

GEOGRAPHIC CONTEXT, INFORMATION SOURCES, AND THE MEANING OF RESPONSES TO THE “NUMBER ONE PROBLEM” ITEM

Paul J. Lavrakas, Ohio State University; Judith A. Schejbal,
National Opinion Research Center

Paul J. Lavrakas, Ohio State University Center for Survey Research,
0126 Derby Hall, Columbus, OH 43210

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For nearly half a century pollsters have been asking the public to identify the “Number One” problem (i.e., the most serious problem) facing the nation. These data have been routinely reported by the news media over the years, often serving as the source behind many editors’ “Page-One” news story placements. They also have served an agenda-setting function for public policy formulation and for the rhetoric of many politicians. However, despite the prominence of this type of survey data, little has been reported about what citizens actually mean conceptually when they give a response to this survey item — one that typically asks for an open-end answer to the question, “What is the Number One problem facing the nation today?” Nor has much been reported about how the public goes about formulating the opinions they express in providing a response.

Our own past experience with this open-end item has shown that the geo-political context (e.g., nation, state, city, neighborhood, etc.) for which the question is posed often will change the answers that respondents provide. It follows logically that this should happen, as there is no certainty that what is (or is perceived as) a major problem in one geographic area should necessarily be a problem in another context. However, what often appears to be missed in the presentation and interpretation of data gathered via this item, is that the nation is made up of states, states are made up of counties and cities, cities are made up of neighborhoods, etc.

Given that most adults are likely to have more knowledge and interest in their own “local” environment than in the larger municipality within which their local environment fits, the question arises as to whether or not the “most serious problem” question should be asked at a smaller geo-political level and then aggregate answers across the larger level to represent the larger area? Or whether the question should be asked about the larger area directly?

The research presented in this paper tries to provide some insights on these issues and comes from two separate RDD surveys, one of Chicago and one of the State

of Illinois. The findings presented provide some indication of the variance in answers that respondents provide when the geopolitical context is shifted and suggests some things about what these answers mean to the respondents who give them and how respondents go about formulating their answers.

Method

1995 Chicago Survey. The 1995 Chicago data reported in this paper were gathered as part of a much larger survey for an ongoing five-year evaluation study of Chicago’s implementation of community policing. A split-half design was used to ask respondents what they considered to be the most serious problems in the city and in their neighborhood by varying the order of these two items. These items were worded as follows:

What do you consider to be the Number One problem facing the City of Chicago today?

What do you consider to be the Number One problem facing your own neighborhood today?

The items were asked as the four and fifth questions in the questionnaire. Interviewers were trained to resolve multiple answers with the probe: “Which of these do you consider most serious?” Interviewers recorded verbatim responses to these items.

Working with the principal investigators of the evaluation project, we used a random subsample of the verbatims to formulate a set of mutually exclusive and exhaustive coding categories. Coders were trained and monitored to code the verbatims using the list which included more than 60 categories. For the purposes of this paper, the coded data were aggregated further to both reduce the unwieldy amount of categories and to allow for more meaningful aggregations (e.g., murder, robbery, rape, burglary, etc., were all collapsed into a “Crime - General and Specific” category).

In addition to these two items, a series of other questions was administered about 15 minutes later in the questionnaire to determine: (1) the respondent’s assess-

ment of the extent to which the problems s/he earlier had identified as Number One “actually affect your own daily life;” (2) the “main sources of news and other information” that formed the basis for the respondent’s answers about the Number One city and neighborhood problems; and (3) the respondent’s rating of the accuracy of the information-sources s/he used/identified. This sequence was asked separately for the City problem and for the Neighborhood problem, and was administered in the same random order in which the two earlier questions had occurred. The respondent was reminded by the interviewer of her/his earlier answers by using the respondent’s previously recorded verbatims in the wording of the subsequent questions.

A two-stage random-digit dialing (RDD) sampling pool was generated. For this 1995 Chicago survey, an eligible household was defined as one in which at least one adult resident of the household spoke either English or Spanish. (However, the Spanish-language questionnaire did not include the sequence of items used in this paper and, therefore, the 110 respondents who chose to be interviewed in Spanish were not included in the analyses reported here.) In each eligible household, one adult was designated as the “eligible respondent” using the standard “last birthday” respondent selection technique.

A total of 1,747 English-language interviews were conducted in April through July, 1995. Using all possibly-eligible households contacted in this survey as the comparison, the completions represent a 67 percent response rate. Using all known-eligible households as the comparison yields a 74 percent response rate. Comparing the completions with the refusals (household refusals, respondent refusals, and partials) yields an 80 percent cooperation rate.

1996 Illinois Survey. The 1996 Illinois data reported in this paper were gathered as part of a larger survey conducted for WBEZ-FM, the Chicago National Public Radio affiliate. The purpose of this survey was to help the radio station identify the “public’s agenda” as part of their 1996 election campaign coverage. A split-half design was used to vary the order in which respondents were asked what they considered to be the most serious problems for themselves, their local community, the State of Illinois, and the nation. Data from the first three of these contexts were used in this paper.

A random-digit dialing sampling pool for the State of Illinois was purchased from Survey Sampling, Inc. For this survey, an eligible household was defined as one in which at least one adult resident of the household spoke English. In each eligible household, one adult was designated as the “eligible respondent” using the standard “last birthday” respondent selection technique.

A total of 502 interviews were conducted in

February and March, 1996. Using all possibly-eligible households contacted in this survey as the comparison, the completions represent a 49 percent response rate. Using all known-eligible households as the comparison yields a 57 percent response rate. Comparing the completions with the refusals yields a 65 percent cooperation rate.

Results

The split-half design used in the 1996 survey to test the effect of the order of asking state-then-community-then-self/family or asking self/family-community-state on the answers respondents gave about the “Number One” problem in the state, their local community, or for themselves/family indicated four noteworthy patterns, as shown in Table 1. First, the overall pattern of answers (i.e., the “big picture”) for each context did not vary much in absolute size across the order in which the three contexts were asked. Second, there was a statistically significant difference ($p < .001$) associated with order in the answers to the Number One problem for one’s self/family: proportionately more respondents mentioned economic problems and crime problems when the self/family item was asked at the beginning of the sequence than when it was asked last. Third, more respondents answered “none” for themselves/families than they did for their local community; in turn, more answered “none” for their community than for the state. Fourth, fewer respondents were “uncertain” when answering for themselves/families than for their local community; in turn, fewer were “uncertain” about their local community than for their state.

The split-half design randomizing of the geopolitical context order in the 1995 Chicago survey had no meaningful effects on the answers respondents provided. Table 2 shows the answers for what respondents believed was the Number One Problem in the City and in their own neighborhoods, combined across the two orders. Overall, “crime” and related problems (street gangs; illegal drug sales/use) were identified as the most serious problems facing the city and facing their own neighborhoods by a majority of Chicagoans. However, there were three clear patterns of differences between what respondents answered for the city’s biggest problem vs. for their own neighborhood. First, almost no one said there was “no” serious problem facing the city, whereas about one in six Chicagoans (15.6%) said there was “no” serious problem facing their own neighborhood. Second, there were approximately 10 percentage point fewer responses identifying crime and related problems (gangs and drugs) as the Number One problem in the neighborhood versus the proportion who identified these as the Number One problem in the city.

Table 1

Frequency of Responses to Number One Problem Items for Self/Family, Local Community, and State of Illinois, by Order of Questions*, in 1996 RDD Survey of Illinois (n=502)

Problem Mentioned	Relative Frequency (%)					
	Self/Family		Local Community		Illinois	
	Form 1	Form 2	Form 1	Form 2	Form 1	Form 2
None	9.2	15.9	6.8	7.1	0.4	0.4
Crime, violence, drugs, etc.	10.0	3.2	38.8	35.7	17.2	18.7
Economics, employment, etc.	54.4	48.0	19.6	14.7	14.8	17.1
Family breakdown, problems, etc.	3.2	6.3	1.6	2.0	0.8	2.8
Education, schools, etc.	0.8	3.2	7.2	9.5	11.2	11.3
Health care, etc	4.4	1.6	1.6	0.4	2.0	1.6
Other	13.6	16.7	16.4	19.0	27.8	23.0
Uncertain	4.4	5.2	8.0	11.5	14.8	12.7
Chi-squared test of Order Effect p <	.001		NS		NS	

*Form 1 order was Self/Family, Local Community, State of Illinois and U.S. Form 2 order was U.S., State of Illinois, Local Community, and Self/Family.

Table 2

Frequency of Responses to Number One Problem in City and Own Neighborhood, in 1995 RDD Survey of Chicago (n=1747)

Problem Mentioned	Relative Frequency (%)	
	In City	In Own Neighborhood
None	0.9	15.6
Crime - General & Specific	29.5	19.3
Gangs	22.8	18.9
Sale/Use of Illegal Drugs	12.8	10.2
Bad Schools/Education/Etc.	9.6	2.2
Poor Economy/Jobs/Etc.	2.9	0.9
Physical Disorder (e.g., Aban. Bldgs.)	2.3	9.6
Social Disorder (e.g., Rowdy Teenagers)	1.8	6.1
Moral Breakdown	1.1	1.7
Transportation	1.0	1.4
Other	4.8	5.0
Don't Know/Uncertain	4.7	6.5
TOTAL	100.1	100.1

Finally, more residents regarded physical disorders (e.g., abandoned buildings, litter, noise, vermin, etc.) and social disorders (e.g., rowdy teenagers, panhandlers, drunks, etc.) as the Number One problem when describing their neighborhood versus when they described the City.

When respondents were asked what sources of information they used to base their opinions about the city's Number One problem, mass media organizations (local television news and newspapers) were cited more frequently than any other information-sources; 56% cited local TV news and 50% cited a Chicago daily newspaper. Two-fifths (39%) cited their own personal experience. When asked about the information sources for their answers to their neighborhood's most serious problem, personal experience (cited by 62%) dominated the mass media sources (17% said local TV news and 18% said a newspaper). Furthermore, when respondents were asked to rate the accuracy of the information sources they identified, direct human sources (self and other acquaintances) were rated significantly more accurate than were mass media sources ($p > .05$).

In Table 3, the results of a regression analysis are presented in which citing "crime" as the City's Number

One problem (or not) was the criterion measure. Predictor variables included a set of demographic factors and a set of information-source variables. Here, it can be seen that local television news as an information-source was the single strongest predictor of saying that "crime" is the Number One problem facing Chicago. Newspapers as an information source also was a significant predictor, but not as strong as local television news. Demographically, it was younger adult, African-American females, who had relatively few years of education, lived in low income households with more than one adult resident, who were most likely to cite "crime" as the City's most serious problem.

Table 4 shows results from three regression analyses of whether or not the respondent had cited "none," a "crime," or a "disorder" as the Number One problem in her/his neighborhood. Unfortunately, we did not ask those persons who said there was "no" most serious problem in their neighborhood to identify their information-sources; (although we can speculate that many would have cited their own personal experience). Without the source variables for the "no" problem response, Table 4 only shows demographic predictors of this answer. Here it can be seen that it is older non-

Table 3

Choosing "Crime" as the City's Number One Problem as a Function of Demographic Variables and Source of Information, in 1995 RDD Survey of Chicago (n=1691)

Predictor Variables	Standardized Beta	p <
Demographics		
Gender	-.109	.001
Age in Years	-.066	.015
Black - Not Black	.108	.001
White - Not White	-.016	NS
Years of Education	-.129	.001
Household Income	-.108	.001
Employed Full-time	.039	NS
One Adult in Household	-.053	.031
Child(ren) in Household	.029	NS
Owner - Renter	.011	NS
Source of Information		
Local TV News	.279	.001
National TV News	.017	NS
Radio News	-.004	NS
Newspaper	.087	.001
Other Person	.008	NS
Own Experience	-.022	NS
Form (Split-half ordering)	-.085	.001
Adjusted R ²	.141	.001

Table 4
 Saying "None," "Crime," or "Disorder" as the Neighborhood's Number One Problem
 as a Function of Demographic Variables and Source of Information,
 in 1995 RDD Survey of Chicago (n=1691)

Predictor Variables	Standardized Betas		
	None	Crime	Disorder
Demographics			
Gender	-.030	-.031	.001
Age in Years	.096**	-.040	-.012
Black - Not Black	-.100**	.114**	-.143***
White - Not White	-.034	-.043	.042
Years of Education	-.062*	-.081**	.048
Household Income	-.015	-.087**	.036
Employed Full-time	-.019	.063*	-.037
One Adult in Household	.009	.019	.019
Child(ren) in Household	-.028	.095***	-.097***
Owner - Renter	-.002	-.007	.000
Source of Information			
Local TV News	XXXX	.155***	-.017
Radio News	XXXX	.029	-.014
Newspaper	XXXX	.136***	-.100***
Local Newsletter	XXXX	.153***	-.071**
Other Person	XXXX	.173***	.031
Own Experience	XXXX	.064*	.190***
Form (Split-Half Ordering)	-.085	-.039	.026
Adjusted R ²	.020***	.110***	.163***

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

Black adults with relatively less formal education who were most likely to report an opinion that there was no Number One problem in their own neighborhood.

For those citizens who said that "crime" was their neighborhood's most serious problem, the mass media sources of local television news and newspapers were found to be significant predictors; (see Table 4). Furthermore, local newsletters, another person, and one's own experience as information-sources also were significant predictors in this analysis. Demographically, it was African-Americans with relatively less education and less household income, who were nevertheless employed full-time and had at least one child, who were most likely to cite "crime" as the most serious problem in their neighborhood.

Also shown in Table 4, are the results of the analysis using the answer, "disorder" as the neighborhood's Number One problem, as the criterion measure. Here it was found that one own's experience as an information-

source was most strongly related to citing a physical or social "disorder." Of note, citing newspapers and/or a local newsletter was found to be negatively related to citing a "disorder" as one's neighborhood's most serious problem. Demographically, it was non-Blacks with no children living in their households who were most likely to say a disorder was the most serious problem in their neighborhood.

Finally, each respondent in the 1995 survey was asked to rate the extent to which the problem(s) s/he had identified as most serious in the city and in her/his neighborhood actually affected "your own daily life." A four-point scale was used: (4) great deal, (3) somewhat, (2) only a little, or (1) not at all. The average response for the effect on residents' daily lives of the most serious problem in the city was 2.83; the average rating for the most serious problem in the neighborhood was 2.97, slightly larger and significantly so.

Discussion

The findings of this “research in progress” support the notion that the geographic context which is used in “Number One” problem survey items does make a difference in the answers people give, even when asking about an area (e.g., the neighborhood) that is a subset of a larger area (e.g., a city), and for smaller areas, which, when taken all together (e.g., neighborhoods aggregated), make up that larger area.

Policy-makers and new editorial decision-makers should heed these findings if they want to formulate accurate judgments about what issues/problems most concern the public. As shown in the 1996 Illinois data, for example, economic issues dominated the responses to the most serious problem facing Self/Family, whereas economics were not the foremost concerns of citizens regarding their communities’ or the state’s biggest problem. Although it is debatable whether the most valid data for assessing what the public considers as the State’s biggest problems should use the State or the local community or the individual household as the “context,” it is clear that a different conclusion will be reached as the context is shifted.

Furthermore, our findings that the mass media are powerful information-sources for the judgments that people make, especially about problems in “larger” geographic areas, while at the same time, people have less

confidence in the accuracy of these mass media information-sources also suggest the need to “qualify” survey findings about what is perceived as the “Number One” problem by the public when the question is asked only within the context of a “large” area.

Considering our findings, we suggest that survey researchers and media pollsters should include more than one geographical context for measuring the “Number One” problem issue within their surveys. This suggestion assumes that respondents are sampled in a way that also randomly samples the smaller geographic areas (e.g., cities, neighborhoods, households) within a larger geopolitical area (e.g., nation, state, counties). By taking at least two measures of the “Number One” problem, using the larger and a smaller geographic context, the researcher should be able to better investigate the “meaning” of the data this type of survey item generates.

We also suggest that whenever a survey budget allows, questions regarding the information-sources that people use to formulate these judgments should be asked. Such additional data can be quite helpful in understanding “why” citizens might be identifying such-and-such as the “Number One” problem, thus allowing both policy-makers and news-producers the opportunity to try to better understand the “meaning” of this type of data.