



High Frequency Mobile Phone Surveys of Households to Assess the Impacts of COVID-19

Overview

As the World Bank Group and client countries move at an unprecedented pace to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, access to timely, policy-relevant, general population-representative information regarding knowledge of, responses to and impacts of COVID-19 and related restrictions will be key to effectively design, target and evaluate the policy interventions.

Since government-imposed social distancing practices are now the new normal to fight the spread of COVID-19, these measures severely limit the use of traditional, face-to-face interviews in population-based surveys to address the data needs. Phone surveys, on the other hand, do not require face-to-face interactions; could elicit information from individuals, households, firms and communities rapidly and at low cost; and are, therefore, highly suited for data collection in emergencies. And these platforms offer flexibility to alter sampling and/or questionnaire design in response of evolving information needs. There are, however, drawbacks associated with phone surveys, including (i) selection bias driven by a large, yet selected segment of the population owing a mobile phone, (ii) non-response bias (that often worsens throughout the life a phone survey), (iii) heterogeneity in mobile phone coverage, across geographies and population groups, and (iv) a limited scope for verifying accuracy of answers.

Despite these drawbacks, phone surveys emerge as a key part of the arsenal aimed at tracking the responses to and impacts of the pandemic. As daily life in our client countries is grinding to a halt, the window is closing for operationalizing phone survey systems that could meet the (likely-evolving) COVID-19 data needs. Therefore, we need to move fast in developing and operationalizing phone surveys that are anchored in best-practice designs and protocols – ultimately for the purpose of informing WBG-supported responses to COVID-19.

In rolling out the first wave of phone surveys, all available opportunities need to be considered and explored to identify phone survey subjects: (1) using as a sampling frame recent nationally-representative sample surveys that have elicited phone numbers for household members, and their friends/relatives/neighbors, (2) selecting numbers from other existing lists, and (3) using numbers selected by random digit dialing (RDD). These surveys could be implemented by national statistical offices (NSOs) or private firms, following a country-specific or a regional approach, and relying primarily on CATI, but also potentially on IVR and SMS.

To respond swiftly to the growing demand to implement household phone surveys to capture responses to and welfare impacts of COVID-19, the World Bank Poverty and Equity Global Practice and the

Development Data Group (DECDG), together with the Education GP and the Health, Nutrition and Population GP, coalesced around the objective of developing survey tools and technical guidelines in support of the country teams that are rapidly moving to design and implement phone survey systems across all regions.

Towards this end, a Coordination Working Group has been established to, in the immediate term, (a) promote the development and use of best-practice approaches to survey design and implementation, and (b) provide a platform for exchanging information on relevant survey activities across the World Bank, including those targeting firms and communities. This working group has in turn been complemented with Technical working groups on (a) sampling, (b) questionnaire design, (c) implementation, and (d) innovation and future directions, comprised of experts across the World Bank. The working groups were constituted on March 24, 2020.

Since then, the working groups on sampling and implementation have converged on draft guidelines, while the working group on questionnaire design has designed and refined a core questionnaire template accompanied by additional more in-depth optional modules. The package is being circulated for peer-review by experts within and outside the World Bank. Following the peer-review of this package and the internal decision meeting, the intention is to make publicly available the revised outputs as working drafts. These drafts will be updated with some regularity to reflect evolving insights and inputs. Additional material may be added to inform multiple rounds of phone surveys. The present material only informs an initial round of data collection. The discussions are on-going regarding the integration of these outputs into a consolidated guidance document that also draws from the practical experience with phone survey systems especially but not exclusively in the current context.