

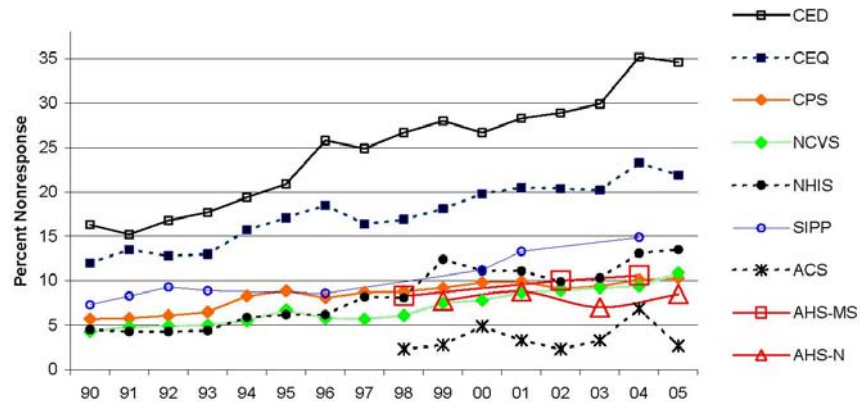
Discussion of Eleanor Singer, “Notes Toward a Cost-Benefit Theory of Survey Participation”

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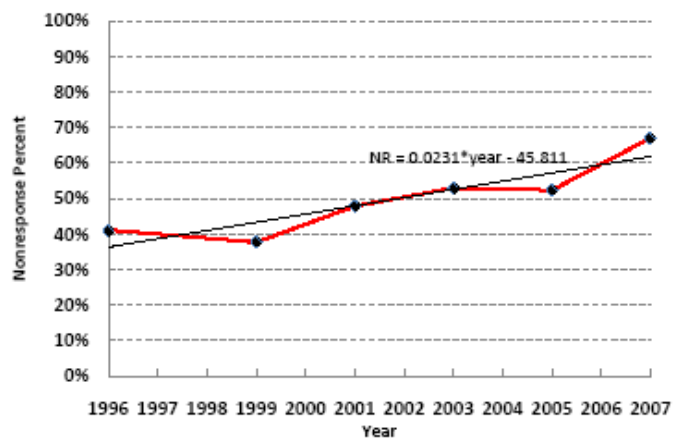
Introduction

- Household survey response rates have fallen steadily over a period of many years
 - Reasons for falling response rates are poorly understood
 - Limited research-based evidence to guide efforts for stemming or reversing the decline in response rates
- Singer paper makes an important point:
In thinking about respondent's decision to participate, need to consider not only factors that affect the perceived costs of survey participation but also factors that affect the positive motivation for survey participation
- Helpful for thinking about trends in response rates and about measures to raise response rates

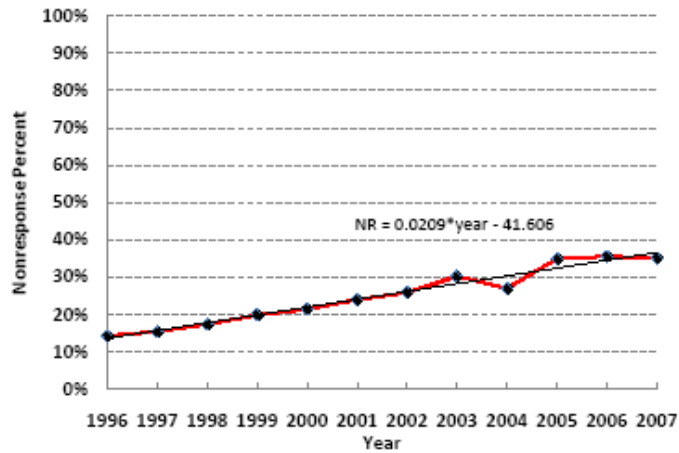
Non-response in Selected Household Surveys Conducted by US Census Bureau (Bates 2006)



Non-response in the National Household Education Survey, 1996-2007 (Brick and Williams, 2009)



Non-response in the National Immunization Survey, 1996-2007 (Brick and Williams, 2009)



Contact versus cooperation

- Growing non-response reflects both increased difficulty in contacting respondents and increased difficulty in securing their cooperation
- Much of the effort survey organizations make to maintain and raise response rates primarily concerned with contact rather than cooperation
 - Significant resources devoted to follow-up mailings, phone calls and visits
 - Acknowledge there is some fuzziness in the distinction between non-contact and refusal, but believe it is nonetheless a useful distinction
- Singer focuses on the cooperation decision
 - This is where costs and benefits as perceived by the respondent come into play

Possible explanations for falling cooperation rates

- Factors related to the perceived cost of survey participation
 - Increasing concerns about privacy and confidentiality
 - Increasing demands on respondents' time (e.g., larger number of telephone solicitations, longer commute times)
- Factors related to the perceived rewards to survey participation
 - "Legitimate" survey requests have become harder to distinguish from market research and sales solicitations
 - Weakening of social capital undermines willingness to contribute time to serve public purposes
- Difficult to be sure about what has changed

Strategies to reduce perceived costs of survey participation

- Promise information will be kept confidential
 - Design questionnaire that is "user friendly"
 - Train interviewers to address any respondent concerns
- Results summarized by Singer suggest that, on their own, these strategies are unlikely to be sufficient

Strategies to affect perceived benefits of survey participation

- Use advance materials to signal request important
 - Make key information collections mandatory
- Explain clearly why information needed
- Offer incentives for completing the survey:
 - Monetary or other tangible incentives?
 - Individualized reports on survey findings?

Strategic use of advance materials

- Sending advance materials ...
 - ... signals to prospective respondent that the survey sponsor cares about obtaining the information
 - ... provides an opportunity for survey sponsor to explain the importance of the information to be collected
- Being able to say that survey mandatory may send an even stronger signal

Explaining to respondents the importance of information requested

- Consider the “sales pitch” for the two surveys used as examples in Singer (2003):
 - NSFG: The goal of the study is to gather information from a national sample of households about schooling, work, marriage and divorce, family life, sexual experiences, pregnancy, and medical care... Your participation will help government agencies and health policy makers to plan better health services and educational programs for American men, women and families.
 - HRS: The study will provide a better understanding of the factors that affect the decision to retire, and the consequences of retirement for health and economic well-being. We are especially interested in knowing how recent changes in the Social Security system and in private pensions have affected retirement plans, so that sensible public policies can be developed for the future.
- Would like to know whether making the sales pitch “punchier” raises the cooperation rate

Offering rewards for survey participation in the form of useful or interesting information

- Promising to share general results from survey may be helpful
- Promising a customized report on some aspect of the survey findings could be even more effective
 - Example: NHANES provides respondents with a report on the results of their tests (not a typical survey)
 - Example: Consumer Expenditure Survey could provide a report on how household's spending patterns compare to those of other similar households
- Would like to know whether offering customized reports raises the cooperation rate

Research agenda

- Research using vignettes is relatively low cost ...but what people *say* they will do is not necessarily what they *actually* will do
- May worry that “sales pitch” showing how data used or suggested comparison of respondent's answers with those from other households will cause bias in responses
 - In addition to looking at effects on cooperation rates, would need to consider possible effects on pattern of responses
- Would like to see more experiments embedded in ongoing surveys to learn about the effects of varying how the respondent is approached on survey cooperation