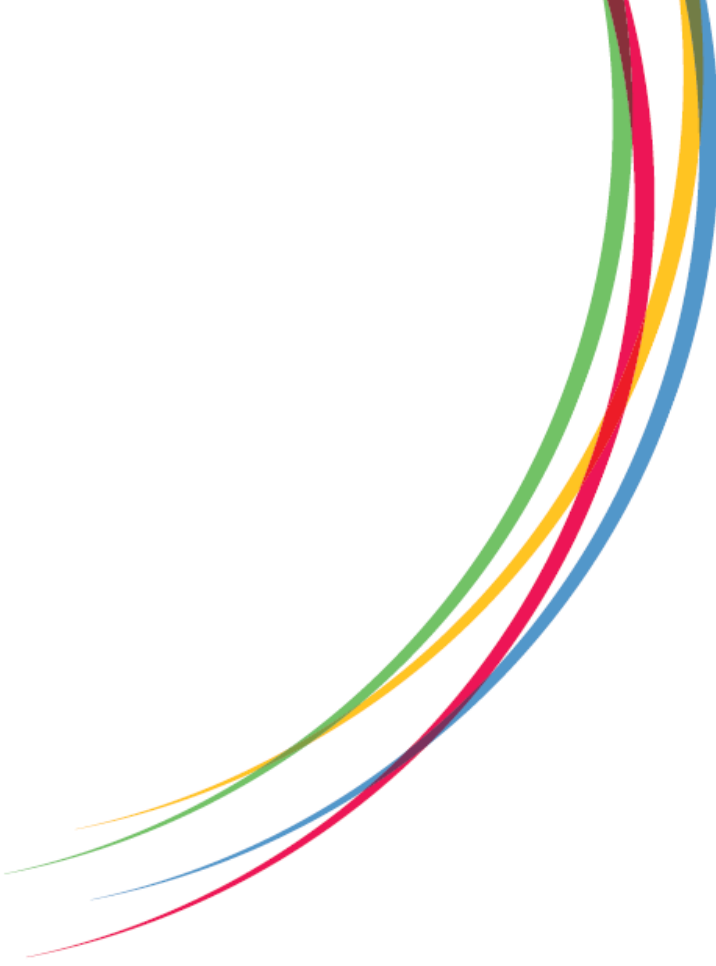




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**Improving response among adolescents and young
adults in Understanding Society: Report from a
workshop**

Jonathan Burton (ed.)

ISER, University of Essex

Improving response among adolescents and young adults in Understanding Society

Non-technical summary

With the increasing proportion of households on Understanding Society that are issued web-first, and more households completing online, we have witnessed a fall in the response rates for the youth self-completion questionnaire, for those aged 10-15. This fall appears to be among both households completing online and among those still responding face-to-face. Engagement with the survey among those joining the adult survey (aged 16-21 years) is also lower than other groups. On 21st May 2024, Understanding Society organised a workshop to discuss these issues, which included Understanding Society researchers, researchers from outside the study who were experts in research with young people, and representatives from the two agencies who conduct the fieldwork for Understanding Society. This working paper is a brief report of the presentations and discussions from that workshop.

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Keywords: young people, self-completion, response

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Corresponding author: Jonathan Burton, ISER, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester, Essex, CO4 3SQ. jburton@essex.ac.uk

Improving response among adolescents and young adults in Understanding Society

Notes from the workshop, 21st May 2024.

Editor Jonathan Burton

Introduction

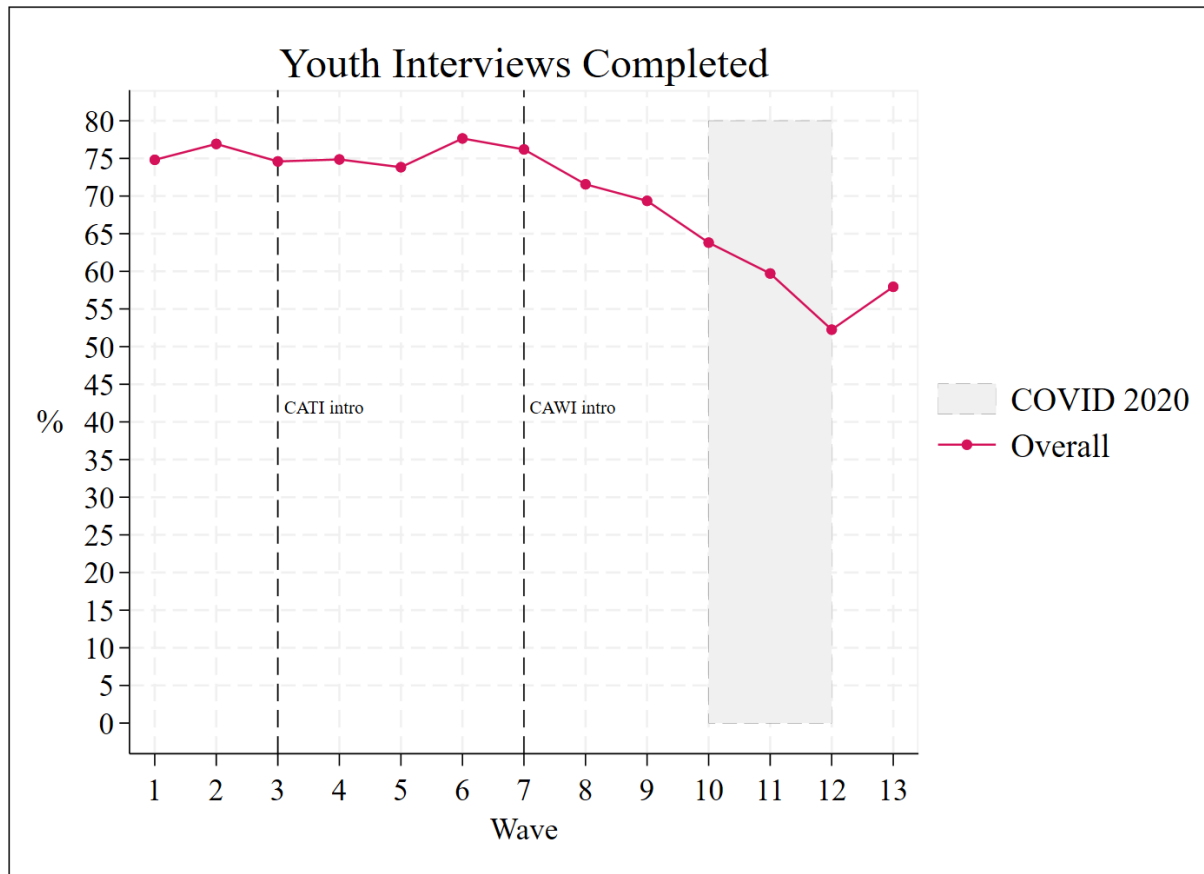
With the increasing proportion of households on Understanding Society that are issued web-first, and more households completing online, we have witnessed a fall in the response rates for the youth self-completion questionnaire, for those aged 10-15. This fall appears to be among both households completing online and among those still responding face-to-face. Engagement with the survey among those joining the adult survey (aged 16-21 years) is also lower than other groups. On 21st May 2024, Understanding Society organised a workshop to discuss these issues, which included Understanding Society researchers, researchers from outside the study who were experts in research with young people, and representatives from the two agencies who conduct the fieldwork for Understanding Society (see Appendix 1 for full list). This working paper is a brief report of the presentations and discussions from that workshop.

Background

Jonathan Burton, ISER provided some background information on current response patterns among adolescents and young adults. The response rate for the youth (aged 10-15) self-completion questionnaire had been falling over the past few years. Figure 1, below, shows the cross-sectional response for 10-15 year olds enumerated in households in which at least one adult took part. For young adults (16-24) we have seen a slight decrease in response during the COVID-19 years. However, for 10-15 year olds, the decline in response starts at Wave 8. This was the wave in which around 40% of households were issued web-first. Adults in these households were invited to take part in their annual survey online. After five weeks, those who had not yet responded were allocated to interviewers. Interviewers would then attempt to carry out an interview with them in-person (CAPI) or by telephone (CATI). The proportion of households issued web-first increased from 40% at Wave 8, to 70% at Wave 12. The proportion of households actually completing online was around 38% at Wave 8 to 40% at Wave 12. So whilst there was a slight increase in the number of household completing online, more than half of those issued web-first were still being allocated to an interviewer after the

web-only period. During this period, we can also see a decrease in the youth self-completion rate compared to earlier waves.

Figure 1: Cross-sectional response for 10-15 year olds enumerated in households in which at least one adult took part



Young people, those aged 10-15, are not contacted independently by Understanding Society. They are only invited to take part, using a paper self-completion questionnaire, once the household has been enumerated and one of their parents or guardians has taken part. The invitation to the young person is therefore conditional on a parent figure having participated in the survey. In households in which the parent figure takes part online or by telephone, the youth self-completion questionnaire is posted to the address. The envelope is addressed to the parent – rather than the young person – and it includes a covering letter, the paper self-completion, a gift-card for the young person, and a return envelope. For households where the parent figure takes part with an interviewer in-person, the interviewer hands over the paper self-completion to the young person, with their incentive. If the young person is not present, the interviewer leaves the questionnaire. Ideally, if the young person is present, the interviewer encourages them to complete the questionnaire and hand it back to the

interviewer whilst others in the household are being interviewed. Thus, during face-to-face interviews, the interviewer is available to hand over the questionnaire and the gift-card, answer any questions about the survey, and collect the questionnaire back and return it to the office. For those where the parent is interviewed online, there is only the questionnaire sent through the post, and a reminder. During COVID-19, when interviewing was online or by telephone, it is clear that the response dipped further. This lends credence to the thought that the intervention of the interviewer was beneficial for the youth survey. However, the youth response is still low post-pandemic, when interviewers are once more visiting the addresses.. Moreover, this is also a period that has seen a growth in the proportion of young people with an internet-enabled mobile device, and an increase in online streaming of fun alternatives to completing a survey.

There is an interesting pattern of participation across ages 10-15 years. Latent class modelling of youth response ([James, 2024](#)) indicates that there are four groups in the sample:

1. Likely to respond at all waves (49% of sample)
2. Unlikely to respond at all waves (20%)
3. High chance of responding in the earlier years, but decrease from 13-15 (16%)
4. Low chance of responding at ages 10-11, increases with age (15%).

Such analysis suggests it may be helpful for initiatives to improve response to be differentiated by such longitudinal participation patterns.

While, improving response to the youth survey is an important goal in its own right as the data provided offer unique research opportunities within the household context. Analysis from **Nicole James** suggests the response at an early age is important for early adulthood participation. Those who took part in the youth self-completion were more likely to take part as young adults as were those whose parents usually participated. Around half of 16 year olds gave an adult interview. Only 10% of young adults did not give an interview at age 16, but did so at ages 17-19. Living with a parent in early adulthood was associated with higher response.

Rosie Cornish, University of Bristol, presented research she has done as an Understanding Society Fellow on non-response among young people in Understanding Society. Her aim is to investigate non-response among young people in Understanding Society and to examine the likely impact of this in terms of bias. She had looked at sample members aged 16-29 who

were in the sample for at least one wave between Waves 1 and 12. She found that 27% of these sample members were in households that had dropped out of the sample before they had reached 16, or were not interviewed in the wave they turned 16. Of those still in the eligible sample, 69% responded at the first wave they were 16. Two thirds (67%) of those who responded in their first eligible wave as an adult also responded at the next wave.

For those aged 16-29, characteristics that were related to higher likelihood of responding included: living in a larger household; being a woman, being married (for men). Lower likelihood of responding was associated with being more socio-economically deprived, living in rented accommodation, living in a household in their first wave where no-one was born in the UK, and not belonging to a religion. Poor mental health was associated with higher response for those aged under 20 at their first wave, but not for those aged 20 or higher. Whereas poor physical health was associated with higher response for those aged 20 or over at their first wave, but not for those aged under 20.

However, the respondent characteristics that were included in the models only explained a small portion of the variation in non-response.

Camilla Salvatore, from Utrecht University, presented work she had done with Peter Lugtig and Bella Struminskaya. Camilla is also an Understanding Society Fellow, and her presentation was called “Youth Nonresponse in the Understanding Society Survey: Investigating the Impact of Life Events”.

Camilla compared 16-24 (early young adulthood), 25-31 (young adulthood), and 32-38 year olds (late young adulthood) with the reference category of 39-45 year olds (middle adulthood). Dropout of the survey was measured as a permanent absorbing state (i.e., once they don't respond at a wave, they are excluded from further analysis even if they come back in at the next wave). Multinomial regression was used to analyse attrition between Waves 1 and 2, whilst a discrete-time multinomial logistic hazard model was used to analyse attrition between Waves 3 and 12. This model took into account the time structure and whether or not certain life events occurred. The life events used in the analysis were a change in employment status, gaining a qualification, change in marital status, having children, change in housing tenure, residential mobility. The results of the analysis were that life events mainly affect response rates for the 16-24 year old group, but controlling for this, an age effect remains, with the younger group less likely to respond than the older groups. Non-contact was more likely if the sample member changed jobs. Sample members were also more likely to

cooperate if they had been cooperating before moving out of parental household. The next step for Camilla's project is to investigate methods to retain young panel members.

Violetta Parutis, ISER, had carried out qualitative interviews with young adults (aged 18-25) from the study to find out what had motivated them to take part, and what had discouraged them. She found that the profile of young people today was complex. Her key findings were that: They were always busy and in transition, so that it was difficult to keep track of them and to engage them in the study. A lot of them were just not interested in the study. They live and socialise on social media, and so are more likely to do something if they see others doing it. For some, the survey length was off-putting, and their attention-span was too short for a 40-minute task which was reminiscent to many of exams. The young adults interviewed suggested that we would have to make it easy for them, and to start the interview with easy questions, which wouldn't tax them too much and put them off from continuing. The invitation text should explicitly state that the questions are easy and the survey is short. The invitation to take part should be short and clear – the invitation letters should be more visual with information on what is in it for them, what to do and how to do it. If young people were motivated, it tended to be because of the incentive, and the young adults interviewed suggested cash would work better than vouchers. If the incentive was conditional, this might help maintain their attention. In a period where many young people don't even watch an online video that is more than 10 seconds, having the 'carrot' of a voucher to claim at the end would keep them going. If they had already received the voucher, then there may be less motivation to even start the survey. The use of the unconditional vouchers is based on the theory of reciprocity and it may be that this generation do not have the same norms as previous generations. One clear finding to come from the qualitative interviews was the value of the gatekeeper – often the mother figure. Engaging other people around the sample member, who help organise their lives, may act as a spur to participate.

Aja Murray, Understanding Society Co-Investigator and Reader in Psychology at the University of Edinburgh, gave a presentation on the retention of adolescents in longitudinal research. She noted that retention in longitudinal research is difficult. There are additional challenges for retaining adolescents, such as competing demands on time and attention, parental consent, developmental changes across adolescence. What we know about preventing attrition is largely from traditional in-person research, and adult research participants.

This research is part of the early work to inform the design of a five-year “mental health in the moment” study. It includes a narrative review of retention strategies for adolescent studies; a young person advisory group consultations to develop a set of strategies; a systematic review of retention strategies, and empirical analyses of predictors of attrition in existing data sets (including Understanding Society) with adolescents.

The narrative review paper is available in the Journal of Adolescent Health (Vol. 74):

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2023.06.032>

The paper finds that over 1,000 recruitment and retention strategies have been proposed, only a handful are well-evidenced. The key recommendations are:

1. Incentivise participation
2. Build rapport/relationships
3. Minimise barriers and burden
4. Consultation, Codesign, or coproduction to establish a suitable incentive, generating ideas for building relationships, and addressing barriers and unnecessary burden for participants.

These themes were taken to two groups of adolescents (aged 11-13 and 14-17) to ask if they agreed that these things are important, and what would this approach look like in practice.

The participant engagement protocol is available:

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/hex.14065>

Incentivise Participation

Studies should provide monetary incentives but also work with young people to figure out non-monetary incentives (e.g., learning/development opportunities, community, feedback, fun). In addition to monetary incentives, there is also the opportunity to learn about the topic of the study (“fun facts”) by offering sessions to schools on mental health, for example, designed to help people learn more about the topic of mental health, and then offer feedback on what the data gathered has told researchers. Participating should enable people to be part of a community of young people. Studies could offer guidance/sessions on how participants can reflect their research participation experiences in personal statements and curriculum vitae to help their future trajectory. Feedback of results should be at the individual-level and use visualisations of results such as responses, response rates or sleep patterns.

Build rapport and relationship.

Studies should select staff based partly on an assessment of ability to build rapport with adolescents. Training should be provided in building rapport with adolescents. Where possible, venues such as schools should be visited to present the project to prospective participants. The value and importance of participants to the study should be clearly conveyed in communications with prospective participants.

Minimise burden and barriers.

Young people should be involved in developing the protocol, specifically ask for feedback on barriers/burden during piloting & think about timing with respect to exams. For example, do young people prefer surveys on their phones? Studies should use tried and tested and easy-to-use software/hardware, ensuring wide device compatibility and careful piloting to identify and address sources of burden. Issues such as confidentiality and anonymity should be very clearly explained to participants in the recruitment materials, assuming minimal prior knowledge and ensuring concerns are answered. Studies should be not conducted during exam times where possible, and although reminders should be used, there should be an upper limit (for example a maximum of three reminders). Many young people may prefer to do the survey on phone, rather than a computer, and often prefer text to email (often only have school or parents' email). To minimise the perceived burden, they should not be asked to commit to a 5 year study – but asked each year.

Co-production with young people

Young people are more likely to participate if they know that the study was co-produced with young people; make it clear in the recruitment materials. In the design stage studies should consult to ensure it includes research questions relevant for them, and consult on the engagement strategy components including things like incentives, reducing barriers and burden, and building positive relationships at an early stage of study design. Young people should also be consulted on the specifics of the engagement strategy components within the context of a draft study protocol and materials (e.g., incentives and individual-level feedback offered, measurement schedule, data collection application and measurement technologies), as well as on other aspects of the study, throughout the project's lifecycle.

Next Steps

There have been several previous systematic reviews of retention strategies in longitudinal research, however, none are focused on adolescence/ disaggregated findings for this developmental stage. There is also a need for an update to reflect increasing shift to remote data collection.

Dejla Hoxha, from the University of Edinburgh, outlined her project to carry out a systematic review of retention strategies for adolescents.

Review questions

- What strategies are used to retain adolescents in longitudinal studies?
- Which strategies have been tested and how?
- Which strategies have been shown to be effective?
- What additional research needs to be done to better understand how to effectively retain adolescents in contemporary longitudinal research?

Dejla is looking at studies which are longitudinal/observational, of people aged 10-24 over the last ten years. An initial review has identified some key effective strategies:

- Extensive contact details (phone, address and social media + collateral contacts)
- The right research staff (continuous, enthusiastic, non-judgemental)
- Relationship building (personal, consistent, opportunity for non-study conversation)
- Intensive follow-ups (personalised reminders, updates, scheduling)
- Incentives (financial, group incentives, progressive)
- Flexibility (time, location, mode of data collection)

Most literature on retention strategies is of a descriptive nature, rather than analytical – generally a list of strategies and lessons learned. It is often difficult to test, if there are no control groups to compare. Retention rate is often used as an indicator of success. In addition, not many articles report on their study's recruitment or retention strategies.

Following this strategic review, Aja Murray reflected that another strand of research would be to develop predictive modelling used to inform attrition prevention, so we know who is likely to drop out, it may be possible to intervene. For example:

- Oversample/ plan refreshment samples for groups more likely to drop out

- Co-produce retention strategies with members of groups most likely to drop-out
- Offer extra encouragement/lower burden variant of protocol, issue earlier in fieldwork

The plan is to use machine learning (such as random survival forests) in existing adolescent data to ask how well we can predict who and when adolescents drop out, and which factors are most important for predicting dropout (such as number of contacts, moving, mental health, etc).

Keith Bolling, Verian Senior Director, presented an overview of Verian's cross-sectional and longitudinal surveys with children and young people. These cover either a range of ages or a particular cohort, some are targeted at young person only, some target both the young person and their parents. Most of these surveys are online-only, and none are the same as the Understanding Society youth survey.

Cross-sectional Push-2-Web surveys. The Science Education Tracker (2023) survey (www.pathwaysresearch.co.uk) with the Royal Society, Engineering UK, and Wellcome. This was first conducted as a push-to-web survey in 2016, with subsequent waves in 2019 and 2023. This has been used by Verian as a template for their other push-to-web surveys of children and young people. The Tracker covers 11-18 year olds, with the sample drawn from the National Pupil Database/Individual Learner Record. The survey is online-only, so no paper questionnaires. It uses a £10 conditional incentive, and adopts a responsive design, with reminders targeted at the low responding groups.

The contact approach is tailored by age to meet the requirements of the GDPR Data Processing Agreement and Market Research Society. For 11-12 year olds, a letter is sent to the parent which includes a letter for the young person. The letter to the parent provides information on survey and gives them an opportunity to opt out. It directs the parent to an online consent survey and asks them to pass the enclosed letter to their child. The letter for the child gives them information on the survey and explains why parents need to give consent. It directs them to survey website and provides login details – but the survey is blocked unless the parent has completed the online consent survey and given consent. For 13-15 year olds the approach is slightly different. The letter to the parent is similar, but there is no online consent survey. The letter to the child also does not mention parental consent. Instead, consent is assumed if the parent has passed the letter on to the child. For those aged 16-18 there is no parent letter, but the young person is written to directly.

Following the invitation letter there is a first reminder letter, sent to all non-respondents. A second reminder postcard is sent, followed by a reminder letter a few days later. The postcard acts as a prompt for the sample member to open the reminder letter. This second reminder is targeted at age groups with low response. This is sent to 50% of non-respondents, although with a higher proportion for the younger group (72% of Year 7 non-respondents, compared to 13% of Year 11 non-respondents). A third reminder letter is sent to 10% of remaining non-respondents, targeted at Years 7 and 13 only. The response, in 2023, before the first reminder was sent out was 32%. After the first reminder – which went to all non-responders – and before the second reminder, the response had increased to 42%. By the end of fieldwork, the response was 47%. The response was lower for the youngest age group (Year 7, 39%), higher for the middle age groups (Years 8-12, 49-51%), and then lower again for the eldest age group (Year 13, 41%). The proportion of young people who completed their survey on a smartphone increased from 25% in 2016 to 46% in 2019, and to 68% in 2023. There was not a big difference in age group, with 64% of the youngest group and 71% of the oldest group taking part on a smartphone in 2023.

An incentive experiment in the 2016 survey found no difference between a conditional £10 and £15 incentive. There are no physical vouchers, just e-vouchers offered via an online incentive platform. The most popular incentives are Amazon and PayPal. The redemption rate is high (93%) suggesting that they are welcomed by the young people and used.

Verian has conducted a couple of other surveys with a similar push-to-web design: the Youth Pilot Survey for DCMS (2023-24), and the Child and Young Person National Survey for Arts Council England (2024-25). The former survey is a version of the Community Life Survey, aimed at 10-18 year olds. It is similar to the Science Education Tracker, but has just two reminders, and these are not targeted. It achieved a similar response, 40%. An incentive experiment resulted in a higher incentive for £10 (43%) than £5 (37%). The CYP National Survey is still in the planning phase, but will use a similar design to the SET. The age range is 0-15 year olds, and so will use a mix of parent and child interviews.

Cohort and longitudinal studies.

COSMO (COVID Social Mobility and Opportunities), Wave 1 2021-22, Wave 2 2022-23, for UCL and the Sutton Trust, also known as Horizons: Looking Beyond COVID-19 (www.horizonsresearch.co.uk). The first wave of COSMO was originally designed as a sequential mixed mode – push-to-web with targeted face-to-face follow up of non-

responders. However, the impact of COVID-19 meant it became predominantly push-to-web with minimal face-to-face fieldwork (only 4% of interviews conducted face-to-face). The second wave was also predominantly push-to-web – with some face-to-face and telephone follow up. COSMO Wave 1 comprised a cohort of Year 11 children (aged 15-16). The sample was drawn from the National Pupil Database and a sample of independent schools. Interviews were elicited from both pupil and parent. The original plan was that it would be a push-to-web design, with four reminders to pupils and parents, with sample members getting their own posted invite. Half of non-responders were then to be followed up face-to-face, targeting those least likely to respond online. Disadvantaged pupils and parents were to be offered £20 incentive, compared to the standard £10. Due to the lockdown associated with COVID-19, there was limited face-to-face follow-up of non-respondents. Rather, additional push-to-web reminders were sent, and the fieldwork period extended. Partially completed households were prioritised for the face-to-face follow-up when this was possible. Late in fieldwork, a reserve sample was issued, but this was push-to-web only, with just two reminders. All mailings to a household were sent in the same envelope.

For the original sample, there was a response rate of 41% for young people, 35% for their parents, with a 31% complete household response rate. The response was lower for the reserve sample: 26%, 25%, and 21% respectively. The higher incentive (for disadvantaged sample members) led to a 7 percentage point increase among young people and complete households.

Between waves 1 and 2 of COSMO there was a “Keeping in touch” survey. Wave 2 had an initial push-to-web design similar to that in Wave 1: initial invite, up to three reminders. In addition there was a pre-notification letter which included some results from the first wave, and some tailoring based on the Wave 1 response. Emails and SMS texts were also used to supplement the letters. A £10 bonus was offered for online completion (“early bird”). There was also an online mop-up stage, with a £5 unconditional incentive targeted to Wave 1 non-responding parents. The final response rates were 84% for pupils, 77% for parents, and 74% complete households. Households offered the early bird incentive achieved a higher response rate for pupils (+6 pp), parents (+10pp), and overall household completions (+11pp).

“Your Life, Your Future” is a longitudinal study for Kings College London. The first wave (2021) comprised a Year 11 cohort (age 15-16) drawn from the National Pupil Database. It was an online survey, with no follow-up mode. The contact approach was tailored by age,

with an initial invite, up to three reminders, and a £5 conditional incentive. The final achieved response rate was 37%. The second wave followed in 2023, with a “Keep in Touch” exercise between the waves. This used a pre-notification letter two weeks before the start of the survey, and then the same contact strategy as wave 1. This wave used a differential incentive strategy, based on priority groups (with groups receiving £5, £10, or £15). The higher incentives were sent to groups that were seen as a high priority for the study to enable sufficient sample sizes for robust analysis of groups that might otherwise be under-represented in the sample. The expectation was that these high priority groups may have lower response rates. The result that there was no significant difference between incentive groups perhaps indicates that the higher incentives encouraged the priority groups to respond at a similar level to those who were in the low priority groups.

The “Parent, Pupil and Learner Voice” survey for the DfE (2021-present) is a panel recruited on an annual basis, with the recruitment of parents of Year 1-11 pupils (aged around 4/5 to 15/16), and pupils from Year 7-13 (ages around 11/12 to 17/18). It involves short, online surveys conducted on a monthly basis, with a short fieldwork period – of just five days per wave. The recruitment to the panel was based on a push-to-web design and used a minimal response maximisation strategy; there was just an invitation letter and one reminder. The survey used an incentive of £7.50 and achieved a response rate of around 18%. Each survey wave was in the field for five days, with contact made by email and SMS only: a prenotification, invite, and reminder. The incentive was £2.50 per wave, which could accumulate over time. The response from parents was around 10-15 percentage points higher than the response from pupils at each wave. The response dropped at each wave; in the 2022-23 survey the first wave, after recruitment, achieved a response of 46%, and this fell to 42% at the second wave, 40% at wave 3, 41% at wave 4, and 34% at wave 5.

The “Young People’s Safety Survey” pilot (2022-23) is a small-scale pilot testing different approach for Youth Crime Survey. The sample of 10-15 year olds are followed up in households where adult has done the main Crime Survey for England and Wales. However, the youth survey is de-coupled from the main survey, with a different name, branding, fieldwork period and mode. The materials are tailored for 10-12 and 13-15 age groups. At the end of the Crime Survey, the parent is told about the youth survey, and can spontaneously opt-out at this point. Later, the parent is sent a pre-notification letter with an information leaflet. The letter also contains a child letter and leaflet. The parent/child are then sent an invitation with log-in details for the child survey. A reminder letter/email/SMS is used if

necessary, and there is a follow-up survey with responders and non-responders to understand levels of engagement. The response rates for the YPSS are 64% overall, slightly higher for the 10-12 age group (66%) than the 13-15 age group (62%). This compares to a declining response rate for the Crime Survey for England and Wales youth survey, which fell from 70% in 2017-18, to 66% (2018-19), 57% (2019-20), and down to 43% (2022-23).

Verian carried out qualitative research with responders to the YPSS pilot. Young people reported that the reasons they had for doing the survey was that it was something new, different (makes a change from Tik Tok). Some were encouraged by their parents, whilst for many the main motivation was the incentive. They found that the materials were age appropriate, colourful, easy to read, short, call to action clear. They liked having a letter addressed to them. Although many didn't read leaflet – they found the information about incentives the main draw and Amazon vouchers most appealing. They found that the pre-notification could be confusing as no obvious call to action, and generally the study website was not looked at apart from to do survey. Parents had no specific concerns about survey, although they remembered the link with the Crime Survey, and this was important for providing reassurance. They felt that their child responding online was appropriate – easy, safer (would be more concerned about someone coming to the house). Some parents encouraged their child to take part but most were largely neutral – passed on information but didn't really discuss it. Their reactions to the materials were broadly similar to young people. They felt that the language was appropriate – having a degree of formality but still easy to understand (growing up, but not grown up). They thought that it was a good idea to have a separate letter for their children – gives sense of responsibility and ownership. Parents were more positive towards the pre-notification – unreliability of post means not all letters are received – more reminders the better.

Qualitative research with non-responders did not identify any specific concerns about the survey. Although they remembered receiving the invite, a significant minority didn't pass the information on to their child – they were too busy, forgot, didn't read it carefully enough. The minority who passed letter on encouraged child to complete the survey but most just passed it on without further discussion. The parents didn't think there were any specific reasons why their child didn't complete the survey – they just forgot, busy, not interested (typical teenage behaviour). They noted that generally children were busy out of school, at weekends or during exam time – they would either do it straight away or not at all. A couple of parents raised accessibility concerns for children with conditions such as dyslexia, autism.

The conclusions from Verian were that:

- Information needs to be minimal, to the point and age appropriate – not just an adaptation of materials used on the adult survey
- Addressing young people directly is important – not just via parents, messages need to reflect what the young person values
- Incentives are critical to this age group – often the main motivator so the type of incentive crucial
- Multiple reminders are also important. Three reminders may be the optimal number. Targeting can be useful.
- In between annual surveys, consideration should be given to a five-minute “keep in touch” survey.
- Online is the norm with this age group and surveys need to be smartphone compatible
- Even within a narrow age range some tailoring by age may help.
- For Understanding Society there is the double barrier of getting first getting the household to take part, and then getting young person to take part.

Martin Wood, Director of Longitudinal Surveys at NatCen, presented some reflections on recent child-focused surveys at NatCen. The focus was on SEND Futures survey (Children with Special Educational Needs, at aged 12-13), two of the Education & Outcomes Panel Studies (EOPS), and Wave 5 of the Mental Health of Children and Young People survey (MHCYP).

SEND Futures (Children with Special Educational Needs (age 12/13)) Discovery Phase, focused on understanding likely response rates for a population of young people with Special Education Needs (SEN). Strand 1 focused on those typically under-represented within this – low-income, ethnic minority, ‘looked after’ (LAC) and ‘children in need’ (CiN). Wave 1 (age 12-13) was CAPI, with letters sent to parents of named child, with a separate letter for the child in the same envelope. Wave 2 (age 13-14) employed a sequential mixed mode design: Web – telephone – face-to-face. Strand 2 Special Education Needs; was web-only at Wave 1, and then web with telephone follow-up at Wave 2. The invitation letter was sent to the parent, with a separate letter for the young person. This survey achieved a high proportion of young person interviews within productive households. However, the response rate was higher for the parent than the young person:

Strand 1: 29% of parents in both waves, 16% in Wave 1 only, 54% didn't take part. For young person it was 22% in both, 16% in Wave 1 only, 2% in Wave 2 only, 61% not at all.

Strand 2: 12% of parents in both waves, 7% in Wave 1 only, 1% in Wave 2 only, 79% did not take part. Young person: 9% in both waves, 8% in Wave 1 only, 2% in Wave 2 only, 81% not at all.

Within the household, where the parent did take part 75%-80% of young people also took part. For some at Wave 1, the CAPI was not accessible (especially for young people with autism). Despite the request for the young person to complete the survey alone, in 73% of cases the parent was present.

Experiments.

Incentives: Half the sample received a conditional incentive in the form of a £10 gift voucher handed out after the interview, one for the parent and one for the child; the other half received an unconditional £5 each, included with advance letter. We know that unconditional incentives often work better, and the same for higher incentives, so this was a way of testing the two against each other and trialling a less costly approach to using unconditional incentives. The contractual arrangements with the gift-card suppliers, by which the survey organisation only pays for those incentives that are redeemed (plus an administration fee) has changed the calculation of what incentive values are equivalent between the two options.

Tailored communications: For half the sample we tailored the content of their advance mailing in line with theories about what may help or hinder their participation in the survey, including addressing issues around trust in authorities for the group with a minority ethnic background, and highlighting the incentive payment amongst those in the group eligible for FSM.

Interviewer training: Half the sample was allocated to interviewers who had undergone an extra day of additional training provided by collaborators at National Children's Bureau which focussed on inclusive participation and communication with children with SEND, and their families. The remaining half of interviewers attended just the single day 'standard' NatCen project training. The hope was that this additional training would make interviewers feel more confident, and better equipped to speak to families both on the doorstep and during the interview.

Web-only Strand 2 experiment on interview length: Tested a 20 min vs 30 min interview length. This was mentioned in the advance letters. It also tested £5 vs £10 incentives (both conditional).

Results: The unconditional incentive group had a higher response rate (48%) than the conditional group (43%). There were no differences between the groups in the other experiments. The short interview did marginally better than the long interview on the web strand (21% vs 18% for parent; 18% vs 16% for child) as did £10 vs £5 on the web strand (22% vs 17% for parents; 20% vs 14% for child). Better trained interviewers didn't influence overall response but did affect data quality and recontact rates.

For the Education & Outcomes Panel Studies (EOPS), two of the studies were examined: EOPS-B ("Five to Twelve", where the child was aged 5-6) and EOPS-C discovery phase ("Growing up in the 2020s", where the child was aged 12-13). NatCen only had the child name in the sample, so letters addressed to "mother, father or carer of...". EOPS-B included an unconditional incentive to household (£10); and a designed colouring book and pencils for child. EOPS-C had an unconditional incentive to household (£10); £10 conditional incentive to the young person in households in receipt of free school meals, and a separate letter for the young person.

Household response rate 47% for EOPS-B (main stage, unweighted) and 36% for EOPS-C in a pilot phase, but households eligible for Free School Meals had a lower response than other households (EOPS-B 39% vs 53%; EOPS-C 25% vs 43%). Within responding households, the young person completion rate was high – 94% in EOPS-B and 88% in EOPS-C. The FSM households had a lower young person response than the non-FSM households, especially for the older child group (91% vs 95% in EOPS-B; 81% vs 93% in EOPS-C).

Mental Health of Children and Young People survey (MHCYP), Wave 5. Originally (W1) a CAPI survey, Wave 5 had a Web-CATI approach. Letters were sent to the parents of 8-16 year olds, and directly to those aged 17 or over. For those aged 8-10, the parent was asked to complete a questionnaire. For those aged 11-16, there was a parent interview and a child self-completion, and for those aged 17-25 the young person was interviewed. Evidence that engaging with the child at an earlier age was beneficial– higher response rate for 8-10 year olds (47%) than the older age groups (35% for 11-16; 30% for 17-25), due to higher parental involvement.

Discussion and Ideas

After the presentations, there was a roundtable discussion which covered two main areas. First, what additional analysis or evidence would we want to enable us to make more informed decisions about methods to improve response among adolescents and young adults. Second, what were the actions we could investigate and develop further for the Study to improve response for these groups.

Additional analysis

- Extend reported analysis to look at the predictors of attrition in youth survey. This would also cover the household-level predictors of participation – who takes part in the household? Parents, siblings? Single parent vs two parents? Is it that the household isn't responding or the household does but the young person doesn't?
- Map out where in the process we lose people – at the household level (reasons for non-response), and then within the household (individual-level non-response).
- Is the association between response at 10-15 and response at 16 causal or correlation?
- As well as socio-demographics, do we have information that parenting styles, child development/SEND status/personality which might affect attrition? Are there any regional effects, e.g., London?
- Given the different longitudinal participation patterns over the youth survey can we analyse these groups to suggest differential response maximisation experiments?
- Who returns to the study (vs drop out completely) – what factors predict return, reasons for returning?
- Could we look at the dates that the self-completion was sent – do they clash with exam dates? Consider university terms for university student contacts.

Additional evidence

- Can we ask the parent, or the adolescents themselves, why they do not take part? This could be with a feedback email to parents, or qualitative interviews. This might shed light on the dynamics of the household when it comes to taking part: who starts/does the grid, who then encourages who, how are children involved, if not why not? Who sends booklets back, when etc? Is it all done on the same day or in stages?

Ideas to develop further to increase response

10-15 years

- Role of mothers as gatekeepers and encouragers was a recurrent theme in the discussion. How can we best harness this? Can we emphasize more how Understanding Society is a ‘family survey’ and hence the importance of getting involvement of the whole family.
- Questionnaire: The content of the youth questionnaire may not seem completely suitable for children under the age of 13. Could we consider having two versions: one for 10-12 year olds, one for 13-15 year olds?
- Are there ways we can enable learning for young person (without contaminating observed data), such as including feedback at the end of the survey, including fun facts, introduce elements of gamification etc
- Evidence suggests consulting and co-producing research may be beneficial to response? How could this be adopted on a study the scale of Understanding Society. Should we establish a separate “Young People” panel to inform and engage young people in survey? Is this, or are there other ways, we could create rapport, sense of ownership of survey with young people.
- Messaging: Include some quotes from youth participants endorsing taking part in the survey. Emphasise that the task is easy: “just want to know about you, no right or wrong” to reduce the “exam” fear and “it might be difficult”. Youth feedback “it was easy and quick to do” video (TikTok).
- Incentives: Might a conditional incentive be more effective than unconditional at this age? –For this age, would online vouchers be more attractive? They may be more likely to spend online than with a gift-card in a shop? Might we consider cumulative incentive for youth (e.g., £10 for first interview, £12 for second, up to £20 for sixth)?
- Contact: Children use phone rather than computers, and text not emails. For this age group, parents are gatekeepers. However, could we streamline the current process, for example ask parent in their interview for permission to send the child a text message with their survey invite and/or give parents information about the youth survey and with a direct link (or QR code) to the child’s survey for them to pass on?

16-24 adults

- Contact: Given, at age 16, people are invited to their first adult interview, and then during this life stage, often young adults are highly mobile and move in and out of the family home. We may want to think differently about how we manage contacts and sample processes. For example, in the preceding year, we could ask for the contact details of 15 year olds (currently just ask for 16+), with the message “next year, <name> will be able to take part in the adult survey and so we can send them their invitation, please can you give us an email address for them? By providing an email address, you are not obliging them to take part, but we would like to invite them so they can make their mind up next year...”.
- When a young person leaves the family home, is there anything else we can do to take advantage of still having the parents in the original household in addition to our standard procedure where we ask the current residents, and try to follow up with telephone, email, stable contacts??
- Should we tailor “leavers” questions based on age/relationship of leaver to try to increase provision of information about where they have moved to and why? We would need to explain why we would like to have the information, and what we will do with it.
- Where a young adult does not take part for a few waves, can we check their contact details and circumstances to enable us to keep trying to contact them. We do this for movers, but not for people still resident in the household but not participating..
- Recruitment: Age 16 – as this is the first adult interview should we have tailored ‘recruitment’ for them. We already have a “Rising-16” invitation letter, but is there more around the length or content of the first adult interview we can do?
- Messaging: Tailor time estimates in the advance letter – e.g., for this age group “20-30 minutes”. Value for participation for including on CV or evidence of social good?
- Should we establish separate “Young People” panel to inform and engage young people in survey? Is this, or are there other ways, we could create rapport, sense of ownership of survey with young people.
- Questionnaire:. Should we have a much shorter young adult interview, so that transition from youth (15 minutes) to adult (45 minutes) isn’t as large ? ELFE (France) implemented as eight short interviews, instead of one long one, would we consider this? How successful and feasible might this be for a survey such as

Understanding Society, both at this life stage and beyond? Break up our survey for young adults

- Need to think about having different approach for students to other kinds of YP.
- Incentives: Additional incentive for whole-household completion to encourage positive gate-keeping (but may increase risk of falsification)? Make the incentive conditional so that it's seen as a method to increase engagement once started, and doesn't rely on the norm of reciprocity.
- Collecting contact details: Break-up contact details so not in one block at the end – e.g., when relevant (mobile phone ownership, email use). Link provision of contact details to conditional incentive (so we can send you your voucher by email...). Use of interviewers to better collect contact information (from young people, their parents), given them justification for why we're asking for these, and why we're asking for different details.

Next steps

The evidence from this workshop (and more widely) suggests that adolescent drop out from longitudinal studies is a widespread challenge, and there is no 'silver bullet' to rectify this.

The workshop provided some insights into areas we might consider to improve response and retention. The Understanding Society team has set up a Task and Finish group to identify key areas of analysis and interventions to trial from the suggestions made at the workshop. These will be planned in a way that maximises learning about how to engage these important groups for research, as well as to improve their response on Understanding Society.

References

James, Nicole D (2024) Understanding Participation in a Long-Term Household Panel Study: Evidence from the UK. Doctoral thesis, University of Essex.
<https://repository.essex.ac.uk/38480/>

Appendix 1 Workshop: Improving response among adolescents and young adults in Understanding Society

12-5, 21st May 2024, ISER, University of Essex

Aim: to establish what we know about the factors affecting non-response among adolescents and young adults and to identify initiatives to improve response

Lunch available from 12.00	
12.30-12.45	Introductions and aims/outputs Michaela Benzeval
12.45-1.00 (allowing time for clarification questions)	Overview of response among 10-25 year olds in Understanding Society Jon Burton
1.00-1.40 (10m presentations, with couple minutes factual queries for each)	Factors affecting attrition among young adults - Camilla Salvatore - Rosie Cornish - Violetta Parutis
1.40-1.55 (allowing time for clarification questions)	Efforts to improve response among 10-25 year olds in Understanding Society Jon Burton
10 min comfort and coffee break	
2.05-2.35 (allowing time for clarification questions)	Overview of factors that encourage and discourage young people (age 11-24) from taking part in studies Aja Murray
2.35-3.05 (allowing time for clarification questions)	Overview of initiatives across Verian surveys to improve uptake among adolescents and young adults Keith Bolling
3.05-3.25 (allowing time for clarification questions)	Overview of initiatives in NatCen surveys to improve uptake among adolescents Martin Wood
10 min comfort and coffee break	
3.35-4.50	Discussion: • what else do we need to investigate re patterns and predictors of attrition? • What ideas/initiatives might we try to improve response on youth survey and young adults? • what are key priorities?
4.50-5.00	Wrap up/next steps

Participants

Edith Aguirre, Understanding Society team, University of Essex

Tarek Al Baghal, Understanding Society team, University of Essex

Michaela Benzeval, Understanding Society team, University of Essex

Keith Bolling, Verian

Cara Booker, Understanding Society team, University of Essex

Jonathan Burton, Understanding Society team, University of Essex

Pablo Cabrera Alvarez, Understanding Society team, University of Essex

Hannah Carpenter, Verian

Rosie Cornish, Understanding Society Fellow, University of Bristol

Kelly Goodyear, Understanding Society team, University of Essex

Dejla Hoxha, University of Edinburgh

Annette Jackle, Understanding Society team, University of Essex

Peter Lynn, Understanding Society team, University of Essex

Aja Murray, University of Edinburgh

Becky Parsons, Understanding Society team, University of Essex

Violetta Parutis, Understanding Society team, University of Essex

Camilla Salvatore, Understanding Society Fellow, University of Utrecht

Martin Wood, NatCen