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What does the evidence say about monetary survey incentives?

Beyond response rates

The research consensus on monetary incentives suggests that monetary payments increase response rates by reducing refusal rates, but the effect is diminishing as incentive size increases.¹ In low- and medium-income countries (LMICs), the impact on response rates ranges between two and ten percentage points.² There is some evidence, but a limited amount, on the role that incentives play on the quality of responses. This evidence suggests monetary incentives may not affect sample composition substantially but may affect response quality. This brief investigates existing evidence on outcomes beyond response rates.

Motivation

Considerable attention has been paid to questions of response bias in surveys. Changing characteristics of the interview also may affect how individuals respond to various survey items. The effect of incentives on reliability, validity, and sample composition are open questions in the literature.³ This is relevant in the COVID-19 context, where interviewers have less ability to monitor respondent's reactions in a phone survey.

In LMICs, there may be additional complications: respondents might be motivated by experience or expectations that the survey may be there as a targeting tool for an aid organization, lack of network or airtime availability, as well as lower rates of mobile phone ownership.⁴ For surveys to accurately measure what they set out to, researchers need to understand how these factors affect who responds to their surveys, especially when these results are used for policy creation or eligibility for a benefit such as a transfer program.

Existing Evidence

A study in Karnataka, India randomly varied the size of incentives offered to face-to-face survey participants. This had little or no effect on the demographic make up of the sample as well as on responses to potentially sensitive items such as household decision making or knowledge of the project underlying the survey.⁵ However, the authors found that participants who had been randomized into the incentive group reported lower income, expenditures, and assets. The reduction in reports of consumption came primarily through luxury spending (Figure 1).

¹ Lygin & Yu, 2019

² Johnson et al., 2019; Stavitsky & Yoo, 2019; Sullivan, Kowalsky & Doolan, 2015; Yu et al., 2019

³ Lygin & Yu, 2019

⁴ https://www.kuinternet.org/statistics/documents/statistics/2019/mobile_cellular_2000-2018_dec2019.xls

⁵ Yu, 2019; Stavitsky & Yoo, 2019

Evidence Brief: Monetary Incentives 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 survey incentives in LMICs. It investigates how incentives may affect survey responses through outcomes beyond response rates such as sample composition changes and changes to

response behavior. It provides suggestions on mechanisms that these effects may operate through as well as some suggestions for future research.

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