

Joint American Statistical Association/AAPOR Statement on Use of Incentives in Survey Participation

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In a recent piece in the LA Times, David Lazarus described the use of incentives to encourage participation as “bribery” (<http://www.latimes.com/business/lazarus/la-fi-lazarus-census-survey-five-dollars-20161021-snap-story.html>). He was criticizing a study done as part of the Gemini Project, a long-term effort being carried out by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) in support of the Consumer Expenditure (CE) Survey. The study featured both prepaid and promised incentives.

Both AAPOR and ASA recognize the value of incentives as tool for encouraging people to respond to surveys. There has been a lot of research on incentives over the years and it is clear that a) they improve response rates, b) nothing works as well as cash for this purpose, and c) incentives often pay for themselves by reducing the number of attempts interviewers have to make to get people to respond. This last point means that incentives in federal surveys may end up saving taxpayers money. Some of the key references to this literature are given below.

One of the reasons all this research on incentives has been done is that fewer and fewer people are willing to take part in surveys, a problem over the last 25 years or so in the United States and in most other developed countries. As a result, survey researchers around the world have turned to incentives as one of the most effective ways to stem this unfavorable tide. Nonresponse threatens to bias survey estimates, a cause for great concern both here and abroad because the survey estimates are so important.

The CE Survey, the subject of the Gemini research that Lazarus criticized, is one of the most important surveys done in the U.S. (arguably in the world) because the data feed into the calculation of the Consumer Price Index, on which many, many cost of living adjustments are based. So it is crucial that the survey be done right. AAPOR and ASA applaud the BLS’s efforts to maintain the CE at the highest possible level of quality. In the current era, that may require BLS to offer incentives.

Some Key Recent References on Incentives

Gelman, A., Stevens, M., and Chan, V. (2003). Regression modeling and meta-analysis for decision making: A cost-benefit analysis of incentives in telephone surveys. *Journal of Business & Economic Statistics* 21, 213–25.

Medway, R. L., and Tourangeau, R. (2015). Response quality in telephone surveys: Do prepaid cash incentives make a difference? *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 79, 524-543.

Mercer, A., Caporaso, A., Cantor, D., and Townsend, R. (2015). How much gets you how much? Monetary incentives and response rates in household surveys. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 79, 105-129.

Singer, E., and Cong, Y. (2013). The use and effects of incentives in surveys. *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 645, 112–141.

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