

Cell Phones and Survey Research

Why It Matters

More and more American households that use cell phones are not using landline phones anymore, creating growing challenges for researchers interested in collecting representative data. Cell phone only households (CPO) will not be reached using traditional survey methods. Findings from the last half of 2008 indicated that 20% of American households use a cell phone only, up 3% from the first half of 2008.¹ An additional 15% of American households are cell-phone-mostly (CPM), who receive all or most of their calls via cell phone even though they have a land-line.¹ Combined, over 1/3 of American households may be left out of survey research and polls conducted using traditional methods. Moreover, cell phone only and cell phone mostly households differ in their opinions and demographic make-up. Research has already demonstrated that cell phone only households are more likely to be:

- Members of minority groups (25% of Hispanic adults and 21.4% of non-Hispanic black adults vs. 16.6% of non-Hispanic white adults)¹
- Have moved within the last year (24% more likely to be cell only than those not having moved for 5 or more years)²
- Younger (41.5% of ages 25-59 compared to 11.6% of ages 45-64)¹
- Renters (39.2% of renters vs. 9.9% of homeowners)¹
- Living in poverty (30.9% vs. 16% of higher-income adults)¹

Identifying Challenges and Developing Solutions

Unfortunately, an easy solution does not currently exist; conducting surveys with cell phone users brings with it a number of challenges. One of these is the additional steps required to the screening process.³ This includes establishing that the respondent is in a safe and proper environment (e.g., not driving) for participating in a survey and determining the geographic area in which the respondent resides. Another consideration is that a substantial number of cell phones users are under 18 years of age and are not eligible to participate in many surveys. In addition, cell phone participants usually receive a modest reimbursement for costs incurred. This reimbursement, along with its corresponding administration, adds to the costs of conducting cell phone surveys. Currently, the cost for completing a survey by cell phone is two to three times more expensive than by landline, while a cell-phone only (CPO) complete is four times more expensive.⁴ These are only a few of the challenges that make cell phone surveys more difficult and more expensive to conduct.

The challenges posed by cell phone only and cell phone mostly populations are being approached in a number of ways. Some of these include: (1) incorporating cell-phone samples; (2) utilizing addressed based samples (USPS data); (3) weighting the data; or, (4) a combination. As the number of cell-phone only and cell-phone mostly users increase, researchers will need to look at using these and other solutions to ensure optimal results.

Sources:

1 Center for Disease Control and Prevention, May 2009, <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhis/earlyrelease/wireless200905.htm>

2 AAPOR, 2009, http://www.pollster.com/blogs/ansolabehere_schaffner_aapor_2009.pdf

3 Pew Research Center Publications, 2007, <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/515/polling-cell-only-problem>

4 Pew Research Center for People and the Press, 2008, <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1061/cell-phones-election-polling>