Northwestern
GLOBAL POVERTY
RESEARCH LAB

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Asking Sensitive Questions by Phone

Case Study: "Proyecto Mi Barrio" Phone Survey, Medellín, Colombia

Phone surveys can be an especially difficult mode over which to collect sensitive data. IPA Colombia conducted phone surveys in May and June, 2020 to understand how the organized crime groups of Medellín were responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. This necessitated asking sensitive questions about organized crime and illegal activities, specifically, extortion, perception of the drug market, and behavior of criminal groups. It can be particularly difficult to build trust over the phone, especially when the respondent cannot easily confirm who they are speaking to.

The project team conducted an extensive piloting process to test multiple strategies for building trust and designing questionnaires. After completing this process, they catalogued a set of best practices for phone surveying with sensitive questions based on their experience.

Recommendations

This brief shares lessons about consent scripts and questionnaires learned from the "Proyecto Mi Barrio" research project based in Medellín, Colombia and led by Christopher Blattman, Benjamin Lessing, Gustavo Duncan, and Santiago Tobón. After trying several strategies for gaining cooperation and trust, the research team offered the following recommendations:

– **Spend time in training (and retraining) on tone of voice:** Tone of voice is one of the main tools the enumerator has to gain the trust of the respondent. Natural sounding delivery is preferred. A monotone can lead to bored respondents and smaller response rates, whereas overly energetic and artificial tones can lead to respondents feeling uncomfortable.

– **Explain clearly how respondent anonymity will be preserved**: Use clear and understandable language to explain what data you will collect, how you will keep it confidential and secure, who will be able to access their data, and how results will be shared. If respondents flag any risks at any point of the data flow process, stop data collection to ensure these risks are controlled.

– **Reduce the amount of personally identifying information (PII) that is collected to the necessary minimum**: Ask yourself whether personal information is truly needed for tracking, quality checks, or analysis before even including these fields in your questionnaire. Consider disabling some fields that are automatically collected by survey platforms such audio recordings or collection of numbers from tablet call applications.

– **Include privacy statements & reminders throughout the questionnaire, especially around sensitive questions**: Add privacy statements or reminders when you ask sensitive questions. It's okay to be repetitive! Add training time and quality checks (such as text or audio audits) to ensure that enumerators are not skipping this important step.

– **Place sensitive question modules intentionally in the questionnaire**: The middle of the form was successful in this context as questions on illegal activities require trust but do not necessarily result in the survey ending if the respondent is uncomfortable. This is not a strict rule, as there are some sensitive topics such as items on intimate partner violence that are often placed at the end of the questionnaire to avoid potential order effects and to allow the interview to end naturally if the respondent is uncomfortable with those questions.