Curated questions and answers from PRCI Webinar on 28 May, 2020: "Using mobile phones for survey research in the time of COVID-19 lockdowns and beyond"

Questions ASKED during the session

1. Looking ahead to when we can return to the field for "traditional" surveys, what is your view about the likely continued role for mobile phone surveys, and how this will and should change compared to pre-COVID? I think phone surveys are here to stay. They will become an additional tool in researchers' toolkit to complement and supplement surveys conducted using face-to-face interviews. They can be used to do shorter, more focused, and frequent follow-up surveys to understand individual and household behavior closer to 'real time' to mitigate the recall bias in a one-time (or once-in-two-three years) surveys that we have been traditionally conducting. As a good practice, all future face-to-face surveys should collect information on three things—phone number, type of phone (basic vs. smart), and a consent to contact the person again by text or phone for research purpose.

2. In your view, how good are our post-weighting techniques in achieving statistical representation of our identified survey universe? What factors do we need to keep an eye on to improve this? Post-weighting techniques have been successfully used by researchers in developed country setting when data are collected by phone of web surveys (see Lusk (2017) for an example of how this method is used in the context of online surveys on food demand in the U.S.). When using phone surveys, researchers should make sure that they are collecting relevant information on characteristics important to their target population, and those population characteristics are available from past census or representative surveys.

3. Are there any IRB considerations to using contact information collected in a previous survey if the informed consent didn't specify that the respondent information might be used to contact them again for other surveys? For 1) the same researchers that collected the original data and 2) other researchers that would like to use the contact info? Yes, this can potentially be an issue and researchers should consult with their IRBs. For own research, this may be less of an issue if the consent statement would have included something like "any data we collect will be used only by researchers for research purposes." Contacting the person again by phone can be considered 'using the data by researcher for research purpose." However, sharing the contact numbers with other researchers (that were not part of the investigator team in the IRB application)

would be considered sharing personally identifiable information, and would go against the IRB guidelines.

4. Why would we think that the problem of 'respondents not willing to answer' is higher when using phone surveys? hence causing a bias where the young and the well-off are under-represented. That is, comparing this to the face to face surveys where respondents still have to consent to the interview: Under-representation of the young and well-off is also a problem with face to face interviews, but it is somewhat easier to get permission to interview when you are there in person (it is easier to hang up a phone than to turn away a person). Also, in-person interviews often go through some kind of local contact—either a local leader or project staff, which gives the more legitimacy. It is worth trying that for phone surveys. For example, in India, IFPRI is working with SEWA, who contacts their members to tell them to expect a phone call.

Questions NOT ASKED during the webinar

1. What can you say about the ability to publish in peer review journals using each of different cellphone survey methods. The survey method (phone vs. in-person) itself, should not be a deterring factor in the ability to publish in a peer reviewed journal. What matters in publishing a paper using any type of survey data is the sample size (i.e., statistical power), the sampling method used, the interpretation/extrapolation of results vis-à-vis the sampling approach, and many other factors. Reviewers may want to know what is the percentage of phone ownership (or mobile data use), and other factors that may bias the sample.

2. In your experience, how recent do in-person surveys with cellphone numbers need to be, for the list of numbers to remain useful in forming a frame for a mobile phone survey? This will depend on the type of your target population. The chances of phone numbers being not valid (i.e., non-functional) is higher among rural and poor population than the urban and higher income people. If there is a high proportion of people switching mobile carriers, that may increase the non-functional numbers. In general, phone numbers from a survey conducted more than 2 years ago, may generate lots of dead calls, making the sample frame biased. But look at John's presentation on how to address this issue.

3. Any suggestions on how to deal with IRB on giving tokens to respondents as their incentive since respondents spent time with the survey? Some form of incentive for participation in surveys—whether in person or face to face—is often allowed by IRBs, but it needs to be proportionate to the time and other costs that the respondent incurs. There are two additional considerations for phone surveys. 1) where people pay per unit airtime, they incur a financial, as well as time cost of participating, and 2) it is harder to give the incentive when you do not meet the respondent in person. Providing vouchers for airtime or sending mobile money are possible strategies to provide compensation. For airtime vouchers, make sure it is on the right carrier. But where many people have monthly plans, mobile money would be more appropriate, if the respondents use mobile money. In some cases, where they do not use mobile money (e.g. very poor women in India), it may be possible to make deposits in their accounts with self-help groups. The important thing is to make sure that the respondent will benefit from the payment.

4. One of the cons mentioned for mobile phone data collection is that 160 character limit. What does this mean? This is a limitation of the SMS mode of phone survey. It's a limitation of any text message communication that a single text message cannot exceed 160 characters. If it does, the text in the message beyond 160 characters is transmitted as another text message.

5. Not all phones have a visual feature, like Apple's FaceTime. That said, is there any evidence that visual contact between surveyor and respondent improves the quality of survey (for example, length of interview) and responses (for example, willingness to give complete answers and/or stay on the call), holding constant the other issues already discussed? Does the visual feature partly substitute for the traditional face-to-face interview? Interesting question. I am not aware of any evidence, but my hypothesis is that visual contact would have a positive effect on the willingness to participate and responses, ceteris paribus. However, given the limitations of data access and strength of signal, it may not be possible to use the visual features (even many in the US have bandwidth issues). If you cannot guarantee equal access across all respondents, this could introduce another source of bias. It may be more appropriate for qualitative studies, where establishing and maintaining rapport is key, but standardization of the protocol is not as necessary.

   Adding that especially in low-income countries, the % of individuals with (a) smart phones with visual connectivity; and (b) bandwidth that would support such conversations is pretty low. So while this is an interesting idea, it may not be relevant in low income settings for several years.

6. The first presenter especially, mentioned 20-40 questions as a maximum limit, and the last one mentioned 15 minutes. If you feel you need more than 40 questions or 15 minutes, what is the potential for dividing the questionnaire in two, and issues in doing that beyond doubling the number of calls? This is also an interesting question/suggestion, but it will depend on the subjects of your research. If they were part of your previous surveys and researchers have a good rapport with them, dividing the questionnaire into two could be a good idea for longer surveys. But for RDD or population based surveys, the chances of a first-time responder agreeing to be re-interviewed at another time to continue the survey are very low. It would lead to a high non-completion rate.

7. What are the options for gaining access to phone numbers for the first time? Face-to-face interview is the best source of getting access to phone numbers. See Mywish's presentation on other ways to source phone numbers. But the options depend on specific research objectives.

8. I don't understand how to address the bias using poverty rate/variables. Thanks. Please see John's presentation as the answer depends on whether you are building off a previous survey or contacting respondents for the first time.

9. What is the explanation for higher response rate when female enumerators are used? Female enumerators are especially important in societies where it may not be seen as acceptable for a woman to be talking to a man. This applies in much of South Asia and many African countries. But even in the US, young women enumerators often get higher response rates, because they are not seen as threatening.

10. How can the phone interviewer validly authenticate respondent in a situation where the call is picked but not by the owner of the phone? Asking the name of the respondent, and verifying whether that is the person on your list, is about that can be done.

    Also, when you are following up from a previous face-to-face survey, you can ask additional questions (eg education, age, birth place) that will help you assess whether you are speaking to the person that you intended to speak to.

11. Since a number of respondents may not want to pick strange numbers, is it good to use collaborators in the areas who are already familiar with the populace of respondents.

To what extent would that linking be useful and result oriented? Where that is possible, it can increase response rates. For example, in India, IFPRI is partnering with SEWA to interview SEWA members; SEWA contacts the women to expect a call. However, it is important that the first contact not bias the sample. In the SEWA case, the interviews are all with SEWA members, but if you went through a community leader or local project staff, think about whether this might introduce a bias.

12. Can the panelists share their sample questionnaires relating to phone survey, please? It would be useful for us to design our questionnaire. Questionnaires depend on the study objectives. In Mywish's presentation she shared some websites where questionnaires from some ongoing surveys are posted and publicly available.

13. Conducting phone surveys requires well-trained data collectors. How many hours should be needed to have well-trained data collectors? If data collector are not well-trained, can this produce another source of bias? As with all surveys, good training of data collectors is key, or you will get bad data (missing, inaccurate, or biased). If the enumerators have not done phone surveys before, this will take additional time (even if they have done face to face interviews).

    Also, it could but it is hard to know in advance in what direction the bias would be. In our Bangladesh and Ethiopia surveys, we have our enumerators record each contact attempt - when it took place and what was the result - to see if there are any correlations between non-contacts by enumerators and specific respondent characteristics.