

Data Collection Procedures in Random Digit Dialing Screening Studies: Interviewers and Respondents

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The paucity of models has been one of the primary obstacles to researchers interested in using Random Digit Dialing (RDD) to locate and interview Jewish households. Researchers who have conducted RDD Jewish population studies have done so almost completely independently of each other. While it is methodologically reassuring for these researchers to discover that they have developed similar solutions to common problems, it would have been better not to have reinvented the same wheel. In this paper the study directors of the Los Angeles, Denver, Phoenix, Chicago, and Milwaukee Jewish community surveys have collaborated in describing some of the strategies and conventions they have found useful.

The rationale for the expense incurred with an RDD or other screening survey is that it most accurately represents the variety of the Jewish community, since every Jewish household has an equal chance of selection. Not every Jewish household, however, is equally disposed to participate in the survey, and thus the success of the research very much depends on the rapport the interviewer is able to establish with the respondent. This paper discusses four sets of decisions that have to be made regarding data collection: selecting interviewers, presenting the study to the respondent, answering the respondent's questions, and selecting the eligible respondent in the household.

THE CHOICE OF INTERVIEWERS

There are three kinds of interviewers available for Jewish community surveys: volunteers; paid but largely inexperienced interviewers recruited from the community; and staff members of professional survey organizations.

Given the voluntary nature of federations, volunteers could, in theory, constitute the interviewing staff. As supporters of the federation, they are conscious of the importance of reducing costs, and could be expected to welcome the task. Further, their identification with the work of the federation itself should make them convincing interviewers. There are two problems, however, with using volunteers. The first is the stability of the interviewing staff. Interviewing is not typical of the kind of involvement that most volunteers are used to. While they might be attracted to the idea of talking to respondents, the paperwork and frustrations that are a major part of survey interviewing often prove burdensome. In a Random Digit Dialing or other screening sample, the amount of work entailed in locating

the Jewish respondents is pure drudgery for volunteers who are accustomed to finding meaning and fulfillment in their volunteer activities. The Los Angeles and Las Vegas studies attempted to reduce study costs by using volunteer interviewers, but they had to abandon these plans when it became apparent that the interviewing would never be completed.

Using volunteer interviewers can present serious problems even in studies that require no screening. Previous experience in studies outside the Jewish community have found that volunteer interviewers work effectively only in studies where the interview is short (no longer than ten minutes), where all respondents are asked the same questions (no branching questions based on answers to prior questions), and where the survey period is short (no longer than four weeks).

The second major problem with using volunteer interviewers entails interview quality. The use of volunteer interviewers limits the scope of the questions because they are more likely to know or be known by the respondent, precisely because of their activity in the community. Sensitive questions, about personal history and income, for example, thus must be excluded from the survey in order to maintain confidentiality.

The Los Angeles and Denver studies used paid interviewers recruited from the community (as noted above, an earlier effort to use volunteers in Los Angeles had failed). The model for recruiting and training community-based interviewers comes from community health surveys conducted in poverty areas using local interviewers from the same communities.¹ Although the original purpose of this model was to provide employment and job training to the poor, its adaptation in Denver and Los Angeles helped to hold down study costs since inexperienced interviewers are paid less than professional interviewers, and there was no overhead to pay as in the case of a survey organization. Using community-based interviewers proved to be workable and economical, but this model was not without problems. Inexperienced interviewers need much more training and require closer supervision than do experienced interviewers. Community-based interviewers are also more likely to interview ineligible respondents (e.g., non-household heads), take down incomplete verbatim responses, and make errors in record keeping and paperwork.

Whatever the interviewing model used, it is advisable to assign interviewing tasks according to skill when conducting a screening study. In Phoenix and Milwaukee the best interviewers were assigned only to the actual interview, so as not to waste their talents and enthusiasm on screening. In Milwaukee a local interviewing firm was employed to conduct the screening and to do interviews when an available Jewish respondent was found. Those Jewish interviews requiring call-backs were conducted using interviewers who had demonstrated their skill working on the Chicago study. These more experienced interviewers were also able to elicit successful interviews from a large number of "not availables" and refusals encountered by the Milwaukee-based screening staff.

PRESENTING THE STUDY TO RESPONDENTS

The presentation of the study to potential respondents is the most sensitive aspect of data collection. Jewishly marginal respondents might feel threatened by the Jewish sponsorship of the study, while those concerned with anti-Semitism will want to be assured of its legitimate Jewish sponsorship. Still others might choose to express their antipathies toward

the federation through noncooperation with the study. The presentation of the study to the potential respondent must navigate through all these shoals.

The first choice to be made in presenting the study to respondents is whether to declare outright that it is a Jewish study; the second is whether to specify sponsorship by the local federation. The Boston and Phoenix studies did not initially specify that the study was intended to locate Jewish households, but used a "blind screen" instead. Since the Boston study was conducted as a community health study by the Survey Research Center of the University of Massachusetts (Boston Campus) in coordination with the local United Way, the study was presented to potential respondents in exactly those terms. Those respondents who turned out to be Jewish answered additional Jewish-related questions (household and demographic data had already been collected for all respondents). The Phoenix study was conducted by the Behavior Research Center, a well-known polling and market research firm in the Southwest. The screening was conducted as a market segmentation study so that BRC and the federation shared the cost of locating Jewish households in Phoenix; this was the only way that the Phoenix Federation could afford an RDD study. The segmentation study included a question about religion ("How many of the persons in your household consider themselves to be Protestant, Catholic, Latter Day Saints, Jewish...?"). Those households with one or more Jews were then called back two to three weeks later with an introduction that specified both Jewish content and federation sponsorship.

In Los Angeles, Denver, and Las Vegas there was concern that federation visibility could hurt participation in the study since respondents familiar with the federation might suspect that they were being asked for money. In all three studies the federation sponsorship was minimized by using the name for the study itself:

Hello, I'm [FULL NAME OF INTERVIEWER], from the Denver Jewish Population Study. In this study we're calling a scientific sample of all possible phone numbers in the greater Denver area.

The interviewer then verified the phone number, established that a residence had been reached, and continued to explain:

We are interested in interviewing households with one or more Jewish persons. The interview is completely anonymous, and the information will be used by the Denver Jewish community to identify social service needs and plan better services. Are there any Jewish persons living in this household?

Should the interviewee want to know more about the study (see the next section), federation sponsorship was acknowledged.

The recontact of screening-identified Jewish households in Phoenix and the initial contact of all households in Chicago specified both the research organization and the federation. Both introductions are reproduced here.

CHICAGO:

Hello. Is this [NUMBER DIALED] ?

This is [NAME OF INTERVIEWER] from Policy Research Corporation in Chicago. We are conducting a household study. Have I reached a business or a residence telephone? We are calling a scientific sample of phone numbers in the Chicago metropolitan area.

Policy Research Corporation is a survey research firm conducting a study sponsored by the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago. We are interviewing in households with one or more Jewish persons. The purpose of the study is to help the Federation learn about the needs in the Jewish community and to help the Federation plan better services. Are there any persons living in your household who are Jewish?

PHOENIX:

The Phoenix introduction included two questions which were intended to establish the legitimacy of the study:

Hello, I'm _____ calling from the Behavior Research Center of Arizona. We have been hired by the Jewish Federation of Phoenix to conduct a community needs study. The purpose of this study is to help the Federation plan to provide better services for the Phoenix Jewish community. There are no right or wrong answers, and all of your answers will be held in confidence.

- A. Did you receive a flyer in the mail from the Federation about the study? [A flyer had been sent to all Federation contributors informing them about the study and asking their cooperation should they appear in the sample.]
- B. Do you recall seeing anything in any paper about this study? [Articles about the study had appeared in both the Jewish and general press.]

To make sure I am speaking with a qualified household, are there any adults in your household who consider themselves Jewish?

The Milwaukee study (also conducted by Policy Research Corporation of Chicago) began by using an introduction identical to that used in Chicago. Later on, some experiments with wording were carried out and the conclusion reached that most respondents really did not care about federation sponsorship while some were confused with sorting out the difference between the survey organization and the federation. Accordingly, that part of the introduction which presented the credentials for Policy Research Corporation was dropped.

RESPONDENT QUESTIONS

Explaining the study to potential respondents in an RDD screening study is the most sensitive aspect of data collection. The respondent cannot see the interviewer, and the interviewer cannot present credentials to the respondent. The very nature of the phone call is itself unusual: a

stranger who is looking for Jews. Finally, the potential respondent may have strong negative feelings about the sponsoring organization or even about being Jewish. These are conditions that are less likely to obtain in general social surveys.

The kinds of questions that respondents ask and the objections they most often raise can be grouped into two categories: general questions or objections about being in a survey, and specifically Jewish questions and objections. The replies interviewers were provided with are presented below.

General Questions and Objections

Respondents in an RDD study (particularly those with unlisted phone numbers) wish to know how they were located. The fact that federations normally contact Jews in order to raise money adds another complication. Interviewers in Chicago and Milwaukee were provided with the following replies:

We had the computer select numbers at random in a scientific manner. In fact, some of the numbers are not even working telephone numbers. When we dial the number we have no idea whose number it is. When someone answers, we ask if anyone in the household is Jewish, and if there is, we do an interview in that household.

We promise you that the information and opinions you give will be kept strictly confidential.

No one interviewed will be identified by name or phone number, and the interview will be seen only by members of the research team.

Your answers will be combined with those of others to establish the statistical results.

The report of the study will be in statistical form, such as X percent of the people over 65 told us such and so; or Y percent of young adults said so and so.

In Denver interviewers explained that "We have a random sample of phone numbers which were generated by computer. Many of the numbers turn out to be businesses, and many are non-Jewish residences. A few numbers turn out to be Jewish households, such as yourself." If the respondent was still skeptical, the interviewer would often simply read directly from the call sheet the disposition of the numbers called immediately before the respondent. Respondents worried about being asked for funds were reassured as follows: "Your name was not taken from any list; in fact, we don't even know your name. The questionnaire is entirely anonymous and confidential."

Potential respondents in a Jewish survey have many of the same reservations about being interviewed as they would in a general survey. The Milwaukee interviewers used the following replies for "put-offs":

"I don't have the time"

We don't need to conduct the study all at once. We could do some now and some later at a time convenient to you. Two shorter ten minute talks might be better for you. Would that help?

"Mail it to me"

That would be great, but unfortunately this survey is set up for telephone interviewing. It's got a lot of instructions and skip patterns that the interviewers are trained on for an entire day. Stuff like, if you're 70 years old we skip the section on the nursery school-aged kids, or if you're married, we don't ask the section on blind dates and singles bars, that type of thing. It really is faster this way, and I'll go just as quickly as I can. (We can stop anytime and pick up later, but the computer can't use a partly done survey.)

"Too old to do you any good"

This study isn't just for the young people. Older people are just as much a part of the Jewish community as the younger ones are, and your situation and opinions are very important to planning services in different parts of the city (or decreasing services in areas that don't need as much service).

"Can't you call somebody else?"

These phone numbers we have are just randomly generated by a computer so it's very important that when we do reach a household with one or more Jewish people living there we do get your unique opinions. You see, you represent more than just your own household, because the phone numbers that get called in the sample represent other Jewish households that don't get included in our random sample. (And yours just came up randomly on the computer.)

Jewish Objections

Some respondents are reluctant to be identified in a survey conducted by the Jewish community. Surprisingly, the potential respondents who are affiliated are no more likely to participate in the survey than those who are not affiliated. In Denver, Phoenix, and Los Angeles (where affiliation is lower than in Chicago and Milwaukee) there were unaffiliated respondents who found the survey to be a novel, and welcome, contact with the Jewish community, and affiliated respondents who felt they already had done enough for the Jewish community.

In Milwaukee the following explanations were used to persuade a reluctant respondent who stated either that he or she was not active in the Jewish faith or not interested in Federation:

Let me tell you a little bit more about the study. It's like something that the Census Bureau might do, but since the government can't ask religion, Jewish communities have to do their own type of census.

The Federation is the sponsor, but the data gathered will be made available in statistical form to all Jewish organizations in the Milwaukee area, not just the Federation. They're only overseeing the project.

If you're not involved in some kinds of activities, then that information alone will help the Jewish community plan where they can

possibly cut some programs and services and save some money. A study like this hasn't been done for about 20 years in the Milwaukee area, so it's important to find out the general area of active Jewish people and less active Jews for community planning purposes.

In Denver, where almost a third of the Jewish households have lived in the community for five years or less, special attention was given to explaining what the Federation is and how it wanted to use the information:

"Who is sponsoring the study?"

The study is sponsored by the Endowment Fund of the Allied Jewish Federation of Denver. The Allied provides social, cultural, and recreational services for the Jewish community of Denver, such as Jewish Family and Children's Service, and the Jewish Community Center.

"How will the information be used?"

First of all, the information will be used to put together a profile of the Denver Jewish community, kind of like a census. This will tell us how the Jewish community in Denver is changing. The findings from the study will also be used to plan social, cultural, and recreational services for the Denver Jewish community.

In Denver, as in Milwaukee, it was anticipated that some respondents would use lack of interest in the services provided as a reason to refuse. The following reply was provided to interviewers:

"But I don't want any services from the Denver Jewish community"

Even if you do not use the services provided by the Allied Jewish Federation, it is still important that you participate in the study. Because you were selected as part of a random sample, your attitudes, opinions, and experiences will be used to represent hundreds of other Denver Jewish households.

Far more common than the respondent who did not want any federation services was the respondent who wanted to verify the sponsorship of the study. In Denver, Phoenix, and Los Angeles the switchboard was alerted to route all calls of inquiry to the planning department. The Denver reply, below, makes reference to the extensive publicity the study had been given in the community:

"How do I know this is for real?"

Perhaps you may have seen or heard one of the television or radio programs about the study. There have also been some newspaper articles (Denver Post, Rocky Mountain News) as well as public service announcements. If you haven't seen any of our publicity, you might wish to call the Allied Jewish Federation of Denver to verify the study. My name is _____, and the number of the Allied is 321-3399. I'd be happy to call you back in a few days after you've verified the study.

In Chicago and Milwaukee reluctant respondents were given the name and phone number of the federation planning director. Interviewers tried to

set a specific time for a recontact after the respondent had verified the survey.

RESPONDENT SELECTION AND ELIGIBILITY

Last, we wish to address the criteria for selecting Jewish respondents in an RDD screening study. Although the problem is complex and sensitive, we believe the solutions are fairly straightforward.

Defining a Jewish Household

The rationale for an RDD screening study is to give every Jewish household the same probability of inclusion. Since the procedure for locating a Jewish household requires the interviewer to ask if there are any Jewish persons in the household, we have decided (Los Angeles, 1979; Chicago, 1981; Denver, 1981) initially to accept the respondent's self-definition. In other words, if the respondent thinks that he or she is Jewish, then the interview is conducted. The Jewish status of the household can be verified as part of the editing process. Both authors accept as Jewish anyone who has a Jewish parent or grandparent and considers himself or herself to be Jewish.

Although the marginal cases included in this way turn out to be few in number, they are interesting and serve to illustrate the variety of households that appear in an RDD screening study. In Los Angeles, for example, a non-Jewish woman was included who was divorced from a Jewish man. She had custody of his child by his first marriage, and was raising the child as a Jew. This was counted as a Jewish household. In both Denver and Phoenix there were several instances of Jewish individuals with non-Jewish parents who had been raised either as "nothing" or as non-Jews, but chose to identify as Jews through a strong sense of personal connection to a Jewish grandparent (or in one case, a Jewish stepfather). Although Phillips did not choose to include in his studies Jews for Jesus (about 1 percent of all the self-defined Jewish households contacted in Denver and Los Angeles), he did include Jewish Buddhists. This rationale was based on an observation by Marshall Sklare that Buddhism was never perceived as a religious identity competitive with Judaism.

Obviously included as Jews by these criteria are persons who have no halakhic Jewish status (almost 10 percent of all Jewish family members in Denver and Phoenix are not halakhic Jews). Since the Federation uses self-definition rather than halakhic status as the basis for service delivery, this procedure is not only legitimate but appropriate. Given the furor over Jewish status in Israel, it is interesting that the Orthodox leadership in Denver, Chicago, and Los Angeles have not raised this as an issue.²

Selecting the Eligible Respondent

In general social surveys, respondent selection is generally done at random from among all adults in the household. In the National Jewish Population Study, all information was collected about every Jewish household member. In the studies described here, limited demographic information (e.g., age, sex, marital status, relationship to respondent, and whether

Jewish) was collected about all household members, but detailed demographic data and socioeconomic variables such as occupation and education were collected only for respondent and spouse. The rationale was to allocate more time (and therefore questions) to other areas of the study. Lost, however, is occupational and educational information about grownup children living with their parents, elderly parents living with their children, and Jewish roommates of single Jewish respondents. Peter Friedman of the Chicago Federation has observed in retrospect that this would have been valuable information to have, since it would provide more complete information about the individuals (as opposed to households) in the Jewish community.

In Milwaukee, Chicago, and Phoenix, the choice of respondent alternated between males and females and was limited to Jews. In Los Angeles and Denver, whoever answered the phone was interviewed in an effort to reduce refusals. The decision to have roughly equal numbers of male and female respondents was made with consideration to attitude questions, as was the decision not to interview non-Jewish spouses.

The inclusion of non-Jews as respondents in Denver and Los Angeles created problems for some of the attitude questions (e.g., attitudes toward Jewish giving, planned fertility, and Jewish identity), but it also illustrated the value of talking to non-Jewish spouses.³ The attitudes of the non-Jewish spouses were, in many cases, very different from those of the Jewish respondents.

It is clear that intermarriage is an established fact of Jewish life. To better understand the dynamics and implications of this phenomenon, Jewish social researchers should probably think in terms of talking to more rather than fewer non-Jews, particularly about issues such as childbearing (intermarrieds in Denver were found to have fewer children than in-marrieds) and childraising (intermarrieds often say that they raise their children as Jews, but do not give them a formal Jewish education).

SUMMARY

In this paper we have shared some of our experiences as well as some of the techniques we have developed in Los Angeles, Denver, Chicago, Milwaukee, and Phoenix Jewish population studies. We noted the pitfalls of using volunteer interviewers. We gave detailed suggestions as to how to open the interview so as to overcome some of the most typical inhibitions to participating in the survey on the part of potential respondents. And we discussed criteria for eligibility and selection of respondents. No doubt there is more to learn in each of these areas, but we hope we have provided a useful starting point.

Notes

1. See Eve Weinberg, Community Surveys with Local Talent: A Handbook, Chicago: National Opinion Research Center, 1971.
2. Sergio DellaPergola of Hebrew University and other researchers have recommended using the broadest definition of Jewish identity possible in order to ascertain accurately processes of assimilation and intermarriage. Thus, interviewers should ask if anyone in the

household ever was Jewish or had parents who were ever Jewish. However, researchers who want to go beyond merely ascertaining whether such dropout Jews exist must address two issues: (1) Interviews conducted with the children of intermarrieds who no longer consider themselves Jewish cannot be used for planning. The supporting federation is thus paying for interviews it cannot use. If there is an institution that wishes to look into the progeny of intermarriages, then the issue of cost sharing must be addressed; and (2) We would construct a set of screening questions to identify the assimilated children of intermarriages, but what would we ask them further? The usual questionnaire employed in community studies would not be usable in these cases. The demographic questions would pertain, but they would not provide very interesting information. In order for such a study to make sense, there would have to be an additional investment in a second questionnaire.

3. See, in this regard, Calvin Goldscheider's article in this volume on the merits of simultaneous surveys of non-Jews.