

AFDC MOTHERS' RESPONSE TO A MAIL QUESTIONNAIRE

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Among recipients of federally-aided public assistance, those receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) are by far the most numerous. In March 1969, close to 6.5 million persons received this form of aid.¹ A majority of the recipients are children. However, because there is no father in the home of about three-fourths of these families,² AFDC mothers are the second most numerous of all adult recipients of public assistance, outnumbered only by persons 65 years of age or older who receive Old Age Assistance (OAA). It is estimated that in March 1969 there were approximately 1.5 million mothers receiving AFDC.

Because the AFDC mother is often the only adult caring for several children,³ she is undoubtedly the busiest, most hard-pressed for time among all adult recipients of federally-aided public assistance. Most of the other adults receiving aid are older in age or disabled or both, and thus less active. They have fewer dependents. In a 1965 nationwide study of Old-Age Assistance, the response rate to a mail questionnaire had been a remarkable 93 percent.⁴ But mothers striving to cope with the problems of child rearing and of living on a low income might be relatively poor risks as mail questionnaire respondents, or so we thought when planning a nationwide study of AFDC in 1967. Our problem was how best to maximize returns.

Many different means, with varying degrees of success, have been used to increase mail questionnaire returns. These have included handwritten notes or postscripts, follow-up letters, sending additional questionnaires with the follow-ups, stamped (vs. franked) pre-addressed envelopes, airmail postage, special delivery postage, deadlines, timing of mailings to arrive late in the week, follow-up postal cards or phone calls, free samples, and money incentives. One study which seemed particularly relevant to our problem of attempting to maximize returns from AFDC mothers had been conducted in 1965 by Mackler.⁵ As part of the study, mail questionnaires were sent to 100 low-income mothers or guardians of grade school children in New York City's central Harlem area, with an offer of \$2.00 for questionnaire completion. A pencil and a stamped return envelope were also sent with the mailings. Mackler concluded that the difference between his response rate of 65 percent and the 35 percent response rate obtained in a similar study of Harlem parents⁶ was largely accounted for by the money incentive.

Two states were to participate in the pretest of our AFDC mail questionnaire, one in the South and one in the West. Money payments to AFDC recipients are made by the state or local welfare agency, depending on whether the public assistance programs are state operated or state administered. There had been some speculation that the high rate of response to the 1965 Old-Age Assistance mail questionnaire, which was mailed by state welfare agencies, had been due

in part to feelings of appreciation, obligation, or apprehension when approached by an agency which provided them assistance.⁷ We in turn speculated that such feelings might be less likely to occur if questionnaires came from a federal agency such as the U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. In our pretest, we decided to test this assumption, and also to test the incentives of a pencil sent with the questionnaire and an offer of \$2.00 for questionnaire completion.

The pretest was therefore designed to include eight different subsamples of equal size, four of them with federal study sponsorship and four with state study sponsorship. Under each type of sponsorship, the subcategories were a combination of money and pencil incentives, money only, pencil only, and no incentive. The pretest sample consisted of a total of 432 open AFDC cases, i.e., families currently receiving money payments, in which there was a mother or other female caretaker of the AFDC children in the home. Very few AFDC families have no adult female in the home, but we wanted all respondents to be female and thus use sex as a control variable. Each of the two participating states furnished 216 cases drawn by systematic sampling. Sample cases were assigned consecutive numbers by the states and then randomly assigned to the eight subsample categories.

The content of the mail questionnaire was based largely on data obtained by interviews in a two-state pilot study of AFDC conducted in 1965.⁸ Pilot study items used were those considered to be most successful in identifying relative deprivation and in revealing respondent attitudes about welfare. For a number of questions in the mail questionnaire, including some asking for opinions, precoded answer categories were adapted from pilot study open-end question reply categories. Although aware of the drawbacks of fixed alternative opinion questions, we believed that in regard to welfare, most public assistance recipients would be likely to hold fairly clear opinions.⁹ We kept the mail questionnaire short, with only 32 questions for everyone, plus nine contingency questions. We provided an "anything else you have to say about welfare" question at the end as a safety valve for respondents who might feel frustrated with the alternatives of a rigidly structured questionnaire (there were only two open-end questions) or who wanted to discuss their problems.¹⁰ To make the questionnaire appear as brief as possible, we used a double-column format, which resulted in a single-fold, pamphlet-type instrument of four pages.

Altogether there were three mailings, with the two follow-ups spaced at 12-day intervals. An explanatory letter of transmittal, a copy of the questionnaire, and a stamped, self-addressed envelope were sent in the initial mailing and first follow-up. The second follow-up consisted only of a short letter of reminder. In the

initial mailing and first follow-up letters, respondents were told that the sponsoring agency was trying to plan better welfare programs, followed by the statement, "... and we think that people who have been on welfare can help us." The women were also told that their names had been selected by chance, their answers were needed but there was no obligation to reply, and they were assured of confidentiality. For respondents in the money incentive subsamples, a statement was included that the \$2.00 payment would not affect their welfare money grant. They were also asked to furnish, on a separate form, the name and address where the \$2.00 was to be sent, just in case some might wish to have the money mailed to another address or to another person.

We set a deadline of sorts,¹¹ requesting that the questionnaire be filled out five days after its receipt. Judging from the response, this deadline was at least moderately successful. By the time of the second mailing the response rate was 63 percent. By the time of the third mailing the response rate was 78 percent. For the pretest, the total response rate was 86 percent. Only 11 of the 432 women in the sample had moved and could not be located by the Post Office.

We were elated by the response rate even though it fell short of the 93 percent rate in our 1965 Old-Age Assistance study. Rates reported for other mail questionnaire studies have usually been in the range of 10 to 70 percent.¹² But our principal interest was in rates for the different combinations of study sponsorship and incentives. Response rates for the eight subsamples were:

Subsample	Percent responding	
	Study sponsorship	
	Federal	State
Money and pencil incentives	86.0	88.5
Money only	90.2	88.7
Pencil only	90.6	84.9
No incentive	92.6	85.2

The pretest sample design included an expected response rate of 80 percent and required a difference between subsample response rates of at least 10 percent for statistical significance at the .10 level. Based on our returns, we therefore concluded that neither the money offer nor sending a pencil nor type of study sponsorship, in any of the combinations, had significantly affected response rates.

Although there were no significant differences between subsample response rates, we decided to test the relationship between the returns and several relevant study variables. One of particular relevance was current welfare status, because women no longer getting aid would presumably be less likely than those still on the welfare rolls to feel obligated to respond or be apprehensive if they did not. Cases currently open were selected for the pretest, but a time lapse of a month or so was unavoidable between drawing of the sample and the first mailing of

the questionnaire, and case turnover for AFDC tends to be highest among all types of public assistance.¹³ We had asked the women if they were currently receiving welfare, and 30 of the 371 who responded replied "no". Unfortunately, this distribution of the variable made it inadvisable to use a chi square test of significance, even with correction for continuity.

A comment here in regard to contingency questions is of methodological interest. Following the question, "Are you getting welfare now?" those who replied negatively were asked when they got their last welfare check. The contingency question was answered by all 30 of the women no longer getting welfare, but it was also answered by 84 percent of respondents who should not have answered it. Mention of receipt of the welfare check, an understandably important event in the lives of welfare recipients, is apparently a powerful stimulus. We believe that the response to this question makes it one of the most unsuccessful contingencies in the history of survey research--a dubious distinction. In the final version of the questionnaire, we took the easy way out and asked everyone the former contingency question; unwanted responses could be disposed of by cross-tabulation.

Study variables, other than current receipt of welfare, which seemed most relevant to the subsample returns were respondent's race (white, Negro, other races); school grade completion (0-4 grades, 5-8, 9 or more); urban or rural place of residence; state of residence; her report of either having been or never having been denied welfare at some time; and her total time on welfare, including past and present episodes (under 1 year, 1-3 years, more than 3 years). With the listings, the two states had furnished us data concerning race and urbanization of place of residence; other data were obtained by the questionnaire. Using the .10 level with the chi square test, as in the study design, the only significant relationship found was that between subsample returns and respondent's total time on welfare. Even though we could not predict the direction of the relationship, the finding appears to warrant further research at some time in the future. It is noteworthy that the chi square test result for relationship between returns and state of residence was unusually small.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on pretest results, we concluded that in our nationwide AFDC study we could expect a fairly high response rate without the use of incentives. We did choose federal rather than state study sponsorship for several reasons, including the slightly higher total response rate for federal mailings (87 percent, compared with a state rate of 85 percent), ease of conducting the study from one central location, and the fact that there was some evidence, although not conclusive, that certain types of open-end replies would be made to a federal but not to a state agency. The relatively few criticisms of welfare workers and allegations of discrimination by respondents had all been made in questionnaires mailed to the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. We decided to repeat the use

of two follow-ups and stamped, self-addressed return envelopes because we believed they had probably had a favorable effect upon the response rate although they were not specifically included in the pretest design. Findings from other studies which have tested these variables indicate that they are effective as inducements to response.¹⁴

In our nationwide study, the mail questionnaire was sent to a representative sample of 3,659 mothers or female caretakers of AFDC children in the conterminous United States. A total of 2,969 women returned completed questionnaires, for a response rate of 81 percent.¹⁵ Although this was somewhat lower than the pretest response rate of 86 percent, it was relatively high for a mail questionnaire survey. Our pretest results were therefore substantiated: Most AFDC mothers, although preoccupied with the problems of child rearing and of living on a low income, would take the time to reply to a mail questionnaire without having received any incentives. There were expressions of appreciation in open-end replies, there may have been feelings of obligation or apprehension on the part of some respondents, but we believe that many of the women were also genuinely interested in trying to provide information which they felt would help the government to plan better welfare programs. In other words, as formulated by Kahn and Cannell,¹⁶ recipients of AFDC were motivated to respond because of their perception that by communicating they would move toward certain of their own goals. We know with certainty that at least some of our respondents felt this way for in addition to answering the structured questions, they wrote in specific recommendations for changes in the AFDC program.

FOOTNOTES

1. Public Assistance Statistics: March 1969, U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Social and Rehabilitation Service, National Center for Social Statistics (NCSS Report A-2 (3/69)), table 7.
2. Preliminary Report of Findings: 1967 AFDC Study, U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Social and Rehabilitation Service, National Center for Social Statistics, October 1968 (NCSS Report AFDC-1 (67)), table 7, p. 9.
3. *Ibid.*, table 1, p. 6.
4. Findings of the 1965 Survey of OAA Recipients: Data by State and Census Division, Part II Data Obtained by Mail Questionnaire, U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Social and Rehabilitation Service, September 1967.
5. Oliver C. Moles, Lola M. Irelan, and Bernard Mackler, "Use of Mail Questionnaires to Collect Data from Low-Income Families," Welfare in Review, Vol. 5, No. 2, February 1967, pp. 21-24.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. Report on Pilot Study of Family Living Conditions, Aid to Families with Dependent Children: Continued and Closed Cases, Denied and Accepted Applications, U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Welfare Administration, Bureau of Family Services, Division of Research, July 1967. Unpublished.
9. For a discussion of fixed alternative questions, see Claire Selltitz, Marie Jahoda, Morton Deutch, and Stuart W. Cook, Research Methods in Social Relations (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1960), pp. 258-262.
10. A device suggested by Sol Levine and Gerald Gordon in "Maximizing Returns on Mail Questionnaires," Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. 22, No. 4, Winter 1958-59, pp. 568-575.
11. Another device suggested by Levine and Gordon, *op. cit.*
12. See, for example, Selltitz, et al., *op. cit.*, p. 241; William J. Goode and Paul J. Hatt, Methods in Social Research (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1952), p. 173.
13. Net change in caseload per 1,000 cases open during year: AFDC (53 states) +94, Old-Age Assistance (35 states) +3, Aid to the Blind (35 states) -11, Aid to the Permanently and Totally Disabled (34 states) +82, Aid to the Aged, Blind, and Disabled (18 states) +12, General Assistance (30 states) +56. Public Assistance Programs: Indices of Case Turnover, Calendar Year 1967, U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Social and Rehabilitation Service, National Center for Social Statistics. Unpublished.
14. See, for example, William M. Kephart and Marvin Bressler, "Increasing the Responses to Mail Questionnaires: A Research Study," Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. 22, No. 2, Summer 1958, pp. 123-132, Stanley D. Bachrach and Harry M. Scoble, "Mail Questionnaire Efficiency: Controlled Reduction of Nonresponse," Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. 31, No. 2, Summer 1967, pp. 265-271.
15. 1967 AFDC Study: Preliminary Report of Findings from Mail Questionnaire, U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Social and Rehabilitation Service, National Center for Social Statistics, January 1969 (NCSS Report AFDC-2 (67)).
16. Robert L. Kahn and Charles F. Cannell, The Dynamics of Interviewing (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1957), p. 121.