Effect of Incentives on Survey Response and Survey Quality: A Designed Experiment Within the HINTS I RDD Sample

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The Health Information National Trends Study (HINTS), sponsored by the National Cancer Institute (National Institutes of Health), is a nationally representative list-assisted RDD survey of adults in the United States, collecting information about health knowledge and utilization of health information resources. The first HINTS study (HINTS I) was fielded November 2002 to April 2003. Within the first wave of HINTS I (16,280 telephone numbers), we had 6,905 mailable numbers (numbers for which we had an address with the telephone number). All of these numbers were sent letters in advance, and initial refusals to the telephone contact were sent refusal conversion letters. We experimented with a single $2 bill cash pre-incentive, sent with the advance letter, sending this to a randomly selected half of the mailable numbers. We also experimented with a single $2 bill cash refusal conversion incentive, sending this to a randomly selected half of the initial refusals for which mailing addresses were available. The hypothesis was that a single $2 bill sent through the mail would be highly salient to potential responders, creating an aura of good will. The design assigned one quarter of the mailable numbers to each of four groups: neither incentive, advance pre-incentive only, refusal conversion incentive only, and both incentives. The telephone interviewers were blinded, not knowing whether an incentive had been sent or not (and the questionnaires did not mention the incentives). Our results indicated considerable success for the advance letter pre-incentive: roughly a six-point increase in final response rate. The results for the refusal conversion incentive were less decisive: roughly a two-point increase in final response rate. There was no clear evidence of interaction: the effects were roughly additive. The paper provides confidence intervals and a breakdown of response rate effects at different points in the interview process, and by different types of nonresponse. In addition, we studied differences in questionnaire item outcomes (both general demographic and study-specific) for the mailable respondents that received the advance letter pre-incentive and the mailables that did not, to evaluate whether the six-point increase in response rates had a measurable effect on questionnaire item distributions.