Author’s response to reviews

Title: Emerging advantages and drawbacks of Telephone Surveying in Public Health Research in Ireland and the UK

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Author’s response to reviews:

Re: TITLE: Emerging advantages and drawbacks of telephone surveying in public health research in Ireland and the U.K.
M Boland1,2*, MR Sweeney1*, E Scallan1, M Harrington1, A Staines1.

Dear Editor

Thank you for your constructive feedback on our manuscript. We have revised the manuscript in light of recent reviewers' comments as follows: The changes to the revised manuscript are tracked in blue.

Reviewer 1. Bernard Choi

1. "The conclusions (p. 12) are a bit weak. The statement that "Despite the trials and tribulation discussed in this paper, telephone surveys remain a useful way of obtaining the views of a relatively representive proportion of the population of Ireland, with due care and attention to methodology" does not seem to be supported by the study's own results that the response rate fell from 58.6% (2000) to 17.7% (2005). Would one consider a 17.7% response rate representative? What kind of "due care and attention to methodology" can make a 17.7% response rate a useful survey?"

The conclusions have been rewritten, alluding primarily to the demonstrated drawbacks of telephone surveying emerging over the past five years.

2. "The conclusions may need to provide more insights into the reasons and strategies to deal with the observed tends. For example, on p.4 it talks about "saturation of householders with market research company surveys". Other potential reasons could be discussed: the increase of households with only mobile telephone, and the characteristics of the mobile telepone users (e.g. they are always on the go, and tend not to answer surveys)"

The issue of dealing with the observed trends has been addressed in the conclusions section, with allusion to strategies to improve utility, in the form of
a) Capturing mobile phone users
b) Parallel benefit of legislation reducing marketing approaches by phone
c) Using incentives

3. "There are two statements at the beginning of the paper which need to be followed up by more thorough discussion in the main text. In the Abstract, the statement "We ... recommend that researchers tailor land-line surveying to each individual setting to minimise cost and maximize outcomes (p.3)" (but HOW?)

We agree with this comment and have removed the sentence above from the abstract. The following sentence has been added to the discussion section of the manuscript "Researchers undertaking telephone surveys need a detailed understanding of the telephone network in that given region and who they are
interested in studying. This will allow the researcher to ascertain who is being included and equally important who is being excluded and then decide whether this exclusion is important to the overall study or not. Hence one methodology for telephone surveying may not be globally applied and researchers need to pay attention to theses details.

In Background, the statement "We recommend approaches for researchers undertaking telephone surveys in the future and consider whether telephone surveys are a cost effective tool (p.5)" (but WHAT are these approaches?)

We have deleted this sentence from the revised manuscript as it is not possible to make one generalized recommendation for all.

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)
1. Page 4, paragraph 3: "households with no landline or mobile telephone" should be "households with no landline telephone"
2. Page 6, paragraph 2: there needs to be a reference for the "hundred-bank method".
3. Page 7, paragraph 2: "had the longest completion time (Table 3)" should be Table 1, not Table 3.
4. Page 10, paragraph 2: "In survey 3 refusals were high in Northern Ireland in the first week of the survey, which took place in mid-July. This time of traditional political difficulties..." could be obvious to readers in Northern Ireland but not elsewhere. What happens in mid-July needs to be explained.
5. Table 1: needs a footnote to explain ROI, NI
6. Tables 1 and 2: needs to explain why "Total numbers generated/extracted" (Table 1) and "Total telephone numbers dialled" (Table 2) are the same for Survey 1, but so very different for Surveys 2 and 3.
7. Table 4: suggest adding a row for "Unit cost per completed interview adjusted to the 2000 constant euro (based on inflation)"

All minor essential revision have been done to the revised manuscript

Reviewer 2. AK Mokdad
1) "The manuscript would benefit from a comparison (in the discussion) to RDD trends in other countries. One possible comparison would be the BRFSS since all response rates and disposition codes are online www.cdc.gov/brfss. Moreover, the author should cite other RDD work in other countries. What they have reported is true everywhere. I strongly recommend that they use some of the published work in the US from CDC and others. BRFSS has done a lot of work to improve its response rate. Moreover, there are lots of publications from the NIS www.cdc.gov/nis"

None response has been increasing in other countries also. In the United States, one of the largest, ongoing RDD telephone surveys, the Behavioral Risk Factor Survey has noted a decline in response rates, from 63% on 1996 to 51% in 2001. The use of advance letters in one of the methods BRFSS has adopted as a mean of improving response rates (Link & Mokdad).


2) "One of the most troubling parts of this manuscript is on page 11, first paragraph. Did these surveys conduct any cognitive testing of their questionnaire and a pre-test (pilot test)? Some of the issues with the introduction and perception of the surveys should have been dealt with before the beginning of the field work. The information in the paragraph is valuable, but I strongly recommend that the authors discuss how these questions were developed and tested and whether they were modified after the pilot test. For example, income is a very sensitive topic in the US and most RDD survey use a cascade approach to deal
with non-response”.

The questionnaire referred to was devised based on two previously validated questionnaires addressing similar issues in the USA (Breckler & Wiggans, 1989; Boulware, 2003).

Full references:


In addition a preliminary pilot and an actual pilot were conducted. The preliminary pilot conducted the study face to face with respondents while the actual pilot was conducted by telephone North and South of Ireland on telephone numbers taken from the quota sheets generated for the study. Some new issues arose which were incorporated into the questionnaire. The questionnaire was re-tested and no further issues arose. However when the instrument went live new issues emerged, which subsequently had to be modified. This has been added to the revised manuscript.

To comment on the final point relating to “sensitive issues such as income” - in these questions we mirrored the format of the national census form.

3) “There is a lot of work on multimode techniques for surveillance and the authors should cite some of this work as a possible solution for declining response rates”.

We have added a paragraph on the utility of multimode techniques as a possible solution for declining response rates to the revised manuscript as follows

"Researchers wishing to address the issue of declining response rates such consider using multimode techniques. These are generally conducted by using different methods of data collection simultaneously (e.g. CATI, CASI, paper and online web surveys). One survey [Ekman et al, 2006] shows that the response rate from multimode techniques (web 41%; paper 31%; overall response rate 72%) is greater than using one single method of data collection. In conducting a multimode method of data collection, participants can and should be offered the method of participation which suits them best i.e. web, postal or telephone. This should increase the overall response rate and at the same time establish the genuineness of responses given”.

Reference


4) "On page 7, first paragraph, last sentence "In survey 2 a quota...” please explain what do you mean by a "quota technique".

Added to manuscript- By quota technique we mean we pre-defined the total sample size to be broken down by age and sex groups to match the distribution of the target population.

Did you do post-stratification adjustment?"

Added to manuscript - Because the sample size was designed to be representative weighting was not used in the analysis.

5) "Do the authors have any data on the use and trends of caller IDs in the area? Such information would be very helpful”.

We agree that this would be very useful indeed but no information is available at this time.

6) "On page 4, second paragraph, first sentence "Telephone surveying..” the statement is true but those in remote areas may well have a much lower telephone coverage. Please address and reword".
Telephone surveying has a number of advantages over face-to-face interviewing, allowing a geographically dispersed sample, including those living in remote rural areas, to be reached easily.

Added in "There is concern that fixed line penetration may be lower in more remote rural areas, and in areas of low population density. This requires careful consideration for each country, and for each region, where it is proposed to carry out telephone surveys. A recently published survey of European telecommunications service indicators shows very wide variation in the penetration of fixed line services within European regions (IPSOS-INRA no date)."

New reference added to list

7) "It would be better if the authors combine table 2 and 3. This will allow the reader to follow the computation of response rates better".

Tables 2 and 3 have now been amalgamated.

8) "The cooperation rate reported in Table 3 needs some clarification. Perhaps the authors could explain it better by adding what numbers they used from table 2. For the first survey, from table 2, 11,782 were eligible and 9,903 were completed interviews".

The reviewer is correct is drawing our attention to these figures as there was indeed an error in the way they were calculated
The correct values have now been added to table 3.
An example from survey 1 of how this was calculated is illustrated below

Co-operation rate = C/(C + R + O) * 100
Where C = completed interview
R = Refusal
O = other (not completed because of language barrier or sickness/disability.

9,903/(9,903 + 1,815 + 64)*100
= 84.1%

Minor comments:
1) In abstract under Results, second sentence of the second paragraph, the word "pm" is included twice.
2) In Results, page 6, second paragraph, the example for the 100 numbers, the last 3 digits are underlined, it should be only 2 digits (from 00 to 99).
3) On page 9, first paragraph, second sentence ends by "is impossible to", it should be "impossible".

All minor essential revision have been done to the revised manuscript