Using Incentives to Aid Within-Household Selection in Mail Surveys

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Within-Household Selection in Mail Surveys is Hard!!

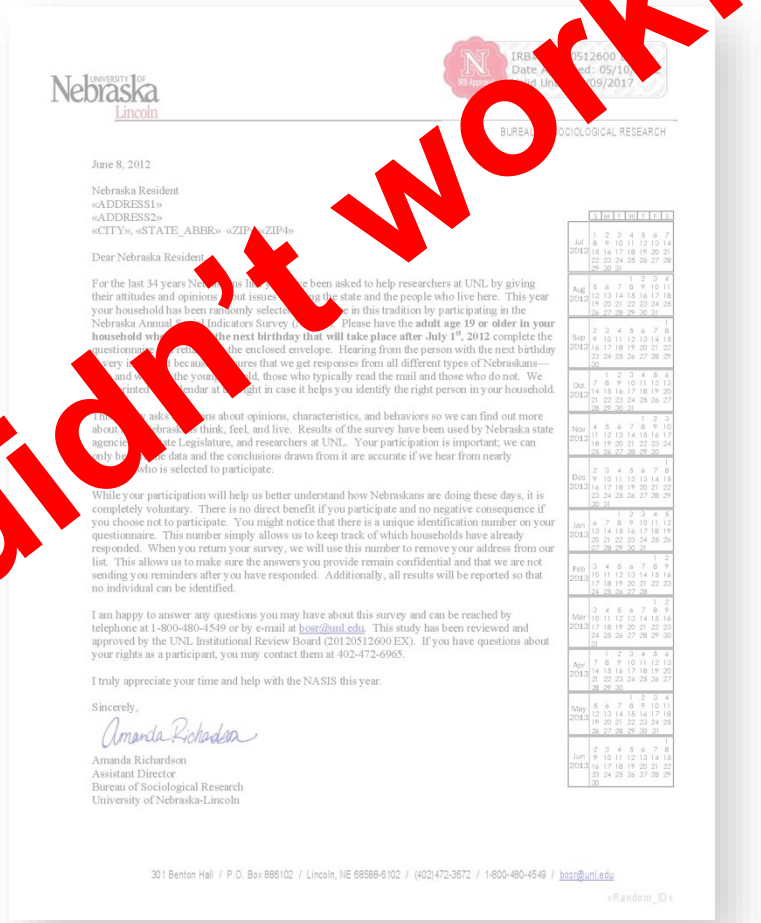
- Instructions placed in cover letter; no interviewer to help.
- Up to 30% of within-household selections are inaccurate (Olson and Smyth, 2014; Olson, Stange, and Smyth, 2014; Battaglia et al., 2008; Schnell, Ziniel, and Coutts, 2007)
- What may be going wrong?
  - Do not read the instructions
  - Do read, but not convinced of the importance of complying or do not understand the method
  - Do read, but have difficulty carrying out selection
  - Selected person does not want to participate

Previous Research

- For the unconvinced – We tested standard wording vs. a more descriptive explanation written for non-surveyors (Stange, Smyth, & Olson, Forthcoming).
  - To make sure that our results accurately reflect the opinions of all Nebraskans, we ask that the enclosed survey be completed by *the adult (age 19 or older) in your household who will be the next to celebrate a birthday.*
  - Some people like filling out surveys and others do not, but hearing from only certain types of people can lower the quality of our results. To make sure that our results accurately reflect the opinions of all Nebraskans, we need to randomly pick someone within your household to answer the survey. Because the timing of birthdays is pretty random, we can use them to determine who should answer. Please take a moment to think about the birthdays of all the adults (age 19 or older) in your home. Who will be the next to celebrate a birthday? We ask that the enclosed survey be completed by the adult (age 19 or older) in your household who will be the next to celebrate a birthday. To ensure the quality of our results, it is very important that this is the person to complete the survey.

It didn't work!!

- For those having trouble carrying out the selection – We tested the inclusion of a calendar in the cover letter to help identify household members' birthdays and which is next (Stange, Smyth, & Olson, Forthcoming).



University of Nebraska Lincoln

BUREAU OF SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH

June 8, 2012

Nebraska Resident
«ADDRESS1»
«ADDRESS2»
«CITY», «STATE_ABBR» «ZIP» «ZIP4»

Dear Nebraska Resident,

For the last 34 years Nebraska has been asked to help researchers at UNL by giving their attitudes and opinions about issues facing the state and the people who live here. This year your household has been randomly selected to participate in this tradition by participating in the Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey (NASIS). Please have the **adult age 19 or older in your household who will have the next birthday that will take place after July 1st, 2012** complete the questionnaire and return it in the enclosed envelope. Hearing from the person with the next birthday every year helps us because it ensures that we get responses from all different types of Nebraskans—men and women, the young and old, those who typically read the mail and those who do not. We printed a calendar at the right in case it helps you identify the right person in your household.

This survey asks questions about opinions, characteristics, and behaviors so we can find out more about Nebraskans—how we think, feel, and live. Results of the survey have been used by Nebraska state agencies, the State Legislature, and researchers at UNL. Your participation is important; we can only be sure the data and the conclusions drawn from it are accurate if we hear from nearly everyone who is selected to participate.

While your participation will help us better understand how Nebraskans are doing these days, it is completely voluntary. There is no direct benefit if you participate and no negative consequence if you choose not to participate. You might notice that there is a unique identification number on your questionnaire. This number simply allows us to keep track of which households have already responded. When you return your survey, we will use this number to remove your address from our list. This allows us to make sure the answers you provide remain confidential and that we are not sending you reminders after you have responded. Additionally, all results will be reported so that no individual can be identified.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have about this survey and can be reached by telephone at 1-800-480-4549 or by e-mail at bosr@unl.edu. This study has been reviewed and approved by the UNL Institutional Review Board (20120512600 EX). If you have questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact them at 402-472-6965.

I truly appreciate your time and help with the NASIS this year.

Sincerely,

Amanda Richardson

Amanda Richardson
Assistant Director
Bureau of Sociological Research
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

301 Benton Hall / P.O. Box 886102 / Lincoln, NE 68588-6102 / (402)472-3672 / 1-800-480-4549 / bosr@unl.edu

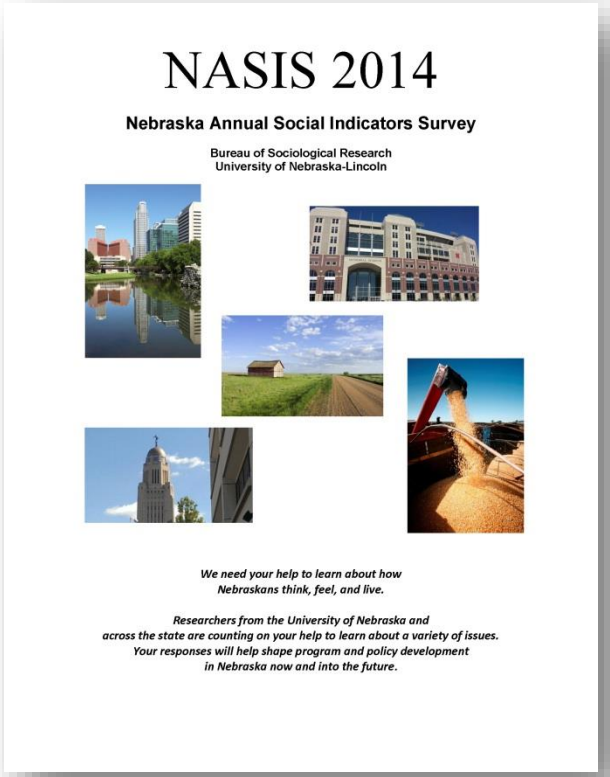
«Random_ID»

Current Research

- For those who are unmotivated - Test the effect of a $1 incentive on response rates, sample composition, and selection accuracy.
  - Why would an incentive make a difference?
    - Attaching an incentive to the letter might get people to read the letter (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian 2014).
    - The incentive may encourage the selected household member to respond.
      - Incentives increase response rates (Church 1993; Singer & Ye 2013)
      - Incentives increase participation among sample members who are uninterested in the topic (Baumgartner & Rathbun 1997; Groves et al. 2006)
  - Could the incentive backfire?
    - The incentive may encourage the mail opener to take ownership of the survey instead of following the selection instructions.
- Test the effect of letter wording emphasizing who the incentive is for.

Data

- 2014 Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey
  - 12 page omnibus survey
- DSF sample of 3,500 provided by SSI
- 3 mailings: Invitation, postcard, reminder
  - Incentives, where used, were provided with the invitation
- Selection instruction: “Please have the adult age 19 or older in your household who will have the next birthday after August 1st 2014 do the survey”
- n=1,018, AAPOR RR1 = 29.1%


NASIS 2014

Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey

Bureau of Sociological Research
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

We need your help to learn about how Nebraskans think, feel, and live.

Researchers from the University of Nebraska and across the state are counting on your help to learn about a variety of issues. Your responses will help shape program and policy development in Nebraska now and into the future.

Experimental Treatments

Sample members were randomly assigned to one of three treatments:

1. No incentive, standard letter wording
2. $1 incentive, standard letter wording
3. $1 incentive, selection-specific letter wording

Standard letter wording:

"We have enclosed a small token of appreciation to thank you for your help."

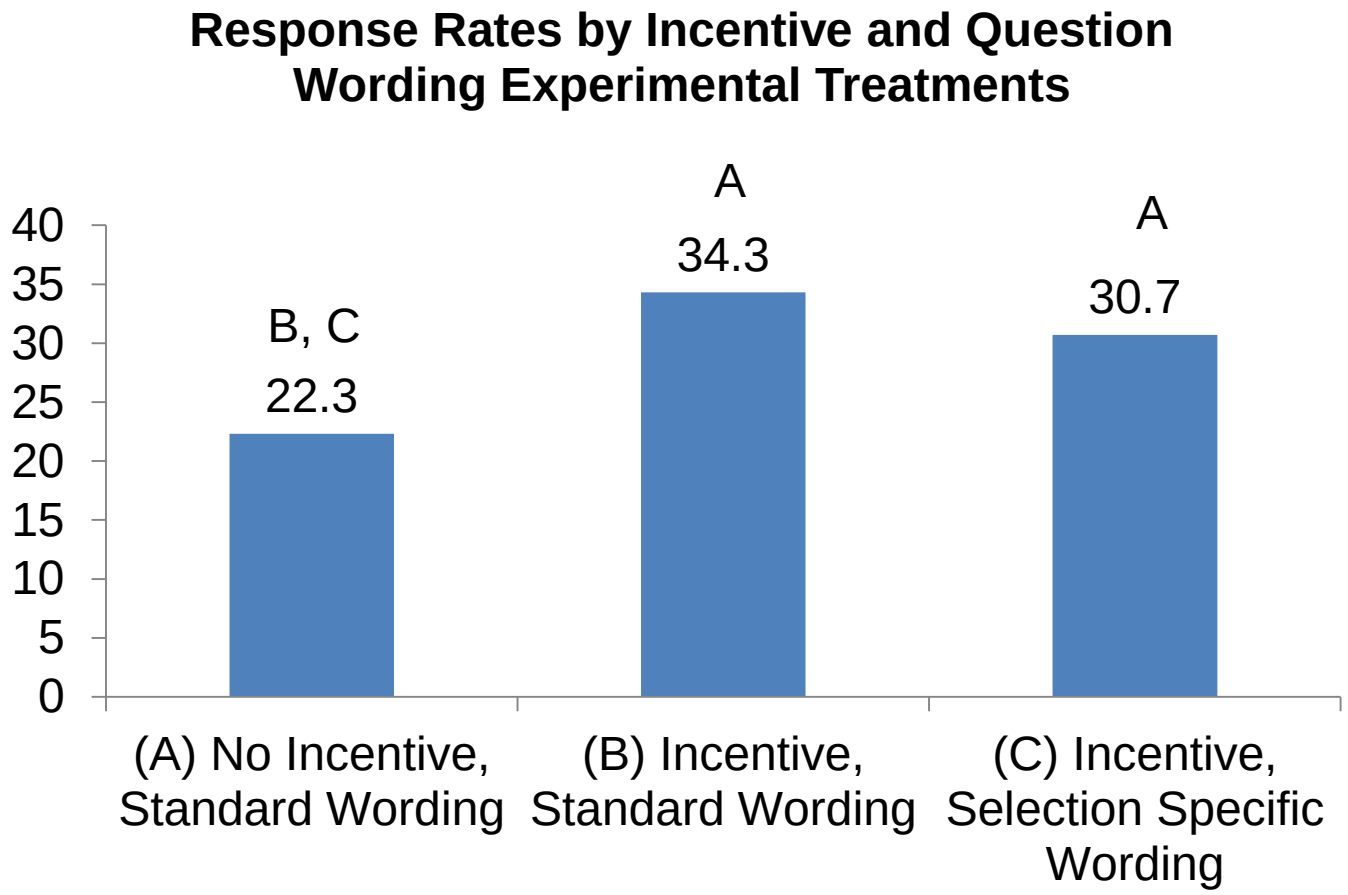
Selection-specific letter wording:

"We have enclosed a small token of appreciation to thank the adult with the next birthday for their help."

Results

Response Rates

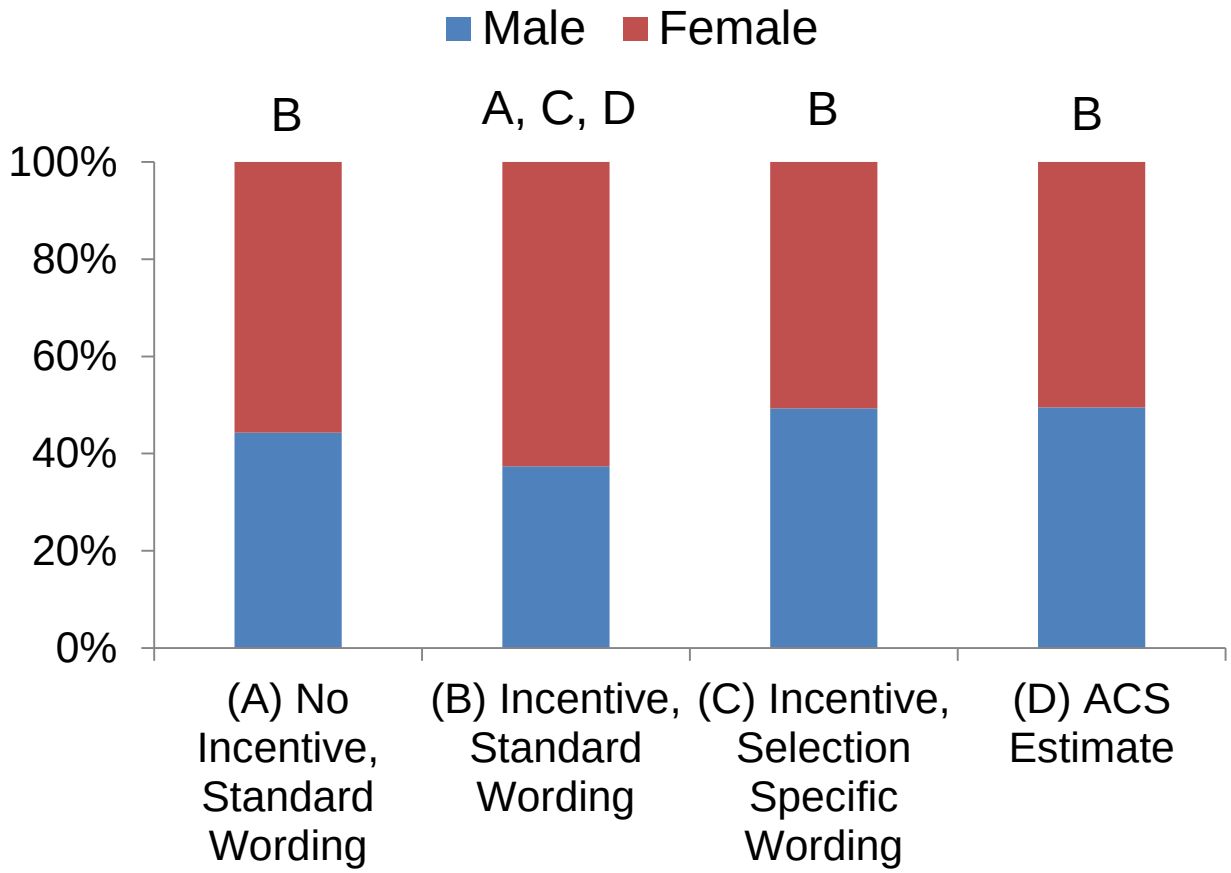
The incentive increased response rates.



A, B, C p≤.05

Sample Composition

Percent Male and Female by Experimental Treatment and ACS Estimates

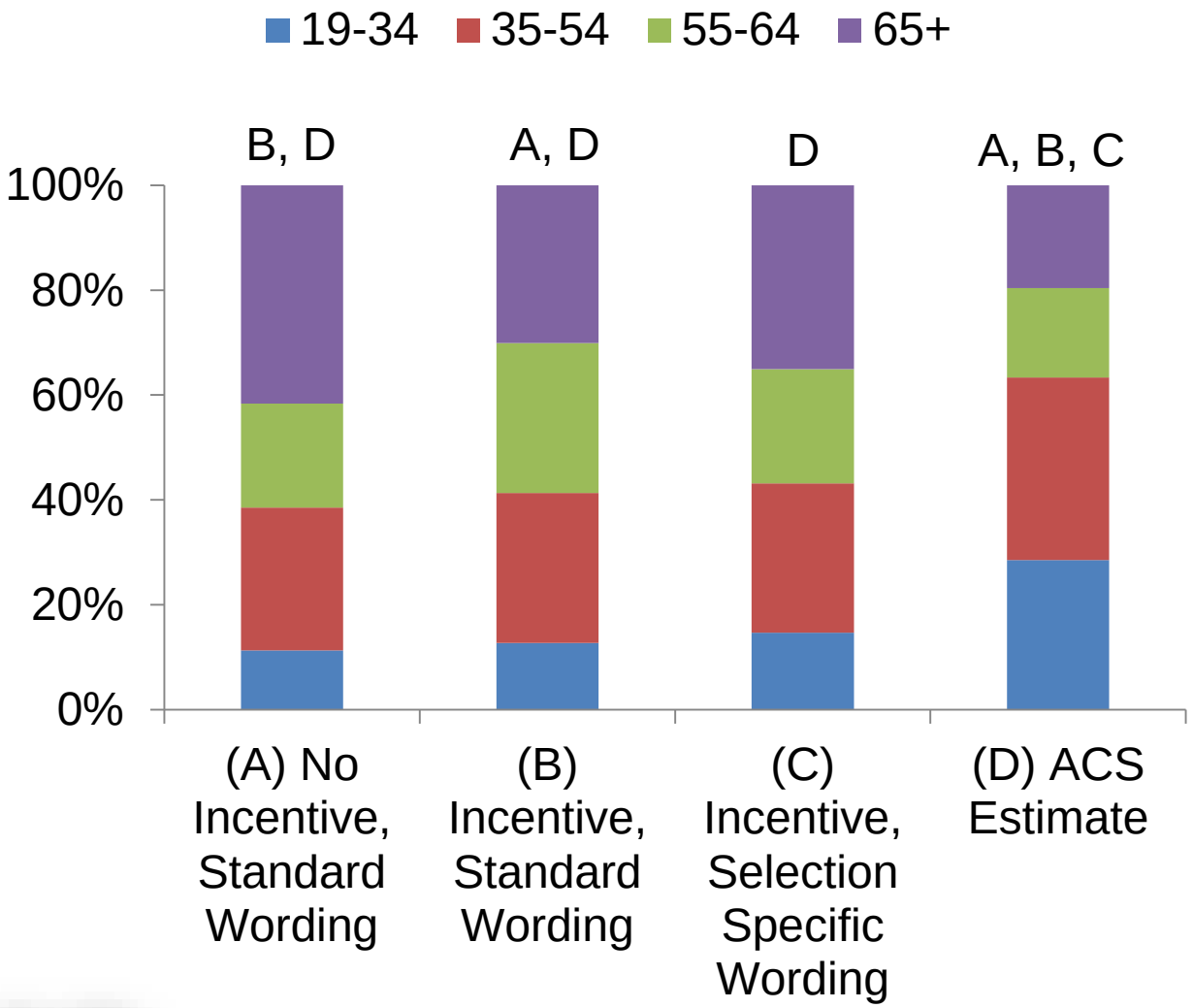


The incentive with standard wording got too many female respondents.

The incentive with selection specific wording did not over represent females.

A, B, C, D $p \leq .05$

Age Distribution by Experimental Treatment and ACS Estimates



All treatments overrepresented the older age categories.

The incentive with standard wording recruited too many in the 55-64 category.

A, B, C, D $p \leq .05$

- No difference across the treatments in…

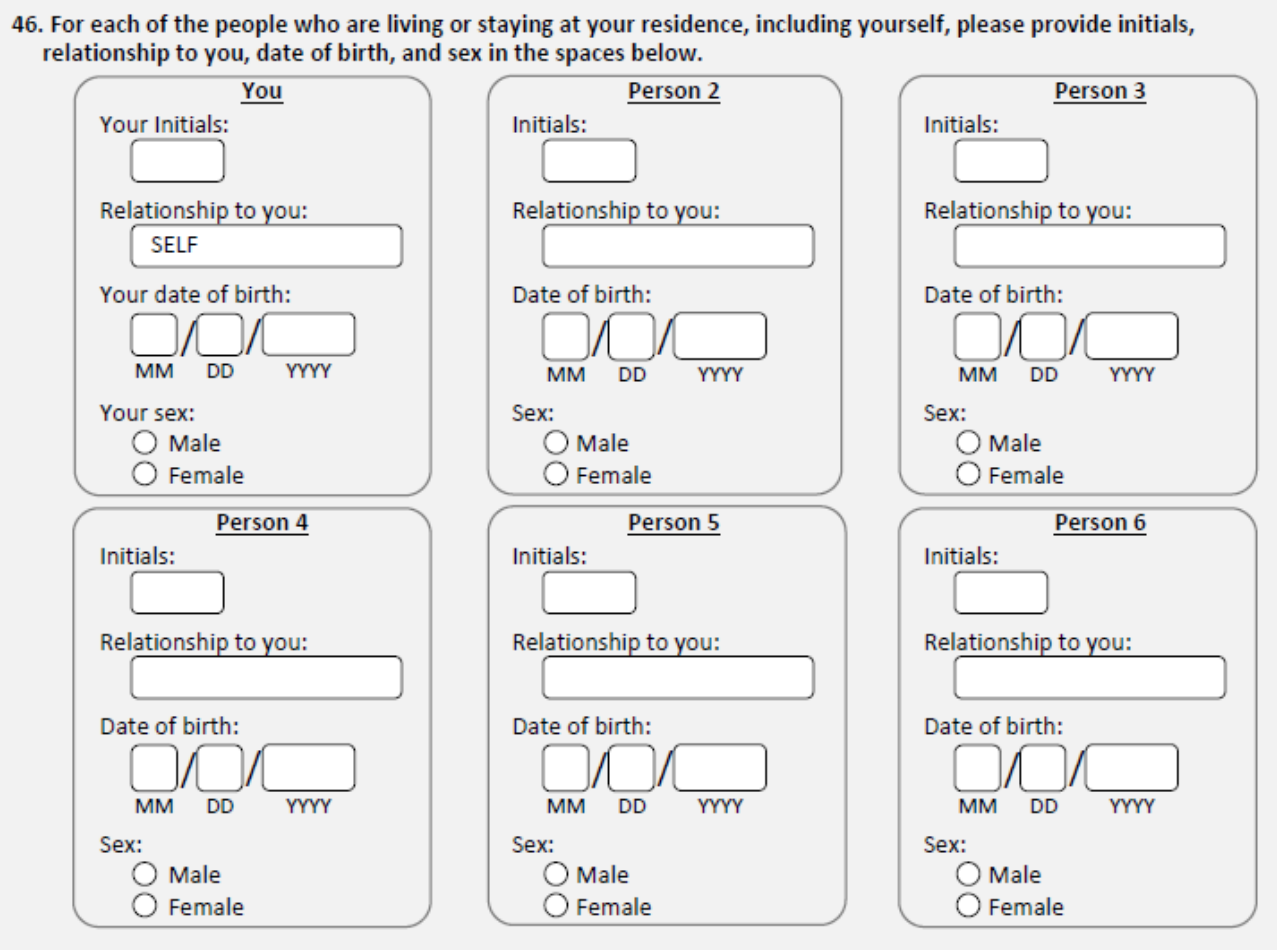
Race	Overrepresented whites
Ethnicity	Underrepresented Hispanics (English only survey)
Education	Underrepresented high school or less and over-represented college degree
Family Income	Underrepresented income over $100,000 and overrepresented income under $50,000
Have Children	Did not differ from ACS estimates

Demographics for all treatments differed from the ACS, but on average, the incentive with selection specific wording treatment was closest.

Average Absolute Difference in Demographics from ACS	
No incentive, standard wording	7.07
Incentive, standard wording	7.09
Incentive, selection specific wording	5.64

Accuracy

How do we gauge the accuracy of within household selection?



46. For each of the people who are living or staying at your residence, including yourself, please provide initials, relationship to you, date of birth, and sex in the spaces below.

You
Your Initials:
Relationship to you: SELF
Your date of birth: MM DD YYYY
Your sex: Male Female

Person 2
Initials:
Relationship to you:
Date of birth: MM DD YYYY
Sex: Male Female

Person 3
Initials:
Relationship to you:
Date of birth: MM DD YYYY
Sex: Male Female

Person 4
Initials:
Relationship to you:
Date of birth: MM DD YYYY
Sex: Male Female

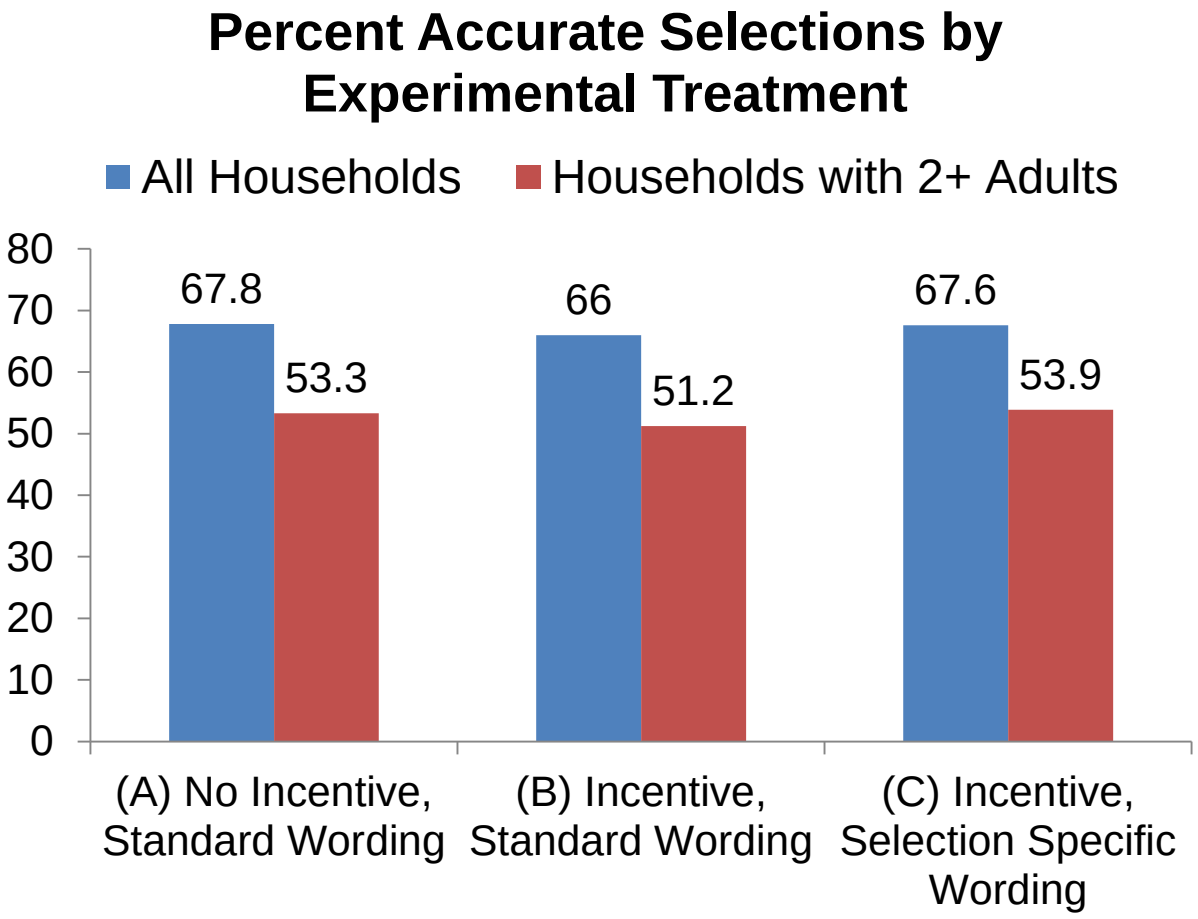
Person 5
Initials:
Relationship to you:
Date of birth: MM DD YYYY
Sex: Male Female

Person 6
Initials:
Relationship to you:
Date of birth: MM DD YYYY
Sex: Male Female

Use information reported in a household roster to determine whether the person completing the survey is the correct household member.

Calculate an accuracy rate for each treatment.

There was no difference in accuracy rates across the three experimental treatments



A, B, C, D p≤.05

Conclusions

- Neither the incentive nor the selection specific wording increased accuracy rates.
- But the incentive did increase response rates.
- And the version with the incentive and the selection specific wording did produce a slightly more demographically representative completed sample.
  - Did not overrepresent females and people ages 55-64 as much as the version with the incentive alone.

What next?
How do we improve accuracy?

What next?

- Maybe $1 was not enough motivation – Try a larger incentive.
- To see if motivation of the sampled household member is the problem, experiment with survey topic.
- Maybe people are not reading the cover letter – Try putting the instruction on the questionnaire itself.