



**Understanding Society**

**Working Paper Series**

**No. 2023 – 15**

**Recruiting and retaining young people in longitudinal surveys: lessons from Understanding Society: UK Household Longitudinal Study**

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**Economic  
and Social  
Research Council**

## **Non-technical summary**

As response rates in surveys have been declining world-wide, young people seem to be especially hard-to-reach. Most of the research to-date focuses on raising response among the adult population, while there is little research into what facilitates or hinders survey response among children, teenagers and young people (CTYP), especially in the longitudinal context. This paper is one attempt at trying to address this gap in research. A small qualitative study has been conducted to this effect using in-depth interviews with young (18-25) sample members of *Understanding Society: UK Household Longitudinal Study*. The participants were asked about what motivated them to take part in the study in the past and what would motivate them to respond now.

Young interviewees indicated some useful strategies for recruitment and retention in surveys that focus on participation mode, incentives, study materials, the role of the mother, and other factors affecting retention. The web mode provides them with anonymity, flexibility and convenience that is needed to be able to include survey participation into their already busy lives. Incentives were cited as the main motivator for young people to take part in the survey. In terms of the survey documents, young people advised to have a short invitation letter which would mention the survey incentive, the time commitment needed, log in details and emphasize that the questions are easy to answer. The mother figure was often mentioned by the young people as the motivator to respond to a survey, especially for children but also for young adults. The interviewees also spoke at length about the barriers to staying in the survey through the transition period to young adulthood which involves leaving parental home, going to college, university or starting employment.

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### **Abstract:**

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**Keywords:** young people, response, survey participation, recruitment, retaining

### **JEL classification:**

**Acknowledgements:** Understanding Society is an initiative funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and various Government Departments, with scientific leadership by the Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex, and survey delivery by Nat Cen Social Research and Verian (formerly Kantar Public). The research data are distributed by the UK Data Service.

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## 1. Introduction

As response rates in surveys have been declining world-wide (e.g. Luiten et al., 2020), young people seem to be especially hard-to-reach, alongside individuals from immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds (Massey & Tourangeau, 2013; Kreuter, 2013). The reasons for survey non-response have been widely investigated (e.g. Massey & Tourangeau, 2013). One of the most cited ones is 'survey fatigue', i.e. being tired of surveys that we all are invited to every day (Ben-Nun, 2008). Other reasons refer to recent technological changes, such the introduction of the Internet, and switch from landlines to mobile phones (Massey and Tourangeau, 2013, cited in Karlberg 2015, p.5). Some social changes are also cited in this context, such as increased distrust towards the authorities, and longer working and commuting time (Massey and Tourangeau 2013, cited in Karlberg 2015, p.5). At the same time research on ways to increase survey response rates has flourished too in the last decades (e.g. Lynn, 2017).

Most of these studies, however, focus on raising response among the adult population, while there is little research into what facilitates or hinders survey response among children, teenagers and young people (CTYP), especially in the longitudinal context. Collecting longitudinal survey data about young people is important though because longitudinal research shows significant relationships between experiences, attitudes and behaviours in adolescence and early adulthood, and later in life. Understanding the transition into adulthood itself is an important goal because of all the social, emotional, identity and behavioural changes that happen at the time. Therefore, it is crucial to identify what drives young people's participation, including recruitment and retention, in longitudinal surveys.

With limited qualitative evidence available on this topic to-date, this paper is one attempt at trying to address this gap in research. A small qualitative study has been conducted to this effect using in-depth interviews with young (18-25) sample members of *Understanding Society: UK Household Longitudinal Study*. The participants were asked about what motivated them to take part in the study in the past and what would motivate them to respond now.

## **2. Literature review: Factors facilitating and hindering survey response among Children, Teenagers and Young People (CTYP)**

Scholars have been aware for some time now that young people's voices have not been heard enough. This has led to the situation where this group's specific needs have not been adequately addressed by various programmes and interventions implemented in the health and social context so far (Flanagan et al., 2015). This is because there is scarcity of methodological research into what helps to motivate young people to participate in surveys and what prevents them from getting involved. Insights from qualitative research with adolescents and young people indicate the importance of personal contact with this age group but also with their parents, facilitating a positive relationship between researchers and study participants, but also with the wider community and the gatekeepers, through organising community events and engagement opportunities (e.g., Shoenberger et al., 2014, Namagyeo-Funa et al., 2014). Similarly, retention has been found to often rely on factors such as retaining consistency of the contact person with the participants, collecting several types of participant contact information and using incentives (for an overview see Jong et al., 2023).

However, forging personal relationships between researchers and participants is not possible on large-scale surveys, which necessitates us to look for more general trends on what techniques help to recruit and retain CTYP in this type of studies. The findings of existing studies on response rates of this group are often difficult to compare because they use different sampling methodologies (e.g., school- or home-based), modes (face-to-face, paper, online or mixed methods), coverage areas (local, national or international), survey designs (cross-sectional or longitudinal), and incentive strategies (use incentives or not). A review of research findings on data collection methods utilised with CTYP (Flanagan et al., 2015) found a variety of quantitative and qualitative types of data used in research with this group. Although most studies in this area use traditional survey methods, there have been some studies using more innovative methods with children such as Interactive Voice Response (IVR) (Blackstone et al. 2009, cited in Flanagan et al., 2015, p. 9), web and audio diaries, and recorded

questionnaire questions that can be played on the personal stereo and the answers noted in a booklet (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010, cited in Flanagan et al., 2015, p.7). The authors of these studies note that creative data collection methods such as creative thinking, game playing, and other arts-based techniques (e.g., photos, pictures, or drawings) are especially effective with younger children (for a review of methods see Walker 2001, cited in Flanagan et al, 2015, p.7).

According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations come into play when deciding on whether to take part in a study or not. The former relate to factors that spark intrinsic curiosity and interest in the activity. The latter are about external influences that motivate someone to take part such as incentives or a push from other people (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Understanding motivations for participation is a key factor in recruitment and retention of participants. Within the traditional survey methods literature, the focus has mostly been on the effect of modes, devices, incentives and study materials on CTYP's response.

### **Participation Modes**

In other qualitative studies about recruitment, young people emphasized that the main requirements for the survey in terms of modes are flexibility and convenience. Most surveys with CTYP have been web- or paper-based. When considering paper questionnaires, having to post a questionnaire back is considered as an additional barrier by young people which would often discourage them from taking part (Jong et al., 2023). If participation is required in person, data collection would need to be conveniently located near their work or school. Data collection in the home setting was considered 'weird' by those in year 11, aged around 15-16 (Jong et al., 2023). Similarly, year 11s preferred to complete surveys during their school or college time because completing at home would mean taking time away from their free time (Jong et al., 2023). For those not in education, the preference was for data collection after work and excluding weekends because weekends were considered their personal time. Telephone (CATI) approaches have been rarely used with young people, although this mode was sometimes included as part of a mixed-mode approach when following up panel survey respondents (Kantar Public, 2023).

Previous research reviews concluded that young people by far preferred online-based data collection methods to face-to-face interviews because they allowed for more perceived privacy, greater anonymity, more control over the process, less risk of being judged by others and yielded more open responses (Bradford & Rickwood, 2012; Cleary & Walter, 2011). There is a clear preference from older teenagers and young adults to complete surveys using an app (Jong et al., 2023). However, they have clear requirements for such an app: free, easy to use, not requiring storage and not tracking GPS (Jong et al., 2023). The anonymity provided by online surveys also improves the chances of recruiting the hard-to-reach young people, e.g., those not in mainstream education or those undergoing specific types of treatments (Cranmer, 2010).

Some studies comparing paper-based and web-based methods found that overall the web-based surveys yielded a better response rate than the paper booklets (Scott-Johnson et al., 2010, cited in Flanagan et al., p.10). In other cases, however, the response rates in both modes were similar but there were more missing data in the paper version (Wu & Newfield, 2007). In the same line of thinking, some health studies found that paper-based approaches yielded higher levels of reporting of risk behaviours (substance use, sexual behaviour) than web-based surveys (Beebe, 2006, cited in Flanagan, 2015, p.10). In the context of surveys on sensitive topics specifically, better quality responses were received in online surveys than face-to-face ones (Baer et al., 2002).

However, research on push-to-web surveys found that these types of surveys had much lower response rates among CTYP compared with face-to-face surveys (Kantar Public, 2023). These differences were explained by the positive effect of an interviewer who can help motivate and engage participants. This is especially important given that in such surveys young person's participation is conditional on parents' agreeing to take part and passing on the invitation letter to their child.

### **Devices and internet access**

Various studies have found that in online surveys CTYP preferred to use mobile phones or tablets (Denny et al 2008, cited in Flanagan, 2015, p.9) rather than laptops and

computers. This is because hand-held devices, especially mobile phones (Kauer et al., 2009, cited in Flanagan et al., 2015, p.11) were found to provide more privacy and therefore yielded larger amounts of and higher quality data on risk behaviours than other devices. In line with these findings, studies investigating risk behaviours of this group found that CTYP reported higher prevalence rates of such behaviours when surveys were administered at school rather than at home (Kann et al., 2002, cited in Flanagan 2015, p.11).

However, it is important to note a major difference between access to mobile phones between primary and secondary school aged children. A similar difference emerges when exploring online access. Ofcom data show that under half (44%) of those aged 9 had a mobile phone, rising to 62% of 10-year-olds and 91% of 11-year-olds, and 100% of those aged 15+ (cited in Kantar Public, 2023, p.23). In a qualitative study conducted by Kantar Public (2023) on the feasibility of running an online crime survey with CTYP, younger children were found to be more likely to complete the online survey on a laptop in a family/communal area, while older children on their mobile phones.

## **Incentives**

Financial incentives offered in surveys with CTYP tend to be in the form of vouchers and in the region of £5 to £10 (Kantar Public, 2023). Most of the time incentives in push-to-web surveys are conditional, although in longitudinal surveys (including Understanding Society and LSYPE) they are used unconditionally in later waves (Kantar Public, 2023).

*Understanding Society* also offers an additional incentive for those turning 16, if they respond, they are entered into a prize draw and have a chance of winning an iPad. This is because at 16 young people in this survey become eligible to complete a full adult individual interview, which is a crucial milestone in transitioning participants from a youth to adult survey. Participants of another health qualitative study reported that CTYP preferred to receive a guaranteed incentive, rather than a chance to win a larger financial reward (Jong et al., 2023).



## **Study materials**

Studies with CTYP tend to use a variety of fieldwork materials directed at children. In addition to printed materials, access to online materials is especially important in online surveys (Kantar Public, 2023). These can include more innovative ways of providing information such as dashboards, videos and others (Kantar Public, 2023, p. 7). Accessible language is another area that needs close consideration. Depending on the target age, age-bespoke versions of all communications need to be produced, tailored to different comprehension levels (Kantar Public, 2023).

Research into longitudinal health surveys with 15-20-year-olds found that young people preferred visual information such as logos and pictures, although caution should be taken to make sure that pictures used are relevant to the age group in question (Jong et al., 2023). In the longitudinal context, young participants wanted to know more about how the results would be used (Jong et al., 2023). For older participants (sixth formers) a catchy tagline was believed to be highly important in persuading them to take part (Jong et al., 2023). It was judged important to ensure that young people were interested in the topics being studied, although there was no clear consensus what those would be. While explaining the longitudinal nature of the study, young people felt it was important to stress the variety of tasks and questions over the years rather than the length of study itself which might sound off-putting (Jong et al., 2023).

In the context of household surveys, it is important to consider the role of parents in facilitating children's access to the survey, especially the younger age groups (ONS, 2023). The recommendation therefore is that information materials need to be tailored not only to children but also to parents (ONS, 2023). Parents need to be able to review the questionnaire that is provided to their children and give consent for their children to be interviewed. The survey invitation letters and emails are therefore usually sent to parents, although a new approach trialled by the Crime Survey for England and Wales includes letters addressed to children that are sent within envelopes addressed to parents (ONS, 2023). Evidence shows that children like opening their own correspondence because it gives them a sense of responsibility and

increases interest. Similarly, QR codes were found helpful to improve CTYPs' access to the survey, as were survey progress screens which told children how many sections they had left to complete (ONS, 2023).

Time commitment is a very important factor in participants deciding to take part. They need to know in advance how much time they need to commit and for longitudinal surveys, how many times (during the life of the study). Time commitment becomes an issue especially for those in college, university or employment, and especially if their participation interferes with their other commitments. In one qualitative health study, young adult participants explained that 'after school, general life, prior obligations, social events, work, and the idea of not knowing where they would be in a years' time' were key barriers to committing to a longitudinal study (Jong et al., 2023, p.7). They also explained that during academically busy periods they would tend not to open their invitations to take part at all (Jong et al., 2023, p.7).

If the survey has an online app, all the communication (invitations and reminders, study updates and findings) with the participants can be done using the app notifications, which young participants seem to prefer (Jong et al., 2023).

### **Recruitment and retention: methods and factors**

When asked about best ways of recruiting CTYP to studies, young people often recommend recruiting their peers through social media platforms or through the word of mouth (Jong et al., 2023). They report that that they would be more likely to take part in a survey if it was recommended to them by their peers (Jong et al., 2023). This preference to take part in studies together with other people they know also applies to focus groups, as Jong et al.'s interviewees felt strongly about taking part in focus groups with people they know and not willing to speak openly in front of strangers. In Jong et al.'s (2023) study participants also advised researchers to come and advertise the study face-to-face in schools. Unfortunately, in national probability-based random surveys these methods of recruitment are not feasible.

Young participants (15-20) of another qualitative study (Jong et al., 2023) were found to be generally happy to be contacted regularly for a longitudinal study. They

preferred an email contact or an SMS message (the latter preferred to a phone call). They were happy to share their phone number and email with the study as well as the postal address and Facebook name. They also emphasized the importance of being contacted by the same study person every time, which would allow them to build trust in the person and the study (Jong et al., 2023).

### **3. Methodology**

Seven in-depth interviews were conducted with dormant (i.e. currently not actively participating) 18-25-year-old *Understanding Society* survey sample members. The young people were recruited from currently active households in which young people were or were not active respondents in the past, but where other household members still take part in the survey. This design was used in the context of plans to re-engage households that had dropped out of the study and the need to better understand the motivations and barriers behind re-engaging young adults in particular who, even in the current context, seem less willing to participate than other age groups. The interviews were conducted on Zoom, recorded and transcribed. The participants received a £50 Love2Shop voucher as a thank you for their time. The study was approved by a University of Essex ethics committee.

While other qualitative studies on this topic have asked participants to think and report their views on taking part in a hypothetical survey (Jong et al., 2023), our study involves a current longstanding survey which participants would be to some extent familiar with because their parents or even themselves took part in it in the past. If they took part in the past, they were asked about their experiences of doing so and factors that played a role in them taking part. If they did not take part themselves in the survey, they were asked about what would motivate them to take part and what would discourage them. During the interview they were also shown copies of the participant materials (a letter and participant information sheet) prepared for the re-engagement project and asked to comment on those with a view of how engaging and relevant they were for people in their age group.

Below are results from our small study with young people presented within the thematic sections on modes, incentives, study materials, the role of the mother, and other factors affecting retention.

#### **4. Results**

##### **Participation modes**

In line with previous findings in this area, our interviewees explained that they preferred to complete the survey online rather than with an interviewer. According to them, they do not feel comfortable having an interviewer in their home and having to interact with them in person. Web surveys also give them privacy which they desire but which they would be denied if questions were asked by a stranger.

*I think [an interviewer] coming to the house is probably not going to be suitable for our age group because they just can't be bothered and they don't want to face someone, a lot of people are quite awkward and wouldn't want that quite formal setting. (male, 19, student, interview ID 3025)*

*Interviewer: ... so it's easier to do it online? ... I mean, you know, that's the preferred method for you, right?*

*Respondent: Yes, 100%, yes, it's just way more convenient ways, yes.*

*Interviewer: Okay.*

*Respondent: It takes the pressure off a little bit as well. (male, 19, currently at university, took part as a 15-year-old, ID 3028).*

However, completing the survey online raises other issues, the most salient of these being other distractions. As a couple of young people explain below, they are likely to multitask when completing the survey online. From their point of view, to prevent this multitasking a telephone interview would work better than an online one, although young people certainly prefer web to telephone surveys:

*I think online is easy but then also if I'm doing a survey and I'm getting calls from my mates and messages from my girlfriend it is very, very easy to click off. Whereas on the phone you're focused and it's easier to engage and you don't have to type out, so a phone call would definitely be my preference.*

*Interviewer: That's interesting.*

*Respondent: I think you would keep the most [participants]. I think if you get someone on the phone you can keep them there and complete the survey but I*

*think getting people to be on the phone, it might be harder than getting people to click on a link, so that is the only thing I would say. That is just the challenge, isn't it. (male, 19, student, ID 3025)*

However, in the longitudinal context, several participants remembered that they originally started to take part in the survey thanks to an interviewer visiting their home. The personal contact was important for older participants (21+) who joined the study as adults and felt that an initial visit by an interviewer reassured them of the legitimacy of the study so that they felt comfortable taking part online in later waves:

*Yes, I think that as soon as I'd put a face to it, like a human being, I mean (...) I'm sceptical by nature. It's not easy for me to trust. But especially online, like I wouldn't trust anything, especially when you are giving over quite a lot of personal information. But when she [interviewer] came over and explained it and she was able to talk to me about what it was, I was like, "Oh yes, fair enough". (female, 24, employed, has a child, ID 3031)*

*I would do it online, no problem. I'd still continue to do it online now. I just think the first time she [interviewer] came over and I met her, I mean my partner had met her quite a few times but it was the first time she had met me. But I think yes, up until then it was, you know, it validates everything for me when I see someone in person (female, 24, employed, has a child, ID 3031).*

*Although it's easy for me to say that now, because we've done the face-to-face ones that I do think are probably quite important to capture you in the first place. The first time you do it, it probably is good to have someone do it face-to-face. Now I just think, now you know it, now you're in it, it's quicker, it's easier to just do it [online]. (male, 25, employed, has a child, ID 3030)*

In some cases where participants had small children, they felt unable to sit down with the interviewer for an hour. Instead, they could do it online even if they needed to do it in chunks. The option to complete on the web offered them the flexibility and convenience that they needed, although *Understanding Society* did not offer the online option in the first few waves, which led to some participants withdrawing from the study due to other commitments.

*It's a little more convenient [the web interview]. I think that then you can just do it when you want. You can do it and sort of squeeze it in rather than it be the entirety of our... Not the entirety of our evening, but a big chunk of our evening having someone do it for us. (male, 25, employed, has a child, ID 3030)*

## Incentives

Incentives seem to be the main motivator for young people to take part in the survey.

*I think it was just generally understood that it was for some benefit, really. Anyway, it was only half an hour or an hour out of your day in the grand scheme of things. It was just a good thing to do, really, for not much cost (female, 18, student, took part as 10-15, ID 3029).*

*Interviewer: What about surveys in general, thinking about your age group and your friends and whatever, do they or you take part in any surveys at all?*

*Respondent: No, I don't to be honest, and I don't think many people do in my age group. I guess people are just quite selfish and focusing on their own lives, obviously they've got a lot of things going on at this age. I think people just focus on themselves to be honest and what is in their little bubble in their life and not thinking about the bigger picture. Unless there is something for them I don't think it would even cross their mind. So I couldn't tell you anyone that I know that does any.*

*Interviewer: What would you suggest in terms of grabbing their attention?*

*Respondent: I feel like the voucher and money because those are the things that stand out to people like myself who are students. (male, 19, student, ID 3025)*

Most interviewees were happy with the value of incentive (£20 for an adult interview) and the form (a Love2Shop gift card). They treat it as a fair compensation for their time, which is equally important to those in employment (including high income individuals) and those temporarily without a job (unemployed, students, mothers looking after young children).

However, with busy lives and lack of interest in surveys in general, some teenagers admit that even with the incentive they would probably find it hard to do a 40-minute survey online:

*Interviewer: So how do you feel about that £20 voucher for a 40-minute survey?*

*Respondent: I think it's probably not encouraging enough to get someone to do it. It's weird, because people spend a lot of time online looking at rubbish, just sitting watching videos. I do it myself.*

*And even at that, I think I would hesitate to go and sit for 40 minutes doing a survey for £20. Which is weird, when I say it out loud, but yeah. I think that's maybe just the main reason I've not done it, as well (...) (male, 20, employed, took part as a 10-15, ID 3024).*

Given the length of the survey, some participants suggested a slightly higher incentive would be more appreciated:

*I don't know. I think it's not far away, like £25, £30. It's not like it's a massive difference, I would say. I think it's just £20 to a lot of people now isn't a lot of money. (male, 20, employed, took part as a 10-15, ID 3024).*

In terms of the form of incentives, teenagers and those in early 20s explained that they preferred cash to gift cards, so they would exchange gift cards for cash from their parents (usually mothers). They used to do this also when they took part as 10-15-year-olds in the past, as some of the interviewees explained:

*Respondent: I exchange it for money still.*

*Interviewer: Oh, okay.*

*Respondent: I remember wanting to spend the gift card when I was in town, and I was in H&M, and they didn't support it. So, yes, I know that it supports, like, a wide array of shops, it was just for what I want and for my sake it didn't cover it, so yes I exchange it for money usually (male, 19, student, took part as a 15-year-old, ID 3028).*

Even for young adults, cash is more attractive than a gift card because they can spend it anywhere, without having to think about specific shops that they would need to go to:

*I think £20 in cash is a lot better than a £20 voucher, if you know what I mean. I think that would drive a lot more people to do it than giving them a voucher. I think a voucher, if it was, like, a £25 voucher, but I think more people would still be more incentivised by £20 in cash than £25 in a voucher, if you know what I mean. (male, 20, employed, took part as a 10-15, ID 3024).*

## **Study materials**

All participants explained that survey invitations sent by post are more effective than emails. This is because, although they use emails all the time, emails are easy to ignore and delete, while letters are more official and therefore tend to be opened by them or at least by their mothers.

*I think a letter would be better only because people physically have to open it. You can quite easily delete an email. It can go into your junk box and stuff. I think a letter, definitely. (female, 24, employed, has a child, ID 3031)*

*A letter [is better]. I say that coming from a place where I ignore... Getting on for 80% of my emails I think I ignore. (male, 25, employed, has a child, ID 3030)*

Letters physically lying on the table can also act as reminders to complete the survey:

*I think letters, honestly. I think, personally, that would work better for me, having something I can physically see. You know, I'd be reminded of it if walked past it in the kitchen, for example. It's a lot easier to take notice of a letter. (female, 18, high school student, took part as 10-15, ID 3029)*

Since young people use emails all the time, it might be a good idea to send an email invitation too. Special attention here should be devoted to the subject line. In order to catch their attention, the email invite would have to have an intriguing subject line:

*Yes, I think an email, like just... it needs to strike a balance between the money incentive, the purpose and not looking like it's a, sort of, scam.*

*Interviewer: Yes, and how, you know, because it's all probably about the title, you know, the heading, the title, whatever you call it, the email, so what would you say so it wouldn't look like a scam?*

*Respondent: Yes, something along the lines of take part in impactful research and earn, you know, x amount. (male, 19, currently at university, took part as a 15-year-old, ID 3028).*

Some of the participants were quite specific about what a letter should look like to grab the young person's attention. They all recommended a letter with pictures and as little text as possible. They explained that they judged the letter by the first couple of lines, which either grab their attention so they read on or fail to interest them and they bin the letter.

*Well, I would usually open it and I would look at the top, you know, it really says a lot when you just see the first line, or you see who it's from, and that determines what I do with it. (male, 19, currently at university, took part as a 15-year-old, ID 3028).*

*I think for me personally it would have to be way more visual. For the whole... Firstly I wouldn't need... I would need straight logo, badge, bang, title, know what it is, done. Voucher and money I want way bigger. (male, 19, student, ID 3025)*

Quite early in the letter there should be a picture of a gift card, as it would definitely be something that the readers would notice:

*Maybe putting a picture, if you are allowed to do that, of a Love2Shop voucher, if you are allowed to do that. Just something that is eye-catching and draws your attention. That's what someone is going to look at first. "What am I getting?" (female, 24, employed, has a child, ID 3031)*



Logos are also helpful, especially in the context of the longitudinal study. Previous respondents tend to recognize the study logos and are inclined to open the letter because they know that it comes from a recognised organisation:

*I did say to my parents, as soon as I got it [the invitation letter to the qualitative interview], "That would be the Understanding Society." because of the logo, so I suppose that was really... You know, I think I would recognise it. That probably had an impact on why I opened it and took more notice of it. (female, 18, high school student, took part as 10-15, ID 3029)*

According to the recommendations provided by the young interviewees, a good invitation letter needs to include the time commitment and instructions on how to complete the survey. It needs not to be too formal and reassure participants that the survey questions are easy to answer:

*I don't think there is anything within that that would be a particular draw, it is more making it aware that the questions aren't going to rattle your brain and you're not going to be... If you think about it, people my age group, if you think questions all we've ever faced in the last ten years is exam questions, so that's it. So you see questions and you think, "Here we go, this is going to be an exam, it's going to be taxing," even though deep down you know it's not, but that's the first thing that comes into your head. I think the fact that it is simple should be quite apparent and quite easy to realise, especially upon opening that letter, what's in it for them, the time it is going to take and the survey is not taxing at all and the questions are simple, if that makes sense. (male, 19, student, ID 3025)*

Since young people value succinctness, they believed that they would make the decision whether to take part or not based solely on the letter and ignore accompanying materials. In this context they considered the information in the accompanying leaflet redundant.

*I think the letter is really important for someone my age and then the leaflet less so. Whereas I feel like someone who might be slightly older, or a bit more mature, the leaflet might be of more value and it might actually be valuable having that detail on there because it will be more suitable for them, if that makes sense. (male, 19, student, ID 3025)*

*If I'm being completely honest, I don't even know if I would check the leaflet. Yes, maybe... I do like where the research goes to, that does interest me, you know, maybe if it was, like, pictures of companies or something even rather than text if you like.*

*Interviewer: Okay.*

*Respondent: Just from a brief look I probably wouldn't take the time to read all that. (male, 19, currently at university, took part as a 15-year-old, ID 3028).*

Some mentioned that they are in principle interested in how the data they provide are used, which is one of the main points of the leaflet, but then could not really explain further what topics exactly would be of interest to them. Some indicated that government data use is of no interest, while health research and charities might be more interesting.

*Interviewer: So is there an organisation that would sound better to people your age, anything that you can think of?*

*Respondent: I'm honestly not sure because I think the part about mental health and women's issues... I think that's what... For me, personally, I think that's quite a good thing to have included. Definitely, the part about mental and physical health and the impact of caring for someone, I think that's a good one to have in there (female, 18, high school student, took part as 10-15, ID 3029).*

The others, however, explained that young people today, including their friends, are not interested in anything, spend time on social media and cannot be bothered to take part in surveys on any topic. They would not even read the letter or the leaflet in most cases, regardless of how important the study was:

*Respondent: I think, in general, it just will get harder and harder to do these kinds of things, because of the way younger people think. I've tried speaking to my friends about certain things, and they're like, "No, not interested." And they'll not even give you five minutes, it's just, "No, I'm not interested in that, full stop, don't mention it again," kind of thing. That's kind of the way my friends think. It's like almost stubbornness not to want to be interested in something else. (male, 20, employed, took part as a 10-15, ID 3024).*

*Interviewer: If we say it in the current letter, if we give examples of who is using the data, if we say things like government departments use data to make decisions and improve lives and that kind of thing, does that mean anything to your age group at all?*

*Respondent: Honestly, I don't think so. I just wouldn't even think about it, I would think, "Yes, whatever," like you're just a number and how many people do it, do you know what I mean? I wouldn't actually think of it if I'm being honest. (male, 19, student, ID 3025)*

Confidentiality is another area which is usually discussed in the information leaflets which are sent with the survey invitations. Unlike older adults, 21-year-olds and younger people interviewed for this study were not concerned about the confidentiality or data security with regards to their survey responses at all.

*It [data security] didn't really cross my mind that, you know, data security doesn't really cross my mind too much. Past passwords, stuff like income and what have you, I'm happy to share (male, 19, currently at university, took part as a 15-year-old, ID 3028).*

When asked if they knew who ran *Understanding Society* and whether this was important to them in terms of building trust in the survey, they were not interested or not concerned about this area at all:

*I don't know who runs this survey, or anything. I couldn't tell you. But it's not- I don't know, I think it's just because it's a kind of- is it not just kind of trying to gauge public opinions on different things, if you know what I mean? It's not like a marketing type thing. I think that's more- just, when I think of this kind of survey, I don't think you are out to gain profit anything from it. I think you are just trying to understand stuff. I might be wrong. Again, that might be just naivety, but... (male, 20, employed, took part as a 10-15, ID 3024).*

However, reading examples of organisations who use the study data made some of them concerned that their data are shared with all these institutions. One piece of advice given in this context was therefore to reduce the number of example organisations that use the data in the information leaflet:

*Yes, I know that's not something that I'm necessarily so concerned with, but when I see that it's going to all these different places, it's a sort of, the equivalent when you accept cookies on a website and you know that okay all this search data is going to, like, various places.*

*Interviewer: Yes, that's interesting.*

*Respondent: Yes, it seems like sort of a way to a data mining rather than, you know, like, actually use for effectiveness (male, 19, currently at university, took part as a 15-year-old, ID 3028).*

Data security was, however, reported as an area of concern for those over 21:

*Yes. I was glad when I read it that that [information about how the study uses and stores data securely] was there. It's instant reassurance isn't it? Because the first thing you think is, "Why do you want all my information?" Then as soon as you read the middle of the letter and it says it's all confidential and the reasons why. The reasons why you want our information along with the*

*confidentiality for me is yes. I don't know if you need to put anything on there really. (female, 24, employed, has a child, ID 3031)*

Those over 21 who took part in the study before felt that they could trust the study and those who run it because they experienced no issues in relation to data security or confidentiality then or since then.

### **The role of the mother**

Young adults repeatedly reported examples of how their mothers were instrumental in them taking part in this study and any others while they were children and teenagers. The mother would be the person who would encourage the young participants (as children, but also as young adults) to complete the interview for Understanding Society every year.

*I probably did take part, at one point, years and years ago, maybe plus five, six years ago. It would've been my mum that encouraged me to do it. And I think my mum's still opening my letters, so as they came through the door, she would just encourage me, push me to do it, say, "Just get it done. You'll get a voucher or something from it." (male, 20, employed, took part as a 10-15, ID 3024).*

The mother would also exchange the gift card for cash for the young person, which was especially motivating for them:

*Interviewer: I mean when you did take part (as a 15-year-old) did your mum have any influence at all?*

*Respondent: Yes, definitely, yes. So, she incentivises it, especially with the gift cards that are given because I wouldn't use them personally, but she does, and she just says to me, "Okay, well if you do it then I will give you the money for it." (male, 19, currently at university, took part as a 15-year-old, ID 3028).*

In household studies like *Understanding Society*, the annual interview sometimes becomes a family occasion, 'something that the whole family would do together' (female, 18, high school student, took part as a 10-15, int no 3029). In addition to actively encouraging the children to take part, mothers would act as role models for them by completing the survey every year themselves. In some cases:

*I think, because I'd seen her doing it, it was just something that I'd thought of doing anyway [as a 15-year-old].*

*Interviewer: Yes?*

*Respondent: Yes. I mean, I suppose, if I didn't see her doing it maybe I wouldn't have thought about it as much but, yes... I think, because we had someone come over to the house and obviously I saw that happening, it was maybe a bit more of an influence to do it myself. (female, 18, student, took part as 10-15, ID 3029)*

The mother was also responsible for ensuring that the completed youth booklet made it back to the office:

*Interviewer: So you did the paper booklet, right? As a child, you did a booklet?*

*Respondent: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. It was just a survey on paper. Yeah. And then my mum would be the one that would send it back. So I never really did much of actually sending it, or anything; (male, 20, employed, took part as a 10-15, ID 3024).*

The mother's as survey facilitator's role is retained as children grow up, as long as they live together:

*I know that it definitely helped when my mum approached me and she was, like, "Yes, you know, you should take part." And that's when I think I got the letter, or maybe I opened the letter and I said it to her, like, "Oh, I've got a letter from Understanding Society," and then she was, like, "Oh, yes, take part. (male, 19, currently at university, took part as a 15-year-old, ID 3028).*

Even when young adults move out, their mail often still goes to their parents and mothers are still the ones opening letters for them:

*My mum actually opened it [the invitation letter to this qualitative study] and sent me a picture of it and said, "You could do this, it's easy," and that was the way. (male, 19, student, ID 3025)*

### **Other factors affecting retention**

Young interviewees believed that the easiest way to ensure the participation of their age group in studies is by allowing existing participants to bring their friends into them. Recommendations from other people they know and trust who already take part, work best in their opinion. Although this recruitment and retention methods works well in qualitative studies, it is not useful in random probability-based surveys.

*I think now I've done it if I told my friends because of who I am, (...) especially if I told them they were going to get £20 they would also do it. I think it takes*

*a, I don't know, it takes someone to, you know, I think rather than getting an email from somebody.*

*I think if I go and tell them that this is what I've done and you can get £20 they'd be like, "Oh cool. I'll probably do it as well. (female, 24, employed, has a child, ID 3031)*

We asked those participants who took part in the study in the past about why they dropped out. Their responses reveal that they tend to stop taking part during important transitions in their lives such as going to college or university, starting a job, or having children. These important life events become significant distractions for them to continue with the survey. While at university, for example, they are busy with exams and adjusting to the new lifestyle, which takes their attention away from surveys:

*I went to university, so if I did receive letters, they definitely didn't get through to me.*

*Interviewer: So, while you were at university you didn't get any contact with anyone, I mean, nobody asked you to take part?*

*Respondent: No, I don't think so, I think maybe I would have got an email through or a letter through, but I would have probably ignored it. (male, 19, currently at university, took part as a 15-year-old, ID 3028).*

Others started working at 16 and lost interest in the study. They were no longer children at that point and so their mother was no longer a significant motivator:

*Interviewer: So you kind of did take part, several times, and then you stopped. How come?*

*Respondent: I don't know, really. Just kind of different interests, and I've just not really been interested in doing it, kind of thing. It was more just working, and then, as soon as I finished work, I was out to meet my mates, and kind of do other stuff, and there was always something else that was more important to do.*

*Interviewer: (...) So your mum kind of stopped directing you, at that point, then.*

*Respondent: Yeah. Yeah. When I started work, my mum probably just left me to do my own thing (male, 20, employed, took part as a 10-15, ID 3024).*

Interview length is another potential barrier to staying in the survey. The under 20s were especially sensitive about the length of time they would have to spend completing the survey. Those who did take part in the past as young adults confessed

that it was difficult for them to reach the end and not to quit the survey because it felt very long and tedious.

*I just think it can be quite repetitive because obviously 40 minutes is quite a long time of just purely doing that and people would... I think I may have even started one before and not even completed it.*

*(...) I just think, you know, with people's attention span shortening with social media and everything now people aren't even watching videos for ten seconds. I think that that length of time, although the voucher is great to get them on there just to get it over the line when people actually start doing, it's just trying to keep them in and engaged and complete the entire surveys. The only challenge that I would come across essentially. (male, 19, student, ID 3025)*

## **5. Discussion and Conclusions**

There are a number of data-collection methods, both novel and traditional that can be utilised to generate data when working with CTYP. They each have their own strengths and limitations as their utility may depend upon such factors as the age range of participants or the topic of the study. There has been little research, however, on factors that influence young people's participation in surveys, especially longitudinal surveys which are an important method of data collection providing evidence on crucial changes that take place in young people's lives as they transition to young adulthood. The surveys with this group so far have been conducted with different age groups, in different modes and in different geographical areas, which makes the findings very difficult to compare and almost impossible to establish which factors actually have a positive impact on response, given a variety of confounding factors. There are also very few qualitative studies with young people that would attempt to explore the issues around their motivation to take part in surveys. This paper therefore addresses this gap and provides a small contribution towards a better understanding of this group's survey participation through in-depth interviews with young adults about their participation in *Understanding Society* (in the past and in the future), both as adults (16+) and as children (10-15).

Young participants indicated some useful strategies for recruitment and retention in surveys. Although young people prefer to take part in studies online, in the

longitudinal context they emphasize the importance of having a personal contact with an interviewer to start with. Other, usually qualitative, studies report young people's desire to develop a good relationship with study staff, (e.g., Namageyo-Funa et al., 2014) which is not possible in large surveys. Some consideration, however, needs to be given to how to promote connectedness within the research, possibly using social media or an app so that participants feel connected to their participant peers and to study staff, even though a direct relationship is not feasible.

In terms of when and how to participate, the web mode provides them with flexibility and convenience that is needed to be able to include survey participation into their already busy lives. Web participation also provides them with anonymity and allows to avoid an unwanted in-person contact with a stranger who is likely to judge them, in their opinion (e.g. Bradford et al, 2012). As noted in other studies, flexibility, autonomy and choice are necessary conditions for the participation of this group (Jong et al., 2023).

The mother figure is often mentioned by the young people as the motivator to respond to a survey, especially for children but also for young adults. She is the one who opens the invitation letters, encourages the young person to respond, sends the completed questionnaires back and exchanges the gift cards for cash, as preferred by the young person. Special consideration should therefore be given to tailor young persons' survey materials to their parents as well, acknowledging their role in the survey participation of young people.

In terms of the survey documents, young people advise to have a short invitation letter (possibly alongside an invitation email) which will mention the survey incentive at the top, the time commitment needed, log in details and emphasize that the questions are easy to answer. Information on how their responses are being used and data protection is only relevant to those in their 20s but not to teenagers. The research topic should be of interest to young people, they say, although there is no consensus what that would be.



There is a clear desire to be recruited and participate together with their peers, although for randomly selected samples this is not feasible. This social connection aspect of their participation helps them to develop trust for the study, break down the barriers of participation and normalise the behaviour (Jong et al., 2023). The young interviewees spoke at length about the barriers to staying in the survey through the transition period to young adulthood which involves leaving parental home, going to college, university or starting employment. The challenges of participation at this stage of life are numerous and can sometimes again be partially counteracted by the involvement of the mother as the person who opens invitation letters and encourages the young person to take part but also by timing of the survey invitations not to coincide with exam periods for example. Interview length becomes especially important in this context, as young people have a lot of competing activities happening in their lives at the same time.

Although quite a lot of research exists on survey engagement of other age groups, young participants seem to be rather understudied in this context. The motivations of younger participants are likely to be different from the older groups and so it is necessary to understand this group better in order to ensure that the study aims are presented in such a way, so they feel it worthwhile for them and the participation itself is made as easy for them as possible. Given the importance of following adolescents into adulthood, researchers need to ensure that they develop meaningful, contemporary, reliable designs of surveys that maximize recruitment and retention of this age group in general population surveys like *Understanding Society*.

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## **Appendix**

### **Dormant sample re-engagement project fieldwork documents**

#### **1. Advance Letter**

Dear [Salutation]

It's been a while since we've been in touch, and lots has happened in the UK.

Last time we interviewed you was ..... We're interested in what you're doing now. Things might have changed and we want to catch up [with you].

An interviewer from Understanding Society can visit you or you can do the survey now by going online.

Type the username into a web browser and then add your password:

User name

Password

You can start your survey and go back to it at any time – all your answers are saved.

[To thank you for taking part we've enclosed a gift voucher for £20/When you complete your survey we'll send you a gift voucher for £20 as a thank you for taking part.]

#### **Need help completing your survey?**

Call our team on Freephone 0800 252 863 or email us at [contact@understandingsociety.ac.uk](mailto:contact@understandingsociety.ac.uk)

We look forward to hearing from you.

With best wishes,

Michaela Benzeval

Director, Understanding Society

## 2. Reminder Letter

Dear [Salutation]

### **What's stopping you from taking part in Understanding Society?**

As the UK faces new challenges, such as the cost of living crisis, we need to hear about your experiences. Understanding Society provides vital evidence needed by the people who make decisions in the UK.

It's easy to take part. Use your username and password to get to your online survey.

Username

Password

If you need help, call us on Freephone 0800 252 863.

If you would rather complete your survey with an interviewer, please let us know so we can arrange this.

### **What's in it for you?**

Your voucher is waiting for you. You'll be sent a gift voucher for £20 as a thank you for taking part.

Thank you for supporting Understanding Society and for helping research in the UK.

With best wishes,

Michaela Benzeval,

Director, Understanding Society

### **3. Text for Participant Information Sheet to go with Advance letter**

#### **Curious to know what Understanding Society has been doing?**

Understanding Society is used thousands of times every year by policymakers, researchers and charities. We are one of the key places to go for information on people living in the UK.

For more information go to [www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/research/impact](http://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/research/impact)

#### **Our survey provides evidence for the people who make decisions in the UK...**

Ofgem used Understanding Society to set the energy price cap

The Treasury used our survey to look at household finances across the UK

The Scottish Government looked at the survey to see how new mums find going back to work after maternity leave.

#### **We help health research...**

On the mental and physical health impact of caring for someone

On whether thyroid problems hold women back at work

On the affect of air pollution on our mental health

#### **Charities needing to plan vital services use our information about people in the UK...**

Age UK used Understanding Society to see how many older people were eating less during the Covid pandemic.

The Young Women's Trust used the survey to investigate why young women were struggling to get into work.

Crisis used survey answers on housing to find out how many people were living in overcrowded homes.

## **Keeping your data safe**

### **What happens to my information? Who sees it? Who uses it?**

#### **Will my information be kept confidential?**

Understanding Society is managed in accordance with the Data Protection Act and GDPR legislation. We are always extremely careful to protect the confidentiality of the information you give us. Your survey answers are **always** anonymised. Your personal details such as name, address and date of birth are removed, so that you cannot be identified. Your anonymised information is combined with the tens of thousands of survey answers from other Understanding Society participants and is securely deposited in the UK Data Archive, which is based at the University of Essex.

#### **What happens to my survey answers?**

The answers you give us to the survey are securely transferred from Kantar to the Institute for Social and Economic Research, using an encrypted online portal. To preserve your anonymity, personal details (your name, date of birth, address) are removed from the survey data and held securely in an encrypted database to which only a small number of people have access. Your survey answers are put together with the answers from thousands of other participants and, in an anonymised format, are deposited with the UK Data Service. There is no information in the data which can identify you.

Any analysis is done on the whole sample, and results are often quoted in terms of specific percentages of people and are not reported as individual answers. The collected survey responses are made available, through the UK Data Service, to academic researchers who must register with the Data Service.

#### **Who uses the survey?**

University, government, and charity researchers can register with the UK Data Archive to use Understanding Society data. Understanding Society data can only be used for genuine social research that can demonstrate public interest and not just be used for

commercial gain. Your details are **never** made available to researchers or other companies who might use them for marketing purposes.

### **Who checks that Understanding Society keeps information secure?**

Understanding Society is compliant with the ISO-27001 data security protocols and procedures, which is an international standard for information security management. We are regularly inspected by an independent auditor as part of our ISO-27001 certification. Our fieldwork partners, NatCen Social Research and Kantar Public, have also achieved ISO-27000 certification.

### **Who runs Understanding Society?**

Researchers at the University of Essex are running Understanding Society. Funding has been provided by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). Ethics approval for the study has been provided by the University of Essex Ethics Sub-Committee 1 (ETH2122-0387).

### **Need more information?**

Our website has more details: <https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/participants>

Or you can contact our participant liaison team by calling Freephone 0800 252 853 or emailing [contact@understandingsociety.ac.uk](mailto:contact@understandingsociety.ac.uk)