NEW RESPONDENT REMINDER METHODS AND THE EFFECTS ON RESPONSE RATE FOR AN ESTABLISHMENT SURVEY

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ABSTRACT

The National Survey of Substance Abuse Treatment Services (N-SSATS) is an annual multi-mode establishment survey conducted by Mathematica Policy Research on behalf of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The survey includes information on facility characteristics, treatment services provided and client count information for over 17,000 substance abuse treatment facilities across the nation. The data also provides information for the National Directory of Drug and Alcohol Abuse Treatment Programs. During the 2011 data collection cycle, Mathematica Policy Research implemented a new multi-mode strategy for handling respondent reminders to help maintain its historically high response rate. This strategy of respondent reminders utilized different technologies (bulk faxes, emails, single mail reminder, and single phone reminder), increased the frequency of respondent reminders to begin the process earlier in the data collection process and used technology to form new procedures. This paper will compare the 2011 N-SSATS protocol to the 2010 data collection cycle that relied on a typical protocol of a single mail and phone reminder with some limited bulk faxing and a single e-mail reminder. The increased use of the bulk e-mail function was a technological enhancement added to the 2011 N-SSATS data collection reminder process. To determine if the new strategy impacted either the rate of return or the overall response rate, we will compare response rates at six distinct time points in the data collection cycle and then examine the number of completes per week to see if any peaks in response rate are apparent and if they coincide with the release date of a respondent reminder. The results of this descriptive inquiry will be used to guide the reminder process for future rounds of N-SSATS and may provide evidence for the field of survey research about reminder methods and their effect on response rates.

I. Introduction

Maintaining a high level of response for an establishment survey, year after year, is a difficult undertaking. The continual burden to respondents tends to decrease respondent motivation and increases the need to find methods to encourage survey completion. The N-SSATS (National Survey of Substance Abuse Treatment Services) has experienced a decline in overall response rate during the past few years. In an effort to maintain and increase overall response rates, the N-SSATS project employed, for the 2011 data collection cycle, the use of an enhanced respondent reminder protocol. Prior to 2011, the typical respondent reminder protocol consisted of a mailed reminder letter, a single reminder phone call, limited fax reminders, and a single e-mail reminder,³ with the majority of

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³ Email addresses were only collected using the web mode in 2010. In 2011, the mail mode also collected email addresses to create a more comprehensive database.
the bulk reminders released during the final month of data collection. This paper will examine the
effects of adopting varying modes of respondent reminders, as well as a new strategy of starting the
reminder protocol earlier in the data collection process on the overall annual response rate for the
N-SSATS. The respondent reminders encourage completion of the questionnaire online and over
the phone by providing the specific access information for each mode. This paper will also compare
the final response rates and the weekly completes from the 2011 N-SSATS with the weekly completes from 2010 in order to determine if the enhanced respondent reminder protocol had a
significant impact on the overall response rate.

II. Overview of N-SSATS

The N-SSATS is an annual multi-mode establishment survey conducted by Mathematica Policy
Research on behalf of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).
The survey collects information on facility characteristics, the treatment services provided, and client
count information for over 17,000 substance abuse facilities across the nation and its territories. The
data also provides the information that is published in the National Directory of Drug and Alcohol Abuse
Treatment Programs and online treatment facility locator on an annual basis. The N-SSATS employs
mail, phone, and web modes to collect data from respondents. Mathematica has conducted this
survey for the past 15 years and the response rate has consistently been above 90%.4

The annual data collection has several milestones that have been constant across every year. These milestones provide a baseline comparison point for response rates across the multiple years of
data collection. The data collection milestones that will be used as points for comparison in this paper are: the date of the first packet mailing,5 the mailing date of the reminder letter, the date the reminder call process begins, one month after the reminder call process ends, two months after the reminder call ends, and the end date of data collection.6

III. Purpose: Why Respondent Reminders?

In reviewing the past five years of data, the N-SSATS project team identified a downward trend
in the response rate. The 2010 response rate proved to be the lowest in the past five years, causing
concern for project staff and prompting the need for additional response stimulation for the 2011
round of the N-SSATS. Figure 1 provides a graphical illustration of the final N-SSATS response rate
for each of the five years prior to the 2011 data collection cycle of N-SSATS.

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4 Response rates have been calculated according to the accepted AAPOR formula.

5 The 2011 first packet mailing did not include a hardcopy questionnaire, as was standard practice in all previous years of the N-SSATS. Only respondents who requested a hardcopy questionnaire during the period between the first packet mailing and the second packet mailing were sent a paper version of the questionnaire. All nonresponders were provided a questionnaire in the second packet mailing.

6 The dates for the six points in the standard data collection cycle are: approximately March 31; mid-April; mid-June; approximately one month after reminder call; approximately two months after reminder call; and early October.
In previous rounds of N-SSATS, the typical reminder protocol, included a single mailed reminder letter (one month after the first packet mailing), a single reminder call (a process that starts in mid-June), and culminated within the last month of data collection with bulk fax reminders and a single bulk reminder email (initiated in 2010). This protocol normally proved to show an increase in the response rate following the time of release. Furthermore, the reminders have historically boosted the number of completes to maximize the final response rate. With this historic trend in mind, encouraging questionnaire completion through respondent reminders is something the N-SSATS team sought to explore. In 2011, the N-SSATS team initiated an enhanced protocol for respondent reminders that started the reminder process earlier in the data collection process with an increased volume of fax and email reminders (from the typical protocol), in addition to maintaining the use of a single mail reminder letter and single reminder phone call during the standard data collection cycle. This accelerated and enhanced protocol facilitated the release of bulk fax and email reminders to respondents starting in mid-July rather than waiting until the final month of data collection (that was standard in the typical protocol used in 2010). The enhanced protocol was designed with the intention to boost the number of completes earlier in the data collection cycle and achieve a higher response rate than achieved in 2010.

IV. Comparison and Descriptive Analysis

To view any noticeable differences on the overall response rate between the 2010 and 2011 data collection cycles, it was important to look at six comparable milestones in the data collection process. They are: the date of the first packet mailing; the mailing date of the reminder letter; the date the reminder call process begins; one month after the reminder call process ends; two months after the reminder call ends; and the end date of data collection. This direct comparison of the response rate at the same points in time during both data collection cycles will show any variation in completes that can be attributed to the enhanced respondent reminder protocol. Figure 2 shows the six milestone dates during data collection and the coordinating response rate for both 2010 and 2011.
This chart suggests that there was a noticeable improvement (approximately 3 percent) in the rate of response in 2011 and that the divergence in the response rate at the comparable points in data collection in the respective years may be the result of the enhanced respondent reminder protocol, which was implemented in mid-July.

Given the difference between response rates at comparable points in the data collection cycle, the project team further examined the total number of completes by week from the beginning of the implementation of the 2011 enhanced protocol to the end of data collection for both of the respective data collection years. Figure 3 shows the difference between the two years and the peaks in 2011 that coincide with the release dates of the various modes of respondent reminders.
This chart suggests that the enhanced protocol for respondent reminders had a positive effect on the response rate in 2011 providing the boost needed to increase the response rate from the 2010 N-SSATS data collection cycle. Figure 4 displays the same positive effect using a breakdown of daily completes.

![Figure 4: N-SSATS Daily Completes](image)

The enhanced protocol for respondent bulk reminders proved to be a benefit for the 2011 data collection cycle and increased the total number of completes. Figure 5 shows the final response rates for the past six years of the N-SSATS, including 2011. The visual evidence suggests that the enhanced protocol (that includes an increase in respondent reminders and a variation of the mode of transmission) reversed a declining response rate, produced an increase in overall completes, and increased the overall annual response rate as much as 3 percent for the N-SSATS from the previous year.

![Figure 5: N-SSATS Historical Response Rates [Revisited]](image)
V. Recommendations and Conclusions

The use of varying modes of respondent reminders, increasing the use of bulk faxes and emails, and sending reminders earlier in the data collection cycle had a noticeable impact on increasing the response rate for the 2011 N-SSATS. For future rounds of N-SSATS, the continued utilization of the enhanced and accelerated protocol will be implemented. In addition, the project team will continue to collect email addresses by web and mail modes and will also collect that information by phone mode in 2012 to facilitate an increased penetration of bulk email reminders. In addition, the project team will continue to research new and innovative methods of reminding respondents to complete the survey. The exploration of social media outlets and emerging technologies may provide a means to extend the variety of reminder modes that can be used.

The results of this descriptive inquiry also indicate that further research on the effects of respondent reminders may provide additional information on how to maintain or increase already high response rates. Further research is also needed in order to confirm if the observed increase in response rate can entirely be attributed to the enhanced respondent reminder protocol or if there were other variables that contributed to the change. Future research can also include an experimental study to examine the sample and rates of response based on the length of time the facility has been included in data collection for the N-SSATS. A comparison of the varying groups (those who have completed before, those who are new to the sample and those who left the sample and have returned in a non-subsequent year) can provide additional insight about respondent reminders and whether respondent reminders have a greater impact on one group of respondents over another. Any trends that are identified in subsequent research will benefit the effectiveness of respondent reminders in the future.