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Using nationally-representative Internet panels to support social policymaking : Experiments in The Understanding America Study

Abstract

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**Objectives/aims**

Nationally representative Internet-based panels are a relatively recent phenomenon in survey methodology. CESR’s Understanding America Study (uasdata.usc.edu) is a probability-based Internet panel of approximately 6,500 respondents representing the entire United States ,and is one of the richest sources of national panel data available. The UAS not only allows researchers to observe a rich picture of the population over time, but also allows policymakers to incorporate experiments in a rapid and flexible way, and to match experimental data to previous survey modules (including modules that correspond topically with the University of Michigan's Health and Retirement Study (HRS)). The collected data are available to the public either immediately or after a brief embargo. This talk illustrates the value of this resource by describing a range of online surveys and experiments carried out by CESR, including an ongoing set of projects conducted in collaboration with the US Social Security Administration with the aim of improving decision-making around retirement for older Americans.

**Methods**

In an ongoing series of repeated surveys, we periodically evaluate American’ public’s overall financial knowledge and their understanding of Social Security and retirement benefits. We matched previously-collected data to an experimental study in which we altered the terms describing Social Security. Our preferred set of terms had the effect of delaying retirement claiming intentions by an average of about two and a half months and clarifying the process for respondents, with a larger effect observed among those with low baseline levels of financial literacy. These monitoring and experimental results have informed the Social Security Administration’s outreach and communications strategies significantly. In addition to the methods for this specific study, the presentation will briefly describe the general methods for UAS sampling, recruitment and survey collection, weighting procedures, standard variables and other relevant aspects of panel administration.

**Discussion**

The discussion will focus on the scientific results and policy outcomes of our work with the Social Security Administration and other stakeholders, as well as broader reflections related to setting up and maintaining a high-quality population-representative panel, and the process of matching policy needs to robust study design to balance scientific impact and direct social value. We will also discuss opportunities for external parties to work with UAS administrators and CESR researchers in developing new surveys and future lines of research.