Journal of Interpersonal Violence
Volume 23 Number 10
October 2008 1483-1493

10.1177/0886260508314341
http://jiv.sagepub.com
hosted at
http://online.sagepub.com

Testing Telephone and Web Surveys for Studying Men's Sexual Assault Perpetration Behaviors

Diana M. DiNitto
Noël Bridget Busch-Armendariz
Kimberly Bender
Hyeyoung Woo
University of Texas at Austin

Melissa Tackett-Gibson
Sam Houston State University

James Dyer
Texas A&M University

Three pilot studies were conducted to obtain information about sexual assault perpetration from adult men in the United States. Each used the same random digit-dial sampling and recruitment strategy. One pilot was administered by telephone and two via the Web. Response rates in all pilots were low. Although results cannot be generalized beyond the sample, of the 97 men who completed the surveys, approximately 40% in each pilot reported some sexual assault behavior, broadly defined. Contrary to expectations, telephone respondents reported a wider range of sexual assault behaviors. Suggestions for improving response rates include offering a choice of participation methods.

Keywords: *sexual assault; sexual assault perpetration; survey research; Web surveys*

Researchers have conducted many studies of sexual assault victimization over the last 25 years, most based on victims' reports (e.g., Greenfeld, 1997; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Information from sexual assault perpetrators is limited, largely because of the small number of those reported, apprehended, and convicted for these offenses (Abbey & McAuslan, 2004; Abbey, Parkhill, BeShears, Clinton-Sherrod, & Zawacki, 2006). A body of work has examined sexual assault perpetrators using samples of male college students (e.g., Abbey & McAuslan, 2004; Byers & Eno, 1991; Koss,

Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987); however, college students may not be typical of other males, and many perpetrators are older than the typical undergraduate student (Greenfeld, 1997).

No large-scale survey asking men about their sexual assault perpetration behaviors has been conducted. The few studies that have used randomly selected community samples are limited to specific geographic areas. For example, Senn, Desmarais, Verberg, and Wood (2000) conducted a mailed survey of men from a small Canadian city, enclosing a Canadian dollar as an incentive. The 195 respondents constituted a 25% response rate, of which 27% reported at least one sexual assault behavior. Abbey et al. (2006) recruited single African American and Caucasian men from the Detroit metropolitan area using random-digit dialing. The men were told that the survey was about dating experiences and were offered $50 to participate. Participants completed a computer-assisted self-interview at their homes or a public place. The 82% response rate was based on those who answered screening questions and met participation criteria. Of the 163 participants, 64% reported at least one sexual assault behavior.

To increase knowledge of perpetrators and unreported or underreported sex crimes, a study using a nationally representative sample of men in the United States is needed. This will require determining the optimum methodologies for obtaining this sensitive information. The pilot studies reported in this article were initial attempts to accomplish this task.

Methodologies for Surveying Sensitive Behaviors

Studying sensitive sexual behaviors—especially, illegal acts such as sexual assault—is challenging. Special methodological attention is needed to increase willingness to participate. Respondents' anonymity and confidentiality are critical, and researchers must ask questions in ways that promote accurate

Authors' Note: We are indebted to the Lois and Samuel Silberman Fund, New York, and the National Institute on Drug Abuse–funded Social Work Research Development Program on Underserved Populations (No. 1R24-DA13579) and the Institute on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault at the University of Texas at Austin for financial support of this work. Thanks also to the staff of the Public Policy Research Institute at Texas A&M University for their work on screening and interviewing and to Dr. Antonia Abbey of Wayne State University for her helpful comments. Address correspondence to Noël Bridget Busch-Armendariz, University of Texas at Austin, School of Social Work, 1 University Station, Austin, TX 78712; e-mail: nbusch@mail.utexas.edu

disclosure of sensitive, embarrassing, and possibly criminal activities (see, e.g., Rosenbaum & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2006). Attempts have been made to compare methods for studying sensitive behaviors. For example, Reddy et al. (2006) compared written questionnaires, face-to-face interviews, telephone interviews, and automated telephonic data collection to collect data on several behaviors from college students, including physical and sexual abuse perpetration. They found greatest comfort and disclosure with automated telephonic data collection. Knapp and Kirk (2003) also surveyed university students about topics that included sexual behaviors and violence. They found no differences in responses among a paper-and-pencil test that each participant mailed in, an Internet survey, and automated telephonic data collection. As interesting as these recent studies are, they cannot be presumed to represent the general population's reactions to different methodologies.

With regard to the general population, door-to-door surveys and telephone surveys generally produce more representative samples of large populations than do Web surveys because far fewer people have e-mail and Internet connections than they do a residence or telephone. Those with Web access differ from those without access on factors such as income, education, and race or ethnicity (Couper, 2000), though any association of these factors with sexual assault perpetration is not known. Response rates are dropping among all types of surveys, and telephone interviews generally produce lower response rates than do face-to-face surveys; Web surveys generally produce even lower rates (Couper, 2000; Tourangeau, 2004). Telephone surveys are, however, generally less costly than face-to-face surveys, and Web surveys can be most economical of all. Incentives may be necessary to increase survey participation, especially when motivation to participate is low and participation is burdensome (Tourangeau, 2004). With the ultimate goal of conducting a national survey of men's sexual assault behaviors, we used three pilot studies to compare survey methodologies on response rates, costs, sample demographics, and disclosure of sexual assault behaviors.

Method

Sampling

The same random-digit dial methodology was used in all three pilot studies to obtain a representative sample of adult males in the United States. The random-digit dial sampling frame comprises all phone numbers nationwide. In our study, the sampling frame included listed and unlisted numbers

to avoid phone coverage bias. An initial sample was drawn and prescreened to exclude businesses and nonworking numbers. The final pilot test samples were randomly drawn from the larger initial national sample.

All potential respondents were asked the same screening questions to determine if they were male, aged 18 or older, and willing to participate. Those younger than age 18 were excluded because of difficulties in obtaining informed consent. Because of funding limitations and the early stage of our work, the survey was administered in English only. Telephone recruitment calls were made during daytime and evening hours to increase sample representativeness.

Procedures

Pilot 1: August 2004. A computer-assisted telephone interview was administered at the time of the recruitment telephone call, unless the potential respondent asked to reschedule. No incentive to participate was offered.

Pilot 2: December 2004. Pilot 2 was administered using a self-administered Web survey. Despite concerns that this approach would compromise sample representativeness and increase early terminations (incomplete surveys), we tested it to determine if the convenience and confidentiality of self-administration would provide a higher response rate than that of the telephone survey. PsychData was chosen as the Web-based service provider for its security and human participants' protection features and ease of survey construction and data collection.[1]

Telephone recruitment strategies for Pilot 2 were the same as in Pilot 1, but potential respondents were asked if they had Internet access and would be willing to take the survey on the Web. The interviewer briefly described the survey content and told potential respondents that full informed consent procedures would be provided on the Web and that an incentive ($20 gift card) would be provided for a completed survey. Interested individuals were asked to write down the survey's Web address and a password and to take the survey at the Web site.

Except for minor modifications to accommodate PsychData's Web-based formatting, the Web- and telephone-administered survey items were identical. Validation procedures (e.g., review of Internet protocol addresses, survey time stamps, and survey responses) identified no duplicate or fraudulent surveys. Personal identifiers (respondents' names and addresses) were collected in a separate data file and used only to deliver incentives.

Pilot 3: March 2005. Pilot 3 was a revised version of Pilot 2. All procedures were identical except that respondents were asked to provide their e-mail addresses. An invitation to participate with an imbedded link to the survey was e-mailed to those who provided addresses. About 10 days later, a reminder e-mail to complete the survey was sent.

Measures

An instrument developed by Abbey, McAuslan, Zawacki, Clinton, and Buck (2001) and based on work by Koss et al. (1987) was used to measure sexual assault perpetration. Behaviors range from verbal pressure and arguments to get an unwilling woman to engage in sex play and intercourse to legal definitions of sexual assault and rape involving coercion, threats, force, and use of alcohol and drugs to obtain vaginal, oral, and anal intercourse. Like Abbey et al., we placed sexual assault items at the end of a broader survey on men's health and relationships in the hope of desensitizing participants to these questions. Language was used to normalize experiences and to limit tendencies to provide socially desirable or inflated responses—for example, "Past research shows that more than one-third of men across the country say 'yes' to at least one of these questions." Respondents were also asked about demographic information; alcohol- and drug-related behaviors and beliefs; history of sexual victimization; and attitudes toward women, men, and sex, including attitudes toward dating.[2] The entire survey was tested with a small group of men; changes were made as necessary. Completion time was 20 to 40 min.

Human Participants' Protection

The institutional review boards at the University of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M University approved each pilot. Given the nature of the subject, no undue effort to convince potential respondents to participate could be made. Elaborate measures were taken to explain the study, obtain fully informed consent, and ensure anonymity. Respondents were told several times that they could decline to answer any question or terminate participation. Telephone interviewers who chose to work on the study participated in a 5-hour training on how to ask these sensitive questions and how to detect discomfort and refer participants to support services. No adverse events were reported.

Results

Response Rates

The goal of Pilot 1 (telephone survey) was 100 completed surveys. After 284 hours of interviewing over an 18-day period, financial resources were exhausted. In total, 5,018 calls were made, with 821 (16%) to eligible or potentially eligible households. These efforts resulted in 66 completed surveys, 13 partial completes, and 742 household- and respondent-level refusals. The response rate was 8.0% (66/821); conversely, the refusal rate was 92.0%.[3]

The six female interviewers had lower rates of completed-to-terminated interviews than did the six male interviewers (3.9 to 7.0), suggesting that once in the interview, respondents with female interviewers were more likely to break off the interview. Female interviewers were also more likely to get a response from a household member saying that no eligible male was present. Given the small number of interviewers, the evidence is not definitive, but it does suggest that male interviewers may be more effective in gathering this kind of data from other men.

In Pilot 2, 3,900 calls were made; among those, 34% identified eligible or potentially eligible households. Of those households, 130 completed the screening interview and agreed to write down the survey's Web address. An additional 1,213 contacts resulted in household- and respondent-level refusals, and 1 terminated during screening. Of the 130 that accepted the Web site information, 23 completed the survey, and 8 began the survey but did not answer any sexual assault perpetration questions. Calculating the response rate as the 23 completed surveys divided by 1,343 (130 + 1,213) gives a Pilot 2 response rate of 1.7% and a refusal rate of 98.3%.

In Pilot 3, 1,024 calls were made; among those, a total of 267 eligible or potentially eligible households were contacted, resulting in 23 e-mail addresses collected and 244 respondent and household-level refusals. One e-mail address was out of service; thus, 22 respondents were sent the Web address. Of the 22, 8 completed the survey, and 1 answered some questions but none about sexual assault perpetration. As such, the response rate was 3.0% (8/267) and the refusal rate, 97.0%.

Because Pilots 2 and 3 utilized the same sample, we also calculated a combined response rate: 1.9%, or 31 completed surveys divided by 1,610 completed and partial interviews, refusals, and callbacks.

Costs Per Completed Interview

The $7,500 available to conduct Pilot 1 was used for telephone recruitment and the telephone interviews. The $3,680 for Pilot 2 and the $920 for Pilot 3 was used for telephone recruitment. The average cost of a completed interview was $114 for Pilot 1, $160 for Pilot 2, and $115 for Pilot 3 (or a combined average of $148 for Pilots 2 and 3, not including incentives). All 31 respondents who completed the Web survey requested the $20 gift card, increasing the cost of a completed Pilot 2 interview to $180, $135 for Pilot 3, and $168 for Pilots 2 and 3 combined. We asked respondents if they would have completed the Web survey without the incentive: 16 (52%) said yes; 10 (32%) said no; and 5 (16%) said that they did not know.

Sample Demographics

Web survey respondents (Pilots 2 and 3) were younger than those in the telephone survey (Pilot 1); specifically, about half of Pilot 1 respondents were aged 18 to 45, compared to more than two thirds in Pilots 2 and 3. Most respondents were White, but ethnic representation was more diverse in Pilot 1. Hispanics participated in each pilot, but only in Pilot 1 did Blacks and those of other racial or ethnic groups participate. Marital status was similar across pilots, with two thirds of respondents either married or cohabitating. Pilot 2 and 3 respondents had more schooling; in Pilot 1, about one quarter had no more than a high school education, whereas all in Pilots 2 and 3 had at least some college education. Pilot 1 respondents were somewhat more likely to be employed full-time. Equal percentages in Pilot 1 and Pilots 2 and 3 combined earned $50,000 or less annually; however, somewhat more Pilot 2 and 3 respondents earned $50,001 to $90,000 annually, and somewhat more in Pilot 1 earned more than $90,000 annually.

Sexual Assault Behaviors

Of the 97 men who completed the telephone and Web surveys, 39 (40%) reported at least one sexual assault behavior (41% for Pilot 1, 39% for Pilot 2, and 38% for Pilot 3). Whereas most behaviors reported were on the less severe end of the continuum (e.g., using arguments and pressure to engage in sexual acts), the men reported seven behaviors that would likely meet a legal definition of sexual assault. At least one respondent in Pilot 1 reported each of these seven behaviors; respondents in Pilots 2 and 3 reported only

three of these behaviors. Of the 27 men who reported any sexual assault behavior in Pilot 1, 10 (37%) reported drinking at the time of at least one incident. Results are similar to those of Pilots 2 and 3 combined; 5 of the 12 (42%) who reported sexual assault behaviors said that they were drinking. Marlowe–Crowne social desirability scores (Rudmin, 1999) were not correlated with reports of sexual assault behaviors ($r = –.17$, $p = .10$).

Discussion

Despite similarities among the percentages of men reporting sexual assault perpetration behaviors in the telephone and Web surveys, the low response rates preclude any generalization to the larger population of men in the United States. As expected, Web survey completers were younger and more likely to be White and better educated than telephone respondents. Also as expected, respondents were more likely to endorse items on the lower end of the continuum (i.e., those that involved verbal coercion rather than physical force).

Contrary to expectations, greater participation was achieved by telephone (and this with no incentives). Telephone respondents also reported a wider variety of sexual assault behaviors. This result may have occurred because twice as many men participated in the telephone survey compared to the number who participated in the Web survey, and it may also reflect the telephone interviewers' abilities to elicit responses and keep respondents engaged. Perhaps telephone participation would have been boosted if an incentive had been offered. However, when the 31 Web respondents were asked if they would have preferred to answer over the telephone, their answers were clear: 26 said no, 1 said yes, and 4 had no preference. These findings suggest that multiple strategies may be needed to obtain a representative sample of participants.

Because most men who began the survey completed it, survey length did not seem to be a major deterrent to participation. Those who answered only some questions stopped early in the survey, suggesting that they may have been interested in or curious about the topic but declined to continue, perhaps as the content became clearer. Thus, sensitivity of the content may be a crucial factor in survey participation and completion.

Extensive efforts to protect participants (e.g., lengthy study explanation, periodic reminders that participation could be terminated and that help was available) may have discouraged participation. To guide institutional review boards and researchers, Rosenbaum and Langhinrichsen-Rohling (2006) called for research on whether negative emotional consequences result from

reporting deviant behavior and, if so, under what circumstances. Abbey et al. (2006) employed less extensive protections than we did and found that sexual assault perpetration questions did not produce strong reactions with a community sample. Arguably, our extensive precautions may not be necessary for adequate protection.

Despite dismal response rates, at $114 to $180 per completed interview, the telephone and Web surveys were economical. The potential benefits derived from greater knowledge of sexual assault perpetration are certainly worth such an investment.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Our work represents preliminary steps toward using telephone and Web surveys to study the prevalence of sexual assault perpetration among men in the United States. To further pursue this goal, we make several suggestions. First, continue to test phone- and Web-based strategies using a multistage recruitment or mixed-mode design that allows potential respondents to choose their preferred method of survey completion. Second, identify informed consent procedures that are nonthreatening to respondents and acceptable to institutional review boards. Third, test alternative-item wording that implies the least amount of culpability on the respondent's part. Fourth, focus on less severe behaviors on the sexual assault continuum, given that men seem more likely to report them. These greater-frequency behaviors deserve attention and may be more amenable to study with a nationally representative sample using telephone and Web surveys. Finally, offer incentives in telephone and Web surveys, and vary incentives to determine the amount necessary to increase participation without being coercive. Studies of sexual assault perpetration using large samples of men can make important contributions, for as we learn more about sexual assault perpetration, we can do more to prevent it.

Notes

1. The PsychData Web site is available at http://www.psychdata.com.

2. These measures have been used in other studies. A list is available from the second author.

3. The recommendations of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (2004) for calculating response rates were used with a few modifications. Partial surveys were not included in the numerator, because none included answers to the sexual assault perpetration items. Response rates were calculated by dividing the total number of completed interviews by the sum of the number of completed and partially completed interviews, callbacks, household-level refusals (a household member refused to identify a potentially eligible male and terminated

the contact), and respondent-level refusals (those terminated by a potentially eligible male). Non-English speakers were considered ineligible; cell phone numbers, nonworking numbers, and those whom we were unable to contact (including cases in which we reached answering machines and no answers) were also excluded from the denominator.

References

Abbey, A., & McAuslan, P. (2004). A longitudinal examination of male college students' perpetration of sexual assault. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 72*(5), 747-756.

Abbey, A., McAuslan, P., Zawacki, T., Clinton, A. M., & Buck, P. O. (2001). Attitudinal, experiential, and situational predictors of sexual assault perpetration. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 16*(8), 784-807.

Abbey, A., Parkhill, M. R., BeShears, R., Clinton-Sherrod, A. M., & Zawacki, T. (2006). Cross-sectional predictors of sexual assault perpetration in a community sample of single African American and Caucasian men. *Aggressive Behavior, 32*, 54-67.

American Association for Public Opinion Research. (2004). *Standard definitions: Final dispositions of case codes and outcome rates for surveys* (3rd ed.). Lenexa, KS: Author.

Byers, E. S., & Eno, R. J. (1991). Predicting men's sexual coercion and aggression from attitudes, dating history, and sexual response. *Journal of Psychology and Human Sexuality, 4*(3), 55-70.

Couper, M. P. (2000). Web surveys: A review of issues and approaches. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 64*, 464-494.

Greenfeld, L. A. (1997). *Sex offenses and offenders: An analysis of data on rape and sexual assault* (Report No. NCJ-163392). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice.

Knapp, H., & Kirk, S. A. (2003). Using pencil and paper, Internet and touch-tone phones for self-administered surveys: Does methodology matter? *Computers in Human Behavior, 19,* 117-134.

Koss, M. P., Gidycz, C. A., & Wisniewski, N. (1987). The scope of rape: Incidence and prevalence of sexual aggression and victimization in a national sample of higher education students. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 55,* 162-170.

Reddy, M. K., Fleming, M. T., Howells, N. L., Rabenhorst, M. M., Casselman, R., & Rosenbaum, A. (2006). Effects of method on participants and disclosure rates in research on sensitive topics. *Violence and Victims, 21*(4), 499-506.

Rosenbaum, A., & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, J. (2006). Meta-research on violence and victims: The impact of data collection methods on findings and participants. *Violence and Victims, 21*(4), 404-409.

Rudmin, F. W. (1999). Norwegian short-form of the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology, 40,* 229-233.

Senn, C. Y., Desmarais, S., Verberg, N., & Wood, E. (2000). Predicting coercive sexual behavior across the lifespan in a random sample of Canadian men. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 17*(1), 95-113.

Tjaden, P., & Thoennes, N. (2000). *Full report of the prevalence, incidence, and consequences of violence against women: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice.

Tourangeau, R. (2004). Survey research and societal change. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *55*, 775-801.

Diana M. DiNitto is Cullen Trust Centennial Professor in alcohol studies and education and a University Distinguished Teaching Professor at the School of Social Work at the University of Texas at Austin. Her recent publications include *Social Welfare: Politics and Public Policy* (6th ed.) and *Chemical Dependency: A Systems Approach* (3rd ed.).

Noël Bridget Busch-Armendariz is an associate professor at the School of Social Work at the University of Texas at Austin and the principal investigator of the university's Institute on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault. Dr. Busch has more than 15 years of experience in working to end interpersonal violence.

Kimberly Bender is a doctoral candidate in the School of Social Work at the University of Texas at Austin. She researches adolescent mental health, juvenile justice, and violence against women. Through work on projects related to domestic violence and sexual assault, she has published several peer-reviewed journal articles and has presented at several national conferences. She is the recipient of the Francis Fowler Wallace Memorial for Mental Health Dissertation Fellowship, provided through the Hogg Foundation, and the University of Texas Harrington Fellowship for her dissertation on the relationship between trauma and delinquency.

Hyeyoung Woo is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Texas at Austin. Her primary interests include gender, family, health, and quantitative research methods.

Melissa Tackett-Gibson is an assistant professor in the College of Criminal Justice at Sam Houston State University. Her specialty areas include drug use and abuse and survey methodologies.

James Dyer is a research scientist at the Public Policy Research Institute at Texas A&M University and oversees the Survey Research Program at the institute. He has broad experience designing and conducting surveys—including large-scale telephone surveys, in-person surveys, and mail surveys—and other methodologies.