

How Do Personal Characteristics Associate with Survey Format Preferences in People Aging with Long-Term Disabilities?

Researchers often use surveys to collect data from participants. When designing a survey study, they may choose to use a certain survey format (for example, phone survey or web-based survey) based on cost or other practical reasons. Using one format over another is sometimes justified but can also result in the survey appealing to some groups more than others, making study results less relevant to the entire population. For example, offering a survey only in web format might cause people without internet access to be left out. The results of the study would then be meaningful only for people who use the internet.

Most studies of the impact of survey format on research have been carried out in the general public. We know less about survey format preferences in aging and/or disability populations. Therefore, we decided to explore how survey format options may affect studies of people aging with long-term physical disabilities. Specifically, we looked at how participants' personal characteristics—such as sex/gender, age, overall health, race and ethnicity, marital status, living arrangement (i.e., whether they live alone or with others), and financial situation—corresponded with their choice to take a survey over the phone or via web link.

Our Study

We looked at data from Year 2 of a long-term study of people who were aged 45–65 and had a physical disability. Each year for 3 years, participants answered a series of questions about their health and participation in home and community activities. They could choose to do the survey over the phone or online.

We analyzed data from 387 participants. About 40% chose to take the survey over the phone, and 60% chose the web-based survey.

Findings

People who chose the web-based survey tended to be younger and have higher education and better physical health than those who chose the phone option. White participants and people in long-term relationships were more likely to choose the web-based survey. On the other hand, participants who lived alone and those with an income below the state poverty level cutoff were more likely to choose the phone option. Overall, we found that age, race, education, income, marital status, living arrangement, and health were all associated with which survey format choice. That is, participants who chose different survey formats had different social and demographic characteristics.

In Conclusion

This study shows how personal characteristics of people aging with long-term disabilities relate to their preferences for phone or web survey. These findings could help researchers design studies. Offering multiple survey format options could both reduce the number of people who drop out of a study and provide a more accurate reflection of the broader population. Using only one survey format can result in less input from certain groups of people. For example, if we only offered our survey in a web-based

format, we would likely miss valuable information from people at the older end of our age range, as well as people with worse health and lower income levels—groups that are in most need of services and support. Researchers should consider providing multiple survey format options when it is feasible to do so. Findings of this study may help researchers make decisions about survey strategies when designing research studies.

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