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What does the evidence say about pre-survey SMS contact?

Improving response rates

There is some evidence, but a limited amount, indicating that pre-survey SMS contact increases response rates, but the evidence varies across studies. In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), response rates increased between three and eight percentage points and may work in conjunction with monetary incentives. There is limited evidence on effects on sample composition. This brief investigates existing evidence on pre-survey SMS contact.

Motivation

A primary concern with phone surveys is low response rates. This is especially true for random-digit-dial (RDD) or similar “cold call” phone surveys, which are necessary in the absence of a sample frame of reliable phone numbers. From an operational standpoint, low response rates mean high costs of interviewer time spent on unsuccessful attempts. Non-response at a minimum likely means the resulting sample isn’t representative as respondent pools are made up of only the most available, compliant individuals and those with working phones at the time of the survey.

Pre-survey SMS contact is a promising approach to increase response rates by improving the likelihood that respondents will answer the phone (prenotification) and/or by improving their willingness to take and complete the survey (intrinsic motivation). Understanding how pre-survey SMS prenotification and intrinsic motivation affect response rates is important to understand data quality of phone surveys in LMICs.

Existing Evidence

Previous research in the United States, Europe and Australia indicates that prenotification¹ in the form of advance letters improves cooperation and response rates in telephone surveys.² However, prenotification of remote survey methods has not been studied in detail in LMICs.

One study used pre-survey SMS notifications for a computer-assisted telephone interview (CATI) to test the effects of intrinsic motivation on survey completion.³ Sending the advance SMS resulted in a significant increase in response rates as shown in Figure 1. However, the mechanism could not be identified between prenotification or behavioral messaging within the SMS. The study also tested the effect of extrinsic incentives (compensations). They found that the combination of incentives resulted in an aggregate improvement in response rates.

Other evidence for CATI surveys suggests that prenotification SMS may not be effective for controlling panel attrition, though the content and format of the messages varied and prompted a

¹Basic characteristics of prenotification letters include mentions of the research agency, contact information for questions, subject of the survey, and assurances, anonymity/confidentiality statement, and duration of the survey.

²De Leeuw et al., 2002

³Winters & Kishor, 2012

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Evidence Brief: Pre-Contact Notifications in Remote Surveys

As part of IPA’s response to COVID-19, many existing and new data collections have shifted to remote data collection modes including computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI), interactive voice response (IVR), and SMS surveys. These remote data collection modes allow research to continue, but there are many open questions about whether these types of data collection can effectively substitute for face-to-face surveying. Research on remote survey methods in low- and medium-income countries (LMICs) has been conducted intermittently over the past decade. This brief provides information on existing research on how pre-survey notifications affect response rates and sample composition. It provides suggestions on mechanisms that pre-survey notifications operate through as well as some suggestions for



future research.

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