Can interviewers target incentives effectively?

This paper reports preliminary findings from an incentive experiment running on this year’s British Social Attitudes survey.[[1]](#footnote-1) This year’s experiment is the culmination of several years of incentive tests, designed to maintain or improve response, while at the same time controlling costs.

Most large-scale social surveys in the UK use either unconditional incentives (given to all sample members whether they participate or not) or conditional incentives (given to those who participate only). While these are effective in improving response rates, they are not cost efficient above a certain value, as they are given to large numbers of sample members who would have participated without being offered an incentive.

In a climate where achieving response rates is becoming more difficult year-on-year, and survey budgets are under pressure, NatCen Social Research is experimenting with possibilities for targeting incentives. There are a number of techniques that have been put forward to achieve this, such as -targeting cases before the start of fieldwork using sample data or appended geo-demographic data or increasing incentives at the reissue stage of fieldwork.

Another option is to use interviewers to target incentives at their discretion, using their own observations to decide when this is appropriate. During fieldwork for BSA 2016, NatCen is trialling a variation of this. In addition to the £XX unconditional incentive provided to the entire sample, interviewers are given two additional £30 shopping vouchers (per assignment of 26 addresses) to distribute at their discretion.

Fieldwork is ongoing until October 2016, so this paper provides preliminary findings from work conducted up until 23rd August.

# Background

NatCen has carried out a series of experimental trials on the British Social Attitudes survey (BSA). This paper is primarily about the most recent in this series of experiments however, details of earlier trials are outlined below.

## Iterative incentive trials

### 2013: Discretionary incentives trial 1

**Summary**

The following conditions were tested in a split sample experiment, with randomisation carried out at the interviewer assignment level:

* Control: £5 unconditional incentive[[2]](#footnote-2) sent with advance letter,
* Treatment:
	+ £5 unconditional incentive sent with advance letter
	+ 4 x £10 gift cards, distributed at interviewers discretion per 26 addresses

**Results**

The treatment group achieved a marginally higher first issue response rate but this was not significant. Discretionary incentives were offered in 18% of eligible cases. Feedback from interviewers suggested that £10 was not a large enough sum to change a reluctant participant’s decision.

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| Figure 1:1 BSA 2013 – first issue response rate |
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### 2014: Different values of unconditional incentive

**Summary**

The following conditions were tested in a split sample experiment, with randomisation carried out at the interviewer assignment level:

* Control: £10 unconditional incentive sent with advance letter,
* Treatment: £15 unconditional incentive sent with advance letter

**Results**

While there was no significant difference in the first issue response rate between the two groups, there was a 4% difference in refusal rates. This was masked in the overall response rate by a higher non-contact rate. Our explanation for this was management and operational issues.

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| Figure 1:2 BSA 2014 – first issue outcomes |
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### 2015: Discretionary incentives trial 2

**Summary**

The following conditions were tested in a split sample experiment, with randomisation carried out at the interviewer assignment level. Only one sixth of the sample was allocated to the treatment group, as this was envisaged as a small-scale proof-of-concept.

* Control: £15 unconditional incentive sent with advance letter,
* Treatment:
	+ £10 unconditional incentive sent with advance letter
	+ 2 x £30 gift cards distributed at interviewers discretion per 26 addresses

NB where a discretionary gift card was offered and refused, cases were excluded from reissue.

**Results**

No significant differences were observed between the treatment and control groups on any outcome categories.

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| Figure 1:3 BSA 2015 – first issue outcomes |
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In the treatment group, 5% fewer cases were reissued and the number of calls per case was also significantly lower – both of which have positive implications for costs.

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| Outcome variable | Treatment | Control |
| Cases reissued | 21% | 16% |
| Calls per case | 4.58 | 4.29 |

# Method

In 2016 a further incentive experiment is being carried out during BSA fieldwork. This experiment repeats the experiment conducted in 2015 on a larger scale. A full split sample experiment with 50% of cases allocated to either the treatment or control group will be conducted. The experimental groups were as follows:

* Control: £15 unconditional sent with advance letter
* Treatment:
	+ £10 unconditional voucher with advance letter
	+ 2 x £30 gift vouchers per assignment of 26 addresses

**Hypotheses**

Based on preliminary findings from our 2015 trial, the following hypotheses will be tested:

* A £10 unconditional voucher, plus 2 x £30 shopping voucher per assignment of 26 addresses, achieves an equivalent first issue response rate to a £15 unconditional voucher only
* A £10 unconditional voucher + discretionary incentives results in lower levels of reissuing
* A £10 unconditional voucher + discretionary incentives results in lower levels of interviewer effort (measured in calls per case)

**Operationalisation**

The experiment was operationalised in the following way:

* Letters with varying £10/£15 unconditional incentive values were sent to selected addresses
* NatCen interviewers had the experiment explained as part of a face-to-face briefing (for new interviewers) or self-briefed (previous interviewers)
* Field Performance Managers (interviewer managers) were also briefed on the details of the experiment.

**Analyses**

The survey outcome categories[[3]](#footnote-3) will be compared between the two groups, using a Wald F test. A comparison of means will be used to examine calls per case data.

The financial impact of different outcomes will also be examined looking at actual incentive costs, and estimated costs of reissuing and interviewer visits.

By end of August 2016, only first issue fieldwork of Wave 1 of two waves of fieldwork will be completed. This paper will report on preliminary findings from this data.

# Results

The paper will report on the following data:

**Usage data**

* Used in X% of eligible cases
* Successful at conversion in X% of cases offered

## **Outcomes: first issue**

* Non-contact
* Other unproductive
* Refusals
* Productive interviews

## **Efficiency**

* Calls per issued
* Calls per productive

## **Reissuing**

* Estimated level of reissues

**Impact on costs**

* Incentive cost
* Interview calls cost
* Reissuing cost

# Points for discussion

* Discussion of hypotheses tested, in the light of preliminary data
* Do discretionary incentives produce a participant or interviewer effect?
* Are targeted incentives ethical?
1. BSA is an annual survey using a stratified random sample of the British population, drawn from the Postcode Address File, a comprehensive list of residential addresses in the UK. An individual, aged 18 or over, is then randomly selected for the interview, which usually lasts 45-60 minutes. The issued sample varies year-on-year from approximately 6,000 – 9,000 addresses. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. NatCen use a Post Office Payout voucher as standard for unconditional incentives. This voucher can be exchanged for cash at any Post Office branch. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Productive interview, non-contact, refusals, etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)