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## RESPONSE RATE TRENDS IN BRITAIN

### SYNOPSIS

This paper describes briefly response rate trends of the National Readership Survey in Britain, and of other large scale British surveys. It examines the reasons for falling response rates and reports the measures which had been tried to overcome the increasing problems.

There is a profile analysis of respondents compared with non-respondents, and a readership analysis by the number of calls made to obtain an interview. This analysis shows the importance of a high number of calls on issued addresses in pre-selected surveys, particularly with reference to readership results of quality newspapers.

# RESPONSE RATE TRENDS IN BRITAIN

As in most countries, Britain has experienced a decline in response rates in sample surveys. The 30 year trend 1960 to 1990 as experienced by the National Readership Survey, shows the following picture: while in the Sixties only 1 out of 5 potential informants remained a non-respondent, in 1990 this has doubled to nearly 2 out of 5.

## NRS RESPONSE RATES

1960	1970	1980	1990
77.0%	79.5%	75.4%	62.6%

Other British large scale surveys employing random sampling also showed declines in response rates. The following table shows response rate figures of three Government sponsored regular surveys:

## GENERAL HOUSEHOLD SURVEY RESPONSE RATES

1982	1984
84%	81%

## FAMILY EXPENDITURE SURVEY RESPONSE RATES

1982	1984
72%	68%

## NATIONAL FOOD SURVEY RESPONSE RATES

1982	1984	1986
55%	53%	51%

The increase in non-response on the National Readership Survey is to its greater part accounted for by an increase in refusals. Refusals have grown faster than other categories of non-response. This is in line with experiences elsewhere. In the USA, according to Charlotte G Steeh (1), who analysed non-response trends in Surveys of Consumer Attitudes and Election Studies 1952-1979 "there have been substantial increases in non-response rates since the early 1950's, and these increases are due primarily to changes in refusal rates".

The British NRS series of year by year figures of response and refusal rates during the Eighties are as follows:

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NRS RESPONSE AND REFUSAL RATES

NRS Year	Response Rate	Refusal Rate	Other Non- respondents
	%	%	%
1980	75.1	11.8	13.1
1981	74.2	12.0	13.9
1982	73.6	11.7	14.7
1983	72.9	12.4	14.7
1984	71.0	14.8	14.2
1985	69.0	15.3	15.7
1986	68.8	16.8	14.4
1987	67.0	17.7	15.3
1988	68.4	16.2	15.4
1989	65.1	17.0	17.9
1990 (Jan-Jun)	62.6	18.7	18.7

How are these figures to be explained? We have grouped the factors which potentially influence response, into the following three categories:

Survey Design

Complexity of sampling task  
Complexity of interview  
Length of interview  
Size and length of assignment

Fieldwork Administration

Quality of central field control  
Quality of regional field control  
Interviewer payment  
Other motivation factors

Social Factors

Population density (urbanity)  
Population mobility  
Crime rate  
Adverse publicity against market research  
Data privacy issues  
Introduction of poll tax

As for the first group of factors, let me pick one example. We know that the complexity of the NRS interview and of the sampling and contacting tasks has increased. For example, in 1970, the non-media part of the NRS questionnaire contained 27 questions. These increased to 46 in 1980, and to 71 in 1988.

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As to the second group of factors, let me mention payment. Interviewer payment (which still trails behind in Britain compared with the Continent) is one of the main influences on performance. We constantly try to update payment, and more recently introduced a bonus scheme on the NRS, despite its difficult implementation on a pre-selected sample where the number of achievable interviews greatly depends on the nature of the area in which sampling takes place.

And with reference to the third group of factors, British market research had in the late Eighties been given an additional burden, namely the introduction of the poll tax (or Community Charge as it is officially called). For the poll tax, inspectors were sent out to check the completion of registers. So, market research interviewers were viewed with suspicion by parts of the population and often thought to be Poll Tax inspectors in disguise.

This, coupled with the "traditional" social phenomena like greater mobility and the increase in working women, together with greater awareness of data protection issues, made pre-selected sampling in Britain much more difficult than it used to be in the past.

One way of counteracting falling response rates on the NRS has always been to stipulate to interviewers that they make more calls on addresses issued to them before they give up their attempts to obtain an interview. We have evidence that this has happened. As the following table shows, the average number of calls per issued address has increased:

Average number of calls made per issued address	
NRS Year	
1983	2.4
1984	2.6
1985	2.6
1986	2.8
1987	3.0
1988	3.2
1989	3.4

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As we have seen, in spite of these increased calls, NRS response rates kept falling. There were numerous other attempts to stem the tide. These included making the assignment more manageable by clustering addresses more than before, by allowing more time to be spent, by allowing greater flexibility as to how the time might be spent over a fixed assignment period, by shortening the interview and record keeping, by handing introduction letters to informants, by giving gifts, by handing letters to refusals, asking them to co-operate at a later call at a later date - all to no noticeable effect.

One potentially promising way to increase response rates was thought to be the sending of advance letters to selected informants. Here the experience of the Government-sponsored surveys was drawn upon. When the three Government-sponsored surveys mentioned above introduced advance letters, there were dramatic results, as shown by these tables:

#### GENERAL HOUSEHOLD SURVEY RESPONSE RATES

##### 1986 Experiment

without advance letter	with advance letter
79%	84%

#### FAMILY EXPENDITURE SURVEY RESPONSE RATES

##### 1986 Survey

Jan - Aug without letter	Sept - Dec with advance letter
69%	72%

#### NATIONAL FOOD SURVEY RESPONSE RATES

##### 1987 Survey

Jan - Jun without letter	Jul - Dec with advance letter
50%	58%

However, these very good results were not repeated when we experimented with advance letters on the National Readership Survey, as the following table shows:

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### NATIONAL READERSHIP SURVEY RESPONSE RATES

March/April 1990 Experiment

without letter

53%

with advance letter

52%

We think there is one important factor which explains the difference in response to advance letters between the Government-sponsored surveys and the JICNARS sponsored NRS. This is the fact that the Government-sponsored surveys were able to send letters using "official" letterheads ("Office of Population Censuses and Surveys") which have arguably a greater impact than letters written on "JICNARS" letterheads.

Recognising the fact that response rates were falling and that no effective way has yet been found to overcome the problems, two sampling changes were introduced on the NRS to ensure that sufficient numbers of interviews are achieved by important demographic groups, without compromising the virtues of pre-selected sampling. The first was introduced in 1987 when a new procedure of oversampling young non-electors came into effect.

The British NRS uses the Electoral Register as a sampling frame. The voting age is 18+. Non-electors are called those not on the list but who are generated as eligible informants aged 15+. The new procedure gives non-electors, mainly 15 to 17 year olds, a disproportional chance to be selected.

The second change was also introduced in 1987 and will be expanded in 1990. This is the selection of alternative addresses to be used under certain conditions if a basic address issued fails to generate an interview. The conditions include that the basic address is not located, empty or demolished, or that the selected person is dead, or sick, or refuses to take part in the interview.

What do we know about the effects of falling response rates on demographic profiles and on readership results?

We have every reason to be worried about potential biases stemming from falling response rates but we have also some grounds for consolation. Our efforts to achieve the highest possible response rates are constantly increased as evidenced by the ever increasing number of calls our interviewers make on issued addresses. The demographic profile of those not interviewed seems as a result only slightly different from those interviewed, as the table below shows.

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NRS interviewers are required to complete a form for each non-respondent, recording the non-respondent's sex, estimated age, and social grade. From this information we deduce, that non-respondents have a very similar profile to respondents by age and social grade, but not by sex. There is a higher proportion of male non-respondents than of male respondents.

What we do not know is, how the attitudes of non-respondents differ.

#### NRS PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS VS NON-RESPONDENTS JANUARY - JUNE 1989

	RESPONDENTS	NON-RESPONDENTS (estimated)
Base	14,927	7,215
	%	%
<u>Sex</u>		
Male	44	50
Female	56	50
<u>AGE</u>		
15-24	21	21
25-34	17	19
35-44	17	16
45-54	14	15
55-64	13	11
65+	18	17
<u>Social Grade</u>		
AB	18	14
C1	22	28
C2	28	32
D	18	16
E	14	12

As for readership, we know that readership results are very much affected by the number of calls made by interviewers on issued addresses, before they give up an attempt to achieve an interview.

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## RESPONSE RATE TRENDS IN BRITAIN

The following table demonstrates how important a high number of calls are, particularly for quality newspapers:

### READERSHIP (AIR) BY CALL NUMBER AT WHICH INTERVIEW TOOK PLACE (NRS 1989)

	Calls 1 or 2	Calls 3 - 5	Calls 6+	Total
Unweighted base	15,892	9,663	1,876	27,431
	%	%	%	%
<u>Newspapers</u>				
Quality Dailies	11.4	13.4	15.5	12.4
Quality Sundays	13.8	15.4	17.9	14.7
Mid-market Dailies	19.0	21.1	21.2	19.9
Mid-market Sundays	20.0	22.2	24.1	21.1
Popular Dailies	38.2	40.6	38.0	39.0
Popular Sundays	51.4	51.9	49.3	51.4

Based on these sort of findings, we believe it is not yet the case that pre-selected sampling for the National Readership Survey is undermined by falling response rates to such an extent that it might as well be replaced by quota sampling. We will continue our efforts to over-come falling response rates, and will monitor the results in the way described in this paper.

- (1) Charlotte G Steeh. Trends in Non-response Rates, 1952 - 1979. Public Opinion Quarterly. Vol. 45: 40-57.