



A Mail Survey to Older Citizens?

Pennsylvania has a higher percentage of persons over 65 than most other states. They comprise a significant percentage (10-15+ percent) of many rural townships and boroughs and central cities. Recent census data reveal a similar trend in another area. People over 65 are now living in more suburban areas than in rural or urban ones, a trend called the graying of suburbia. What's the impact of this demographic profile on collecting data for needs assessments and baseline data when using a mail survey?

Not only a sizable contingent of voters and a source of revenue in a community, persons over 65 sit on many extension boards and agricultural committees, are stalwart volunteers in programs like Master Gardeners (over 20 percent), and are the focus of specific extension programs. Their views are important to extension.

Finding out what persons over 65 in a systematic sample think may be a bit of a challenge. Recent research in *Public Opinion Quarterly* revealed that "age, within an elderly population, does have a significant impact on response rate to a mail questionnaire." The rate of response decreases as age over 65 increases. Research reported in *Evaluation Review* referenced below about a large program for the elderly in Pennsylvania demonstrated however, that response rate to a mail questionnaire from participants *in a program* tend to be significantly greater than the same group in the public at large, suggesting that survey results from a needs assessment may be more of a concern than results from a program evaluation.

What to do?

Proceed with caution. You have various options but some may introduce *other* biases you should weigh. Here are some guidelines:

- Consider using a personal interview, telephone survey, or focus group as an alternative to a mail survey with persons over 65. These methods have less "respondent burden."
- If you retain the mail survey:
 - Advertise your needs assessment well in advance in places where the elderly frequent in order to increase salience and participation by this group.
 - If you know the age ahead of time, over sample among this group.
 - Correct the problem of non-response, statistically.
 - When you pretest the questionnaire, be sure to include persons over 65.
 - Don't ask someone familiar with extension.
 - Plan to interview a sample of *non*-respondents to see if their opinions are systematically different.

You can use a mail survey with success for a needs assessment and program evaluation with persons over 65. Consider ahead of time however, how to reduce the possibility of non-response bias from this group.

For further reading, see: Abramson, Paul R., and Charles W. Ostrom. Question Wording and Partnership. *Public Opinion Quarterly*. 1994, 58(1):41-42.

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