

Remote Surveying in a Pandemic: Research Synthesis

Executive Summary

As part of IPA's response to COVID-19, many existing and new data collections have shifted to remote data collection modes including computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI), interactive voice response (IVR) and SMS surveys.

To support this effort, IPA examined existing evidence from remote surveys in low and middle-income countries, which is synthesized here. The source data, a categorized list of research papers, is [available online](#). We invite clarifications and updates by [email](#), including suggestions of relevant literature we may have missed.

Though there is extensive evidence to inform study and protocol design, it comes with several caveats, stemming from inconsistent reporting, lack of explicit testing, and limited evidence in some modes and topics. We identified four key lessons from the evidence that can be used to inform decision-making:

- **Sampling frames** have dramatic effects on research protocols, representativeness and response rates, as demonstrated by meaningful differences in the proportion of connected phone numbers by sampling frame. Existing samples connected with 63 percent of unique numbers attempted, whereas random digit dialing samples connected with 19 percent of unique numbers attempted.
- **Estimated costs** vary substantively by mode, with IVR being the cheapest mode and CATI the most costly. Using data from 27 studies and 18 countries, cost per completed survey ranged from \$11.97 using CATI to \$4.86 using IVR and \$7.75 using SMS (all in 2020 USD).
- **Response rates**, which we report as the number of complete interviews divided by unique numbers attempted, are over 250 percent higher in CATI than IVR or SMS based on data from 41 studies and 20 countries. CATI surveys using existing samples averaged response rates of 56 percent compared to an average of 33 percent using RDD samples.

This document is part of a series reviewing existing evidence on implementing surveys using computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) and other remote survey modes. It was made possible with the generous support from and collaboration with Northwestern University's Global Poverty Research Lab (GPRL). It was prepared by Savannah Henderson and Michael Rosenbaum with helpful input from Jennie Bremer and additional review by Steven Glazerman, Doug Parkerson, and Shane Warren.

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As part of IPA's response to COVID-19, many existing and new data collections have shifted to remote data collection modes including computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI), interactive voice response (IVR) and SMS surveys. These remote data collection modes allow research to continue, but there are many open questions about whether these types of data collection can effectively substitute for face-to-face surveying. Research on remote survey methods in low- and medium-income countries (LMICs) has been conducted intermittently over the past decade. This paper reviews this evidence on remote surveying methods to inform researchers about the efficacy of remote surveying methods across three domains: cost, response rates, and representativeness. We report key lessons from this research as well as caveats and some areas for further research.

The list of manuscripts, which serve as the source data for this review, is also [available online](#).

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