How Could They Ever, *Ever* Persuade You? Are Some Refusals Easier To Convert Than Others?

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Abstract

As response rates decline, concern has been increasing about the error introduced to surveys by non-response. Steps are routinely taken to maximise response, now often including the reissue of non-interview cases for conversion attempts.

There is relatively little data available on the impact of conversion attempts on survey results. To understand the process, we need to look not at conversion overall, but separately at those who were hard to find (non-contacts) and those who were reluctant to be interviewed (refusals).

The cost of conversion can be considerable, and to investigate whether the process could be made more efficient, the authors analysed a conversion exercise on a major UK survey to establish whether some types of refusal were more susceptible for conversion than others.

Keywords refusals, non-response, conversion, survey error

1. Background

As Dillman, Eltinge, Groves and Little (2002) argued, as response rates to certain surveys have been declining, the error caused by non response has attracted greater interest and concern amongst social scientists and statisticians worldwide.

Survey organisations and survey clients place great emphasis on achieving the highest possible response rate based on an assumption that improving response rates will bring worthwhile gains in the accuracy of estimation beyond those simply due to an increase in sample size. That is, it is assumed that adding in hard-to-get respondents will not merely improve precision but actually reduce the non response bias (Lynn and Clarke (2002), Lynn, Clarke, Martin and Sturgis 2002))

In addition to this, for those of us working on longitudinal surveys, where the aim is to re-interview the same sample members over a number of years, attrition is of major concern.

Groves and Couper (1998) suggested survey researchers should "design for non response" as a component of survey design. Various methods are implemented on surveys to reduce non-response, and on longitudinal surveys, to counter survey attrition.

Dillman et al identified the design impacts of response propensity (Dillman, Eltinge, Groves and Little 2002). Firstly there are design issues that can affect initial contact with sample units. There are a number of tools used to reduce non-contact non response, principally the following:

- call scheduling
- the length of the data collection period
- the interviewer workload.

There are also design features that can affect cooperation:

- the reputation of the agency of data collection
- the use of advance notification
- the use of incentives
- follow-up visits to convert non-response to response

Reissuing refusals and non-contacts is the standard method employed to increase response rates. This has traditionally included the following stages (Groves and Couper 1998):

- Mailing a letter to the household reiterating importance of their participation to success of survey from study director
- Using a different, senior interviewer to make face-to-face conversion attempt
- Changing the mode of contact e.g. from telephone to face-to-face
- Reducing the burden of interview, such as shortening the interview length
- Using the reason for refusal to customise interviewers' introductory words

Burton, Laurie and Lynn (2004) reported developments in procedures on the British Household Panel Study, combining many of these standard practices. Survey staff assess all refusals and decide if a conversion attempt should be made. If a refusal is made on one wave it is almost always reissued the next wave. Refusals are initially telephoned by survey staff, to discuss possible problems that may have led to the refusal, and attempt to

persuade them agree to a second interviewer visit to complete the questionnaire. If respondents refuse the interviewer visit they are asked if they will complete a short telephone survey – normally carried out at that point – which collects only a limited subset of the full interview data.

There are thus several possible outcomes from conversion attempt

- Interview carried out in respondent's home
- Respondent converted on telephone may refuse or be non contact when interviewer calls
- Short telephone interview may be conducted
- Respondent may refuse on telephone to any type of interview

Refusal conversion is, then, a fairly standard procedure, but as Lynn and Clarke (2002) point out, the cost of refusal conversion efforts can be considerable. This raises the question of what benefit, beyond satisfying the demands of the client, does this expenditure achieve? Crucially, does it affect the statistical accuracy of survey estimates?

In an attempt to answer this question, Lynn, Clarke, Martin and Sturgess (2002) examined two distinct components of difficulty of obtaining an interview;

- Difficulty of contacting sample members – "ease of contact"
- Difficulty of obtaining cooperation once contact is made – "reluctance to cooperate"

They argue that a major weakness of much previous work is that it confounds them both, or isolates one without considering the effects of the other. Their paper developed separate measures of each. They found no evidence that households that are more difficult to contact are any more or less reluctant to cooperate once contacted. In terms of whether extended efforts affect survey data, they found that it was the difficult to contact people who differed from the easier to get. This suggests that extended efforts would be better concentrated on making contact with difficult to contact households, rather than on attempting refusal conversions.

One problem in interpreting data on refusal conversion is that, with around 1/3 or more of samples typically remaining as refusals even after conversion, researchers can't be confident that non-converted refusals are the same as conversions.

Overall, as was also concluded by Stoop (2004), it seems clear both non-contacts and refusals contribute to non-response bias, and also that extended interviewer effort appears to reduce this, particularly the component due to non-contact.

Burton, Laurie and Lynn (2004) examined the long-term effectiveness of procedures for minimising attrition on longitudinal surveys. Their paper looked at longevity of successful refusal conversion over eight years of the BHPS, with the aim of discovering whether the refusal conversion procedure is effective at retaining units in the sample for many waves, or is simply postponing drop out for a wave or two.

A proportion of those who go through the refusal conversion process and are interviewed remain in the sample for some years, but those who are converted later in the life of the survey are less likely to continue doing a full interview in the future. This may suggest that the longer a panel runs, the more difficult refusal conversion becomes.

Burton et al looked at the reason for refusal, and at the results of refusal conversion for each reason for refusal. The most common reason was that the respondent simply didn't want to bother, and only 2% of these gave an interview following year.

The second most common reason was that the respondent was senile or incapable. Of these 9% gave interview following year.

Of those who said they were too busy, almost a fifth gave an interview the following year. The highest proportion of people returning to the survey came from those who were temporarily absent (37%) or almost never home (26%).

One little-considered aspect of refusal conversion is whether it convenes ethical standards devised to protect respondents from harassment. Although it is standard practise across many Government funded surveys in the UK, it could actually be deemed to fall foul of the Market Research Society's (MRS) Code of Conduct as "unwelcome intrusion".

NOP contacted the MRS to ask if any guidance has ever been issued on this subject. The MRS response was "It is standard practise in many large social studies which have high response rate requirements to convert the so called "soft no's", and as such the Code and guidelines do

not restrict this practice. Only in instances where a respondent says a firm "no, and do not ever contact me again" would a researcher have an obligation to honour that request and insure that the individual is not re-contacted for the study".

The AAPOR Code is similarly silent on the subject of conversion attempts, but it does state that respondents must make "an informed and free decision about their participation", which raises the question of whether that decision is truly a free decision if we try to convert them.

2. The Experiment

This is the policy and research context in which the experiment reported on in this paper was conducted. It was carried out as part of the Millennium Cohort Study, which is the fourth of Britain's world-renowned national longitudinal birth cohort studies. The Principal Investigator is the Centre for Longitudinal Studies (CLS) at the Institute of Education in London, and the study is funded by the ESRC and individual Government departments.

The MCS follows the lives of nearly 19,000 babies born in 400 wards in UK between 2000 and 2002. The initial sampling stage involved over sampling of areas with higher child poverty and higher minority ethnic populations.

Interviews for first survey took place with both parents (where applicable) when the babies were nine months of age, and 18,533 families with 18,819 babies (including twins and triplets) gave information for the first survey.

NOP Social and Political are currently conducting the second wave of the survey. Fieldwork was carried out from September 2003 to May 2005, when the children were aged approximately three years, and 15,575 interviews were achieved. In addition to interviews with the child's main parent and, where present, the latter's partner, interviewers also conducted cognitive developmental tests on the children, weighed and measured them, and administered self-completion questionnaires to any older siblings.

As one might expect with a survey with such a high degree of relevance to respondents, response rates were high, but still not as high as we had hoped. Response details are still being finalised, but the provisional field response rate is 84%, calculated on the basis of excluding all those who had emigrated, had left their address without any new address had been found for them, or had written to CLS saying they no longer wished to take part.

Because it was felt that there was still a chance to boost response still further, all non-contacted sample members were reissued to the field, unless a very high number of calls had already been made. All refusals were examined, and were reissued except in cases where it was clear from the "Reason for Refusal" that it was an adamant refusal, or where there were special circumstances such as the death or serious illness of a family member.

It should be noted that fieldwork was spread over a very long period, with the aim of interviewing each family within a month of the child turning three, and the decision to go for conversion attempts was not taken till towards the end of fieldwork. This meant that in some cases several months could have elapsed between the original interview attempt and the second attempt, and this undoubtedly had an influence on the conversion attempts.

A new letter was sent to all cases identified for conversion, and people were given the opportunity to opt out before the interviewer called.

The original plan was to have tailored refusal conversion letters, addressing the reason stated for the original refusal, and so refusals were sorted not just into "reissue" and "not reissue" but also into groups based on reason for refusal. Ultimately the client decided to use a standard letter rather than tailored ones, but the effort to sort by reason for refusal was not wasted, since interviewers were still able to make use of the stated reason for refusal to help them phrase their conversion attempt.

Also, having the refusals sorted by type provided the opportunity to track reissue success against the reason for the original refusal.

The conversion attempt improved the overall survey response by 2%, with the overall results in table 1.

Table 1 – Results of conversion

	Refusals	Non-cons
Reissued	748	917
Interviewed	180	211
Conversion rate	24%	23%

The similarity of success between the two sources of reissue sample is striking, but the much longer than usual delay between initial and conversion attempt almost certainly increased the conversion rate of non-contact households considerably.

As Table 2 shows, the conversion rate was broadly the same across the different types of refusals, with a few notable exceptions. One of these – the higher conversion rate among those who were prepared to be interviewed in the future - can again be attributed to the time lag between initial and conversion approaches. Much refusal is situational, and circumstances could have changed considerably over a period of six months or so.

Those who thought the questions were too personal were far less likely to be converted than the average, and this suggests it may not be worth reissuing such respondents in future, at least without a letter targeted at their particular objections.

Table 2 - Refusal Conversion by Reason for Refusal

	Number reissued	**% converted**
Not interested	170	22
Too busy	168	20
No reason given	128	25
Broken appointments	83	35
Interview too long	61	26
Will co-operate in future	44	30
No English	28	29
Questions too personal	21	14
Others	45	18
Overall	**748**	**24**

Broken appointments may also come into the category of cases affected by the time delay, but the very high conversion rate does suggest that this is a group worth targeting. The conventional wisdom from interviewers is that broken appointments are a means of refusal for people too polite or shy to refuse outright, but these figures suggest that even a small gap, followed by another letter and a then further contact attempt might be an approach worth implementing generally on surveys.

We also looked at consistency of response, at how many of the reissued refusals came back as refusals again, and how many as other responses. As Table 3 shows, consistency was high, as 41% of the refusals were refusals again. Removing the 24% who were interviewed, this means that over half of the unsuccessful refusal conversion attempts were again refusals

Table 3 – Second Outcome of Reissued Refusals

Interview	**24**
Refusal to interviewer	41
Refusal to client	11
Total refusal	51
Non contact	18
Moved	5

Examination of the second outcomes by original reason for refusal shows relatively few consistent differences, but two figures do stand out. As Table 4 shows, the proportion of conversion attempts who responded to the letter by contacting the client to say they did not want to be visited again was far higher among those who originally said the questions were too personal and, to a lesser extent, among those who originally said the interview was too long.

Table 4 - Second Outcome by Reason for Refusal

	Refusal to int'r	Refusal to CLS	Non contact	Interview
Not interested	46	8	19	22
Too busy	50	7	19	20
No reason given	45	9	13	25
Broken appointments	29	5	25	35
Interview too long	26	20	21	26
Will co-operate in future	29	0	14	29
No English	29	11	18	29
Questions too personal	33	38	14	14
Overall	**41**	**11**	**18**	**24**

A comparison was also made between reason for refusal on the first occasion and reason for refusal at the conversion attempt. Time and resource limitations meant that it was only possible to match the reasons in 242 out of the total of 385 cases that refused on both occasions, but the overall pattern was clear, with the vast majority of cases giving the same reason for refusal on both occasions.

Moving on to the non-contacts, there was again a high degree of consistency, with half of all attempted conversions being returned again as a non-contact. This represents two in three of all failed conversion attempts.

It has been suggested that non-contacts may often be disguised refusals. People who are too polite to refuse outright to the interviewer can avoid the survey simply by not answering the door if they think it is an interviewer calling. There is certainly a lot of anecdotal evidence from interviewers of having seen curtains move as they walked up the path, but the door not being answered.

Our hypothesis therefore was that we would expect a high proportion of reissued non-contacts to come back as refusals rather than repeat non-contacts. We hypothesised that the conversion letter, by letting respondents know that we were not going to give up on them easily, would encourage more of them to more open about their unwillingness to take part.

In fact this hypothesis was supported to only a very limited extent. Only just over one in ten reissued non-contacts were returned as refusals at all, and only 1% as refusals to CLS. If our hypothesis about the effect of the letter had been correct, we would have expected to see many more people refusing by telephone or letter to CLS, as a way of getting out of the survey but still not having to refuse outright to an interviewer.

Table 5 - Second Outcome of Reissued Non-contacts

Interview	23
Refusal to interviewer	11
Refusal to client	1
Total refusal	13
Non contact	51
Moved	10

The fact that the level of refusal was so low suggests that the great majority of non-contacts were indeed just people who were difficult to find at home. As with the 'ring no answer' cases in telephone surveys, this then raises the question as to whether we can be sure there really is someone living there.

This idea finds further support in the fact that 10% were found to have moved by the time of the reissue attempt. Some of these may have been people who were in the process of moving at the time of the first interview, and if they were split between two homes they would be less likely to be found by an interviewer at either of them.

Also, it suggests that there may be others among the non-contacts who had indeed moved away, but had not been positively identified as movers by the interviewer.

It should be noted that because of the cost of making personal visits on a largely unclustered sample, and because all non-contact cases had already had at least six and usually several more calls made, only three further visits were made at the reissue stage. This will inevitably have made a further non-contact a more likely outcome.

3. Conclusions

As is summarised in Table 6, there was a high degree of consistency between original outcome and reissued outcome. The most common outcome of refusal conversion attempts was a second refusal, either to CLS or to the interviewer. The most common outcome of non-contact conversion attempt was again a non-contact.

Whilst one may have expected a degree of similarity, what is perhaps surprising is just how similar the two reissue conversion types were in outcomes. The proportion where the second outcome was the same as the first was 51% in each case. And the proportion successfully converted to interview was 23% for non-contacts and 24% for refusals.

Table 6 -Second Outcome of Reissues

	Refusals	Non-contacts
	%	%
Interview	24	23
Refusal to interviewer	41	11
Refusal to CLS	11	1
Total refusal	51	13
Non contact	18	51
Moved	5	10

The increase in overall survey response was relatively small, at just 2%, and even if the extra cases were different from the original interviews (and thus would serve to reduce response bias) the fact that there are so few of them means that they can't impact much on overall data, even if they were all alike.

Data analysis has yet to start in earnest, so it is still too soon to say just how different or similar these extra respondents are, but if they were more likely to be drawn from particular demographic groups that are both of special interest to the researchers using the data, and under-represented in the original data, then the cost of the conversion exercise will have been entirely justified

Furthermore, in a longitudinal survey **any** increase in response is valuable for future waves. It increases the number of cases for which comparison between wave n and wave n-1 is possible, and also increases the number of cases for which comparison will be possible between wave n and wave n+1.

It should also be noted that the conversion attempts were made against the background of an already very high response rates. In amore typical survey, likely to have at least twice the number of non-interview cases, the opportunity for conversion would be much greater, and the costs probably lower as a result.

It may never be possible to know in advance whether the cost of a programme to attempt to convert refusals and non-contacts can be justified in terms of improvement in data quality, but our experiment suggests strongly that the more targeted the conversion attempts can be, and in particular the more use that can be made of the exact reason for the original refusal, the more efficient the process will be.

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