

International Response Trends: Results of an International Survey

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Household survey nonresponse is a matter of great concern in many countries. International comparative data on response and types of nonresponse in combination with data on design and fieldwork strategies are scarce. Data from an international survey on household survey nonresponse are presented in this article. Response rates differ across countries and over time. Knowledge of survey design characteristics and fieldwork strategies helps to increase our insight into the possible causes of nonresponse. Differences in fieldwork strategy are discussed as potential explanations for the differences in response rates across countries. The importance of an optimization of fieldwork strategies is emphasized and the implementation of a system of Current Best Methods (CBM) is proposed.

Key words: International data; unit nonresponse; survey design; fieldwork strategy.

1. Introduction

Survey nonresponse is a phenomenon as old as survey research itself. However, there is a growing concern that response rates are declining and have been declining for some time (Bradburn 1992). Brehm (1994) states that all sectors of the survey industry – academic, government, business, and media – are suffering from falling response rates. Over the years, several researchers have investigated nonresponse trends both in the U.S.A. and in other countries around the world.

One of the first trend studies in the U.S.A. was performed by Steeh (1981). She found that refusals were increasing in academic surveys conducted between 1952 and 1979. In 1989, Groves summarizes the literature and concludes that “participation in social surveys by sample households appears to be declining in the United States over time. This is true for government, academic, and commercial surveys.” Groves and Couper (1998) also present data from other countries, based on long time series. Nonresponse in the Canadian Labor Force Survey appears to be remarkably stable over the years, while in Sweden and Holland the nonresponse has been increasing. Also, in Japan nonresponse has been increasing steadily over time (Groves and Couper 1998, 163–165).

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Several researchers have attempted to explain these trends. Goyder (1987) used meta-analyses to evaluate American and Canadian surveys with respect to nonresponse. His conclusion was that nonresponse was increasing for face-to-face surveys, but that the nonresponse trend for mail survey nonresponse appeared stable. Similar patterns have been noted by De Leeuw (1992) in the Netherlands, Lyberg and Lyberg (1990) in Sweden, and Bretschneider and Schumacher (1996) in Germany.

Following Goyder, Hox, and De Leeuw (1994) conducted a meta-analysis to model nonresponse in surveys. They showed that the response to face-to-face and telephone surveys was going down in the period covered by their analysis (1947–1992), but the response to mail surveys remained stable. They also showed that sampling procedure, saliency of topic, and agency performing the survey all influence the response rate. Schnell (1997), who analyzed the nonresponse in Germany, emphasized the importance of fieldwork procedures and research institute involved. He concluded that nonresponse had only increased a few percentage points between 1970 and 1990, but that there were large differences between survey organizations in Germany. These differences were mainly caused by methodological and fieldwork inaccuracies. There are no clear indications that people in Germany are less cooperative nowadays than they were in 1970.

Contrary to Schnell, both Kojetin, Tucker, and Cashman (1994) and Kojetin and Tucker (this issue) argue that the refusal rates in the U.S. Current Population Survey are increasing. Furthermore, they show that changes in refusal rates are related to societal changes in, among other things, consumer sentiments and unemployment rate. Of course, there are many differences between Schnell and Kojetin et al. For instance, the latter had data available for a much longer time series, and the data were collected in a government survey. This illustrates some of the difficulties one encounters when documenting response trends. As Smith (1995) points out, differences in trends may reflect “apple-and-orange comparisons of the past to the present.” Changes in respondent definition, mode of data collection, content and design of the survey, fieldwork procedures and strategies as well as organizational changes of the survey agencies may distort comparisons.

When in 1990 the International Workshop on Household Survey Nonresponse was founded to exchange experiences, expertise and findings, one of the first conclusions of this group was that there was a great need for a reliable and empirical overview of response trends. This resulted in an International Survey on Nonresponse to establish a dataset with long-term, cross-national and comparable data on response and nonresponse variables. The present article presents the main results of this survey. I first briefly describe the questionnaire used; I then present response figures over time and across countries for the Labor Force Survey and the Expenditure Survey. In the next section, I attempt to relate differences in response between countries to differences in fieldwork strategies. I end with a critical discussion and some recommendations.

2. Design and Content of the International Survey on Nonresponse

The International Survey was designed to collect data on response, nonresponse and types of nonresponse as well as information on sampling and survey design, fieldwork and survey organization. Early versions of the questionnaire were discussed and adapted at the yearly meetings of the International Workshop on Household Survey Nonresponse.

This resulted in a “low profile” survey that was as short as possible, with easy to answer questions. For more details on the development of the questionnaire and some preliminary results, see De Heer and Israëls (1992), and Maas and De Heer (1995).

The questionnaire covered the following topics:

- **Sampling design**, sample unit, observational unit, over- or underrepresentation of subgroups, use of substitution, use of proxies.
- **Survey design**, topic of the survey, survey method, data collection mode(s) and techniques.
- **Fieldwork strategy**, contact strategy and approach, persuasion strategy, incentives, nature of survey participation, fieldwork period, workload.
- **Interview corps**, use of controls and monitoring, interviewer payment, employment conditions.
- **Survey climate**, special events, publicity campaigns.
- **Response data**, fieldwork sample, administrative and overcoverage losses, final response, final nonresponse, refusals, noncontacts, other nonresponse.

The questionnaire was sent to contact persons at governmental survey agencies in different countries. Private and university-linked survey organizations were not included. To investigate response trends, data on continuing surveys or on repeated surveys over time were needed. This type of data is rare outside governmental settings.

3. International Response Trends for the Labor Force Survey

In this paragraph, data are presented for Labor Force Surveys in several countries. To fully understand changes in response over time, it is necessary to distinguish between different sources of nonresponse (e.g., refusals and noncontacts). Table 1 contains response rates. Data on the two major sources of nonresponse, that is, refusals and noncontacts, are presented in Table 2 and Table 3. Response rates, refusal rates, and noncontact rates are all expressed as percentages of the total fieldwork sample. The fieldwork sample is the total of all sample units (addresses, persons) that are actually used in the field. The blanks in the tables indicate that there was no survey carried out. Dashes indicate that there was a survey carried out but that no data are available yet. When a country uses a panel design, the data for Wave 1 are reported.

Data were collected for 16 countries: Australia (Austl), Belgium (Bel), Canada (Can), Denmark (Dan), Finland (Finl), France (Fr), Germany (Ger), Hungary (Hun), Ireland (Irl), the Netherlands (NL), Poland (Pol), Slovenia (Slov), Spain (SP), Sweden (Swe), the UK, and the U.S.A. For Germany data were available for both the former Western Germany (Ger1) and the former Eastern Germany (Ger2).

Table 1 shows that different response trends can be distinguished. In the UK, Ireland, Spain, Canada and the U.S.A. response trends appear to be quite stable over time, with some deviations in a single year. For Finland, France, and Sweden a downward trend can be observed. In Belgium, the response seems to recover since 1993, and in The Netherlands it is difficult to keep the response rate above 60%.

Response rates not only vary over time; they also vary between countries. An extreme case is the Netherlands with response rates around 60%. Several countries show a more or

Table 1. Response rates for labor force surveys (% of fieldwork sample)

Year	Austl	Bel	Can	Dan	Finl	Fr	Ger1	Ger2
1983		90			96			
1984		88		89	95			
1985		85		88	94			
1986		82		82	94			
1987		79		82	94			
1988		83		81	93	93		
1989		83		82	92			
1990		83		82	92		97	
1991	96	83	95	84	92		96	96
1992	96	82	96	82	93	93	97	96
1993	97	84	–	82	92	92	97	98
1994	96	86	95	76	93	92	97	98
1995	96	84	94	74	92	91	97	99
1996	96	85	95	75	91	91	97	99
1997	–	86	95	–	87	–	98	99

less stable response level above 90%. Although the trend in Poland is downwards, the level is still around 90%. Belgium and the UK have a response level above 80% and despite the downward trend, the response level in Finland and Sweden is still far above 80%. The decreasing response trend in Denmark appears to have leveled out around 75%, which makes it the only country together with the Netherlands that has response rates below 80%.

Differences in response levels may be caused by specific circumstances in some countries, for instance whether or not a survey is mandatory, or what specific survey design is being used. This will be discussed in Section 5. First, I will concentrate on two major sources of nonresponse: noncontact and refusal.

Changes in society (e.g., smaller households, working mothers) make it more difficult to contact people (cf. Bradburn 1992), and more attempts at different times have to be made before a potential respondent is contacted (cf. Campanelli et al. 1997; Louwen 1992.)

Table 2. Noncontact rates for labor force surveys (% of fieldwork sample)

Year	Austl	Bel	Can	Dan	Finl	Fr	Hun
1983		6.1			2.9		
1984		6.6		–	3.2		
1985		–		–	3.9		
1986		–		–	4.2		
1987		11.0		–	4.2		
1988		4.2		–	4.3	4.0	
1989		5.9		–	5.2		
1990		6.6		–	5.2		
1991	2	6.2	3.5	–	5.5		
1992	2	11.8	2.9	–	4.4	4.8	3.8
1993	2	13.4	–	–	4.7	5.0	3.9
1994	2	12.9	2.7	14.7	4.8	5.3	3.1
1995	3	14.5	4.0	15.2	4.5	5.7	3.8
1996	2	12.6	4.0	15.0	5.1	5.8	4.6
1997	–	12.2	3.5	–	7.5	–	4.5

Hun	Irl	NL	Pol	Slov	Sp	Swe	UK	USA
	94	81				94		96
	94					94	81	95
	96	77			91	93	82	95
	96					90	82	95
	93					90	81	95
	96	61				89	83	96
	96	61		88		89	84	95
	96	60		88	90	88	83	96
	95	60		91	89	86	84	96
83	96	58	95	88	89	86	80	96
83	96	58	94	91	90	88	83	94
85	91	59	91	88	90	87	82	94
83	–	60	90	87	90	87	83	93
81	–	59	90	90	90	87	81	93
82	–	56	–	–	89	–	80	93

In addition, interviewers encounter more and more physical impediments (e.g., telephone answering machines, doormen in higher priced multi-unit structures) that make it difficult to contact a sampled household (cf. Groves and Couper 1998). Noncontact rates are presented in Table 2. For Germany and Ireland, no noncontact data are available.

Trends differ by country. In several countries (Finland, Belgium, The Netherlands, Poland, and Sweden), the noncontact rates are increasing. The UK and Slovenia show an opposite trend; there the noncontact rate is decreasing. Noncontact rates also differ across countries. Australia and the U.S.A. show very low noncontact rates, while for instance Denmark and the Netherlands, the countries with the highest overall nonresponse, show remarkably high noncontact rates.

A second important source of nonresponse is refusal. Changes in social environment

NL	Pol	Slov	Sp	Swe	UK	USA
				2.9		1.7
				3.1	8	2.0
			7.7	3.7	6	2.0
				4.6	7	2.0
				5.4	9	2.0
8				5.0	7	1.9
9				4.8	6	1.7
8			7.7	5.1	6	1.8
9			8.5	5.5	6	1.7
9	2.4		7.2	8.3	8	1.8
9	3.0	3.5	7.1	7.4	5	3.9
10	5.3	4.0	7.0	7.6	4	2.7
9	6.2	1.1	7.3	7.7	5	3.0
11	5.9	1.8	6.5	7.0	5	2.5
11	–	–	7.2	–	5	2.3

Table 3. Refusal rates for labor force surveys (% of fieldwork sample)

Year	Austl	Bel	Can	Dan	Finl	Fr	Hun
1983		0.4		–	1.4		
1984		0.2		–	1.8		
1985		–		–	1.9		
1986		–		–	1.8		
1987		0.5		–	1.6		
1988		0.1		–	2.3	3.0	
1989		0.2		–	2.1		
1990		0.4		–	2.2		
1991	1	0.1	1.4	–	2.4		
1992	1	0.4	1.2	–	2.2	2.3	4.1
1993	1	2.1	–	–	2.5	2.6	4.3
1994	1	1.4	1.3	8.5	2.3	2.9	3.1
1995	1	1.7	2.0	8.5	3.1	3.1	5.2
1996	1	1.9	1.0	8.4	3.3	3.2	6.5
1997	–	1.6	1.4	–	4.4	–	6.4

and economic conditions (cf. Groves and Couper 1998; Kojetin, Tucker, Cashman 1994) and in individual attitudes towards surveys (Cialdini, Braver, Wolfs, Pitts 1992; Hox, De Leeuw, Vorst 1995) may influence the willingness to cooperate when contacted. Table 3 contains refusal rates for 14 countries; again, no data are available for Germany and Ireland.

Again, trends differ by country. In Finland, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, Sweden, the UK, and the U.S.A. refusals are increasing. However, both the UK and Slovenia show a decreasing trend in noncontacts, which results in a stable overall response over time. Other countries do not show this compensating mechanism. Again, Denmark and the Netherlands show the highest refusal rates, and again the Netherlands is extreme (over 25% refusals). For these two countries, both components of nonresponse (i.e., refusal and noncontact) are high. Although several countries still have a high overall response, the nonresponse trends for these countries are rather worrisome. For instance, Finland and Sweden show clear trends of increasing noncontacts and refusals over time. Something similar appears to be the case in Poland and Hungary.

Increasing nonresponse is not limited to the Labor Force Survey, as will be shown in Section 4.

4. Response Trends for Expenditure Surveys

From previous research (e.g., Hox and De Leeuw 1994) it is known that the topic of a survey may influence response. To investigate whether the trends found for the labor force survey can also be observed in other surveys, additional data were gathered. Unfortunately, for other survey topics data are available for only a limited number of countries and years. In Table 4 response rates for expenditure surveys are presented for twelve countries: Australia, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Hungary, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, the UK, and the U.S.A. No data are available for Canada, Belgium, France, Germany, Hungary, and Ireland.

Comparing Table 4 and Table 1, the first striking fact is that response rates for

NL	Pol	Slov	Sp	Swe	UK	USA
				2.8		2.4
				3.3	11	2.6
			1.4	3.5	12	2.7
				5.2	11	2.7
				5.1	9	2.7
27				5.0	10	2.6
26				4.8	10	2.7
27			2.2	5.1	11	2.4
27			2.1	5.5	10	2.7
28	1.8		3.4	5.2	15	2.7
28	2.2	5.5	3.0	4.7	12	2.8
26	3.0	6.5	3.0	4.9	13	3.5
26	3.1	7.5	3.1	5.0	13	3.9
26	3.4	7.6	4.3	5.0	14	4.1
28	–	–	3.6	–	15	4.1

expenditure surveys are overall much lower than those for labor force surveys. This could be attributed to the higher respondent burden for expenditure surveys in general.

As in Table 1, clear downward trends can be distinguished for Hungary, Poland, Sweden, and the U.S.A. Data² on the Swedish Survey on Living Conditions show a similar pattern, with response rates dropping from 84% in 1983 to 79% in 1991. Data on the U.S. Income Survey also show a slightly downward trend, from 95% in 1984 to 91% in 1996. The trend for Finland is not so clear from the expenditure survey, however data on the Finnish Income Survey show again a downward trend, from 85% in 1984 to 76% in 1996. Also, the trend for Denmark is not so clear for the expenditure survey.

Further inspection of Table 4 shows a remarkable trend for the UK. Whilst the response trend for the labor force survey was more or less stable, the expenditure survey shows a slight downward trend after 1992. The general household survey and the national travel survey in the UK show similar trends.

Data on other countries are too scarce to draw any conclusions, although it should be noted that the 25% response rate in the Netherlands, even for a highly burdensome budget survey involving diaries, is low indeed. Data on the Dutch National Travel Survey show a less worrisome picture, although a downward trend can be seen, from 75% in 1985 to 71% in 1997.

In sum: for several countries, a downward trend in response can be discerned for several surveys. However, the trends are not always clear-cut and differences between countries exist for different surveys. Differences between countries and surveys may be caused by differences in survey design or by specific circumstances in some countries. This will be discussed in the next section. This exploration will be limited to the labor force survey. Labor forces surveys are carried out on a regular basis in many countries; time series data across countries for other surveys are extremely rare.

² Data were available for a limited number of other surveys. Unfortunately there was almost no overlap on topics between countries. I will only discuss the trends, the data are available for interested parties.

Table 4. Response rates for expenditure surveys (in % of fieldwork sample)

Year	Austl	Bel	Dan	Finl	Hun	NL	Pol	Slov	Sp	Swe	UK	USA
1983		22 ('80)			80.8	25	71.0		75 ('80)			
1984					81.0		66.4				68	
1985				69.6	80.5		63.9			73	68	87.5
1986							68.5				69	
1987			50.0		76.2		69.0				72	84.7
1988		12					61.7			63	72	87.0
1989					82.2		58.4				73	87.0
1990				70.2			63.3		63		69	87.0
1991					82.2		65.1				70	87.4
1992					54.1		61.6			63	72	85.4
1993					60.9		72.4	75.4			69	86.0
1994	57		67.4	62.9	57.1		74.7	82.2			67	82.8
1995		30	71.3	67.0	64.9		70.9	72.0		64	66	69.6
1996		24	67.8	65.4	55.0	25	68.6	65.4		54	62	74.6
1997		23	65.1		57.8		–	–		–	–	74.7

5. Towards an Explanation of Differences Between Countries

The labor force survey is not strictly replicated in the countries investigated. There are differences in design, fieldwork strategy and organizational conditions (cf. Groves and Couper 1998). In addition, the survey-taking climate may differ between countries (cf. Lyberg and Dean 1992). These differences may explain the differences in response between countries. Furthermore, knowledge why countries differ may help to understand the nonresponse process better.

Two major groups of variables can be distinguished: Those that are at least in principle under the control of the researchers or the survey organization (e.g., survey design, fieldwork strategies) and those that cannot be controlled by the researcher (e.g., survey organization, survey climate). The latter are only of theoretical interest, as they cannot be manipulated to reduce nonresponse.

For the labor force survey data were available on survey design, fieldwork strategies, and survey organization for twelve countries. These are summarized in Table 5.

A blank indicates that no data on this aspect are available. The following factors are incorporated in Table 5:

General design factors:

1. Mode of data collection: face-to-face interview with paper and pen (F-t-F), or with a computer (CAPI), or a computer assisted telephone interview (CATI).
2. Survey method: panel design (panel) or cross-sectional (cross).
3. Observational unit: person (pers) or whole household (househ).
4. Whether or not proxy respondents are allowed.
5. Whether substitution is allowed.

Factors related to practical fieldwork strategies:

6. Use of formal call scheduling: that is, contact attempts are scheduled to maximize contact probability.

Table 5. Characteristics of survey design and survey organization for labor force surveys

Characteristics	Austl	Belg	Can	Finl	Fr	Ger 1,2	Irl	NL	Sp	Swe	UK	USA
1. Mode of data coll.	F-t-F	F-t-F	CAPI	CATI	F-t-F		F-t-F	CAPI	CAPI	CATI	CAPI	CAPI
2. Method of survey	panel	cross	panel	panel	panel		panel	cross	panel	panel	panel	panel
3. Observ. unit	pers.	housh	pers.	pers.	housh		housh	housh	pers.	pers.	pers.	housh
4. Proxy	no	yes	yes	yes	yes		yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
5. Substitution	no	yes	no	no	no		no	no	yes	no	no	no
6. Formal call scheduling	no	no	yes	no	yes		yes	no	no	no	yes	yes
7. # of contact attempts	high	low	high	high	high		low	low	high	high	high	high
8. Refusal conversion	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes		yes	no	no	yes	yes	yes
9. Interv. incentives	yes	yes	no	no	no		no	no	no	no	yes	yes
10. Resp. incentives	no	no	no	no	yes		no	no	no	no	no	no
11. Voluntary part.	no	no	no	yes	no	no	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	yes
12. Employm. cond.	free 1.	civ.s.	free 1.	civ.s.	contr		civ.s.	free 1.	civ.s.	civ.s.	contr.	civ.s.

7. Number of contact attempts (high vs low).
8. Use of refusal conversion.
9. Interview incentive; that is, differential payment for well-performing interviewers with high response rates.
10. Incentives for respondents to participate.

Fixed factors related to the *survey organization*:

11. Voluntary participation in survey: “yes” indicates that the participation in the LFS is voluntary, “no” indicates that the participation in the LFS is mandatory, and “no?” indicates that a survey organization has the ability to proclaim a survey mandatory.
12. Employment condition of interviewers: “free-lance,” contract, and “civil servant.”

Table 5 shows that there are differences between countries in *general design*. The mode of data collection can play a role in response rates. In general, telephone surveys have a lower response rate than face-to-face surveys, but in Finland and Sweden they seem to perform well. Telephone surveys have the advantage that it is financially possible to make many contact attempts in sparsely populated areas. Telephone surveys also have the disadvantage that they exclude a part of the population that cannot be contacted by telephone. Furthermore, technological gadgets, such as answering machines, or call-screener devices, make reaching the intended respondent more difficult over the years. In addition, the survey method may affect respondent burden and response rates. Panels (Finland, Sweden, UK, Ireland, Australia, Canada, and U.S.A.) can be more burdensome than cross-sectional surveys, because respondents have to participate in the same survey at different times.

The definition of observational unit may have an influence too. If the household is to be questioned, as is the case in Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Ireland, and the U.S.A., one needs information on all household members. In all these cases, proxies were allowed, reducing the risk of nonresponse. Substitution in the case of refusals or “not at homes” is used in Belgium and Spain. This explains the low refusal rates in these countries, as compared with their noncontact rates.

Also, factors related to the *fieldwork strategy* differ between countries. Five countries (UK, Ireland, France, Canada, U.S.A.) use call scheduling, that is, calls and visits are scheduled in these countries to maximize the contact probability. Some countries (Belgium, France, Finland, Sweden, Australia) prescribe a larger number of contact attempts than others. Reducing the noncontact rate is the first step in the battle against nonresponse, the second step is reducing refusals.

Most countries use refusal conversion, the Netherlands being the exception. Incentives for respondents are not used in labor force surveys, except in France. Statistical offices in general only use respondent incentives in exceptional cases with a heavy respondent burden (e.g., long and detailed diaries). Interviewer incentives, in general, mean use of “differential payment” related to interviewer performance. In countries where this kind of incentive is used (Belgium, UK, Australia, and U.S.A.), this instrument is mostly combined with performance monitoring systems. Sometimes paying per response is seen as a way to motivate interviewers to perform as well as they can. However, when it is used without a monitoring system (such as in the Netherlands) it probably

will not work well. When interviewers are only paid for a response, they will expend hardly any effort on persons difficult to reach and will instead go for the quick response.

Whether or not a survey is mandatory together with other factors related to the *survey organization*, play an important role in survey participation. In some countries (Belgium, France, Germany, and Spain), participation in the labor force survey is mandatory. This might explain why in those countries refusal rates are very low, and the overall response stays constant over time. In several other countries, participation in the labour force survey is not mandatory, but participation in other surveys sometimes is (e.g., Australia, U.S.A., Canada). In Australia, the statistical bureau even has the ability to proclaim survey participation as mandatory. In the U.S.A., participation in the census is mandatory. People might think that participation in the LFS, which is also carried out by the U.S. Census Bureau, is also mandatory.

Organizational practice can also influence fieldwork strategies and so influence response. Sometimes the survey agency does not have the possibility of using differential payment according to performance. Some organizations have faced budget cuts and important changes with respect to the fieldwork organization, which affect fieldwork results. Organizational circumstances affected response results in The Netherlands to some extent in 1993 and 1994. Barnes (1996) showed that organizational change and budget cuts have influenced response results for all Office for National Statistics field surveys except LFS, because LFS was not affected by the budget cuts and organizational changes as were all other surveys. In the U.S.A. the response rate dropped more than “ever before,” because of the introduction of the redesign of the Current Population Survey (the U.S. Labor Force Survey) in 1994.

Researchers cannot directly influence factors related to the survey organization and the survey climate. Still these factors need to be understood, and can guide further research. Survey climate is a largely unknown factor. In The Netherlands the survey burden seems to be very high. Many surveys are carried out; and also the growth of call-centers and tele-marketing seems to have a negative effect on the survey climate. In addition, public debates on privacy might have a negative effect on the survey climate, as was the case in The Netherlands (around 1981) and in Sweden (Metropolitan debate, 1985). On the other hand, in Ireland the survey climate is said to be very positive. Far fewer surveys are conducted. In addition, the labor force survey is seen as being very important with respect to government policies to improve employment conditions, and respondents have a rather positive attitude towards it. So with somewhat less effort one can obtain very high response results in Ireland.

6. Conclusions and Discussion

Nonparticipation in surveys is feared to be increasing by survey researchers all over the world. Data collected in an international study on household survey nonresponse partly support this fear. But trends differ strongly by country. There is a downward trend in response in several European countries (e.g., Sweden, Finland, Poland) and the U.S.A.; other countries (e.g., Australia, Germany, UK, Slovenia) appear to remain stable. However, overall nonresponse is the result of two mechanisms, noncontact and refusal.

When survey design, fieldwork strategies, and organizational factors are incorporated, it becomes clear that in some cases these apparently stable figures are “bought” with an

increased fieldwork effort. For instance, in the UK and Slovenia the noncontact rates are decreasing, thereby compensating for the increasing refusal rates. Other countries (e.g., The Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden) could improve their response by reducing the “non-contacts,” although there still is a considerable percentage of refusals left. In other countries (e.g., Australia) both noncontact and refusal rates have remained relatively low and stable over time.

One should keep in mind that the data were gathered for a limited number of topics, mainly the labor force survey, which limits the generalizability of the findings. One should also keep in mind that the data concern official surveys, which are carried out by government agencies. Government agencies generally obtain a higher response than other survey organizations (e.g., Hox and De Leeuw 1994; Groves and Couper 1998). For many countries, the figures reported here, may well be an upper limit; although much depends on the topic and the fieldwork effort. Finally, only an informal analysis of the differences between countries was made. When more data on different survey topics and fieldwork strategies are available, a formal statistical analysis should be carried out to explain differences between countries.

Still, the following conclusions seem to be justified:

1. There are large differences in response rates and response trends between countries for official statistics. The same holds for refusal rates and noncontact rates. This might have serious implications with respect to data quality, especially when the results from these surveys are used for “international comparisons or trend reports.”
2. Differences with respect to response trends, levels and types of nonresponse seem to be affected to a great extent by sample and survey characteristics, fieldwork strategy and aspects of the survey organization. To this extent, response and nonresponse levels are also partly under the control of the survey organization.
3. There seems to be no large or fast-growing group of hard-core refusers in many countries. For instance, in seven of the 16 countries response rates still exceed 90%, and in six other countries, the percentage of response is in the upper 80s. Furthermore, in many countries refusal conversion seems to be profitable.
4. The above does not mean that one should not be worried about survey participation. In some countries with a long history of continuing labor force surveys (Finland, Sweden, Great Britain, and U.S.A.), refusal rates are increasing. In Finland, Sweden, and the U.S.A. also the noncontact rates are increasing. These changes might have to do with changing attitudes towards the survey request which influence refusals (maybe the “survey burden” and the influence of telemarketing have a negative effect on the climate) and with “societal” changes which make it more difficult to contact people.
5. A greater effort is needed now (e.g., more contact attempts) to establish acceptable response results or to keep response on the same level.

The most important conclusion is that it is possible to gather data on response, types of nonresponse, and survey characteristics in different countries, and build a database for the investigation of response trends. This is not without problems, and extreme care should be taken that the data are comparable. Also, survey organizations will change over time, which means that data on fieldwork procedures and changes in fieldwork

procedures should be gathered periodically. It would, however, be better to collect and analyze these data continuously, and in a more official way, that is, under the responsibility of and funded by international organizations.

Therefore it seems to be necessary to summarize the reasons for, and the advantages of undertaking such a project. First of all, cross-national and international outcomes and comparisons are becoming more important to underpin policies of international organizations (such as the UN, EC, OECD). This implies that it is necessary to pay more attention to data quality affected by nonresponse in order to improve comparability of data. "Common wisdom" can be replaced by empirical evidence to give a more reliable view of what is really happening.

Secondly, it will stimulate precise definitions and formulae to be used to calculate response rates. Without a detailed description of the response, it is impossible to evaluate the quality of a survey. Without comparable response rates it is difficult, to say the least, to compare or integrate data from different sources or countries.

Thirdly, it provides information for survey organizations in different countries to benchmark their individual survey practices, to make them aware of problems, and to offer possibilities of overcoming these. It might motivate organizations to administer their own response in detail and monitor it continuously, resulting in a rich dataset to analyze trends and to investigate potential determinants of nonresponse. This will broaden our insight with respect to the causes of nonresponse, which in turn can be used to develop or improve systems of Current Best Methods for national and international surveys (cf. Japac and Lyberg 1995).

Finally, it might stimulate survey organizations working in different disciplines (e.g., government, and market research) to invest in long-term policies, for instance policies to prevent the survey-taking climate being made worse by these organization themselves.

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