

## E. ENHANCING RESPONSE RATES

Survey researchers are well aware of the importance of achieving the high response rates critical to establishing the reliability and accuracy of survey findings. There are many well-known methods for doing so (AAPOR, 2006). In this section, in order to distill lessons specific to improving response rates for the Hispanic/Latino Adult Tobacco Survey (H/L ATS), we focus on the experience of researchers who have surveyed Hispanic and Latino populations.

### *Overall Comments*

First, there are no “silver bullet” solutions to the problem of raising survey response rates. Survey response rates have consistently declined over the past 20 years across all segments of the population. Second, much of the evidence concerning specific recommendations for enhancing response rates among Hispanic and Latino populations is anecdotal. Usually the race or ethnicity of the nonrespondents is unknown, precluding rigorous quantitative analysis. What is known about effective techniques is often based on qualitative review of call history records and interviewers’ impressions of the relative success they have using different approaches.

### *Using the H/L ATS*

Seasoned survey researchers generally affirm that using approaches sensitive to the specific cultural and social context of the target population will help achieve the highest rates possible. The foremost method we can recommend for improving response rates among the Hispanic/Latino population is, therefore, the use of the H/L ATS itself. As described in Section F.1, the survey design and the questionnaire were carefully developed to be sensitive to the specific cultural and social contexts of Hispanic and Latino populations in the United States. The better the respondents can relate to the survey—the introduction, the questions, their communications with the interviewer—the more likely they are to cooperate and complete the interview.

### *Advance Letters*

Advance letters generally aid in increasing survey participation and in reducing the number of contacts required to obtain a full response to the survey (Dillman, 2000). Anecdotal findings reported by Schoua-Glusberg (1998, 2000) affirm the value of advance letters in helping win respondent cooperation. Section B.5 details how the H/L ATS advance letter can be incorporated into the survey protocol.

### *Customized Introductions*

Experienced survey researchers understand the importance of an effective introduction to create rapport with respondents and to gain their cooperation. A researcher experienced in

surveying Hispanic/Latino populations offered CDC the following advice on developing effective introductions with Hispanic/Latino persons:

Many [Hispanic/Latino] people do not really understand what surveys are for and how health-related surveys are the source of the data that serve not only for planning, but also for better educating the community. We understand that IRB [institutional review board] issues require significant formality, but a brief explanation of what the survey is and what the information will serve for early in the introduction tends to boost participation. . . .

We also found that the straightforward and somewhat cold presentation of the survey when the first person answers the phone increases the nonparticipation rates. The presentation of the survey needs to be friendlier and with opportunities to ask feedback from the person who answers the call. . . .

We found that "asking for a favor" is key. . . . When we tell them that we are asking a favor from them, they understand right away the social value of the survey. (Personal communication, June 7, 2006)

### *Appropriate Response to Concerns*

The success of a good interviewer often rests in his or her ability to quickly perceive and respond to the concerns of potential respondents. It is worthwhile for researchers administering the H/L ATS to invest in developing effective responses to frequently asked questions and in training interviewers to use those answers. This correspondence with CDC specifies, "It is also very important to clarify that it is not about selling anything to them, or that it is not at all a market-related call." The report issued after CDC's 2002 expert meeting, *Effective Tobacco Control in Hispanic/Latino Communities: A Synopsis of Key Findings and Recommendations* (USDHHS, 2004), provides insight into ways to approach Hispanic and Latino persons and the concerns they have about participating in surveys.

### *Bilingual Interviewers*

The H/L ATS is available in Spanish, and use of the Spanish version will help ensure that bias is not introduced by way of failure to interview monolingual Spanish speakers. Beyond this measure, however, interviewers should be able to alternate easily between English and Spanish during the initial contact with a household. Even if some household members speak English, some members, particularly older members or recent immigrants, may speak only Spanish. It is most efficient for the interviewer to be able to immediately conduct the introduction and screener with the person who answers the phone, whether that person speaks English or speaks Spanish. Even when the screener or interview is conducted in English, it may be helpful for the interviewer to be able to answer respondents' questions in Spanish. For maximum flexibility and response rate, therefore, we recommend that all interviewers be bilingual and that they be assessed for their bilingual skill before being allowed on the telephone.