Reviewer's report

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

Version: 1 Date: 30 March 2006

Reviewer: Bernard Choi

Reviewer's report:

General

This is an important and timely article which provides information on the changes in recent years in the usefulness of telephone surveys for public health research. The study indicates that in Ireland and the U.K., there is a drop in response rates and an increase in the cost per completed interview from 2000 to 2005.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

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 representative 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?

2. The conclusions may need to provide more insights into the reasons and strategies to deal with the observed trends. 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 telephone users (e.g. they are always on the go, and tend not to answer surveys).

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 maximise outcomes (p.3)" (but HOW?). 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?)

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------

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)"

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.