Breaking Barriers for Non-English/Non-Spanish Language Speakers in Survey Research

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Language Use in the United States

- 19.7% of the United States population age 5 years and older speak a language other than English at home
- 8.1% of the population speak English less then “very well”
- 4.7% of the population age 5 years and older live in linguistically isolated households
Reaching Non-English/Non-Spanish Speakers

- Hire a translating service to translate questionnaire and study materials into multiple languages
- Hire an interpreting service to facilitate interviews in other languages
- Interpretation vs. translation
Examples from Surveys Conducted by Mathematica

- **Evaluation of the Healthy Start Program**
  - Funded by Health Resources and Services Administration
  - Site-based study
  - Used a combination of translation and interpreter facilitation

- **Evaluation of the Trade Adjustment Assistance Program (TAA)**
  - Funded by the U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration
  - List-frame survey of more than 13,000 individuals in 26 states
  - Used interpreters to facilitate interviews
Process to Reach Non-English/Non-Spanish Speakers

- Step 1: Identifying languages
- Step 2: Selecting an approach
- Step 3: Training interpreters
- Step 4: Training interviewers
- Step 5: Ensuring quality
Step 1: Identifying Languages

- The ease of identifying languages depends on sample frame
  - Site-based: more efficient because languages can be identified from the start
  - List-frame: less efficient because languages can only be identified as cases are worked
Step 2: Selecting an Approach

- Target languages with the highest prevalence of speakers
- Ensure the firm hired has interpreters available in the necessary languages
- Ask the firm to translate (and closely review) the advance letters, consent forms, and frequently asked questions, if possible
Step 3: Training Interpreters

- Interpreters must be trained to:
  - Ask question exactly as read by the interviewer
  - Probe only when the interviewer indicates
  - Understand interviewing conventions
Step 3: Training Interpreters (continued)

- Content of Training:
  - Overview of study
  - Topics covered in survey
  - Interviewing conventions
  - Detailed discussion of materials: English language instrument; any translated critical, sensitive, or complex questions
Step 4: Training Interviewers

- Interviewers must be trained to:
  - Understand they are in charge of the interview
  - Make sure the instructions to the interpreter are clear and unambiguous
  - Recognize that a sentence of 10 words in English may be 20 words in an Asian language
  - Intervene if there is extra discussion between the interpreter and the respondent
Flow of Interpreted Interview

1. Interviewer reads question in English
2. Interpreter interprets question
3. Sample member provides answer
4. Interpreter interprets the answer
5. Interviewer records answer in English
Step 5: Ensuring Quality

- Pre-translate:
  - Critical questions and terms
  - Sensitive questions
  - Complex questions
Important Considerations: Risks

- Interviews will be longer and more costly (especially with Asian languages)
- Cannot be 100% certain whether the question has same meaning in other language as in English, even after translation
- Difficult to be certain of verbatim interpreting of questions
Important Considerations: Benefits

- Higher response rate from minority respondents
- Some amount of control over critical, sensitive, and complex questions
- Less costly than full-scale translation
For More Information

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