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Measuring the measurement error:
A method to qualitatively validate sensitive survey data*

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Abstract

People may under-report sensitive and risky behaviors such as violence or substance abuse in surveys. Misreporting correlated with treatment is especially worrisome in causal analysis. We develop and test a survey validation technique that uses intensive qualitative work to check for measurement error in random subsamples of respondents. Trained local researchers spent several days speaking with and observing respondents within a few days of their survey, validating six behaviors: four potentially sensitive (crime, drug use, homelessness, gambling) and two non-sensitive (phone charging and video club expenditures). Subjects were enrolled in a randomized trial designed to reduce poverty and anti-social behaviors. We find no evidence of underreporting of sensitive behaviors, partly because (we discovered) stigma in this population is low. Non-sensitive expenditures were underreported, however, especially by the control group, probably because of strategic behavior and recall bias. The main contribution is a replicable validation method for observable, potentially sensitive behaviors.

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Measuring the measurement error: a method to qualitatively validate sensitive survey data

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