

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 (compensation). 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

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

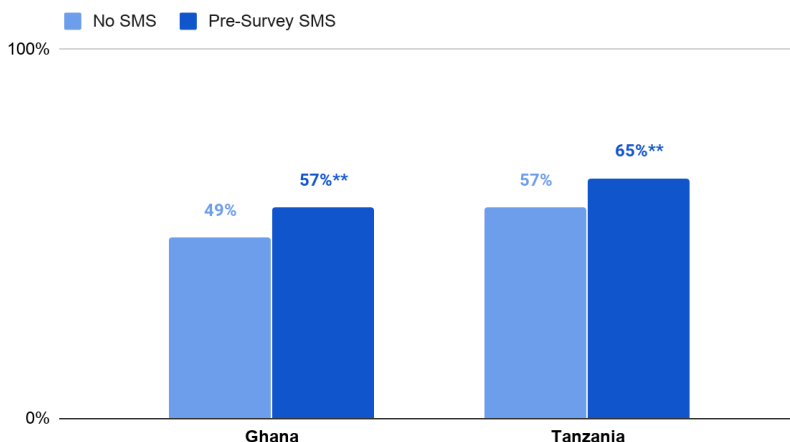
² [De Leeuw et. al., 2007](#)

³ [Morello & Leo, 2016](#)

IPA's evidence briefs are part of a series reviewing existing evidence on implementing surveys using computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) and other remote survey modes. These briefs are made possible with the generous support from and collaboration with Northwestern University's Global Poverty Research Lab (GPRL). It was prepared by Savanna Henderson and Michael Rosenbaum with helpful input from Steven Glazerman.

response from individuals.⁴ Of note, the authors found similar sized effects on retention rates for SMS combined with monetary incentives to Morello & Leo.

Figure 1. Response Rates With and Without Pre-Survey SMS Contacts



Note: $n = 1000$ in each site, * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$; source: [Morello & Leo, 2016](#)

Evidence is lacking on how prenotification effectiveness varies by mode and sampling frame. There is speculative evidence that prenotification does not affect response rates for interactive voice recognition (IVR) modes.⁵ However, another study found substantive differences due to a prenotification SMS and timing of the IVR survey call though the study sample -- farmers during planting season -- may have played a role in these findings.⁶

Mechanisms

The theory behind the positive effects of prenotification include: dispels suspicion, underscores the legitimacy of the survey, eliminates the surprise of an unexpected cold call and evokes the principles of social exchange and reciprocity, which positively influences response. The role of intrinsic incentives in prenotification has been less explicitly explored but qualitative research indicates that there are three categories of intrinsic motivation to explain why individuals respond to surveys: (1) altruistic, (2) egoistic, (3) survey characteristics.⁷

These mechanisms may also affect response quality by incentivizing truthful reporting and prompting respondents to commit their full attention to the survey. These effects hinge on the literacy of pre-survey SMS contact recipients. Additionally, the character limitations of SMS challenge the amount of information that can be conveyed and the characteristics of the information.

As part of IPA's research methods initiative, we are investigating the effect of various content in pre-survey SMS messages on response rates and sample composition.

⁴ [Velthausz et al., 2016](#)

⁵ [Amaya et. al., 2018](#)

⁶ [Kasy & Sautmann, 2019](#)

⁷ [Singer & Ye, 2013](#)