

# Hard-to-Survey Populations

Peter Lundquist and Johan Löfgren

Statistics Sweden, [peter.lundquist@scb.se](mailto:peter.lundquist@scb.se)

In recent years has the negative trend in individual surveys with increasing nonresponse accelerated even more in hard-to-survey populations. Several one-time surveys, using traditional survey designs, have had problems producing reliable statistics for groups such as young people, vulnerable people and new arrivals to Sweden. There is a growing public interest in being able to collect and measure the status, on a variety of aspects, for these kinds of populations.

Technological development has made it more difficult to get in touch with respondents. Almost all adult people in Sweden have cell phones today. Less than 50 per cent of the households have a landline phone, in larger cities the proportion is even smaller, about 37 per cent (according to The Swedish Post and Telecom Authority). Nowadays it is difficult to reach people on the phone, few responds to a number they do not recognize. Social media and the information flow influence people in a more diversified way than historically when the "national television" and the newspapers provided the information.

Today, more than 20 per cent of Sweden's population in the age 15-74 years are foreign-born. An increased proportion of citizens with foreign background means that the total willingness to respond decreases in the population. Over the past ten years, the largest immigration to Sweden has consisted of refugees and family migration. Immigration due to war or persecution, calls for stronger efforts when explaining the benefits of social surveys. These people often come from countries with a widespread lack of trust in authorities.

In other words, the prerequisites for conducting socially important surveys are tougher today than it has been before. Over the past decades, the number of surveys directed at individuals and households has increased. Today, a large number of organizations are carrying out different types of surveys. Singer (2011) reasoned about an attitude change in the willingness to participate in a sample survey: in the past, the general attitude was to participate, while today it seems that the default is not to participate.

Two different kind of surveys exists at Statistics Sweden: periodic surveys, such as the monthly Labour Force Survey, carried out on an ongoing basis over time, and one-time surveys. The periodic surveys usually have allocated funds for methodological development, with some caution when it comes to major changes in the design of the surveys, e.g. because of extra costs in order to maintain comparability over time or other requests from the users. In one-time surveys, on the other hand, it is easier to test new designs that regular surveys can benefit from. The studies described in this document are one-time surveys.

The problem with surveying difficult populations is not new, but has not been as tangible in Statistics Sweden's operations before. In the light of limited capacity to handle hard-to-survey populations with the survey designs at hand, we have to seek new ways to produce reliable statistics for these groups. Our presentation gives an overview of the present situation, illustrated with some examples and a discussion on possible ways to create new sampling approaches in the coming years.