

Cell Phone Samples in Data Collection

This paper will address the inclusion of cellular phone only users in market research studies. Survey Communications has identified both advantages and disadvantages of including cellular phone only users in market research projects. Many studies have been conducted over recent years regarding the increase in the number of cellular phone only users in the United States. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reports that slightly more than 20% of American homes had cellular phones only during the second half of 2008.¹ The CDC also reported that nearly 15% of American homes received all or almost all calls on cellular phones, despite having a landline telephone in the home.² Survey Communications believes it is necessary to investigate the effect of the increase in cellular-only homes on the market research industry.

It appears that studies of the general population are not yet significantly affected by the lack of cellular phone only users. In an analysis of six surveys regarding the 2008 Presidential election, conducted between September and November 2008, The Pew Research Center found an average bias of 2.3 percentage points between cellular phone only respondents and landline respondents.³ This bias, while statistically significant, is smaller than the usual margin of error in most polls.⁴ In another article, the Pew Research Center reports that,

...although cell-only respondents are different from landline respondents in important ways, they were neither numerous enough nor different enough on the questions we examined to produce a significant change in overall general population survey estimates when included with the landline samples and weighted according to U.S. Census parameters on basic demographic characteristics.⁵

The affect of the increase in cellular phone only users is most pronounced when the study focuses on a demographic most likely to be cellular phone only users. The CDC reports that cellular phone only users are more likely to be renters, living with adult roommates, young (between the ages of 18 and 29), males, living in

¹ Blumberg SJ, Luke JV. Wireless Substitution: Early Release of Estimates From the National Health Interview Survey, July – December 2008. National Center for Health Statistics. May 2009. Available from: <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nhis.htm>

² *Ibid.*

³ The Pew Research Center for The People and The Press, December 18, 2008. "Calling Cell Phones in '08 Pre-Election Polls."

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Pew Research Center Publications, June 20, 2007. "How Serious is Polling's Cell-Only Problem?" The Pew Research Center for The People and The Press. Retrieved May 7, 2009 from <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/515/polling-cell-only-problem>

or near poverty, living in the South and Midwest, and Hispanic or black.⁶ Further, the CDC reports cellular phone only users are more likely to binge drink, smoke cigarettes, report being in excellent or very good health, engage in leisure-time physical activity, have been tested for HIV, and be without health insurance. The same individuals are less likely to have received a flu vaccine during the previous year, less likely to have a usual place to go for medical care, and less likely to have been diagnosed with diabetes.⁷

The most prominent demographic represented largely by cell phone only users is young people. Over 40% of adults aged 25-29 years and over 30% of adults aged 18-24 are cellular phone only users.⁸ This is a significant chunk of the young person demographic, and that should be taken into consideration when this demographic is targeted for specific studies. The benefit, therefore, of including cellular phone only users in a study sample, is to get a more complete view of the population, especially when the target population happens to heavily favor cellular phone only use.

Market research studies that include cellular phone only users or dual users (those who utilize both a cellular phone and a landline) are certainly feasible; the main drawback is an increase in cost. Random Digit Dial (RDD) lists of cellular phone numbers are available for purchase, just as RDD samples of landlines are available. Estimates are that a study including solely cellular phone only users will cost four to five times that of a landline only study.⁹

This increase results from greater administrative costs and the addition of a monetary incentive, which has been found necessary when asking a cellular phone user to take a survey over his or her cellular phone. Cellular phone use generally involves a pre-set monthly rate, allowing the user to a certain amount of minutes of use per month. Individuals are more wary of using their cellular phones to take surveys; they are, in essence, paying for the time the survey takes. To offset this cost, market researchers offer a monetary incentive. A \$10 incentive

⁶ Blumberg SJ, Luke JV. Wireless Substitution: Early Release of Estimates From the National Health Interview Survey, July – December 2008. National Center for Health Statistics. May 2009. Available from: <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nhis.htm>

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Keeter C, Kennedy C, Clark A, Tompson T, Mokrzycki M. May 17-20, 2007. "What's Missing from National RDD Surveys? The Impact of the Growing Cell-Only Population." The Pew Research Center and The Associated Press.

was offered to each cell phone user by the Pew Research Center over the course of those studies surveyed for this paper.¹⁰

The industry should be aware that even when offering an incentive to a cellular phone respondent, ill-will may be generated toward the market research company or the market research client. Calling a cellular phone user to inquire as to whether he or she would be willing to participate in a study may cause anger or frustration, simply because the respondent must pay for each minute of his or her cellular phone usage. Increased screening is also required to ascertain that the cellular phone respondent is in fact a cellular phone only user, and not a dual user.¹¹ These two issues require more experienced research interviewers, which also increases costs, as they are generally paid more.

Compliance with federal law when calling cellular phones leads to increased administrative costs. Under the Telephone Consumer Protection Act, automated dialing devices cannot be used when calling cellular phones.¹² Although the cellular phone numbers may be automatically provided to the research interviewer, the interviewer must then manually dial each number. This, too, causes an increase in cost.

Additionally, surveying cellular phone users entails some safety concerns. Because a cellular phone user may be anywhere at the time his or her number is dialed for a market research study, additional screening must be done to determine that the cellular phone respondent may safely complete the survey. Market researchers should determine that the respondent is not driving his or her car or engaging in another activity that requires concentration for safety. Moreover, because of their surroundings, cellular phone users may be more distracted than landline users. This distraction can lead to improperly completed surveys.

The complications involved in producing a cellular phone user only study or a dual study certainly can be mitigated. Market researchers and their clients should be aware of the potential benefits and increased costs when designing future studies.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² TCPA 47 U.S.C. §227