Reviewer's report

Title: Factors affecting Study Efficiency and Item Non-response in Health Surveys in Developing Countries: The Jamaica National Healthy Lifestyle Survey

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Reviewer: Carol Brayne

Reviewer's report:

This paper aims to address issues around the design and conduct of studies in less developed regions of the world. The paper presents a slightly uneasy mixture of content results and results which relate to the conduct, reliability and validity of the study. The setting (not mentioned in the abstract) is the Caribbean and the survey is one of general health. There are few papers dealing with methodological and operational issues in such surveys and so the paper should be welcome to those wishing to conduct such research, building on the published evidence to draw on. They survey was conducted some time ago, but the lessons learnt and recommendations should not change over this time frame.

The context and justification of the survey is covered in the backgound, but the background literature on choice of survey methods is such settings and previous experience is only fleetingly referred to. It would be helpful for the background to provide more of the lead up to the specific issues and questions that this paper is felt to address, thus providing a clearer focus.

The methods are described extensively - particularly sample creation and project administration. Some of this could be shortened, although the detail could be made available on request perhaps. The methods also would benefit from a clear statement about the aims of this paper and what results to be presented and why.

Results - despite the description of the sample in detail the issue of refusal and traditional response rate is not covered (I know this is dealt with in weighting to some extent, but this is clearly an important aspect of surveys, and is covered in discussion). The detail on interview time is too much (and isn't introduced as a topic in the background). This needs to be cut to the aspects which matter to future studies. The results on question response are important and could be developed more in discussion (and background). The regional analyses seem only of limited interest - this is clearly of interest to a local audience but not to international one. One aspect which could be expanded is the multiple approaches - do people who require one, two and three approaches differ in their responses. Having to visit places up to three times is very costly in time and transport and if there is no bias introduced or tiny uptake this is potentially important to future study conduct. Including the older population, and looking at special aspects of these usually excluded groups might also be important to the theme of this paper (not just examining age in multivariate models but pulling out the older group).

The discussion would be strengthened if it provided more rationale of the topics, with highlighting of generalisable issues and implications. The issue of how to code don't know, not answered etc for such populations could be expanded as it is valuable for future researchers.

The conclusions could be more far reaching in their statement of lessons learnt and implications for similar surveys in developing countries.

Tables and Figures

The degree of detail is probably not necessary in Table 1. Only if the detail can be justified by a question on the importance of length to response/cost is it worth including. table 6 - are these percentages? Figure 1 - either cut Fig 1 or Table 2

figure 2 is covered in the text and could be dropped. Figure 4 - is it really adding anything?

What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions
Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests