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Transitions from Telephone Surveys to Self-Administered and Mixed-Mode Surveys: AAPOR Task Force Report

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TRANSITIONS FROM TELEPHONE SURVEYS TO SELF-ADMINISTERED AND MIXED-MODE SURVEYS: AAPOR TASK FORCE REPORT

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Telephone surveys have been a ubiquitous method of collecting survey data, but the environment for telephone surveys is changing. Many

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surveys are transitioning from telephone to self-administration or combinations of modes for both recruitment and survey administration. Survey organizations are conducting these transitions from telephone to mixed modes with only limited guidance from existing empirical literature and best practices. This article summarizes findings by an AAPOR Task Force on how these transitions have occurred for surveys and research organizations in general. We find that transitions from a telephone to a self-administered or mixed-mode survey are motivated by a desire to control costs, to maintain or improve data quality, or both. The most common mode to recruit respondents when transitioning is mail, but recent mixed-mode studies use only web or mail and web together as survey administration modes. Although early studies found that telephone response rates met or exceeded response rates to the self-administered or mixed modes, after about 2013, response rates to the self-administered or mixed modes tended to exceed those for the telephone mode, largely because of a decline in the telephone mode response rates. Transitioning offers opportunities related to improved frame coverage and geographic targeting, delivery of incentives, visual design of an instrument, and cost savings, but challenges exist related to selecting a respondent within a household, length of a questionnaire, differences across modes in use of computerization to facilitate skip patterns and other questionnaire design features, and lack of an interviewer for respondent motivation and clarification. Other challenges related to surveying youth, conducting surveys in multiple languages, collecting nonsurvey data such as biomeasures or consent to link to administrative data, and estimation with multiple modes are also prominent.

KEYWORDS: Data collection; Mixed mode surveys; Telephone surveys.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1970s, telephone methods have been a ubiquitous way of collecting large scale surveys. This has been especially true for studies with complex questionnaires, surveys requiring screening for special populations, and those requiring smaller area geographic estimates. With the changing environment for telephone surveys, an increasing number of surveys are transitioning from telephone to self-administration or combinations of modes for both recruitment and survey administration, where telephone may be only one of a number of modes that are used—if at all. Survey organizations are conducting these transitions from telephone to mixed modes with only limited guidance from existing empirical literature and best practices. This task force aimed to help the survey research field navigate these challenges by examining what surveys have done in this transition, what is known, and where areas are open for additional insights and research.

We gathered information for this report through three approaches. First, we conducted an extensive review of the literature, examining published articles, technical reports, conference presentations, and internal reports conducted by members of the task force or their organizations. Second, we reached out to the greater AAPOR community via AAPORnet and asked for any description, papers, or documentation about surveys that had transitioned from telephone to self-administered or mixed-mode approaches or were thinking about making this transition. Finally, we conducted a convenience sample survey of the AAPOR community to get more general insights into survey organizations' reasons behind making these transitions.

The AAPOR Task Force Report on Transitions from Telephone to Self-Administered and Mixed-Mode Surveys contains eleven chapters. Each chapter focuses on various design features that need to be considered when transitioning from telephone to a self-administered or mixed-mode survey. In doing so, we review issues related to coverage and sample designs (chapter 2), within-household selection (chapter 3), questionnaire design (chapter 4), testing of questionnaires and other materials (chapter 5), recruitment methods, nonresponse, and operations (chapter 6), data preparation and processing (chapter 7), and survey estimation (chapter 8). We also address what is known about survey costs when transitioning from telephone to different modes (chapter 9), human subjects issues that change when transitioning modes (chapter 10), and communicating the impact of the change of modes to sponsors, stakeholders, and users (chapter 11). The report focuses on issues related to *transitioning* from telephone to other modes; we cite relevant, more general mixed-mode survey literature where appropriate. This article summarizes major findings of the report; details for multiple additional individual design decisions not discussed here are available in the corresponding report chapter. We provide illustrative examples of surveys that made a transition or have considered transitioning to self-administered or mixed modes throughout; additional examples are in the report.

2. WHY ARE SURVEYS TRANSITIONING AWAY FROM TELEPHONE TO SELF-ADMINISTERED AND MIXED MODES?

Traditional telephone surveys have provided valid and reliable survey data for decades, but they are now facing serious challenges (e.g., [Lavrakas, Benson, Blumberg, Buskirk, Cervantes et al. 2017](#)). The growth of cellphone-only households has required significant changes in sample design and has generally reduced operational efficiency. Although the percentage of adults and children with no telephone service at home has remained relatively steady since 2003, the percentage of adults and children in households with access only through a cellular number has skyrocketed from about 3 percent in the early

2000s to 56.7 percent of adults and 67.5 percent of children in late 2018 (Blumberg and Luke 2019). To ensure adequate population coverage, telephone surveys now typically use a mix of landline random digit dial (RDD) and cellphone RDD samples. This adaptation by researchers extended the life of telephone surveys, but two other challenges arose.

Perhaps the most serious challenge for telephone surveys is the precipitous drop in response rates for both landline and cellphone frames (Lavrakas et al. 2017). Another challenge is that geographic targeting of RDD telephone surveys has become much more difficult. Traditional landline RDD frames permitted geographic targeting of small areas because of how telephone companies assigned banks of telephone numbers to specified geographic areas. The efficiency and accuracy of geographic targeting of telephone surveys are less viable due to number portability (Federal Communications Commission 2016) and because cellular numbers do not have the same geographical associations as landline numbers (Skalland and Khare 2013; Pew Research Center 2015). At the same time, a new sample frame providing good coverage of US addresses, the Delivery Sequence File (DSF) based off of the list of addresses that receive mail from United States Postal Service, is now available, facilitating a method known widely as address-based sampling (ABS) (Harter, Battaglia, Buskirk, Dillman, English et al. 2016). These multiple simultaneous changes to the landline and cellular telephone frames and declining response rates have created significant challenges for survey researchers attempting to measure the household population in the United States and elsewhere in the world. In reaction, multiple surveys have transitioned their surveys from a single-mode telephone administration to a self-administered and/or mixed-mode survey or are considering doing so.

3. WHAT KIND OF SURVEYS ARE TRANSITIONING?

General population surveys started examining the possibility of transitioning away from interviewer-administered modes (whether they did or not) in the early 2000s (e.g., Cantor, Covell, Davis, Park, and Rizzo 2005; Link, Battaglia, Frankel, Osborn, and Mokdad 2008; Bailey, Grabowski, and Link 2010; DiSogra, Dennis, and Fahimi 2010), coinciding with the advent of ABS sampling (Iannacchione 2011; Harter et al. 2016). Surveys examined in this report that have transitioned or are studying transitioning from interviewer-administered to self-administered or mixed modes encompass smaller community-based surveys and large scale, national surveys covering a wide variety of topical domains. These surveys cover multiple topics and target both general and special populations.

The AAPOR Mixed Mode Task Force conducted a survey using a convenience sample of organizations that have transitioned one or more surveys across modes or are planning such a transition in the near future. Participation

was solicited on AAPORnet and by personal contacts from members of the task force. Data collection began May 10, 2018, and concluded on July 2, 2018. Representatives of twenty-one organizations responded to the survey, providing data about a total of at least twenty-five different data collection efforts, including both named studies and broader shifts in the standard data collection mode for the organization.

Although we have no benchmark to compare this convenience sample with, the range of studies cited by respondents reflects the range of surveys seen in our review of the literature. Some of the transitioned studies involve national samples, but many are geographically focused or target special populations rather than the general public. This survey includes responses from researchers in government, academia, nonprofit organizations, and commercial firms, though at least half of the studies are sponsored by government agencies. Most but not all are surveys of populations in the United States. Nearly all are household rather than establishment surveys. Most are cross-sectional rather than longitudinal surveys. The survey transitions reported in the study began as early as 2004, and about half of them are still ongoing.

4. WHAT IS THE PRIORITY GOAL OF THE TRANSITION?

Transitions from a telephone to a self-administered or mixed-mode survey are motivated by a desire to control costs, to maintain or improve data quality, or a combination of both, according to our survey of a convenience sample of organizations that have transitioned or are in the process of doing so. While controlling costs is a relatively straightforward goal, the issue of data quality is more nuanced. Survey designers may aim to (1) minimize mean squared error (MSE) of the self-administered survey estimates (independent of existing telephone survey estimates) or (2) minimize the MSE of the self-administered survey estimates with respect to existing telephone survey estimates. This decision depends on what the design will be for the survey in the future. That is, will the future survey design be a single mode (only web, only mail), a mix of web and mail modes, or a mix of web, mail, and telephone methods of data collection? Other organizations with surveys that have not had a telephone survey administration for many years may prioritize maximizing the quality of data from the self-administered or mixed-mode administration, whereas organizations with ongoing telephone survey administrations may prioritize consistency in the survey estimates over time or minimizing the difference in the quality of estimates between the two administrations. For example, an expert panel for the National Household Travel Survey (NHTS) recommended prioritizing data quality for the 2017 NHTS mixed-mode administration, stating that dramatic changes in the survey landscape since the 2009 administration rendered over-time comparisons not useful ([Transportation Research Board 2016](#);

Table 1. Why Transition?

Number of respondents choosing each response	Number of respondents choosing each response			
	Extremely important	Very important	Somewhat important	A little/not at all important
Response rates to the interviewer administered survey	12	5	2	3
Anticipated response rates to the self-administered or mixed-mode survey	10	5	4	4
Anticipated coverage for the self-administered or mixed-mode studies	9	6	3	6
Costs for interviewer administered survey	9	2	3	5
Coverage of the frame of the interviewer administered survey	8	3	5	6
Anticipated costs for the self-administered or mixed-mode survey	8	2	4	6
Desire for greater precision/ lower standard errors / different estimation strategy at lower or same costs	6	4	4	7
Client demands	4	9	3	5
Sponsor or funding agency demands	3	6	3	7

NOTE.—Source: AAPOR Mixed Mode Task Force survey of organizations that have transitioned a survey across modes.

p. 26). The University of Michigan’s Survey of Consumers is evaluating methods for combining data from telephone, web, and mail modes to minimize the effect of a future potential mode transition from solely telephone data collection on estimates of change in economic conditions (Elkasabi, Suzer-Gurtekin, Lepkowski, Kim, Curtin et al. 2014). Other organizations and survey sponsors may have other goals.

In our survey of organizations that transitioned, data quality topped the list of reasons for implementing the transition of modes (Table 1). A large majority (seventeen of twenty-two responding) said that response rates in the interviewer-administered survey were either “extremely” or “very” important in making a decision to transition. Anticipated response rates in the new modes closely followed (fifteen selecting extremely or very important of twenty-three responding). Anticipated frame coverage for the new modes matched this level of importance (fifteen). Ten organizations said that demands for greater precision, such as lower standard errors at the same level of cost, were either extremely or very important.

5. IS TELEPHONE STILL PART OF THE MIX IN MIXED-MODE SURVEYS?

Many surveys that transitioned included telephone as part of the mixed-mode approach. In many early studies, phone numbers were matched to addresses selected from the DSF to facilitate telephone attempts, and mail was used to request telephone numbers from those who were not successfully matched (e.g., Jans, Grant, Lee, Park, Edwards et al. 2013; Montaquila, Brick, Williams, Kim, and Han 2013; Allison, Stevenson, and Kniss 2014; Kali and Flores Cervantes 2016). For the 2012 Wisconsin Family Health Survey, Allison et al. (2014) sent a one-page mail questionnaire requesting a telephone number to an address-based sample of Wisconsin households that could not be reverse directory list-matched to a telephone number. Forty-three percent of unmatched households returned the questionnaire, 91.6 percent of which had a valid telephone number to be called for a telephone interview.

Some studies using list samples with available telephone numbers or those with matched telephone numbers may also include telephone or face-to-face interviews as one of the modes, possibly for nonresponse follow-up (Murphy, Harter, and Xia 2010; LeClere, Vanicek, Xia, Amaya, Murphy et al. 2012; Klausch, Hox, and Schouten 2015; Lien 2015; Mayfield, Frasier, Vanicek, Li, English et al. 2015; Sterrett, Malato, Stern, Tompson, Benz et al. 2015; Mathews, Parast, Tolpadi, Elliott, Flow-Delwiche, et al. 2017; Federal Highway Administration and Westat 2018; Wells, Hughes, Park, CHIS Redesign Working Group, Rogers et al. 2018; Amaya et al. 2018; Axinn, Wagner, Couper, and Crawford 2018). For instance, the Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health across the US Risk Factor Survey (REACH US) randomly assigned addresses matched to a telephone number to be initially contacted in a telephone mode and then nonrespondents followed up with a mailed paper questionnaire (the phone-first approach), or they were initially contacted with a mail questionnaire and then nonrespondents followed up with telephone (the mail-first approach) (Amaya, Leclere, Carris, and Liao 2015). Thus, transitioning to a self-administered or mixed-mode survey does not necessarily mean that telephone or other interviewer-administered modes are abandoned.

6. WHAT MODES ARE BEING USING IN MIXED-MODE SURVEYS?

As surveys transition from telephone to self-administered and mixed-mode surveys, the mode for initially contacting the sampled household and the mode of data collection may differ. Table 2 describes combinations of recruitment modes and survey administration modes used in several surveys that

Table 2. Examples of Modes of Contact and Modes of Administration for Surveys that Transitioned or Examined Transitioning to Self-Administered or Mixed Modes

Contact mode: mailed letter	Example surveys
Administration mode: Mail survey	2005 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System pilot; 2007 Health Information National Trends Survey; 2006-2014 ODOT surveys; Dutch Crime Victimization Survey mode experiment; National Household Education Survey: 2011 Field Test; Survey of Consumer Attitudes; Coastal Household Telephone Survey; Gallup Sharecare Well-Being Surveys; CAHPS Hospice Survey; National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation; Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH) U.S. Risk Factor Survey, Phase 1-3
Administration mode: Web survey	2016 American National Election Studies Time Series Study; Canada National Travel Survey pilot; 2018 California Health Interview Survey Push-to-web pilot (three counties); National Immunization Survey; 2015 Residential Energy Consumption Survey National Pilot study; Dutch Crime Victimization Survey mode experiment
Administration mode: Concurrent mail and web survey	Survey of Consumer Attitudes; 2015 Residential Energy Consumption Survey National Pilot study; National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent to Adult Health Wave V pilot; Gallup Sharecare Well-Being Surveys
Administration mode: Sequential mail survey followed by web survey	2015 New York Adult Tobacco Survey; Gallup Sharecare Well-Being Surveys
Administration mode: Sequential mail followed by telephone	National Household Education Survey: 2009 Pilot Study; CAHPS Hospice Survey; Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH) U.S. Risk Factor Survey
Administration mode: Sequential web survey followed by mail survey	Survey of Consumer Attitudes; 2015 Residential Energy Consumption Survey National Pilot study; 2015 New York Adult Tobacco Survey; 2006-2014 ODOT surveys; 2016 National Survey of Children's Health; 2016 National Household Education Survey; Gallup Sharecare Well-Being Surveys

Administration mode: Sequential web followed by telephone	2018 California Health Interview Survey Push-to-web pilot (three counties)
Administration mode: Sequential web followed by mail followed by telephone	German Health Update 2.0 (GEDA) pilot study; 2017 National Survey of College Graduates
Contact mode: mailed screener	
Administration mode: Telephone topical Survey	Wisconsin Family Health Survey; 2013-2014 California Health Interview Survey ABS pilot (one county); Brick et al. (2013)
Administration mode: Mail topical survey	National Household Education Survey: 2011 Field Test; 2016 National Household Education Survey; National Survey of Veterans; 2017 National Household Travel Survey
Administration mode: Web topical survey	National Household Education Survey: 2009 Pilot Study
Contact mode: Mailed letter, Multiple modes screener and topical survey	
Administration mode: Sequential: Mail topical survey followed by phone	
Administration mode: Sequential: Web screener and/or topical survey followed by mail	2016 National Household Education Survey; National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent to Adult Health Wave V
Contact mode: Email	
Administration mode: Web survey	American National Election Studies 2012 Time Series Study; 2015 Canada Election Study; Rutgers-Eagleton Poll 2019; American Trends Panel; Penn State Harrisburg Lion Poll University of Michigan 2015 Campus Climate Survey
Administration mode: Sequential web survey followed by telephone and face-to-face	
Contact mode: Telephone	
Administration mode: Concurrent phone and web	2005 Health Information National Trends Survey (HINTS)
Administration mode: Sequential telephone followed by mail	Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH) U.S. Risk Factor Survey

transitioned to self-administered or mixed modes. The most common recruitment mode among surveys that have transitioned to self-administered or mixed modes is mail, including only a letter and questionnaire or a URL to complete the survey online; others with available contact information use email. As shown in [Table 2](#), there are a variety of strategies used for initial contact and data collection. Many surveys that transitioned from telephone to self-administered surveys used only mail for both contact and data collection mode (e.g., [Montaquila et al. 2013](#); [Brick, Andrews, and Mathiowetz 2016](#); [Breidt, Kreuter, Lesser, Moore, and Smyth 2018](#); [Lesser et al. 2016](#)). Recent mixed-mode studies used mail to recruit sampled individuals but use only web as a data collection mode (e.g., [Bosa, Gagnon, and Caron 2017](#); [American National Election Studies 2018](#); [Federal Highway Administration and Westat 2018](#)). Others used a mailed contact letter to recruit respondents to complete either a mail or web questionnaire (e.g., [Marlar, Chattopadhyay, Ander, Kanitkar, Andrews et al. 2017](#); [Ghandour, Jones, Lebrun-Harris, Minnaert, Blumberg et al. 2018](#); [McPhee, Jackson, Bielick, Masterson, Battle et al. 2018](#); [Marken et al. 2018](#); [Marken 2018](#); [Lesser et al. 2016](#)). Still other surveys used web surveys, obtained from probability-based web panels or nonprobability opt-in panels, as the self-administered mode, replacing the telephone survey (e.g., [Breton, Cutler, Lachance, and Mierke-Zatwarnicki 2017](#); [American National Election Studies 2018](#); [Brown, Olson, Farrelly, Nonnemaker, Battles et al. 2018](#); [Ghandour et al. 2018](#); [Penn State Harrisburg Center for Survey Research 2019](#)).

7. WHAT BENEFITS CAN BE REALIZED WHEN SURVEYS TRANSITION?

As noted previously, survey organizations anticipated many opportunities for improvement when transitioning from telephone to self-administered modes. We describe some of the major opportunities in this section; the report details additional benefits and contains additional examples for each of these benefits.

7.1 Improved Frame Coverage and Geographic Targeting

Many studies that transitioned from telephone to self-administered or mixed modes also transitioned from random digit dialing sampling to ABS sampling using the DSF as the frame, covering households with and without telephones. Because addresses are linked to geography, targeting small geographic areas such as states, cities, or even neighborhoods is easily accomplished ([Harter et al. 2016](#)). These studies may use the DSF as-is or append information for stratification purposes or to target a rare population (e.g., [Brick et al. 2016](#)).

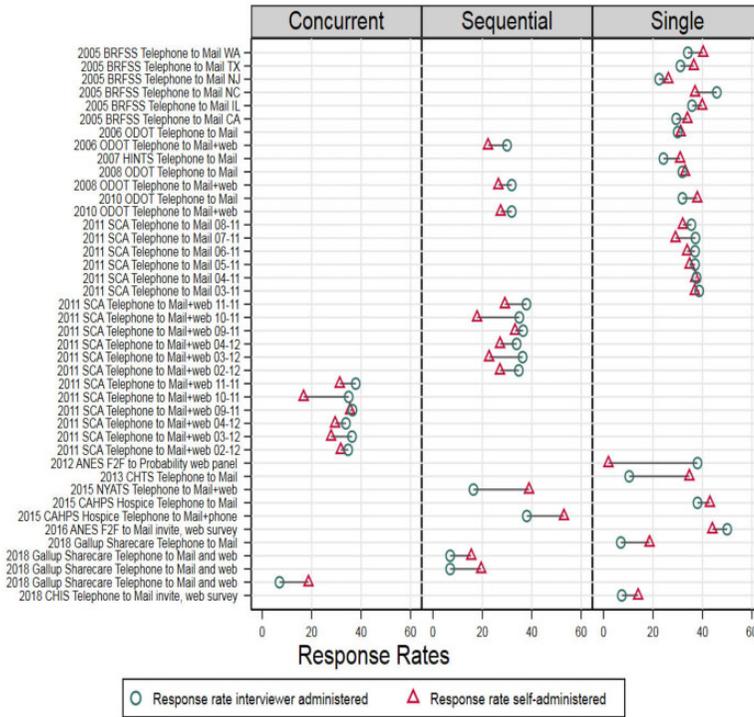


Figure 1. Response rates for surveys conducted in both interviewer-administered and self-administered or mixed-mode data collection modes—only US surveys with interviewer-administered mode conducted within two years of self-administered mode.

For instance, addresses with household members who may speak a particular language (e.g., Spanish, Korean) may be identified through a compiled surname listing (e.g., Zuckerberg and Mamedova 2012; Brick, Lohr, Edwards, Giambo, Broene et al. 2013; Wells et al. 2018). In a field test to transition the California Health Interview Survey from dual frame RDD to a mixed-mode web-phone ABS sample, Wells et al. (2018) used Spanish, Korean, and Vietnamese surname lists to potentially identify nonEnglish speaking households in three counties in California.

7.2 Improved Response Rates

Figure 1 displays response rates from a set of surveys conducted in the United States that have examined transitioning from interviewer-administered modes to self-administered modes, ordered by the year of the transition study.

Table 3. Summary of Monetary Incentive Levels and Example Studies Using the Incentive Amount

Incentive amount	Example studies
Prepaid	
\$1	Andrews, Brick, and Mathiowetz (2013); Skalland, George, Welch, Hill, and Elam-Evans (2017); Williams, Edwards, Giambo, and Kena (2018)
\$2	Cantor et al. (2009); Brick et al. (2011); Jans et al. (2013); Montaquila et al. (2013); Allison et al. (2014); Ghandour et al. (2018); Federal Highway Administration and Westat (2018); Wells et al. (2018); Williams, Edwards, Giambo, and Kena (2018); Jackson, McPhee, and Lavrakas (2019)
\$5	Murphy et al. (2010); LeClere et al. (2012); Montaquila et al. (2013); Elkasabi et al. (2014); Amaya et al. (2015); Brown et al. (2018); Federal Highway Administration and Westat (2018); Ghandour et al. (2018);
\$10	Jackson, McPhee, and Lavrakas (2019)
\$20	American National Election Studies (2018)
\$30	National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2018)
Promised	
\$5	Cantor et al. (2005); Brick et al. (2011); Montaquila et al. (2013)
\$10	Montaquila et al. (2013); Biemer et al. (2018)
\$15	Cantor et al. (2005); Brick et al. (2011); Montaquila et al. (2013)
\$20	Montaquila et al. (2013); Allison et al. (2014); Biemer et al. (2018); Federal Highway Administration and Westat (2018)
Promised >\$20	American National Election Studies (2015); American National Election Studies (2018); Harris (2018)

Concurrent mixed-mode designs, sequential mixed-mode designs, and single-mode designs (either mail only or web only) are presented separately. Some of these comparisons are experimental (interviewer- and self-administered modes mounted at the same time), whereas others are observational (self-administered mounted at a different time, limited here to those with no more than two years between the interviewer- and self-administered surveys, or one mode used as a follow-up mode for another mode). The response rates are taken directly from the available reports or articles, and thus some are AAPOR Response Rates (RR1 and RR3 are common), whereas others are CASRO Response Rates. Many factors vary across the studies. Yet patterns can be easily observed. In the one-stage surveys conducted between 2001 and 2012, response rates to the telephone mode tend to be higher or at about the same level as response rates to the self-administered or mixed modes. After about 2013, response rates to the self-administered or mixed modes tend to exceed those for the telephone mode, largely because of a decline in the telephone mode response rates.

7.3 Increased Flexibility in the Use of Incentives

In mailed invitations to a mail or web survey, prepaid incentives are highly effective in increasing participation rates. [Table 3](#) contains an overview of monetary incentive levels that have been offered in surveys that have transitioned to self-administered or mixed modes of data collection. Looking across surveys, prepaid incentives of \$2 and \$5 are common. Promised incentives are less commonly used, but when used, they tend to be larger in value than prepaid incentives. In mixed-mode surveys, a combination of prepaid and promised incentives can be effective in pushing respondents to a new mode. For instance, the proportion of respondents who complete via a web instrument in a web survey with mail follow-up can be increased when a small prepaid incentive is followed by a larger promised incentive paid to those who respond by web ([Biemer, Murphy, Zimmer, Berry, Deng et al. 2018](#)). Nonmonetary incentives can also be delivered in a mixed-mode survey, although with more limited effectiveness. For example, the 2014 National Household Education Survey-Feasibility Test included a Department of Education magnet in the screener questionnaire. There was no statistically significant benefit to including this nonmonetary incentive on response rates or eligibility rates ([McQuiggan, Medway, Zhang, and Megra 2015](#)).

7.4 Innovative Measurement Possibilities

One advantage of web and mail modes is that researchers can take advantage of visual design to more effectively communicate with respondents. Visual self-administered surveys allow for the use of graphics such as maps, ladders, smiley faces, or thermometers to try to help respondents understand questions that are not possible or very difficult to implement in telephone surveys. For example, in the National Household Transportation Survey transition, researchers were able to capitalize on the visual and dynamic nature of the web by integrating mapping functions (using Google Maps API) for the origin, destination, and shortest path distances of respondent-reported trips ([Federal Highway Administration and Westat 2018](#)). Likewise, in the Residential Energy Consumption Survey, pictures of modern cooktops and images of CFL, LED, and incandescent light bulbs were included to improve reporting ([Murphy, Mayclin, Richards, and Roe 2015](#)). Both of these surveys were able to use the visual communication channel of self-administered modes to improve their data collection.

7.5 Potentially Lower Costs

Little data are available that compare costs directly for a previously administered telephone survey to a newly administered self-administered or mixed-mode survey. In our survey, thirteen out of twenty-three organizations reported

that the surveys were redesigned in an attempt to reduce total survey costs, but six organizations reported that costs were not part of the decision process. Thirteen survey respondents indicated that both the total survey costs and cost per completed interview were reduced compared with the interviewer-administered mode. There are examples of surveys that have reduced costs by transitioning to self-administered modes. In an early study, [Link et al. \(2008\)](#) compared costs for the traditional telephone-administered Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System with a mail version of this survey. They found that the mail survey reduced costs by about 12 percent, from \$79,578 per 1,000 completes for the telephone survey to \$70,969 per 1,000 completes for the mail survey. The main driver of the difference was the reduced interviewer time, which offset the increased costs for printing and other mail materials.

8. WHAT ARE THE BIG CHALLENGES IN TRANSITIONING TO SELF-ADMINISTERED AND MIXED MODES?

A myriad of challenges exists when transitioning a survey from telephone to self-administered or mixed modes. We describe some of the larger challenges here; the report details additional challenges.

8.1 Within-Household Selection May Be Problematic

Selecting a respondent within a household is an important decision. In some surveys, the traditional process of rostering and selecting an individual is separated into two steps: after transitioning, the household completes a roster, sends it back to the survey organization, and the survey organization selects the sampled person. For example, [Brick, Williams, and Montaquila \(2011\)](#) and [Montaquila et al. \(2013\)](#) used a two-phase approach to selecting persons within a household in the mail survey version of the National Household Education Survey (NHES). Selected households completed a screener questionnaire, including the presence and number of children in the household, including a full roster of children (name, age, sex, type of school, and year in school).

Because these methods increase the length of the survey field period, resulting in higher survey costs and potentially lower response rates, other methods put the within-household selection decision into the hands of the sampled household via instructions in a cover letter or survey instrument. Methods used in self-administered and mixed-mode surveys reflect the range of methods used in telephone surveys, ranging from asking any knowledgeable reporter or all adults in the household to report for the household (e.g., [Battaglia et al. 2008](#); [Elkasabi et al. 2014](#); [Brick et al. 2016](#); [Biemer et al. 2018](#)), asking the oldest or youngest person in the household to report (e.g., [Bosa et al. 2017](#);

DeBell, Jackman, Maisel, Amsbary, Meldener et al. 2017; Wells et al. 2018; Smyth, Olson, and Stange forthcoming), or asking the adult in the household with the next or most recent birthday (e.g., Battaglia et al. 2008; Hicks and Cantor 2012; Westat 2013; Olson and Smyth 2017; Wells et al. 2018; Wells, Hughes, Park, CHIS Redesign Working Group, and Ponce 2019). The methods selected may affect response rates and the accuracy of the selections. For example, in the California Health Interview Survey web pilot, Wells et al. (2018) included an experimental comparison of the next birthday method and the next birthday method with a verification question (Olson and Smyth 2017). The next birthday method with the verification question yielded the highest response rate of the three methods (15 percent compared with 13.9 percent for next birthday and 13.6 percent for age-order) and a substantial improvement in selection accuracy (10 percent inaccurately selected compared with 30 percent inaccurately selected for the other methods).

8.2 Long Questionnaires May Be Shortened

Many surveys that transition shorten the questionnaire. For example, the Residential Energy Consumption Survey (RECS) transition shortened a 40-minute face-to-face survey to a 20- to 30-minute web and paper questionnaire by focusing on only the most critical content and asking for less detail in the self-administered modes (Murphy, Biemer, and Berry 2018). Similarly, the 2007 Health Information National Trends Survey (HINTS) introduced a mail instrument to the existing RDD telephone survey, reducing the length of both from a 40-minute interview to a 30-minute interview (Cantor, Coa, Crystal-Mansour, Davis, Dipko et al. 2009). Others have attempted to deal with questionnaire length issues for a transition by offering the new version in two separate modules versus one longer survey (Peytchev, Peytcheva, Conzelmann, Wilson, and Wine 2019). The National Longitudinal Survey of Adult to Adolescent Health, however, found offering multiple modules to be an ineffective strategy, as it decreased response rates and increased data collection time and costs (Liao, Biemer, Mullan Harris, Burke, and Halpern 2019).

8.3 Computerization May Affect Data Collection Decisions

When transitions involve mail surveys, survey designers lose the ability to use a package of automation methods to assist respondents. As such, the questionnaire may need to be simplified, abbreviated, or redesigned to avoid complex skip patterns (Berkold 2018). The NHES simplified or removed many complex skip patterns that had been built into the telephone questionnaire for mail administration, including moving a set of questions about homeschooling—a topic that applies to about 3 percent of school-age children—into a separate

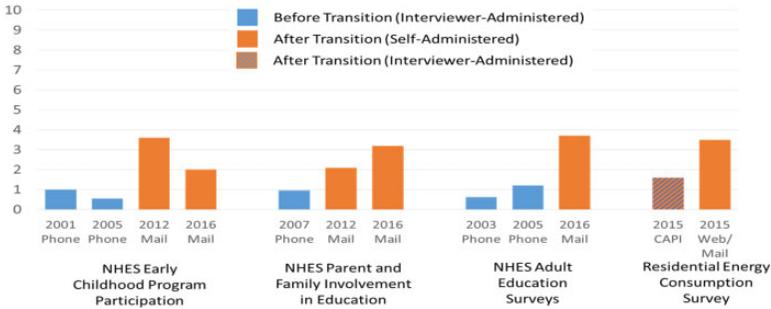


Figure 2. Item nonresponse rates by survey mode before and after transitions.

questionnaire to avoid complicated skip patterns (Chapman and Hagedorn 2009).

Computerization also opens up possibilities for customizing and personalizing the questionnaire, such as by using prior information to create personalized routing and/or question wording. A mail version of a survey requires more generic item wording or construction of a version for each fill, which greatly complicates survey production and management. For instance, in the transitioned National Survey of Children’s Health (NSCH), computerization is used for skip patterns, range checks, “pick lists,” fills, required responses for screening questions, soft edit prompts, and online help screens in the web mode. On the mail questionnaire, researchers were able to include identifying information taken from the screener about the sampled child (name, initials, or nickname; age; and sex) but were unable to use any of the other automation tools (US Census Bureau 2018b).

8.4 Loss of Benefits of Interviewer Administration

Self-administered surveys do not have the benefits of having an interviewer for administration, clarification, motivation, or order of presentation of items. For instance, in interviewer-administered questionnaires, “don’t know” and “refused” options are available for respondents without explicitly offering them aloud. In a web or paper questionnaire, when interviewer presence is not possible, offering a “don’t know” or “refused” response as an explicit response option is the only way to communicate to the respondent that the response is a valid one. Since self-administered modes are typically more prone to item nonresponse than interviewer-administered modes (Nicolaas and Tipping 2006; Heerwegh and Loosveldt 2008; Heerwegh 2009; Klausch, Hox and Schouten 2013; Breton et al. 2017), surveys experience slightly higher item nonresponse rates when transitioning to self-administered modes, sometimes on different types of items than experienced higher item nonresponse rates in the interviewer-administered modes. Figure 2 shows examples of average (mean for the RECS or median for the NHES) item nonresponse rates before and after mode transitions for the NHES and RECS surveys.

Surveys that transition from telephone to self-administered or mixed modes may see changes in their survey estimates related to knowledge questions, socially (un)desirable issues, topics that are subject to acquiescence, or ordinal attitudinal items, all possibly related to the loss of interviewer-control, the absence of interviewer characteristics cueing the respondents to a response, or the transition from aural processing with interviewers reading questions to visual processing of self-administered questionnaires. For example, respondents to web surveys may be able to look up answers, and thus, transitioning to a web-based mode may have unintended consequences on knowledge items. Multiple studies have found higher levels of political knowledge (Chang and Krosnick 2009; Ansolabehere and Schaffner 2014; Liu and Wang 2014; Clifford and Jerit 2016; Gooch and Vavreck 2019), science knowledge (Fricker, Galesic, Tourangeau, and Yan 2005), and health knowledge (Domnich, Panatto, Signori, Bragazzi, Cristina et al. 2015) in web modes than interviewer-administered modes. Self-administered modes may generate more accurate reporting of sensitive autobiographical information contained in records than interviewer-administered modes (Tourangeau and Yan 2007; Kreuter, Presser, and Tourangeau 2008; Preisendorfer and Wolter 2014). There is also evidence that nonsensitive autobiographical information is more accurately reported in self-administered surveys because of the ability to use records (Seeskin 2016; McGonagle et al. 2017), although more research is needed here. Additionally, several studies have found that respondents are more likely to agree with items in interviewer-administered than self-administered modes (Dillman and Tarnai 1991; Greene, Speizer, and Wiitala 2007) and shifts in attitudes on race-related topics (Liu and Wang 2015; Keeter, McGeeney, Igielnik, Mercer, and Mathiowetz 2015; Abrajano and Alvarez 2019), including in surveys that transitioned modes (Cernat, Couper, and Ofstedal 2016; Sinozich, Langer, Filer, and De Jong 2019). Finally, one persistent mode effect is that ordinal scale attitude/opinion items produce more extreme positive responses in interviewer-administered modes, especially telephone, than in self-administered modes (e.g., Tarnai and Dillman 1992; Krysan, Schuman, Scott, and Beatty 1994; Christian, Dillman, and Smyth 2008; Dillman, Phelps, Tortora, Swift, Kohrell et al. 2009; Ye, Fulton, and Tourangeau 2011), including in surveys that transitioned (Keeter et al. 2015; Liu 2018).

8.5 Additional Decisions Related to Language of Administration

When transitioning, surveys that use multiple languages must decide whether to translate all self-administered materials into all possible languages or continue using telephone administration with language-specific interviewers for respondents who speak languages other than English or Spanish. In the surveys that transitioned from telephone to self-administered or mixed modes, most were administered in only English or only English and Spanish. Self-administered and

mixed-mode surveys conducted in multiple languages often include cover letters and survey questionnaires in these multiple languages from the initial mailing (Zuckerberg and Mamedova 2012; Montaquila et al. 2013; Brick et al. 2012, 2013; Jans et al. 2013; Ghandour et al. 2018; US Census Bureau 2018a). For instance, the National Survey of Children's Health provided English and Spanish versions of the screening materials and survey because of the rare occurrence of other language interviews in previous interviewer-based administrations. Spanish-language translations were printed on the back on the invitation letters, and respondents could request a Spanish-language paper screener and topical questionnaire. The web survey included an option to switch between English and Spanish language instruments (Ghandour et al. 2018; US Census Bureau 2018a, 2018b). Asking non-English-speaking respondents to call into a language-specific telephone survey is less successful (e.g., Cantor et al. 2009; Wells et al. 2018). The California Health Interview Survey recently tested a transition from phone to a web-push/phone survey, in which English language questionnaires are initially attempted via the web, and speakers of other languages are asked to call in to a phone line to talk with an interviewer who speaks Spanish, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, or Tagalog; only eleven of 667 interviews were conducted in a language other than English (Wells et al. 2018). In surveys where respondents can switch between languages, data users who want to know which language was used to complete the questionnaire may need item-specific flags; alternatively, the survey organization may need to make a decision on how to assign language used. For example, in the 2016 National Household Education Survey web experiment, language of interview in the web surveys was identified as the language used for the last item completed in the questionnaire (McPhee et al. 2018).

8.6 Increased Difficulty in Interviewing Children and Teens

Transitioning an existing phone survey to a self-administered mode for research to screen and identify minors faces a unique set of challenges. One important decision is whether parents/guardians provide proxy reports for all of their children or a single child or whether the child is asked to report for themselves. For example, in the redesigned web- and mail-based National Survey of Children's Health, household informants completed a screener questionnaire to identify whether there were any children in the home, including those who met particular survey criteria of having special health care needs or being young. Focal children in the household were then randomly selected from the screening questions, and the adult household informant completed a survey about the child (Ghandour et al. 2018; US Census Bureau 2018a, 2018b). Difficulties associated with transitioning to a self-administered mode increase substantially when the minor is a teen who is requested to answer survey questions for themselves. Here, the parent must provide permission both to contact and interview the

teen. The California Health Interview Study pilot collected data from teens on the web by first asking parents for permission and contact information for a selected teen respondent and then following up with the teens. Parents provided permission for only thirty-eight out of the 125 eligible teens, and completed interviews were obtained from only twelve of them, yielding about a 10 percent cumulative response rate among the eligible teens (Wells et al. 2018).

8.7 Increased Difficulty in Collection of Nonsurvey Data

Transitioning away from interviewer-administered to self-administered modes raises challenges if interviewer observations, biological measurements, environmental samples, and consent to link to administrative records are required as part of data collection. Some studies send a separate observational team to collect the assessments, but consent rates may decrease substantially, and more research is needed to minimize the losses. For example, in wave five of the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent to Adult Health, the survey transitioned to a mixed-mode design that started with web and mail data collection followed by telephone nonresponse follow-up. Researchers sought consent for the physical and biomarker collection during the initial web, mail, or phone survey and then had a biomarker subcontractor visit respondents for actual collection. Using this two-step process, consent rates were considerably lower than prior in-person interviewer administration, with only 66 percent consenting for the biomarker visit (Harris 2018). Others have used self-administration to collect biological samples, with typically lower participation rates than those using interviewers (Sakshaug, Ofstedal, Guyer, and Beebe 2015). Transitioning from interviewer-administered to self-administered modes can also be problematic for record linkage, with lower consent rates and higher nonconsent bias in self-administered than interviewer-administered modes (Fulton 2012; Sakshaug, Hulle, Schmucker, and Leibig 2017).

8.8 No Single Approach to Measuring or Adjusting for Mode Differences

A major challenge for surveys that want to account for potential “mode effects” in estimation is that it is a bias that is difficult to quantify, potentially resulting from differences in coverage, nonresponse, or measurement. Additionally, each variable collected in the initial telephone survey and the transitioned self-administered or mixed-mode survey yields a different bias term. There is no single method for evaluating differences in estimates across multiple modes, nor is there a single method for accounting for these differences in estimates analytically.

To evaluate and diagnose differential sources of selection and measurement errors in mixed-mode surveys, data need to be gathered through (1) “gold standard” or administrative data record systems (e.g., Hox, de Leeuw, and Klausch 2017; Sakshaug, Cernat, and Raghunathan 2019), (2) parallel surveys

conducted in different modes on different respondents, sometimes called “benchmark” or “bridge” surveys (e.g., [Peytchev, Ridenhour, and Krotki 2010](#); [Klausch, Schouten, and Hox 2017](#)), or (3) repeated measurements on the same respondents in different modes (e.g., [Klausch, Schouten, Buelens, and van den Brakel 2017](#)) and in a variety of statistical modeling and analysis approaches. Multiple analytic approaches to statistically account for differential measurement errors across modes exist, including regression models, propensity score adjustments, and imputation, each of which relies on auxiliary or reference data (e.g., [Peytchev et al. 2010](#); [Kolenikov and Kennedy 2014](#); [Hox et al. 2017](#); [Suzer-Gurtekin, Valliant, Heeringa, and de Leeuw 2018](#)). Different methods often do not produce differences in conclusions, although some may be more suited for different problems than others.

8.9 Deciding Whether to Transition Using Bridge Surveys

One of many decisions made in the transition include whether to simultaneously field the survey in the new modes and the old mode to evaluate how estimates change with the change in design, an expensive but potentially important testing decision. For example, according to the Transition Plan for the Fishing Effort Survey ([Marine Recreational Information Program 2015](#)), during the bridge survey time, both the telephone mode Coastal Household Telephone Survey (CHTS) and the mail mode Fishing Effort Survey (FES) were fielded. The cost for conducting the telephone-based CHTS was \$1.8 million per year, and the mail-based FES was estimated to cost roughly \$1.3 million per year—costs considered important to incur while calibrating estimates across the two modes. As an alternative, some surveys compare a field test in the new self-administered or mixed modes, with the most recent implementation of the survey in the interviewer-administered mode. For instance, the Panel Survey of Income Dynamics (PSID) compared the implementation of a web instrument in 2016 with the most recent (2015) telephone administration ([McGonagle, Freedman, Griffin, and Dascola 2017](#)).

9. WHAT DESIGN DECISIONS HAVE HAD LIMITED EMPIRICAL ATTENTION?

9.1 Data Processing

A review of the current literature regarding transitions from single-mode data collection efforts to mixed-mode data collection provides little experimental or empirical data with respect to how such transitions affect data processing. In our survey, eight of the respondents said that data editing for their project varies by mode; eleven said it did not. Transparency and documentation of data processing steps are critical, including identification of a data source (e.g.,

survey mode; administrative or survey data or other source) and identification of alterations to data, such that analysts can make informed decisions as to the pooling of data across modes. Organizations engage in many data processing steps; these decisions should be made a priori, including whether processing procedures will vary across modes. This may include what constitutes a complete case, rules concerning deduplication, the use of single versus parallel review, clerical and/or automatic editing, and imputation. For example, one of many decisions made for data processing in mixed-mode surveys has to do with deduplication of completed cases. When one mode is used sequentially for nonrespondents, a sampled case may participate in a survey using the first mode offered and may inadvertently also complete the survey in another mode while the survey organization is processing the initial response. The National Survey of Children's Health (US Census Bureau 2018a, 2018b) prioritized a completed questionnaire in any mode but selected the completed web questionnaires if both web and mail questionnaires were returned and completely filled out. Other processing, coding, and editing decisions abound.

9.2 Human Subjects Issues

When considering a transition of modes, one important consideration to take into account regarding protection of human subjects is obtaining informed consent. In interviewer-administered modes, the informed consent process is administered verbally. When transitioning to a self-administered mode such as a web or paper survey, a few considerations arise. First, the respondent must be sufficiently literate to read and understand the consent form, although in a web survey, there is the possibility to have an audio feature read the consent language aloud. Second, there is no single mechanism or guarantee to ensure that respondents in the self-administered environment read the entire consent document. Finally, there is also no clear way to check for understanding of the informed consent document in self-administered surveys. As such, surveys that transition from telephone to self-administered modes would benefit from conducting experiments that vary the display, attention, or comprehension attributes of informed consent information between interviewer-administered to self-administered surveys. Issues related to protection of personally identifiable information (PII) and handling respondent distress also require future attention.

10. WHAT NEW REPORTING REQUIREMENTS MAY BE NEEDED IN A SELF-ADMINISTERED, MIXED-MODE SURVEY SETTING?

Standard survey documentation reports contain information on the survey's target population; the frame; the sample design, including stratification variables; and information on the data collection, including the mode of recruitment,

response modes, and the order/timing they are offered. Some surveys also indicate changes from previous data collection cycles and the potential impact of this change on estimates, which is particularly important when switching from a telephone survey to a self-administered survey or mixed-mode survey. We recommend that all survey documentation identify any changes to the sampling frame from the previous administration and how the data collection procedures differ. This is particularly critical for surveys transitioning to self-administered or mixed modes for which over-time comparisons are important.

We were surprised to find that at the time that we started writing this report, no surveys included screenshots of questionnaires of each question in the electronic modes, including differences in displays for PC web and mobile web questionnaires. Yet small differences in visual displays can yield large changes in responses. Thus, as surveys transition from aural to visual modes, a clear documentation of all questionnaires, including web, mobile, and mail versions, is critical for understanding how visual layout and design may affect data quality.

To go a step further in helping data users understand the impact of change in mode, we believe that organizations can add information to data files that would be beneficial. First, we recommend that data files contain information on the new data collection modes and specify how they are different from the previous survey cycles. In particular, survey response data files should contain flags for the response mode when multiple modes are available to respondents so users can subset by mode or compare across modes. We also recommend that files include more detailed information, particularly for web surveys, including the devices used to respond (smartphone, tablet, or PC). Many surveys also did not provide summary tables that reported the percentage of cases that responded by each mode. Presence of these flags on data files will facilitate users examining the impact of the change of mode of data collection.

Furthermore, we found it surprisingly hard to compare response rates across the telephone and self-administered or mixed modes of data collection for many surveys. Some of this had to do with differences in how response rates were reported—self-administered surveys with two stages of response (screeners and main survey questionnaires) often reported each separately, but not an “overall” response rate. There are also substantial differences across modes in identification of ineligible sample units. Finally, many surveys reported response rates for each mode or frame used (e.g., separately for mail and web; separately for an ABS frame and a list frame) but did not combine to provide an overall response rate. Understanding the differences in how response rates are calculated across studies and modes will be critical to the field for understanding the effect these transitions have had on survey participation and other outcomes.

11. WHAT ORGANIZATION-LEVEL SHIFTS ARE OCCURRING AS SURVEYS TRANSITION FROM TELEPHONE TO SELF-ADMINISTERED AND MIXED MODES?

The shifts now occurring in data collection mode are affecting not only surveys but also survey organizations more generally. Organizations have had to develop new data collection systems that effectively track what contacts cases have received and ensure interventions are properly employed. Having systems that talk to each other across multiple modes and also permit real-time analysis of data collection may be challenging or require significant infrastructure development at survey organizations. As such, smaller survey organizations may manage and evaluate the mailings and web-based contacts in different files, using Excel, SPSS, SAS, or other spreadsheet-style programs for analysis and reporting. Larger organizations may build in-house mixed-mode data collection systems, which would require substantial commitment of resources, planning, and extensive use of field managers, researchers, and IT professionals, which would in turn require multiple years of planning and integration (e.g., [Cheung and Maher 2015](#); [Wernimont and Snowden 2015](#); [Edwards, Maitland, and Connor 2017](#); [Bonhomme 2018](#)).

Additionally, many survey organizations are developing models for predicting the sample size for cost effectiveness of a mixed-mode survey (e.g., web and mail combined) over a single-mode survey (e.g., mail only, web only). Previous studies find mixed conclusions about the sample size “tipping point,” depending on the mix of modes and assumed cost structure (e.g., [Fricker and Schonlau 2002](#); [Griffis, Goldsby, and Cooper 2003](#); [Lien 2015](#); [Lesser, Nawrocki, and Newton 2017](#); [Kaminska and Lynn 2017](#)). Individual surveys that transition from telephone to self-administered or mixed-mode surveys will experience different fixed and variable costs of modes. For some studies, it will be more cost effective to data enter mail questionnaires than to program a web survey. In other instances, there may be costs that have already been sunk into developing a complicated telephone instrument that are more easily ported into a web survey than the cost for developing an easily administered mail survey (e.g., [Wells et al. 2018, 2019](#)). Similarly, some survey organizations may not have the capacity for data entry and thus would need to outsource that cost to a different organization. Each of these issues must be considered when examining survey costs related to transitioning from one mode to another.

12. CONCLUSION

The transitions described in this report reflect the adaptability of the survey research profession as it confronts the profound challenges of growing nonresponse and costs, along with the opportunities provided by new technologies

and databases. One clear conclusion of the report is that there is no single way that a survey is transitioned from telephone to self-administered or mixed modes of data collection. Each survey transition requires a package of decisions that affect all survey error sources. Some survey researchers prioritize comparability of survey estimates with the telephone modes of data collection and thus make decisions to minimize any potential differences that may arise. Others prioritize maximizing the quality of the survey data collected in the new mode and thus make decisions to optimize a design for the current set of modes. Determining which of these decisions is optimal is survey-specific and estimate-specific.

Clearly communicating these decisions—and how they may affect survey estimates—is key. If changes in estimates are expected, plans should be made, and procedures for how to address the break in the time series should also be communicated. These plans and procedures may include reporting on a parallel or bridge study or statistical modeling to help smooth the changes in estimates. The plans may simply be that the new set of modes starts at the beginning of a new time series. Results from experimentation and related literature can be used to explain what the organization can expect to see from the survey moving forward, including costs, response rates, and any changes in estimates. We hope this report helps survey organizations consider, plan, and inform users about the important issues related to these transitions.

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