FORS GUIDES
to survey methods
and data management

Refusal conversion

Marieke Voorpostel[1]

[1] FORS

FORS Guide No. 04, Version 1.1 (last update January 2025)

January 2019

Abstract:

Refusal conversion is a common feature of most surveys. It entails re-approaching sample members who declined the first request to participate in the study, with the intention to convince them to participate after all. This procedure is successful in increasing survey response rates. This guide provides an overview of common practices in refusal conversion and how it is used in the Swiss Household Panel.

Keywords: response rates, extended fieldwork efforts, Swiss Household Panel

How to cite:

Voorpostel, M. (2019). Refusal conversion. *FORS Guides,* 4, Version 1.1, 1-7. https://doi.org/10.24449/FG-2019-00004

The FORS Guides to survey methods and data management

The FORS Guides offer support to researchers and students in the social sciences who intend to collect data, as well as to teachers at university level who want to teach their students the basics of survey methods and data management. Written by experts from inside and outside of FORS, the FORS Guides are descriptive papers that summarise practical knowledge concerning survey methods and data management. They give a general overview without claiming to be exhaustive. Considering the Swiss context, the FORS Guides can be especially helpful for researchers working in Switzerland or with Swiss data.

Editor:

FORS, Géopolis, CH-1015 Lausanne
www.forscenter.ch/publications/fors-guides
Contact: info@forscenter.ch

1. INTRODUCTION

Refusal conversion is a widely used strategy to increase participation rates in surveys. It consists of re-approaching initially refusing sample members to convince them to participate in the study. This guide provides an overview of common practices in refusal conversion and how it is used in the Swiss Household Panel.

Refusal conversion is “the procedure that survey researchers use to gain cooperation from a sampled respondent who has refused an initial survey request. Refusal conversion may include different versions of the survey introductions and other written scripts or materials (e.g. cover letters), study contact rules, incentives, and interviewer characteristics and training. This is a common procedure for many surveys, but it requires careful consideration of the details of the refusal conversion efforts and the potential costs versus the potential benefit of the effort” (Lavrakas, 2008). Although a costly measure (Calderwood, Plewis, Ketende, & Mostafa, 2016), this strategy is used in most, if not all, large-scale surveys, as a way to increase response rates. The effect of refusal conversion on response rates is a combination of the initial refusal rates, the number of re-approached sample members, and how many of them in the end participated in the study. With decreasing response rates in many surveys, the share of respondents that enter the refusal conversion has increased. As a result, the share of refusal converted respondents among all respondents in a survey has increased over time (Curtin, Presser, & Singer, 2000; Hall, Brown, Nicolaas, & Lynn, 2013; Stoop, Billet, Koch, & Fitzgerald, 2010), although successfulness of refusal conversion depends on a number of factors, including the survey mode and the topic of the survey.

In general, it is assumed that by increasing response rates, refusal conversion would reduce non-response bias. Empirical support for this is rather ambiguous (Stoop, et al., 2010). Enhancing response rates may not necessarily improve the representativeness of the sample (Roberts, Vandenplas, & Ernst Stähli, 2014). Moreover, converted refusals have higher item-nonresponse rates compared with immediately participating respondents, although they do not necessarily provide less accurate or variable answers (Olson, 2013; Yan & Curtin, 2010).

The question with refusal conversion is how far a survey agency should go to obtain cooperation from sample members who indicated they did not want to participate. Stoop et al. (2010) argue that empirical evidence suggests that the process of refusal conversion should not be considered as unethical, since reluctant individuals or sample members who refused the initial survey request generally do not feel harassed by a second request and cooperation rates after a refusal conversion attempt are rather high. Fieldwork agencies generally distinguish between “soft” and “hard” refusals. Respondents who state that they do not want to be contacted ever again for the study are considered “hard” refusals, and generally do not enter the refusal conversion phase. When respondents state they are not available for an interview at the time, without refusing to participate in the future are considered “soft” refusals, and tend to enter the refusal conversion procedure. Ultimately, the decision which sample members to assign to the refusal conversion procedure is a subjective one, as the distinction between soft and hard refusals is not always clear-cut.

2. REFUSAL CONVERSION IN THE SWISS HOUSEHOLD PANEL

The Swiss Household Panel (SHP) is a longitudinal survey that follows a large sample of households in Switzerland over time since 1999. Refreshment samples have been added in 2004 and 2013. The SHP interviews all household members aged 14 and older, predominantly by CATI, although CAPI and CAWI are used as well for a small part of the sample.[1] The SHP first approaches the household reference person, who provides information on the household composition (grid) and several household characteristics. Subsequently, all eligible household members are approached for an individual interview.

In the SHP refusal can occur at several steps: nonresponse to the grid, to the household questionnaire and to the individual questionnaire. Hence, refusal conversion could entail trying to convince a reference person to complete the grid and household questionnaire, or to re-approach individual household members to complete the individual questionnaire.

The refusal procedure until 2010 varied from year to year in the SHP, with regard to criteria for assigning a nonparticipating household or household member to the refusal conversion process and to whether or not additional mailings or incentives were used. The current procedure (since 2010) includes a call back of every household or individual who refused to participate in the current or the previous wave of data collection (see for more details Dangubic & Voorpostel, 2017). These sample members are approached by experienced interviewers who had additional training in refusal conversion. As a rule, the SHP no longer contacts households that have sent a written refusal or who call the hotline to refuse further participation. Sometimes fieldwork managers decide not to approach households that were clearly annoyed by the survey request, as reported by the interviewers. In all, about 80% of the initially refusing households enter the refusal conversion process every wave.

Table 1 shows for the years 2005 to 2015 the number of households that entered the refusal conversion procedure and the success rate with regard to grid completion, household questionnaire completion and individual questionnaire completion by the reference person. The number of households assigned to the refusal conversion procedure varies over time, depending on the start of refreshment samples and when refusals from previous waves are contacted again. The table shows that refusal conversion pays off in terms of increasing response rates: between 23% and 69% of the re-approached households completed the grid, 19% to 61% also completed the household questionnaire, and 17% to 45% additionally completed the individual questionnaire of the reference person.

[1] For a detailed description of the SHP please see www.swisspanel.ch.

Table 1. Households in refusal conversion and conversion rates in the SHP (2005-2015)

Year	Households in refusal conversion	Grids completed		Grids and household questionnaire completed		Grid, household and individual questionnaire reference person completed	
2005	794	205	(25.8%)	159	(20.0%)	125	(15.7%)
2006	1560	545	(34.9%)	508	(32.6%)	457	(29.3%)
2007	347	79	(22.8%)	65	(18.7%)	58	(16.7%)
2008	1202	659	(54.8%)	542	(45.1%)	473	(39.4%)
2009	1146	703	(61.3%)	575	(50.2%)	511	(44.6%)
2010	963	492	(51.1%)	408	(42.4%)	356	(37.0%)
2011	708	336	(47.5%)	281	(39.7%)	235	(33.2%)
2012	728	330	(45.3%)	265	(36.4%)	211	(29.0%)
2013	817	561	(68.7%)	502	(61.4%)	153	(18.7%)
2014	1447	718	(49.6%)	642	(44.4%)	541	(37.4%)
2015	927	404	(43.6%)	353	(38.1%)	267	(28.8%)

Notes. Years 2005 to 2012 concern SHP_I and _II. 2013 includes SHP_III on the household but on the individual level. 2014-2015 includes SHP_I, _II and _III.

Table 2 presents the contribution that refusal conversion makes to the sample size, measuring participation as household questionnaire completion. Refusal conversion accounts for an increase in the sample size between 1.5% (in 2007) and 15% (in 2009), showing a large variation over the years.

Table 2. SHP household sample size before and after refusal conversion in completed household questionnaires (2005-2015)

Year	Sample size before conversion	Number of converted refusals	Sample size after conversion	(% increase)
2005	4097	159	4256	(3.9%)
2006	3713	508	4221	(13.7%)
2007	4246	65	4311	(1.5%)
2008	3722	542	4264	(14.6%)
2009	3831	575	4406	(15.0%)
2010	4134	408	4542	(9.9%)
2011	4214	281	4495	(6.7%)
2012	4196	265	4461	(6.3%)
2013	7855	502	8357	(6.4%)
2014	6717	642	7359	(9.6%)
2015	6434	353	6787	(5.5%)

Notes. Years 2005 to 2012 concern SHP_I and _II. 2013 includes SHP_III on the household but on the individual level. 2014-2015 includes SHP_I, _II and _III.

Further analyses of participation patterns over time in the SHP (Dangubic, 2017) showed that refusal conversion was more successful among sample members who had been in the panel for a shorter period. The later sample members were converted in the panel history, the less likely they would remain in the panel for a longer duration.

In sum, refusal conversion is a common practice, with the potential to increase response rates. Sample members who refuse at one point may still take part in the study when contacted at a different time or by a different interviewer. Success rates with respect to response rates vary, however. Also, there is no strong evidence for refusal conversion increasing representativeness of the sample. Survey practitioners should be prudent when deciding which refusing sample members to re-approach. As participation to surveys is voluntary, sample members should not be re-approached following a hard refusal.

3. IMPLICATIONS FOR SURVEY PRACTITIONERS

Recommendation 1 – Although it increases the cost of the survey, refusal conversion has the potential to increase response rates substantially and usually is worth the effort.

Recommendation 2 – Whereas sample members giving soft refusals (e.g. no time) are worth re-approaching, a definite hard refusal should be respected and not re-contacted.

REFERENCES

Calderwood, L., Plewis, I., Ketende, S., & Mostafa, T. (2016). Evaluating the immediate and longer term impact of a refusal conversion strategy in a large scale longitudinal study. *Survey Research Methods, 10*(3), 225-236. doi:10.18148/srm/2016.v10i3.6275

Curtin, R., Presser, S., & Singer, E. (2000). The effects of response rate changes on the index of consumer sentiment. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 64*(4), 413-428. doi:10.1086/318638

Dangubic, M. (2017). *Short-term and long-term effectiveness of refusal conversion in the Swiss Household Panel. Master's thesis* (Vol. Master). Lausanne: University of Lausanne.

Dangubic, M., & Voorpostel, M. (2017). *Refusal conversion in the Swiss Household Panel 1999-2015: An overview. Working Paper 2_17.* Lausanne: FORS. Retrieved December, 7, 2018 from http://ohs-shp.unil.ch/workingpapers/WP2_17.pdf

Hall, J., Brown, V., Nicolaas, G., & Lynn, P. (2013). Extended field efforts to reduce the risk of non-response bias:Have the effects changed over time? Can weighting achieve the same effects? *Bulletin of Sociological Methodology/Bulletin de Méthodologie Sociologique, 117*(1), 5-25. doi:10.1177/0759106312465545

Lavrakas, P. J. (2008). *Encyclopedia of survey research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Olson, K. (2013). Do non-response follow-ups improve or reduce data quality?: A review of the existing literature. *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society: Series A (Statistics in Society), 176*(1), 129-145. doi:10.1111/j.1467-985X.2012.01042.x

Roberts, C., Vandenplas, C., & Ernst Stähli, M. (2014). Evaluating the impact of response enhancement methods on the risk of nonresponse bias and survey costs. *Survey Research Methods, 8*(2), 67-80. doi:10.18148/srm/2014.v8i2.5459

Stoop, I. A. L., Billet, J., Koch, A., & Fitzgerald, R. (2010). *Improving survey response: Lessons learned from the European Social Survey*. Chichester: Wiley.

Yan, T., & Curtin, R. (2010). The relation between unit nonresponse and item nonresponse: A response continuum perspective. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research, 22*(4), 535-551. doi:10.1093/ijpor/edq037