

Health Survey Methods Research Conference

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Williamsburg, VA

Keynote Address

Survey Costs: What do we know and what can we learn?

Kristen Olson, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Rapporteur: Jay Clark, Westat

The keynote speech delivered by Kristen Olson during lunch on the first full day of the conference covered the costs of surveys – the many different types of costs, ways to measure costs, and the relationship between costs and budget (estimated costs).

The discussion after the keynote talk centered around three main questions – comparing budget to actual cost, the effect of adaptive (or responsive) designs on survey cost, and what the standards for survey costs should be.

For comparing budget to cost, the point was made that budgets are often created that estimate total costs, but not for each component of the survey. Clients usually do not ask for more time to be budgeted to project management or programming, but know that achieving higher response rates will cost more money. As a result, some wiggle room is often put into budgets to account for possible changes to specific components of the survey that drive up costs. In other cases, a probability (say, 10-20%) is assigned to the likelihood of having cost overruns to provide something similar to a confidence interval around the total cost of the survey.

Adaptive designs tend to focus on convincing a subset of nonrespondents to participate rather than all nonrespondents, but it can be difficult to evaluate whether any cost savings result from this procedure. The cost drivers most closely related to error indicators are probably the right sets of cost measures to be monitoring, but we may not be able to articulate what those are. Interviewer travel, for example, may be one of the biggest costs of the survey, but the adaptive design may not reduce the amount of traveling they need to do. Some studies try to show clear error indicators (like response rate) and then link that to cost measurements.

During the talk, the point was made that AAPOR developed standardized definitions of response rates after many years of confusion about how response rates were defined on different surveys. During the discussion, the point was made that it would be very helpful to survey designers to have some kind of standardized cost calculator similar to the standardized response rate definitions. Before that can happen, though, cost data from many different surveys and many different survey organizations needs to be gathered to determine common cost components. The speaker had several different “buckets” for types of survey costs, but an AAPOR task force should be created to get other perspectives.