Understanding Data Collection Through a Survey of Field Staff

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“We can reduce measurement error if we just _______.”

...ask respondents for financial records

...implement mobile web data collection

...ask everyone in a household over age 15 to complete a diary
Introduction

- Over years and decades, these ideas make their way into our surveys
  - Almost always they are cognitively/qualitatively tested
  - Sometimes they are field tested
- Interviewers are on the front lines in implementing survey changes/improvements
  - They can tell us what works and what doesn’t
  - Their buy-in is important for successful implementation
Feedback From Interviewers

- The Consumer Expenditure (CE) Survey at BLS periodically conducts surveys with field staff
  - Prior surveys were conducted in 2009 and 2011
  - The focus of today’s talk is a field staff survey conducted in 2015
- We ask for feedback on training, specific issues relevant to data collection
- We use this feedback to improve training and data collection processes
Today’s Talk

- What insights we (or at least I) gained from the 2015 survey
  - Who are our interviewers?
  - What do new CE interviewers think of the training they received?
  - How burdensome do interviewers feel the survey is for respondents?
- How we disseminate our findings
- Conclusions
The Consumer Expenditure Survey

- Interview Survey (CEQ)
  - In-person interview
  - Focus is on large, infrequent expenditures
  - Covers a 3-month reference period
  - Average length: 56 minutes

- Diary Survey (CED)
  - Two one-week, paper diaries
  - Collects all expenditures
  - Focus is on small, frequent purchases (e.g., groceries)

- Both surveys involve personal visits from field staff
- Field staff at the Census Bureau collect the data
The 2015 CE Field Staff Survey
The U.S. Census Bureau collected the data and monitored data collection through Google Forms.

An email request was sent to 1,169 field staff email addresses. This includes some duplication for staff that work on both the interview and the diary survey.

Staff were allowed to charge 1-hour of work time for completing the survey.

The data were screened for PII and delivered to BLS.
The Questionnaire

- 43 Questions
  - 15 Open-ended
  - 28 Close-ended

- Topics
  - Demographics
  - Interviewer Experience
  - Training
  - Respondent Burden
  - Contact History Instrument
  - Neighborhood Observation Instrument
  - Redesign Topics
Data Collection and Response

Cumulative Response

n = 716
Who were our respondents?

**Staff Position**
- Interviewer: 522
- Supervisor: 194

**Regional Office**
- Atlanta: 180
- Chicago: 117
- Denver: 113
- Los Angeles: 78
- New York: 102
- Philadelphia: 126
Interviewers have a wealth of experience outside of CE

- Years of Interviewing Experience:
  - Less Than 2 Years: 19%
  - 2 or 3 Years: 12%
  - 4 or More Years: 69%

- # of Other Surveys Currently Working:
  - None: 25%
  - 1 or 2: 32%
  - 3 or 4: 18%
  - 5 or More: 26%
Experience With CE Surveys?

- 73% of Field Staff have experience with both the CEQ and CED
- Nearly half have 4 or more years of experience, 30% have less than 1 year
- There are more CEQ cases worked per month
Training
Most interviewers are satisfied with the training they receive

Year Completed Initial Training

- 2012 or Earlier: 58%
- 2013: 9%
- 2014: 14%
- 2015: 20%

N = 298

How Well Did Training Prepare You?

- Poorly: 2013: 13%, 2014: 9%, 2015: 9%
- Neither Well Nor Poorly: 2013: 6%, 2014: 6%, 2015: 4%
- Well: 2013: 15%, 2014: 19%, 2015: 19%
- DK: 2013: 7%, 2014: 4%, 2015: 4%

Year Completed Initial Training

- 2012 or Earlier: 2013: 13%, 2014: 15%, 2015: 15%
- 2013: 15%
- 2014: 7%
- 2015: 71%
Paired Practice Interviews

How well did paired-practice interviews prepare you for CE respondents? (n=119)

- "Practice interviews were ‘perfect case’ scenarios not real world situations"
- "...you can get all the jitters out about how you are going to get the interview and what to say to the respondent"
Pre-Classroom Materials

The current pre-classroom self-study for CE initial training contains some material in computer-based training modules (CBTs) and some material in paper chapters. Which do you prefer? (n=140)
Respondent Burden
Burden

- The subjective feeling of discomfort or unease that respondents have during the interview

- We have directly asked survey respondents about burden and have seen mixed findings

- Interviewers hear directly from respondents, they see non-verbal behaviors, they witness varying levels of effort

How burdensome was this survey to you?

- Not at All: 30%
- A Little: 31%
- Somewhat: 28%
- Very: 11%
- Extremely: 0%
Burden

How burdensome do you feel the CEQ survey is for respondents? (n=624)

- Not at All
- A Little
- Somewhat
- Very
- Extremely

- 35%
- 25%
- 18%
- 11%
- 1%

"For those that are willing to be interviewed.... they are very cooperative."

"TOO MANY INTERVIEWS."

"too time consuming and wordy. Ask too many of the same questions."
Please enter your suggestions for token incentives that might encourage participation in the CEQ.
Conclusions

- Regular communication between survey administrators and field staff can lead to higher data quality through improvement of procedures and through interviewer buy-in.
- Field staff can serve as an early warning system for potential issues.
- Open-ended questions are necessary to capture those issues you don’t know to ask about.
- It is important to show field staff when/where their recommendations are incorporated into data collection.
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