

Getting Respondent's Attention in the Digital Age

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Abstract

In 1997, a representative sample of U.S. households was selected from 200 National Frame Areas for the National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth – 1997 cohort (NLSY97). Interviewers screened households in all of these NFAs to identify families who had children between the ages of 12 and 16. From these identified families, approximately 9,000 youths agreed to be respondents in the NLSY97. NORC at the University of Chicago has conducted annual interviews with these individuals since they were selected. The NLSY97 provides significant insight into employment and unemployment trends, schooling, training and transition to work, family formation, and career and earning paths. Because longitudinal surveys, such as the NLSY, track the same individuals over time, the NLSY gives a more in-depth and complete picture of the labor market and provides unique, important insight into the experiences of adolescents as they enter the job market for the first time.

Over the last several rounds, the NLS team has made an effort to tailor the respondent materials and outreach to encourage more electronic communication and faster response and turnaround to completing interviews. In the last 5 rounds, we have seen an explosion in the number of emails, texts and web interactions with the NLSY97 respondents and would like to describe our outreach process and report on the early returns and interactions on Round 15 of the survey. We believe the cumulative effect of changes to the timing of our outreach, the mode of our contact, our tailoring of contact based on respondent preference, and the refinements of our website are moving the project in the direction that will tighten the respondent's relationship to the survey, leverage the speed and economy of electronic communication, and provide a strong bedrock of website use that will foster the possibility for the project to move to web data collection..

A Brief Background of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 97 (NLSY97)

The primary purpose of the NLS program, which is funded by U.S. Department of Labor (Bureau of Labor Statistics), is to collect data on the labor force experiences of adults and young adults on a range of factors potentially affecting these experiences. Each young person participating in the NLSY97 cohort represents approximately 1,900 young people like him/herself. When all these young people are studied together, they represent the young adults born between 1980 and 1984 within the US population. Thus researchers can learn a great deal about all young adults in the United States by studying this comparatively small sample. Year by year, the changes, or lack of changes, that NLSY97 respondents report in their lives are an accurate measure of large scale changes that affect everyone in their generation. Through the NLSY97, researchers will be able to identify characteristics defining the transition that today's youths make from school to the labor market and into adulthood. To achieve this goal, the NLSY97 collects extensive information on youths' labor market behavior and educational experiences. This information will help researchers assess the impact of schooling and other environmental factors on these newest labor market entrants. Data from the NLSY97 will also aid in determining how youth experiences relate to establishing a career, participating in government programs, and forming a family. Many "life events" influence jobs, careers, wages and earnings. These include schooling and training, living arrangements (marriage) and fertility, health, savings and level of wealth, & civic behaviors. All are documented in the NLSY data sets. Over time, information from the NLSY97 will allow researchers to compare the progress of this cohort to that of the earlier NLS cohorts.

The first round of the survey began in calendar year 1997. During that year, the sample was selected, Round 1 interviews were administered, and the Profile of American Youth was conducted. In 1997, a representative sample of U.S. households was selected from 200 National Frame Areas for the NLSY97. Sample design uses two samples: cross section sample and a supplemental sample of African-Americans and Hispanics. In the spring of 1997, interviewers screened some 91,000 households in these NFAs to identify families who had

children between the ages of 12 and 16. From these identified families, approximately 9,000 youths agreed to be respondents in the NLSY97. One round of interviews has been administered annually to these same respondents since. Round 15 gathers data on the respondents' activities during the time since they were last interviewed. The study is currently fielding the 15th round. These yearly interviews are done primarily by face-to-face interviews with only a small percentage done over the phone (less than 15%).

The Round 1 Pretest took place in October 1996. Since then, the pretest has been scheduled between June and August of each year. Most Round 1 interviews were conducted from February to October of 1997 (a handful were conducted in early 1998). As part of Round 1, both the eligible youth respondents and their parents completed separate Youth and Parent Questionnaires. The youth respondents that were interviewed at that time became the permanent NLSY97 sample.

The following rounds of interviews were conducted according to the table below:

Table A: Start and End Dates by NLSY97 Round of Data Collection

Round	Start	End
1	February 1997	October 1997
2	October 1998	April 1999
3	October 1999	April 2000
4	October 2000	June 2001
5	November 2001	May 2002
6	November 2002	June 2003
7	October 2003	July 2004
8	November 2004	July 2005
9	October 2005	July 2006
10	October 2006	May 2007
11	October 2007	May 2008
12	October 2008	May 2009
13	September 2009	April 2010
14	October 2010	May 2011
15	September 2011	April 2012

Following each round of data collection, all identifying information is removed and survey data are made available to the study sponsors and the general public. Data from the first thirteen rounds of NLSY97, as well as data from the other NLS cohorts, are available to the general public at <http://www.nlsinfo.org/web-investigator/>. The NLSY97 has maintained responses rate of 84% or better over the life of the study (deceased respondents excluded). The study will continue so long as funding remains available.

Introduction

With the initial age range of selection for NLSY97 respondents being 12-16 years old, our 'Youth' respondents at the start of the 15th round are now roughly 28 to 32 years old. This particular age range has shown to be a highly active and avid user of texting via cell phone and overall the highest age group in smart phone ownership (Smith, 2011). Smartphone owners typically will send and receive more text messages than those with other types of phone (Smith, 2011). Also, with a supplemental sample of African Americans and Hispanics as well as the full spectrum of respondent representing all Socio-economic and education levels with the NLSY97 sample, it is important to note that non-white cell phone users will text more than whites and those with lower income or

less education attainment tend to text more than those with higher income and more education attainment (Smith, 2011). This lends itself to being an important medium for our outreach to our respondent population.

Cell phone usage is not a passing trend. It is here to stay. And with more and more individuals ditching their landlines and purchasing cell phones, for some, the capabilities of those phone with internet access have become the only way to reach to reach them. Voicemail, texting, social networks have become an almost instantaneous way for individuals to connect with each other and the world at large. With data plans to support internet usage from a cell phone, one can see an increasing trend in internet usage and text messaging from cell phone and smart phones users.

Over the course of the last few rounds, the NLSY97 has been changing the format of their hard copy materials as well as increasing our electronic based communications with our respondents. We continue to increase the options available in our communications to our respondent's for any inbound communications they may have (questions, concerns, appointments to complete interviews, participation refusal, etc...) with the introduction of web based version of our advance letter coupon (further description below), a texting option to notify the study about readiness to participate and more email communications with respondent over all.

This paper looks at our initial observations and findings in how both subtle and specific changes made to our advance materials and modes of communication, both inbound and outbound, as well as the timing of our outreach have increased electronic communications with our respondents and increased our rate of completion in the beginning weeks of data collection as we attempt to prepare our respondents for future changes from face-to-face interviews to the potential of web-based data collection. First, we will overview how our interviewing training model has shifted our initial communication strategies. We will then discuss our past and current models for initial communications with our respondents and how we have made changes to this outreach. We will also share initial observations of how these changes have made an impact on how our respondents choose to communicate over the two years based on these changes. Finally, conclusions and next steps for both further analysis as well as additional ways we plan to increase our electronic communications and technologies in our outreach efforts to NLSY97 respondents.

Initial Communications and Inbound Contacting Modes

Historically, the NLSY97 initial contacting strategy of its respondents for each round since its inception has included a hard copy advance letter/coupon mailed to all respondents at the start of each round. This advance letter/coupon both announces that the study has started and that our interviewing staff are available to start scheduling interviews as well as providing some basic study details. We also ask the respondents to return the detachable portion in an enclosed pre-paid envelope with their updated contact information, including current address, phone numbers, email, whether or not they plan to move, the best date time to reach them and their preferred method of contact.

Example of Detachable Portion of Advance Letter:

First Name: _____	
Last Name: _____	
Address: _____	
Apt. or Unit Number: _____	
City, State, Zip Code: _____	
Phone (Home): _____	
Phone (Work): _____	
Phone (Cell): _____	
E-mail: _____	Best time to call: Days _____ Times _____
Are you Moving? When and Where? _____	Best way for us to reach you: <input type="checkbox"/> In Person <input type="checkbox"/> Cell Phone <input type="checkbox"/> E-mail <input type="checkbox"/> Home Phone <input type="checkbox"/> Work Phone <input type="checkbox"/> Text Message

Adding electronic communication options. The letter also includes a toll free number and an email address to allow respondents to contact the study about scheduling an interview. In more recent rounds (starting in Round 10), a website address was added for respondents to be able to update the information asked for in the advance letter coupon online. In the last two rounds (Round 14 and Round 15), a texting option was added where respondent could text to a phone number to let the study know they were available to be contacted to schedule their interview (see Table B below).

Table B: Introduction of Communications Options by Round: Advance Letter Coupons

Advance Letter Coupons															
Inbound Communication Options	Introduction of Option by Round														
	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6	R7	R8	R9	R10	R11	R12	R13	R14	R15
Advance Letter return	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Toll Free number	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Email						X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Website (hyperlinked)										X	X	X	X	X	X
Text														X	X

Email outreach. With the start of the Advance Email in Round 10, the Toll free number, Email and Website options have been included within the body of the email. While texting was offered in the Advance Letter in Round 14 and Round 15, the Texting options was only included in the Advance Email in Round 15.

Mailing changes. In earlier rounds of the study, the advance letter would be sent via standard postal mail 2 weeks prior to the start of data collection. Since Round 11, the advance letters have been sent Federal Express,

when possible, to increase the visibility and perceived importance of the letter to the respondent as well as reduce the time it took to get to them.

Format changes. In the last three rounds, the text used to give inbound contacting options to a respondent has been simplified from sentences to a bullet-point list within the Advance Letter. In this round, the exact same bullet-point list was used to simplify the email and to make the text more smart phone friendly for consistent usage in mass emails.

Except from the Round 13 Advance Letter:

We realize that your life is very busy and your free time is limited. There are four easy ways you can contact us to schedule your interview.

- Call us at **1-800-789-1346**
- E-mail us at **nlsy97@norc.org**
- Visit our website at **www.norc.org/nlsy97**
- Fill out, detach and **mail the card below**

Except from Round 14 Advance Letter:

We know you have many demands on your time, and we are happy to accommodate your schedule. We encourage you to check out all the different ways you can reach us to set up an appointment or update your contact information:

- **Visit our website** at www.norc.org/nlsy97
- **Text** 'NORC' to 312-835-1905
- **E-mail** us at nlsy97@norc.org
- **Call** us toll free at 800-789-1346
- **Complete the card below** and **mail it to us** in the postage-paid envelope

Except from Round 15 Advance Letter:

Check out all the different ways you can reach us to update your contact information or RSVP for an appointment. We look forward to hearing from you soon!

Visit: www.norc.org/nlsy97
Text: 312-835-1905 with your name
E-mail: nlsy97@norc.org
Call: 800-789-1346
Mail: Complete and send the card below in the postage-paid envelope

Option order changes. In prior rounds, the toll free number would be the first in the list of ways to contact. In Round 14 and Round 15, the methods of inbound contact were listed so that electronic communications were at the top with the assertion that the top options would be the ones selected first by the respondent. The differences between Round 14 and Round 15 may be more subtle but the simplified text in Round 15 allows for the key information of the website, the phone number to text, the actual email address to stand out more and draws the eye to the list of information with the overall simplified format.

Starting in Round 10, in addition to the Advance Letter, an Advance Email was sent to respondents where an email address was on record. This email has historically been sent the day or so before the first day of data collection. The email would ask the respondent to respond to email, to call their local FM (personalized by area) or to go to the study's website. The toll free project phone number was also included. The general content of the email has traditionally been slightly different so those receiving both did not get the exact same materials in hard copy and electronically.

Example of Round 14 Advance Email:

Subject: Scheduling your NORC interview

Body: Dear **[Respondent First Name]**,

It's time once again for a new round of the survey!

Your NORC interviewer will be contacting you soon to schedule a date and time for your next interview. Why wait? To set up a time now to complete this year's interview, please e-mail me or call **[FM Full Name]**, toll-free at **[FM Toll-Free Number]**. She can also be reached by e-mail at **[FM Email]**.

You can also visit our website at www.norc.org/nlsy97 to update us on how best to contact you, to give us your availability and see how the information that we collect has been used. By participating in the study you represent 1900 other people just like yourself which gives them a chance to make their voices be heard.

The puzzle is not complete without you! I look forward to hearing from you.

Mark Ross
The National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago
(NORC)
(800) 789-1346

Si usted necesita hablar con un entrevistador en español, por favor llame al teléfono gratuito 1-800-789-1346.

ID#: **[Mailing_ID]**

Example of Round 15 Advance Email:

Subject:	Scheduling your NORC interview
Body:	<p>Dear [Respondent First Name],</p> <p>Join us in celebrating 15 years of this important study!</p> <p>You can RSVP for your interview by calling [FM Full Name] toll-free at [FM Toll-Free Number] or by e-mail at [FM Email].</p> <p>You can also:</p> <p>Visit: www.norc.org/nlsy97 to give us your availability</p> <p>Text: 312-835-1905 with your name</p> <p>E-mail: ross-mark@norc.org</p> <p>Call: 800-789-1346</p> <p>See experts in the field discuss how your participation can impact you and the lives of others by watching the videos posted here: [url of videos to be posted]. Your voice, which represents 1,900 other people, helps policymakers and researchers see the whole picture of your generation, so contact us today!</p> <p>I look forward to hearing from you.</p> <p>Mark Ross NORC at the University of Chicago</p> <p><i>Si usted necesita hablar con un entrevistador en español, por favor llame al teléfono gratuito 1-800-789-1346.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">ID#: [Mailing_ID]</p>

While all of the options, except texting, were available in the Round 14 Advance Email, the inbound contacting information layout was integrated within a standard letter layout making the key pieces of information blend into the other text associated with it. Starting in the current round, the bullet point list in the Round 15 Advance Letter was also included within the Advance Email in the hopes to of increasing inbound contact via any of the modes available. Also, the texting option was now listed within the Round 15 Advance Email.

Hyperlinks and smartphone format. The other notable difference was the hyperlink of the website address within the Advanced Email took the respondent to the study home page in Round 14. In Round 15, the list format was used within the body of the Advance Email, the text option was included and the hyperlinked web address took the respondent directly to the contacting update page, rather than the home page. Also, when the Round 14 inbound contact information was viewed on a smart phone compared to the Round 15 inbound

contact information; it was much easier to identify each piece of inbound contact information and select it from the list. With the structure of how smart phones identify and hyperlink information, both the texting phone number and the project's toll free number were hyperlinked allowing respondents to click on the number to call or send a text versus having to write the information down or remember it to call or text.

Staggered Start – Initial communications strategy based on Case assignment

Over the study's life span, there have been two major 'shifts' in how the NLSY97 interviewers have been trained. From the start of the NLSY97 through Round 5, all Field Interview trainings were done in-person with all field staff. From Round 6 until the present round, all trainings took on a mixed mode approach dependent on the field interviewer's prior experience with the study and its questionnaire. Two groups were and continue to be identified each round: Experienced and New.

Experienced interviewers can be categorized as a field interviewer that had actively interviewed during one or both of the last two rounds of the NLSY97. New interviewers can be categorized as not having been on the NLSY97 study in the last two rounds or are new to the company. Depending on whether the interviewer falls in ~~to~~ the experienced or new category determines the mode of training they received. During Rounds 6 through 9, the in-person training for New Field Interviewers was conducted at the same time that our Experienced Interviewers were remotely training through a self-study booklet and certification to conduct the interview via phone with their managers. As of Round 11, a new 'Staggered Start' concept was tested and proven to be the most efficient and effective way to get field interviewers trained for the NLSY97. This 'staggered start' concept entails having Experienced Interviewers remotely train in the days leading up to the first day of data collection and having the New Interviewers attending in-person training 2-3 weeks *after* the first day of data collection. This staggered start concept for training field interviewers was then mimicked for the initial respondent communications at the start of Round 15.

As mentioned, the traditional model used by the NLSY97 was to send all respondents the Advance letter and the Advance Email all at the same time to announce the start of the study. With the staggered start in training New Field interviewers 2-3 weeks after the start of data collection, this left a considerable gap in time for some respondents if they happened to be in an area where their local interviewer was not trained at the start of data collection. As the majority of interviews for this study are done face-to-face, this delayed start for new interviewers could leave a respondent with more than a month to wait for that interviewer to be available, increasing the potential for a cooperative respondent to become irritated or frustrated and running a higher risk of non-response for a particular round.

In the current round of the study, an effort was made to avoid this "wait time" for the respondent by changing our Initial communication strategy. The timing for sending the Advance Letter and Advance Email were tailored to match the deployment of Field interviewing staff using respondent location, case assignment and the training schedule of the field interviewer in the current round of the study. All cases that were assigned to Experienced Interviewers were sent their Advance Letter and Advance Email three days prior to the start of data collection.

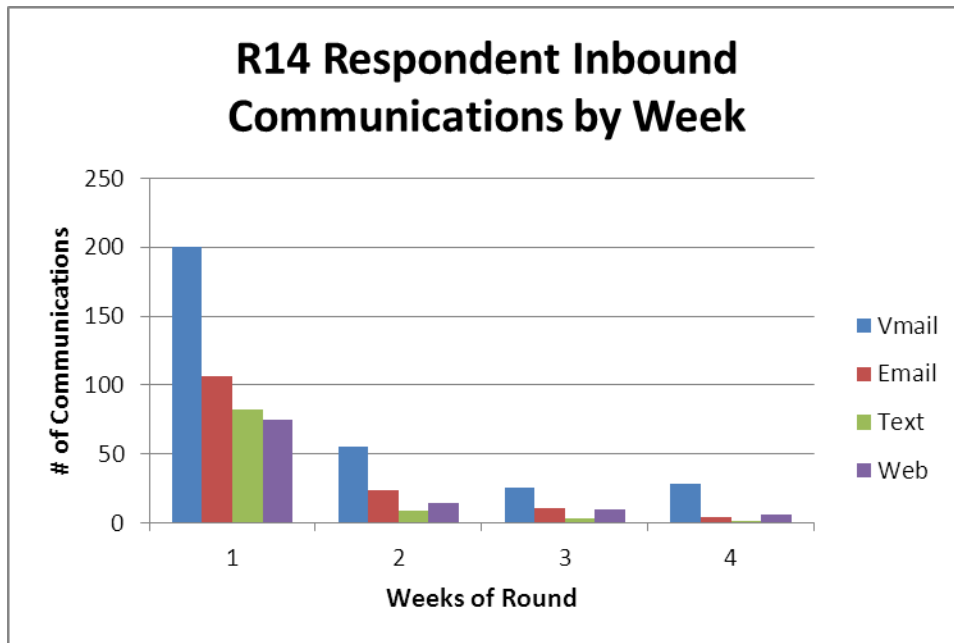
All cases that were assigned to New Interviewers, were delayed three weeks and sent their Advance Letter and Advance Email three days prior to the those interviewers completing in-person training. In addition to reducing the "wait time" for respondents, there was a reduction in burden on project staff and field staff in responding to immediate requests for appointments set weeks in advance. With this contacting model, a smaller secondary spike in the production was expected as there were now two groups of respondents being contacted at alternating times versus all of the respondents being contacted right from the start of data collection.

Findings

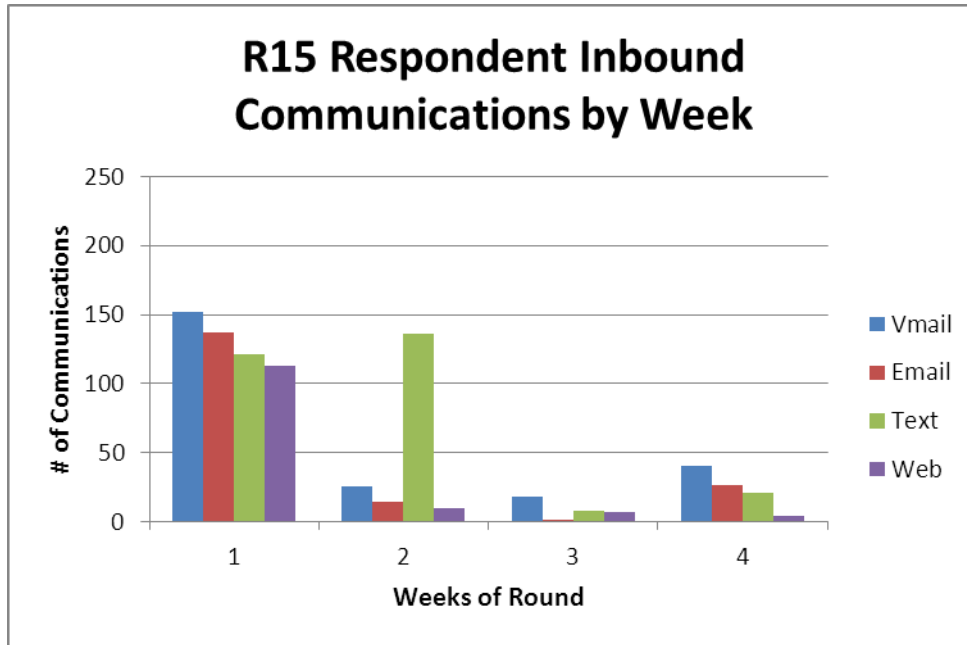
Did any of these changes in layout, format, inclusion of texting option in email, making more Smartphone friendly, etc. with the Advance Letter and Email themselves have any impact on respondent inbound communication mode choice? Did the changes to when the Advance Letter or Email were sent based on Case Assignment and Interviewer Training/Experience schedule result produce the expected 'second spike' in production?

Looking at the inbound communications comparison in the first 4 weeks of fielding for both Round 14 (Graph A) and Round 15 (Graph B), one can see an increase in all electronic modes of communication occurring in Round 15 compared to Round 14. In Graph A, it is clear that calling the toll free number was the preferred method of inbound contacting for those respondents that contacted the project within the first week of fielding in Round 14. While calling the toll free project number had the highest number of contacts by respondents in the first week of Round 15 as well (Graph B), the other electronic methods of communication (emailing, website updates and particularly texting), were used more frequently in the first week than in the prior round. What is interesting to note is that the texting option was more heavily used by respondents in the second week in Round 15 compared to Round 14. One can see an uptick in inbound communications in Week 4 in Round 15 which we had expected to see from the second wave of the Staggered Start Advance Letter and Email being sent during that week.

Graph A: Round 14 Respondent Inbound Communication by Week



Graph B: Round 15 Respondent Inbound Communication by Week



The Table below shows each of the different electronic inbound contacting modes and the number of individual contacts made with respondents (multiple contacts with the same respondent counted as one contact). What the table highlights is the large increase in texts received by the project in the just the first 4 weeks of Round 15 when compared to both the first 4 weeks of Round 14 and the overall total of text received in the entire field period of Round 14. As Round 15 Data Collection has not been completed as of this paper, one can see that there may be no overall increase in the total number of communications per round once fielding has ended but that the mode selection of those communications between the compared rounds has shifted.

Table C: Number of Inbound Communications by Mode

# of Inbound Communications by Mode and Round				
	R14 (Weeks 1-4)	R15 (Weeks 1-4)	R14 (Through End Week 36)	R15 (through Week 24)*
Toll free Calls	308	235	543	307
Email	145	178	296	255
Text	95	286	103	298
Web Updates	105	134	138	186
TOTAL	653	833	1080	1046

*Upon publication, R15 data collection was still ongoing.

In looking at specific production milestones at the beginning of each round over the last 5 years, we can see a fairly significant increase in the total # of interviewers completed within the first four weeks of data collection in Round 15 as compared to previous rounds. This trend continued 8 weeks into data collection.

Table D: Number of Completes by Round and Production Milestones

# of Completes by Round and Production Milestones					
	R11	R12	R13	R14*	R15
After 4 weeks	2910	2344	2633	1613	3039
After 8 weeks	5204	4435	5156	4076	5352
After 12 weeks	6218	5688	6291	5744	6320
Final Total	7418	7490	7559	7479	???

*Larger group of New Interviewers starting later in fielding period this round.

Conclusion and Next steps:

While these are just initial observations/comparisons, we can see that the adaption of our materials to be more smartphone friendly, simplifying the message and incorporating the texting option into our emails did show some impact on the inbound mode selection as well as an increase response within those modes. A more in-depth look at other potential confounding variables is warranted. However, these numbers indicate that the higher prevalence of smart phones with this age range along with our modifications could have combined for the increased use of electronic mediums.

While the increased production within the first 4 weeks of Round 15 can be partially attributed to an increased number of Experienced Field interviewers starting in Week 1, both the increase and more immediate responses via electronic inbound communications, we believe, can also be attributed to faster turnaround of completed interviews. As we hoped there would be an increase in electronic communications due to our changes to materials and our outreach strategy, this meant that we needed to turn around our response as quickly as possible to those that contacted us through these faster mediums. Two methods were employed to achieve this: A centralized communications depository and direct updates from our Project website. The first method involved the use of centralized phone interviewers who monitored electronic voicemails, text message and emails that were all sent to the project email address. The second was the improvement to our website to 'match' key information that was entered by the respondent with their cases in our case management system. If matched, the information entered by the respondent was passed directly in the case management system as a record of call, giving the case a specific disposition and displaying the information in a specific location with the interviewer's case load. The assigned Interviewer would then know there was a case where the respondent had given updated information and needed their attention. Analysis is forthcoming on whether there was an actual increase in our response time in comparison to prior round. Anecdotally, the overall production within the first 4 weeks seems to support this being one of the factors for the increase but again, more analysis is needed.

As we continue to look for additional ways to incorporate more electronic communication and newer technologies into both our communications and our data collection strategies in upcoming rounds, here are just a few of the planned changes and/or experiments that we hoping to pursue:

- QR Codes on printed study materials
- Reordering the initial communications strategy to Email First then Letter Follow-up
- Introducing mini web-surveys via the study website,
- Electronic payment options like PayPal for respondent with existing accounts
- Creating a Smartphone Application for the study
- Potentially adding a web-based component as a data collection mode

It is our hope that these technological advances can help to reduce respondent burden in data collection, increase communication ease and timing, maintain or increase our response rates and continue to building a lasting and more interactive relationship with our respondents using these newer technologies.

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