

Improving survey response rates

Rebecca Piatt, Daniel Friend, Avery Hennigar, and Angela Valdovinos D'Angelo

A survey is a useful way to hear directly from participants in Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education (HMRE) programs. Thus, surveys are a common method to collect data in HMRE evaluations. A survey response rate is the percentage of participants in a sample (out of all participants in the sample) who take a particular survey. Because missing survey responses affect what HMRE programs can learn from an evaluation (Box 2.1), it is important to try to maximize the number of participants who respond to each survey. This brief includes six tips that HMRE local evaluators can use to improve their survey response rates.

Box 2.1. Downsides of low response rates

Missing survey responses mean missing out on learning about participants' characteristics, experiences, and outcomes. Low response rates can also lead to misleading results, known as nonresponse bias. Nonresponse bias can happen when people who are unable or unwilling to fill out surveys systematically differ from those who complete them. When nonresponse bias occurs, results might be higher or lower than they should be.

Source: American Association for Public Opinion Research (2023); Czajka and Beyler (2016).



Tip 1: Assess the root causes of low survey response rates and develop tailored strategies to overcome them

Participants may not respond to surveys for many reasons, including their perceptions of surveys (for example, not understanding or not being adequately informed of the value of research, not being interested in a survey completion incentive, or concerns about privacy) and the survey's characteristics (such as mode or length). Programs can also experience challenges with tracking, locating, and contacting participants (Dillman et al. 2014; Sheehan 2001; Singer and Ye 2013; de Leeuw et al. 2008).

Examining why participants are not completing surveys can help evaluators select strategies to boost response rates. To do so, evaluators can use a combination of staff knowledge, participant feedback, and data to figure out why response rates are low. For instance, evaluators can involve program staff and participants in brainstorming about the potential root cause or causes of the issue (Box 2.2). In addition, evaluators could consider conducting the following exploratory activities:

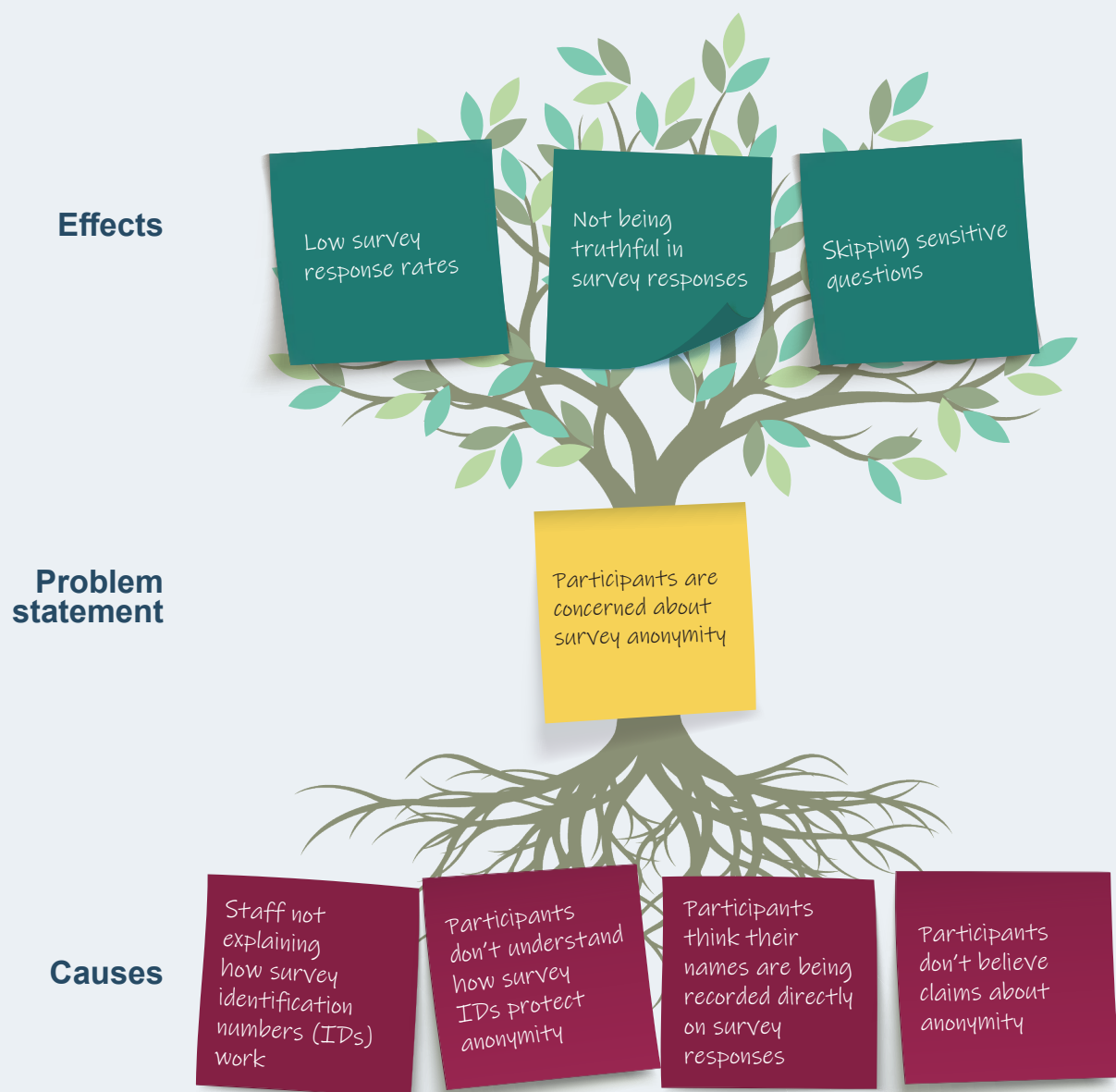
- Asking program staff and participants if they understand the purpose and importance of completing surveys
- Asking participants if they are hesitant to complete surveys because of privacy concerns
- Using baseline data to explore whether certain groups or types of participants are completing surveys at different rates
- Using existing data to determine the percentage of participants who don't respond to surveys and cannot be located by program or evaluation staff

The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) provides grants to fund healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) programs to strengthen and improve the quality of relationships. The programs offer a range of services from relationship education for high school students to marriage and relationship skills building for adult couples. Grant recipients may be funded to also conduct descriptive or impact evaluations of their funded programs. Independent local evaluators support grant recipients in conducting their local evaluations. This brief is part of a larger evaluation technical assistance (TA) toolkit developed by Mathematica to help HMRE local evaluators understand key program evaluation concepts, common evaluation challenges, and strategies to prevent or overcome challenges. The briefs are standalone documents that can be read in any order. The TA toolkit was developed with HMRE program staff, their local evaluators, and other partners in mind, but it is also relevant to other program areas and organizations.

Box 2.2. Unpack why response rates are low

HMRE local evaluators can consider setting aside time in a regular staff meeting to reflect on the challenge of low response rates. One method evaluators may try is using a [problem tree analysis](#)¹ to unpack why response rates are low and to understand the causes and effects of the problem in a systematic way. During the activity, staff use a tree template to map causes (on the roots) and effects (on the branches) of a problem to better understand it. A problem tree analysis helps untangle complex problems, reveals their various causes and effects, builds a shared understanding of the problem, and provides direction for solving it (Luma Institute n.d.).

For example, consider that staff hear from participants that their main concern with completing surveys is that their name will be tied to their responses. When asked more about this challenge, participants voice that they are hesitant to complete surveys because they are concerned about their personal data use being reported to the federal government. To unpack this challenge, staff complete the problem tree activity below.



¹ ODI. "Planning tools: Problem Tree Analysis." 2009. <https://odi.org/en/publications/planning-tools-problem-tree-analysis/>

After determining some reasons why response rates may be low, program staff and evaluators can rank them and brainstorm potential solutions to test. To generate solutions, evaluators can ask program staff and participants for their ideas about how to solve the top response rate challenge. For instance, if the main challenge is locating participants for a follow-up survey, staff might suggest sending out an address reminder card for participants to indicate if their address changes during the evaluation. Or, if the main challenge is that participants are not completing surveys due to privacy concerns, staff might explain measures to protect participant anonymity. Evaluators and program staff can participate in group brainstorming activities, such as a [creative matrix](#)², to invite everyone in the group to identify new and innovative ideas for addressing the challenge(s) (Box 2.3). After selecting one promising strategy, evaluators can work with program staff to run a small pilot—for example, with one cohort of participants—to see whether employing the selected strategy increases response rates.

Box 2.3. Brainstorm ideas for addressing the challenge

After completing the problem tree analysis activity, evaluators and program staff brainstormed solutions to the identified problem using a creative matrix. To unpack solutions to the challenge, staff came up with the following ideas (written in the sticky notes) for how to help participants understand that their survey responses are anonymous. After brainstorming five potential ideas, staff decide to first try creating a script to explain to participants how survey identification numbers protect their anonymity.

Solution categories	How might we help participants understand that their survey responses are anonymous?	
...with technology?	Add text at the top of the survey explaining how surveys are anonymous	Create a lecture slide explaining privacy protection in surveys
...with people?	Create a script for staff to use to explain how survey IDs protect anonymity	Train staff to field privacy questions
...with partnerships?	Set up meetings for evaluators and program staff to review progress after trying solution(s)	



Tip 2: Clearly explain the importance of surveys to increase willingness to respond

People are more likely to complete a survey when they understand the importance of their participation (Fowler 1995). Before administering a survey, staff should clearly describe why they are asking participants to complete it (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] 2018). HMRE local evaluators can develop a brief script for survey administrators to use when distributing surveys to participants. This script might include a description of the rationale behind the evaluation including the overarching goals and purpose—why it is critical to hear participants' perspectives, and how responses may improve the program for others in the future.

² Maad Labs. "Creative Matrix." <https://www.maadlabs.io/strategic-design-kit/creative-matrix>.

Evaluators should consider tailoring language in the script to the people and communities served by the program. For example, evaluators can consider providing examples of how they adapted or expanded the program based on past participant feedback. If the program experiences high rates of absences or dropouts, staff administering the survey can remind participants that the HMRE program plans to collect survey data from participants even if they leave the program. If the program is serving youth in school, staff can differentiate the current evaluation surveys from other tests, exams, or assessments that students are used to.



Tip 3: Consider when and how to administer surveys to increase responses

Evaluators should think about administering surveys when it's most convenient for participants to complete them (for example, during workshop sessions) (de Leeuw et al. 2008). Responses to follow-up surveys (for example, a six-month follow-up) are typically harder to obtain than surveys administered at enrollment because of participant absences, dropouts, or difficulty locating participants once the program has ended. However, it's important to obtain survey responses from all participants—even those who don't complete the program—to make sure their experiences are captured in the data. Evaluators might work with program staff to host an in-person event for participants who have not completed their follow-up surveys where evaluators could gather responses—such as a dinner; additional workshop or service; or a family night, date night, or program alumni night. Administering follow-up surveys when many participants are together eliminates the need to follow up and locate them outside of the program.

Also, evaluators should think about ways to bundle surveys together so that participants can complete them in one sitting—for example, offer the required exit and local evaluation surveys at the same time.³ The brief on consent and enrollment discusses methods for assessing existing procedures to determine how to bundle and streamline surveys.



Tip 4: Obtain multiple modes of contact information to track and contact participants

At the beginning of the program, evaluators should request participants' contact information and permission to use different methods to contact them (Box 2.4). Having multiple ways of contacting participants increases HMRE local evaluators' chances of reaching them (CDC 2018). Staff obtaining contact information for participants should ask their preference for outreach—for example, text, direct message on social media, phone call, and so on. A participant might not respond to emails but may reply to other forms of outreach such as texts. Evaluators should tailor their outreach strategy to the people and communities the HMRE program serves.

In addition to participants' contact information, evaluators should collect information for an alternative contact—for example, a friend, mother, or neighbor. Staff can ask for permission to contact a participant's alternative contact in case they cannot reach the participant. Also, evaluators may consider assessing the stability of a participant's primary and secondary contact information by asking if they plan to move or switch any of their contact information in the next year.

Box 2.4. Examples of contact information to collect

- Mailing address
- Multiple phone numbers (cell, work, and so on)
- Email address
- Social media accounts and permission to contact (for example, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat)
- Alternative contact information (for example, mother's or father's cell phone number)

³ HMRE local evaluators should be mindful of the length of time participants spend completing surveys—especially when bundling them. Consider including page breaks in surveys to help participants pace themselves while taking the survey. Make sure to select a survey platform that autosaves responses, in case participants exit the survey early.



Tip 5: Offer participants several ways to take surveys

Using multiple modes for local evaluation surveys can increase response rates, reduce bias, and improve the quality of the data gathered (Bethlehem 2010; Dillman et al. 2014). When reaching out to participants who haven't completed a local evaluation survey, evaluators should offer different modes for them to do it—for example, over the phone, in person, via the web, or by accessing the survey through a link in a text message. Providing multiple ways for participants to complete surveys recognizes that people have preferences for or access to different modes of communication (Box 2.5).

Box 2.5. Offer flexibility in local evaluation survey modes for a variety of populations

Below are some considerations for tailoring survey mode to the different populations served by HMRE programs:

- **People that live in rural areas.** Completing a web-based survey may be challenging for participants in rural areas due to a lack of internet connectivity. Offer a paper- or phone-based survey instead.
- **People with low incomes.** Completing surveys over the phone may be challenging if participants have limited call minutes or if their phone is temporarily out of service. Offer a paper- or web-based survey to these participants.
- **Couples.** Privacy while discussing sensitive topics over the phone may be a concern for people who live with others—for instance, couples that participate in an HMRE program together may not want to answer questions about their relationship together. Consider giving these participants the option to complete a web- or paper-based survey separately.
- **Youth in juvenile detention facilities, foster homes, or homeless shelters.** Participants in these situations have unique needs and may not have access to technology. Consider visiting these places to administer surveys in person, working closely with facility staff to administer surveys, or meeting participants at a neighborhood restaurant or library.
- **People with special needs, disabilities, or visual impairments.** Assess which format participants prefer based on their individual needs, such as a phone survey rather than a paper survey. Tailor the survey mode accordingly.

Note: Grant recipients that use nFORM surveys in their local evaluations should follow guidance given on administering that surveys. Evaluators should check with their FPS before making any survey mode changes.

ACF's [data collection and logistics manual](#)⁴ provides best practices for collecting performance measure data in the Information, Family Outcomes, Reporting, and Management system (nFORM 2.0). If a program's local evaluation uses nFORM surveys (for example, the Applicant Characteristics, Entrance, and Exit Surveys), reference the manual to create or revise the administration of these surveys. Evaluators can also consult [the manual for using nFORM for local evaluations](#),⁵ which includes information on how to grant local evaluators access to data. ACF also recommends that HMRE programs and evaluators consult their Family Assistance Program Specialist (FPS) for all data collection scenarios.



Tip 6: Use motivating and well-timed survey completion incentives

To be effective, the incentives for completing a survey should be enticing to participants (Singer and Ye 2013). HMRE programs and local evaluators should tailor incentives to something that will motivate participants and that they will be excited to receive. Evaluators can gather data on participants' preferences—for example, allow them to vote on which type of gift card they find most appealing. Incentives might differ based on cultural preferences, popular stores in the area, or age groups of the populations served. For example, using a gift card to a local store may be enticing for one population (like adults) but not for another (like youth), who may prefer a cash gift card.

⁴ Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Resource Site for 2020 Grantees. "nFORM Performance Measures and Data Collection Logistics Manual." Administration for Children and Families, March 2023. https://hmrfggrantresources.info/sites/default/files/2023-03/PMDC%20Logistics_Mar2023.pdf.

⁵ 2020 Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Resource Site for 2020 Grantees. "Using nFORM 2.0 for Local Evaluations." Administration for Children and Families, May 2021. https://www.hmrfggrantresources.info/sites/default/files/2022-04/nFORM_2.0_Evaluation_Guidance.pdf.

Evaluators can consider using higher incentive amounts for follow-up surveys than for entrance or exit surveys. Lower incentive amounts are usually fine for baseline surveys or surveys administered during enrollment because participants are more motivated at the beginning of services. Higher amounts may be needed to encourage responses six to 12 months after programs end because participants have likely ended their involvement with the program. Evaluators can work with program leaders to tie incentive to evaluation milestones that align with the HMRE program—for example, tying incentives to attending all workshop sessions *plus* completing the local evaluation survey.⁶

Incentives don't only need to be for participants. Evaluators might also offer incentives or verbal congratulations to staff who consistently obtain high response rates. If evaluators cannot link response rates to individual staff, they might consider offering group incentives, such as a staff lunch, if the group achieves an overall high response rate in a particular month or quarter. Acknowledging program and evaluation staff reinforces how important they are to achieving high response rates and gaining valuable feedback from participants.

References

- American Association for Public Opinion Research. "Best Practices for Survey Research." 2023. <https://aapor.org/standards-and-ethics/best-practices/#1668112232459-8b1678f0-d862>. Accessed June 20, 2023.
- Bethlehem, J. (2010). "Selection Bias in Web Surveys." *International Statistical Review*, vol. 78, no. 2, pp. 161–188.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). "Data Collection Methods for Program Evaluation: Questionnaires." Evaluation Brief No. 14. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, November 19, 2018. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyouth/evaluation/pdf/brief14.pdf>. Accessed June 20, 2023.
- Czajka, J., and A. Beyler. "Background Paper: Declining Response Rates in Federal Surveys, Trends and Implications." Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, June 15, 2016.
- de Leeuw, Edith D., Joop J. Hox, and Don A. Dillman. *International Handbook of Survey Methodology*. Routledge, 2008, pp. 221–238.
- Dillman, Don A., Jolene D. Smyth, and Leah Melani Christian. *Internet, Phone, Mail, and Mixed-Mode Surveys: The Tailored Design Method*. John Wiley & Sons, 2014.
- Fowler, F.J. "Improving Survey Questions: Design and Evaluation." Sage, 1995.
- Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood. "Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Grants; Information, Family Outcomes, Reporting, and Management (nFORM 2.0) System User Manual." March 2023. https://hmrfgresources.info/sites/default/files/2023-03/nFORM_UserManual_March2023.pdf. Accessed July 7th, 2023.
- Luma Institute. "Problem Tree Analysis." n.d. <https://www.luma-institute.com/problem-tree-analysis/>.
- Sheehan, K.B. "E-Mail Survey Response Rates: A Review." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2001, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2001.tb00117.x>.
- Singer, E., and C. Ye. "The Use and Effects of Incentives in Surveys." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 645, no. 1, 2013, pp. 112–141.

⁶ HMRE programs must stay within OFA's guidelines on maximum allowable incentives. Programs can contact their FPS for more information.

Suggested citation: Piatt, Rebecca, Daniel Friend, Avery Hennigar, and Angela Valdovinos D'Angelo (2024). "Improving Survey Response Rates" OPRE Report #2024-140. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Acknowledgements: Many people contributed to this toolkit. First, we acknowledge staff at the OPRE in the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. We are particularly grateful for the direction and feedback from Samantha Illangasekare, Rebecca Hjelm, and Kathleen McCoy. We want to extend our gratitude to Sarah Avellar and Angela D'Angelo for reviewing drafts of the briefs. We also extend our appreciation to Effie Metropoulos and Bridget Gutierrez for editing and Yvonne Marki-Korosec and Gwyneth Olson for designing the graphics in this toolkit.