Reviewer's report

Title: The effect of survey method on survey participation: Analysis of data from the Health Survey for England 2006 and the Boost Survey for London

Version: 1 Date: 10 June 2010

Reviewer: Jonathan VanGeest

Reviewer's report:

General comments:

The article is timely, as surveys remain important in health policy, public health, and health services research. Moreover, the need for local data is compelling. Policy and service delivery solutions are largely local, and the need for data-driven solutions at this level is compelling. The questions posed by the authors are suitable. The methods employed in their analyses are also appropriate as a natural experiment.

Discretionary Revisions:

Introduction: The authors indicate a need for local data, but do not make a complete argument regarding this need (e.g., link to local solutions, etc.). I would recommend that the case be more clearly stated.

Introduction (second paragraph): The discussion of the Health Survey for England is somewhat confusing. I would recommend that the authors include additional description for this survey (i.e., basic sampling methodology, etc.) prior to making the logical jump to the need for the Boost Survey. Additional information should then be provided on the Boost Survey and its methodology, including basic sampling methodology, inclusion/exclusion criteria, etc.

Statistical Analysis (page 7): Would recommend eliminating the first sentence and simply sub-title the different sections that follow.

Minor Essential Revisions:

First paragraph of the Methods section: Restate title of the Health Survey for England.

Differentiate between household response and response rates within cooperating households.

Socio-demographic characteristics of participants (second paragraph): In the first sentence, I would recommend editing to read as follows: “There was a significant difference in the proportion of participants from racial and ethnic minority groups, with...”

Major Compulsory Revisions:
Introduction (third paragraph): This is also somewhat incomplete. The declining trend in survey response overall is cited, without any discussion of implications. The authors then immediately address the related – but different – issue of differential item response. I would recommend that the authors clearly differentiate between the two issues and fully explore their implications for survey results as justification for the present study. I would further recommend that the authors incorporate literature addressing these two issues as they are large. Lastly, the authors should note where issues remain in terms of the existing literature as justification for the present study.

Discussion: The discussion section should be reorganized to focus on the outcomes in question and then address strengths and limitations. Key questions are also left unanswered, such as how the household and individual response rates vary from current trends in health surveys generally. This is also another opportunity to discuss the potential implications of response rate. Similarly, the data on item non-response is not discussed in light of the existing literature on item non-response and its implications.

Discussion: There is very little reference back to the existing body of literature on the impact of response rate and item non-response generally. There is also literature on impact of question wording/content and questionnaire literacy that is omitted (both of which are discussed).

Discussion: As presented, this study is really measuring the effect of mode on response rate and item non-response, along with data on potential measurement error. Present organization makes it difficult to tease each of these issues out effectively. I would recommend that the discussion section be re-organized to provide further clarity.

Overall, the authors do not cite the breadth of literature on the subject matter in question, which is considerable.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests.