Obtaining administrative record linkage consent by mail: 
*Examining the impact of incentives and phone follow-up*

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Background

- Linkage requests often require obtaining sensitive, personally identifiable information (PII) from respondents
  - For example, linking to social security (SS) records requires respondents to provide their SSN

- Linkage requests are normally made via interviewer-administered modes

- Little is known about the feasibility of collecting consent for record linkage by mail (Fulton, 2012)
  - To date, no study has attempted to collect SS linkage permission by mail
Research questions

Health and Retirement Study (HRS) was interested in exploring the feasibility of obtaining SS linkage consent by mail

1) What is the impact of incentives on SS linkage consent rates?
   • To what extent do additional efforts and prompting by phone improve consent rates?
   • *Interested in cost/benefit tradeoffs*

2) What respondent characteristics are associated with higher consent propensities?
Partnership between HRS and AIR
- Funding under administrative supplement from NIA to HRS

Pilot used a frame of \( \approx 377,000 \) people who participated in Project Talent as adolescents in 1960
- In 2011, these individuals were 65-70 years of age – similar in age to the median HRS participant
- Rich data collected in 1960 and follow-ups (through 1974)
- Individuals had no contact with the project in 37-50 years
PTPS12 Study Design

- Subsample of 4,159 was selected to receive a questionnaire and SSA linkage request by mail
- SSA request was “bundled” with the survey request
  - Study cover letter
  - Project brochure
  - Frequently Asked Questions flyer
  - 28-page questionnaire booklet.
  - **SSA authorization booklet**
  - A separate SSA-specific cover letter
  - An SSA endorsement/ authorization letter
• Designed to look like forms used by HRS
• Included a consent page providing information about the request

SOCIAL SECURITY AUTHORIZATION FORM

To the Participant:
We would like to obtain a history of your earnings, employers, and any benefits information from programs administered by the Social Security Administration applied for or received from 1935 through 2030. Since most people cannot recall this information very well, we are asking for your permission to obtain from government records the following:

1. Your earnings and employer information reported to Social Security.
2. Any information about benefits from programs administered by the Social Security Administration applied for or received from 1935 through 2030.

The information we are requesting is protected by Federal law and cannot be released to us without your written consent. If you give us your permission to collect this information from the Social Security Administration, we will combine it with other information in this study for research purposes only. The University of Michigan is committed to maintaining the privacy and confidentiality of all data obtained from or relating to our survey respondents.

We will remove your name, date of birth, and Social Security number, and release the resulting unidentified statistical information to approved researchers for research purposes only. Additional procedures will be adopted to protect the confidentiality of individuals participating in the survey.

At any point and without penalty, you may withdraw authorization for future data collection from the Social Security Administration by writing to: Director, Project TALENT Study (PT), 426 Thompson Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48104. The Director will transmit to the Social Security Administration the withdrawal of your authorization. From that date, we will no longer collect your information from the Social Security Administration. Withdrawal of authorization does not affect your continued eligibility for participation in Project Talent.

PLEASE FILL OUT AND SIGN THE NEXT 2 PAGES. PLEASE PRINT.
(1) Earnings and Employers Form

- Booklet included 2 separate consent forms
(2) Benefits Form

Each form:

Name

Date of birth

Full SSN

Sign, date, return by mail

To the Social Security Administration:

[Please print]

Name

Maiden Name (if applicable)

Date of Birth

Social Security Number

Authorization for Benefits Information

I authorize the Social Security Administration to release to the University of Michigan, for use in the Project Talent Study, information about the benefits I applied for or received under programs administered by the Social Security Administration for the years 1955 through 2020. It is my understanding that the University of Michigan will protect the privacy and confidentiality of these data.

Signature of Person Named Above

Today's Date

Logging ID
PTPS12 Study Design & Experiments

- **Phase 1: Mail contact (Dillman method)**
  - **Experiment 1**: 3 pre-paid incentive levels at Phase 1 ($0, $2 bill, $20 check)

- **Phase 2: Nonresponse follow-up (NRFU) by phone**
  - Noncontact cases were sampled \( \approx \)1 week after final mailing
  - **Experiment 2**: 2 nonresponse treatments at Phase 2:
    - Half received the additional phone follow-up (Treatment; Mail + NRFU)
    - Half did not (Control; Mail only)
Study Background: Survey Cooperation Rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Incentive Level</th>
<th>SAQ + SSA linkage request</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No phone FU</td>
<td>Phone FU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$0</td>
<td>43.2</td>
<td>56.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$2</td>
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<tr>
<td>$20</td>
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<td>63.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>49.6</td>
<td>61.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: n=2,886. AAPOR COOP2. Denominator includes all eligible (not deceased) cases that were contacted.
Analysis

- Unconditional consent rate – “yield”:
  - # Consenting / # Contacted

- Conditional consent rate:
  - # Consenting / # Survey Respondents

- Consent = One or more forms complete forms
Results
Results: Overview

- 21.2 percent of those contacted provided SSA linkage consent
- 86.8 percent of the consenters provided consent when contacted by mail only (no phone follow-up)
RQ1: How do incentives affect consent for linkage in a mail-based study?
Significantly higher levels of SSA consent for $20 group only

Responding in Phase 1

% providing linkage consent
% responding to survey

* Significantly different from $0 group ($p<0.05)
† Significantly different from $2 group ($p<0.05)
Conditional consent rates were significantly lower in the $2 group.

Conditional Consent Rates for Phase 1 Respondents

- $0: 46.5%
- $2 bill: 37.1% († significantly different from $0 group)
- $20 check: 46.0%

* Significantly different from $0 group (p<0.05)
† Significantly different from $2 group (p<0.05)
To what extent did prompting by phone improve consent rates?
Phone FU yielded significant increases in survey cooperation, but increases in SSA consent were significant only for $2 group.

Responding in Phase 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Survey cooperation</th>
<th>Linkage consent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$0, SSA</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$2 bill, SSA</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$20 check, SSA</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Significant increase ($p<0.05$)

Light = Treatment (No phone FU)
Dark = Control (Phone FU)
Overall “boost” in consent rates was \( \approx 3 \) percentage points

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Incentive Level</th>
<th>SAQ + SSA linkage request</th>
<th>Increase in % giving consent after phone FU</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No phone FU</td>
<td>Phone FU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$0</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$2</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>22.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>$20</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>26.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>23.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: n=2,886. Denominator includes all eligible (not deceased) cases that were contacted.
RQ2: Who consents?
Consent propensity: Factors examined

- **Rapport**
  - Participation in previous waves, Recollection of study, Direct contact with study

- **Request salience**
  - Income, Retirement status, Feelings about financial situation, Number of years working

- **Interview resistance**
  - Early responders, Income=Missing

- **Altruism, civic engagement**
  - Attend meetings of political, community, or other interest groups?

- **Political views**
Consent propensity: Factors examined (con’d)

- **Other Characteristics**
  - Sex
  - Race
  - Educational attainment
  - Marital status
  - Tenure (Rent/Own)
  - Internet use
- **Incentive amount**

- **1960 Measures**
  - General academic aptitude
  - Family socioeconomic status
  - Impulsivity (personality)
  - Student-reported interest in social engagement activities
  - Level of participation in: sports-related and nonsport student activities
Characteristics associated with SS consent

Amongst the survey respondents, SS consent rates were consistently higher for those who:

- Reported higher levels of educational attainment (vs. high school or less)
- Reported higher levels of civic engagement
  - Reported attending community meetings daily-at least once a month (vs. Never)
  - Identified as Liberal or Conservative (vs. Moderate)
- Were observed to be more cooperative
  - Early responders (vs. Later responders)
  - Those answering income question (vs. Those not answering)
- Demonstrated more interest and had more familiarity with the study
  - Had any direct contact with study in 2010-12 (website, requested 1960 scores, etc.) (vs. none)
What did we learn?
Wrapping Up

- $20 check was somewhat effective, but $2 bill was not
  - Is it the amount ($20), the legitimacy (check), or a combination?
- Phone follow-up--not a cost-effective approach for improving consent rates
- Those who provide consent via mail are the most cooperative, but are not representative
  - The resulting sample of consenters was more educated, higher levels of civic engagement, etc.
- Obtaining consent for SSA consent linkage by mail is not very feasible where there is no rapport and limited contact
  - The “best” approach in PTPS12 yielded a consent rate of 28% compared to $\approx 40\%$ for HRS
Additional Research Underway

- Exploring interactions between respondent characteristics associated with consent propensity and incentives
- Impact of SS linkage request on SAQ response rates
- Relative costs and effectiveness of incentives and phone follow-up
- Assessment of nonresponse bias
Thank you!

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Center for Survey Methods at AIR: www.csmair.org
EXTRA SLIDES
Effect of SSA linkage request on SAQ response rates

- PTPS12 included an additional experimental group that was added later to test effect of linkage request on mail response (n=720)
  - No SSA request, $20 incentive, 100% phone follow-up

- Imperfect design
  - Phase 1 fielded earlier, with shorter lag between tracking and data collection

- Still useful for understanding impact of the SSA consent request on survey response rates when the requests are made simultaneously by mail
Effect of SSA linkage request on SAQ response rates

Survey Response Rates

- SSA: 63.7%
- No SSA: 76.6%
Effect of SSA linkage request on SAQ response rates, by Phase

Survey Response Rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SSA</th>
<th>Phase 2 completer</th>
<th>Phase 1 completer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>46.1</td>
<td>49.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63.7</td>
<td>76.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<table>
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<th>NO SSA</th>
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