contact to give us her address and phone number. Each participant receiving governmental assistance was also asked to sign a release form for the government agency handling her case." This is a protocol that has been used successfully at NORC, primarily on drug study follow-up interviews. Contacts are more comfortable knowing (by actually seeing the respondent's signature on the form) that the respondent has given permission to help locate them.

Training on gaining respondent cooperation is essential on all types of studies, and is best provided when woven throughout the training session, rather than just being covered directly in a module of its own. The ultimate goal in this type of training is to enhance the interviewer's abilities to tailor his or her reaction to the respondent and to maintain interaction with the respondent long enough to gain cooperation. (See Groves and Couper, 1998, Chapter 9, for elaboration on the concepts of tailoring and maintaining interaction.) During training, interviewers practice their approach to gaining cooperation through role playing. They are encouraged to rely on all "tools" provided by the study. For example, each of the five NORC studies referenced in this paper offered an important tool for gaining cooperation, namely, respondent incentives (see Table 3-1). Interviewers report that when a survey involves a long questionnaire that focuses on sensitive topics, as each of these surveys did, incentives make their task of gaining cooperation/averting refusals significantly easier.

Sensitivity training often is appropriate to prepare interviewers for the situations they may encounter. It is designed to help them respond respectfully to the respondents with whom they will interact and to make them "unshockable." Sensitivity training typically covers some background information about the kinds of situations likely to be encountered. The presentation of this information can be done by the principal investigator, an outside expert, or an experienced senior-level field manager. On a study of the terminally ill, for example, the principal investigators talked with the interviewers at training; the interviewers saw a videotape about terminal illness and its effect on the respondent and his or her family; and grief counseling was available to field staff during the course of data collection. In addition to providing interviewers with substantive background, the training often provides opportunities to help the trainees to deal with the emotional responses they are likely to experience themselves and to handle those reactions in the interview situation. On some studies, the field staff are invited to attend special conference sessions prior to the study's implementation. For example, field staff working on the D.C. Networks Study, attended an HIV conference to make them more aware of the types of situations facing potential respondents.

Traveling Interviewers

Supplementing local interviewers with a team of highly experienced traveling interviewers is a strategy that has been successful and cost effective on these studies. This is especially true when the sample is clustered and therefore requires a large number of newly hired interviewers. It is also particularly valuable if the data collection period is very short. On the Seattle Study, several experienced travelers came in at the start of the data collection period. When some of them had to leave, others came in to assume their assignments. Throughout the data collection period, the local field staff worked together with the travelers. NORC experience shows that seasoned travelers can focus on weak data collection areas and apply their proven skills in locating, refusal conversion, and strong production. They also help to motivate and train local interviewers, providing role models of success for new interviewers to emulate. This modeling is especially important when the number of refusals from respondents grows during the field period. Experienced interviewers can describe and/or demonstrate (in the field and/or in role plays) how they prepare for and approach respondents who have refused at least once. They help the less experienced interviewers to move beyond experiencing refusals as personal attacks and turn the focus back onto the importance of the study, the production goals, and how to use the information obtained and recorded in the call notes for each case. Successful interviewers see each problem case as a personal challenge and help convey that state of mind to less experienced interviewers.

SUPPORT AND COMMUNICATIONS

Supervision

Supporting and motivating field staff on low-income studies can differ markedly from the traditional methods used on a national study with a mixed sample. Assigning strong, experienced supervisors with field interviewing expertise is key to achieving high response rates. Interviewers need continual support, brainstorming opportunities, motivation, locating assistance, and morale boosting from involved and caring supervisors. Supervisors must:

(1) Communicate by phone with interviewers no less than twice a week, or more often if indicated.

(2) Discuss numbers, projections, costs, and disposition codes for cases during one call, and have a completely separate call for problem solving. The second call is for question-and-answer periods and problem solving, uninterrupted by the administrative process.

(3) Offer to do locating through central office or Internet sources or to help convert refusals. Managers sometimes can do phone interviews for interviewers on projects that allow it.

(4) Pair up new interviewers or ones hesitant to interview during late hours with experienced interviewers or escorts. (For example, traveling interpreters worked with interviewers who needed to interview Chinese, Vietnamese, and other ethnic groups on the recent Media Use Study.)

(5) Readily transfer cases around once the interviewers have established a work pattern. Supervisors must be quick to recognize procrastinators and replace them with more effective interviewers. This also helps to motivate less productive persons to improve and increase their efforts. Some interviewers prove to be more effective on the telephone than in person, so flexibility is key.

Supervisors also should be adept at refusal aversion, refusal conversion, and locating in order to help interviewers strategize effectively.

Site Office

A centrally located site office, whether for the duration of the study or just during the startup and the final crunch phase of the data collection effort, has proven beneficial. On the Woodlawn Studies, the field management staff were based at an office at NORC's University of Chicago location. This office was set up with multiple telephone lines to allow for centralized locating and some telephone interviewing by the field staff. On the New York Minority Youth Study, the office was set up in client-provided space at Columbia University. On the D.C. Networks Study, a permanent office is set up in a storefront centrally located to the sample members. On the Seattle Study, the site office was set up at the hotel where training was held and the travelers stayed; for the baseline interviewing it was maintained and staffed for the entire data collection period, whereas for the other rounds of interviewing it was set up for training and maintained for the first couple of weeks of data collection. After that the interviewers were supervised remotely, although the supervisor visited at least a few times to meet with field interviewers. There were travelers (experienced interviewers) in for the entire data collection period, although they were not the same individuals during the entire time.

In many studies the site office served to make interviewers more responsible and provided supervisors with greater flexibility to transfer cases and assignments when necessary. Interviewers were required to submit their Time & Expense Reports in person together with their completed cases. This closely tied pay to production and receipt control. Site offices also permitted supervisors to review Records of Calls and do the strategy planning face to face with interviewers.

On the New York Minority Youth Study, the front-line field manager believed that having a site office for the field interviewers helped in many ways. The respondent population was very transient, presenting multiple locating, refusal aversion, and conversion problems. Having a site itself lent a "helping hand" to interviewers who were not strong in these areas. The site office also provided a physical opportunity to brainstorm and share successful approaches with peers. Where one interviewer may have been unsuccessful with a certain case, the field manager could have another interviewer share his or her experience with similar cases or transfer that case for another approach. The field manager believed another benefit of the site office was in the team pressure it created. Interviewers had the opportunity to "shine" in person when they had a great week, and those who were not as successful felt pressured to perform better the following week.

Communications

Field managers on all projects know they are expected to be available to their interviewers 7 days a week. However, on some of these studies that expectation was intensified. On the Seattle Study, for example, a communication link between the field manager and the interviewers was needed 7 days a week and 24 hours a day. Respondents were given a toll-free number that was staffed by the senior field manager in charge who could page any of the interviewers if a respondent called and wanted an appointment. On this study, all interviewers had pagers, and the toll-free number was set up with three-way calling, caller ID, call waiting, and other features. This allowed the supervisor to contact an interviewer while she had a respondent on the phone and set up an appointment on the spot. Cellular phones would have been even more efficient, but at the time they were too costly to rent.

Teamwork

Support also comes in the form of working together in teams, during either the interviewing or the locating phases. The team could include a field supervisor or experienced traveler who can model an effective approach at the door and gain cooperation when new interviewers are unsure of themselves. It also can involve sending both a male and a female interviewer to an area where the female interviewer alone might be uncomfortable. The team effort also can be invoked for a "blitz" when all of the interviewers and supervisors work together to finish up specific cases.

BUDGET CONTROL/QUALITY CONTROL

Successful containment of costs requires strict measures and frequent monitoring. Senior field staff are involved in developing the proposal and the associated budget. During this process, alternative options and tradeoffs are discussed until all are in agreement on priorities and budget caps. Contingency plans, in keeping with the client's objectives, must be in place. Field staff are then provided with a budget they helped formulate and are given the responsibility to manage it.

During the Woodlawn Studies, when the locating became more time consuming than expected, the client extended the field period to give the field staff more time. When extending the data collection period may not be feasible, as was the case during the baseline interviewing for the Seattle Study, other contingencies were adopted, such as keeping the travelers on site longer than anticipated originally. Others included the need for attrition training if interviewers dropped out for one reason or another, lowering targeted response goals, and so on.

The pressures imposed on the interviewers in a study characterized by a short field period, low budget, and difficult-to-locate respondents increase the importance of quality control efforts. It is essential to conduct validation interviews for at least 10 percent of each interviewer's cases, sampling from completed cases as well as noninterviews. If possible, especially if there is a site office, plan to have supervisors observe some of the interviewing. This step displays their interest in quality control.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The protocol described in this paper for obtaining high response rates in in-person surveys of low-income and welfare populations (summarized in Box 3-1) includes, but goes beyond, the factors identified by Gordon et al. as being important in follow-up surveys of low-income populations: initial contact information; updating of contact information; sophisticated tracking methods; mixed-mode interviewing; and respondent payments (Gordon et al., 1992). To those factors, the NORC approach adds effective field staffing; training with appropriate emphasis placed on the gaining cooperation tasks; and strong field support. Without identifying and deploying the resources to collect the data in the most supportive manner, even the best sample information will not result in a completed interview. The people involved in the actual data collection tasks are key, from the field interviewers to the field supervisors to the support staff in the home office. Groves and Couper's (1998) concepts of tailoring and maintaining interaction support our recommendations. In terms of the staffing approach, the most effective field staff are expert at tailoring their approach to respondents; staffing as many experienced field interviewers as possible and/or supplementing a staff of less experienced interviewers with experienced travelers is important. On the training front, it is important to cover issues related to training the respondent and gaining cooperation, along with examples and opportunities for practice, throughout the course of training. On the field support front, having a site office where interviewers and field managers can interact in person and brainstorm and allow early intervention if a problem is developing further supports the opportunities for interviewers to learn how important tailoring and maintaining interaction can be.

Finally, because of cost constraints, we recognize that face-to-face interviewing is not going to be affordable in many cases. Therefore, we strongly recommend that more focus be given to planned mixed-mode studies, acknowledging that high response rates by mail or telephone are very difficult and potentially miss key parts of this population, such as the homeless and other respondents who move frequently or those who lack phones. Part of a successful mixed-mode model would include approaches such as collaborative locating efforts with agency staff to help cut locating costs; adaptation of a Release of Information form for use with locating contacts (Sullivan et al., 1996:267); use of respondent incentives; and perhaps even "piggybacking" of some data collection that could offer a more cost-effective way to obtain additional data.

BOX 3-1
Key Elements in Obtaining High Response Rates in In-Person Studies

Locating and Contacting the Sample

Quality of the list sample: Prior to fielding the sample, make any effort possible to update the list. Collaboration with the client often can be very beneficial.

Use of advance letter: Interviewers report that an advance letter sent to the respondent helps to emphasize the legitimacy and importance of the survey, thus becoming a "tool" in their gaining cooperation kit.

Community authority contacts: Interviewers feel supported and safer when a project alerts community authorities of the study and their presence in the community.

Locating: Resources devoted to locating efforts, both centralized and in the field, are essential for obtaining high completion rates with low-income populations. Putting together a cost-effective locating protocol is key because it is easy to spend a great deal on these efforts.

Staffing and Training Interviewers

Data collection plan: It is important that the researchers and data collection staff consult about the feasibility of any proposed data collection strategies.

Recruiting field interviewers: Careful screening and selection criteria applied by experienced field recruiters are critical. Not all interviewers, even those who are experienced, are effective working with low-income populations.

Training: Training for interviewers should cover basic interviewing techniques, project-specific topics, and sensitivity training. It should be ongoing throughout data collection and focus on the needs that emerge, such as dealing with refusals.

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Use of experienced, traveling interviewers: Although this may seem counterintuitive on a survey with limited data collection funds, NORC's experience has shown that such a strategy can be cost effective if planned from the outset and managed carefully.

Optimizing Field Support and Communication

Field supervision: Use experienced field supervisors who have experience working successfully with low-income populations. Make sure the budget allows for close supervision, not just taking reports.

Site office: When the sample is clustered, setting up a site office can be very effective for motivating interviewers to stay on task. Even when the site is set up only temporarily, such as at the beginning and end of data collection, it can be a positive impact on production.

Communications: Be available to interviewers beyond regular business hours. Depending on the schedule and sample, consider use of beepers, cell phones, and other communications methods.

Teamwork: Interviewers are more likely to be successful if they feel they are part of a team and have contact with that team during the data collection period, even if just via conference calls.

Controlling Budget and Quality

Budget: Review the budget on a regular basis.

Contingency plans: Have contingency plans ready for implementation in case original budget assumptions don't hold.

Quality control: Don't skimp on quality control; be sure to validate a percentage of each interviewer's cases, both completes and noninterviews.

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