METHOD MATTERS

THE TRADE-OFF BETWEEN CONVENIENCE AND REPRESENTATIVENESS

We need good data. But very often that is neither easy nor straightforward. This is particularly true in the pursuit of reliable prevalence data on child sexual abuse perpetration. Gathering reliable data is hard, and the pitfalls are many, but quality really matters. One of the key considerations is the trade-off between convenience and representativeness when considering your sampling strategy. The accuracy of prevalence estimates can have real-world consequences because they inform public perception, influence policy responses, and affect the design of prevention programs. The design of your method matters.

WHAT POPULATION?

To assess the prevalence of an issue, you first have to clearly define the population you are interested in. For example, is it a whole country, a geographic region, or a specific demographic within a country (e.g. adult males)? This is critical as this population will be the source of your research sample.

WHICH CHARACTERISTIC?

Next, you need to isolate the specific characteristic that you want to survey (e.g. depression, past perpetration).

WHAT SAMPLING METHOD?

Finally, you have to assess which approach to sampling is right for you. Different methods come with different trade-offs between convenience and representativeness. Consider how your circumstances and resources best fit with the core research aim – representative prevalence data.

SOCIAL MEDIA OUTREACH

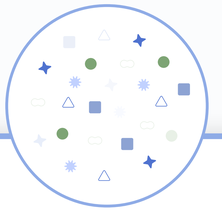
Finding a representative sample to survey is hard. Social media offers reach and access to a large pool of potential survey participants. But with no control over the selection of participants, a social media sample is not representative. Social media brings low cost, convenient access to large numbers of participants, but such samples do not allow for claims about prevalence in the population. Social media brings convenience, but not scientific confidence in data.

ONLINE PANEL

Another method available to researchers is working with a market panel company that retains a large panel of online respondents. These panels are built through open sign-ups: a company creates a panel, posts ads, and people sign up to receive payment for participation. One benefit of online panels is that they offer a relatively inexpensive and fast way to access large samples. However, there is little-to-no management of who is in the panel or how many surveys people can complete. These panels are open to selection bias and may contain a substantial number of ‘professional survey takers’, or panel members who do a lot of surveys to make a wage. So, a sample recruited from an online panel won’t be representative of the population.

MARKET PANEL

Researchers may consider recruiting through a panel that is built using non-probability quota sampling, to use the technical term. This is when a market panel company or researchers build a large panel of survey respondents BUT set quotas for different characteristics that represent wider society and then non-randomly recruit participants to fill these quotas. It’s not a pure representative sample, and is open to selection bias, but it provides high quality data with a reasonable degree of representativeness. For example, such a panel might include numbers of females or people from different income brackets that closely match the rates in the whole population. This approach can deliver reliable and robust prevalence data.



PROBABILITY PANEL

Gold standard ultimately comes down to representativeness. The more representative a panel, the more accurate the national prevalence estimates that are produced by our research. To achieve this requires all members of the target population have a known, nonzero chance of being included in a panel. This approach also uses random selection to minimize selection bias. Companies and organizations that take this approach will have access to all household addresses or all phone numbers in a country. They then work to recruit a panel that is representative of the population. This method is more expensive and more demanding, but also more rigorous and reliable. When feasible, this approach provides the highest quality prevalence data.

CONVENIENCE — **REPRESENTATIVENESS**