



## Field Procedures in the European Social Survey Round 4: Enhancing Response Rates

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### I Introduction

One of the distinguishing features of the ESS is its objective to achieve high methodological standards, thereby striving for optimal comparability in the data collected across all the participating countries. Amongst these standards, one essential element is the need to achieve high response rates in all participating countries, in order to ensure that the people interviewed in each country closely represent the country's total population. This aims to minimise cross-national nonresponse bias and is essential for unbiased comparative analyses.

As a result, a **minimum effective response rate of 70 per cent** in each country has been specified -

*“...The minimum target response rate - after discounting ineligible (...) - should be 70%. As seen in Round 2, this figure is likely to be exceeded in certain countries. Countries that participated in Round 3 and achieved lower response rates will nevertheless be expected to aim for the same 70% target in Round 4. Survey organisations should thus cost their surveys with this response rate in mind and consider what steps may be required to achieve it. ... All potential survey organisations must be invited to suggest a range of techniques that they believe would enhance the final response rate. Such techniques may include advance letters, toll-free telephone numbers for potential respondents to contact, extra training of interviewers in response-maximisation techniques and doorstep interactions, implementing refusal avoidance and conversion techniques, re-issuing of ‘soft’ refusals and ‘indecisive’ non-contacts, and many others. ... Response enhancement techniques employed should be documented in the national technical reports.” [ESS Specifications for participating countries, Round 4]*

This paper outlines how certain fieldwork procedures may enhance response rates. Some procedures form part of the Specification for participating countries and, as such, should be adopted in each country. However, other issues discussed in this paper are recommendations or suggestions. We are aware that the procedures covered here are not new; many of the National Coordinators (and the survey organisations) will be familiar with them. The paper should thus be seen simply as a summary and reminder of issues which should be considered in maximising response rates.

The effectiveness of different approaches may well vary between different countries, with different norms, cultural settings, geography, and so forth. The CCT is therefore very happy to discuss or advise on fieldwork procedures to be adopted within particular countries. **Wherever possible, countries should take into account experiences from previous rounds of the ESS to improve fieldwork and response rates in the present round.**

Before going through some of the more detailed issues, it is worth noting the following essential points:

### 1. **Boosting response across subgroups**

One of the main difficulties with non-response is the difference in characteristics between respondents and non-respondents. Data quality and comparability are compromised by the extent to which those interviewed differ from those not interviewed. In attempts to enhance response rates, **you should be mindful of the need to boost levels of response amongst all groups of the population and to bring response rates to a more consistent level across subgroups, if possible.** This is, for instance, why the ESS allows no substitution of addresses or individuals.

### 2. **Response enhancing measures can affect population differentially**

Certain elements of the survey design may differentially affect the likelihood of participation among different groups of the population. For instance, a monetary incentive may be more likely to encourage the participation of people with low incomes rather than those with high incomes. **Measures to reduce non-response should take account of such issues, targeting groups who are disproportionately underrepresented as a result of design issues.** When re-issuing refusals in order to convert them into productive interviews, you might, for example, consider trying also to convert some more reluctant persons, since less reluctant ones often tend to be more similar to respondents.

### 3. **Close monitoring of response rates**

During fieldwork it is essential to closely monitor response among the entire sample and, if possible, among some important subgroups. This will provide an early warning of any response rate difficulties and might enable timely remedial action. Using the ESS contact forms for the monitoring should provide you with all necessary information<sup>1</sup>, though some survey organisations use their own monitoring system. In the latter case, **care should be taken that the monitoring system allows for enough detail to detect problems during fieldwork in time.**

### 4. **Types of non-respondents**

There are three basic types of non-respondents:

- **Non-contacts** - those who cannot be contacted during the fieldwork period;
- **Refusals** - those who are contacted, but refuse to participate;
- **Other non-respondents** - those who are contacted and might be willing to participate, but cannot do so, for example because of illness or language problems.

As the last group is usually much smaller than the other two, this paper concentrates on minimising non-contacts and refusals. Obviously, different measures are required to deal with each of these two groups. After discussing broader issues of interviewer selection, training, workload, monitoring and payment (Section II), the paper focuses separately on possible ways to minimise non-contacts (Section III) and refusals (Section IV).

### 5. **Quality control back-checks**

In order to assure high data quality, interviewing and field procedures must be closely monitored via quality control back-checks. It is specified for the ESS that these back-checks must be carried out and documented on at least 10 per cent of respondents, 5 per cent of refusals and 5 per cent of cases where no contact with the sampled person was made (non-contacts and ineligible).

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<sup>1</sup> Detailed guidance is given on the design and content of contact forms (see: [www.europeansocialsurvey.org](http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org)).

## II Interviewers: selection, organisation and training for response enhancement

### a) *Selecting interviewers to work on the study*

There is a considerable body of evidence that shows that different interviewers achieve substantially different response rates. Although it is often difficult to distinguish between interviewer and area effects - (for instance, interviewers working in inner city areas normally face bigger challenges in obtaining good response rates than interviewers working in more rural areas) - there is evidence that **more experienced interviewers tend to achieve higher response rates** than those with less experience. On the other hand, socio-demographic characteristics of interviewers, like age and gender, do not seem to play a major role in affecting response rates.

#### Recommendations:

- *Attempt to enhance response rates by selecting experienced interviewers wherever possible.*

### b) *Briefing interviewers about all aspects of the study*

*“All interviewers will be **personally briefed** by the National Co-ordinator or members of the research team from the survey organisation before carrying out an assignment, drawing on detailed interviewer instructions prepared by the CCT.”* [ESS Specifications, Round 4]

It is important that the personal briefings – and accompanying written instructions – do not focus purely on the content of the questionnaire and the conduct of the actual interview. It will be essential to **brief interviewers in detail on the respondent selection procedures (if applicable), the contacting procedure and the registration of the calling process using the standard contact forms**. Interviewers should be **briefed on a broad repertoire of approaches to enhance their response rates**, in a way that allows them to tailor their approach to the specific situation. This will be of particular importance where less experienced interviewers are being employed on the study. In countries with high levels of refusals, briefings should cover detailed **training on refusal avoidance and refusal conversion techniques**. If the contact procedures being used on the ESS differ from those usually employed by the survey organisation a longer briefing will be needed.

In addition to disseminating information an equally important aim of the personal briefings is to **motivate the interviewers** working on the ESS. This might be achieved by conveying the importance of such a large cross-national survey to them for example by providing some background to the survey and presenting some key findings. Interviewers might also find this information useful when ‘selling’ the survey to target respondents. It is important that interviewers feel that their role in the ESS process is essential and that they feel that their skills and efforts are being acknowledged. There is evidence that interviewers who are confident about their ability to elicit co-operation tend to achieve higher response rates

**Note:** An ESS Round 4 Briefing should be in addition to general interviewer training given by the survey organisation! Care should be taken that especially less experienced interviewers also receive training on general interviewing and contacting techniques.

The CCT will prepare a paper on issues to include within the personal briefings and written instructions by mid-May 2008.

### Recommendations:

- *One day or half day personal briefing sessions of all interviewers by the National Co-ordinator and survey organisation, covering all aspects of the field procedures and the interview (essential for complying with the specification for participating countries).*
- *Include a session on doorstep introduction and discussions on encouraging participation.*
- *Motivate interviewers to deliver good work and boost their confidence about their ability to 'sell' the survey.*

### **c) Interviewer assignment sizes and overall workload**

*"Interviewers' assignment sizes (workload) should not exceed 24 issued sampling units (i.e. 24 named individuals, households or addresses) and no interviewer should carry out more than two assignments... **Each interviewer should not work on more than 48 issued sampling units** and any proposed deviation in this area must be discussed with the CCT in advance."* [ESS Specifications, Round 4]

**Response rates can be affected by the amount of work allocated to each interviewer.** The assignment size will affect the amount of effort an interviewer can apply when attempting contact and securing co-operation from each sampled individual (and household where relevant). For instance if an interviewer's workload is large, relative to the length of the fieldwork period, it can place limits on the possible number of calls and their spread in terms of days and times of the day.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond the assignment sizes on this particular study, you should **make sure that interviewers are not overloaded with work from other surveys**. Not only would this have the potential to depress response rates generally (for the reasons above), it may lead to interviewers having to prioritise one survey over another, in terms of completing work on time or putting in the effort to maximise their response rates.

### Recommendation:

- *Discuss the workload of interviewers with the survey organisation, to avoid such conflicts of interest. (However, deciding on priorities may be more difficult if interviewers are working for more than one organisation during the fieldwork period.)*
- *In addition to the overall ESS deadlines set internal deadlines for when interviewers have to complete their assignment by. Leave sufficient time for reissues of non-contacts and refusals afterwards too.*

### **d) Monitoring interviewers' progress**

**Close monitoring of fieldwork progress will allow for the early identification of difficulties.**

*"One month prior to fieldwork commencing the NC must agree projections for fieldwork with the CCT. At a minimum this must include the number of completed interviews expected per fortnight. Progress must then be closely monitored, including producing a fortnightly report on response for the CCT."* [ESS Specifications, Round 4]

Before fieldwork survey organisations need to provide projections of how many interviews they expect to be completed each week. During the fieldwork period, survey organisations should provide **fortnightly or – even better - weekly progress reports**. These reports should contain as **essential information** an overall breakdown of the issued sample and an

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<sup>2</sup> In addition, from a methodological point of view one should keep the average workload of the interviewers low in order to reduce the possibility of interviewer effects on survey estimates. See, e.g., Philippens, Michel and Loosveldt, Geert (2004). [Interviewer-related variance in the European Social Survey](#), Paper presented at the Sixth International Conference on Logic and Methodology, in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 16-20 August 2004.

appraisal of the overall response rate. **Important additional information** includes response rates for demographic subgroups or interviewers, and information about re-issues. This information can then be compared to the projections to identify possible problems and the need for action.

If possible, obtain some interim data sets of achieved interviews or of contact form data during the fieldwork period. To facilitate these progress updates, interviewers must return all interviews and all records of refusals and other non-response promptly to the survey organisation.

For detailed recommendations about what is essential or useful to include in these reports see the [‘Progress checking’ guidelines](#) for Round 4. These guidelines also contain guidance on what National Coordinators should look out for when reading the progress reports of survey organisations.

#### Recommendations:

- *During the fieldwork period, survey organisations should provide regular feedback to the National Coordinators regarding fieldwork progress.*
- *During the fieldwork period National Coordinators must provide fortnightly reports on response progress to their CCT contact person (essential in order to comply with the specification for participating countries).*

#### **e) Payment of interviewers**

**Levels of interviewer pay and the pay structure may affect interviewers’ incentive to work hard and their willingness to enhance their response rates.** The pay rate for the study should be set in relation to the length and complexity of the interview, the expected difficulties of obtaining co-operation, and the amount of record keeping demanded of the interviewer. Of course, an attractive pay rate relative to the pay on other studies is always advantageous.

‘Bonus’ payments for achieved interviews above a certain response rate target may have a positive effect. However, any bonus system must be perceived as being fair otherwise it can lead to resentment. The areas in which interviewers work can vary considerably (and often in an unknown way) in the challenges they pose to the interviewers and this should be taken into account too.<sup>3</sup>

It is usual for survey organisations to have a standard policy concerning pay arrangements, which they are unlikely to want to amend for a particular study. The two standard policies are to pay interviewers an **hourly rate** or to pay **per completed interview**. The former may make fieldwork costs very hard to control (and make them more expensive as a result), whereas the latter may provide less incentive for interviewers to enhance their response rates amongst individuals who are hard to reach, or hard to persuade to participate.

#### Recommendation:

- *Discuss the interviewer pay arrangement with the survey organisation. The pay rates for ESS should be attractive for interviewers, both with respect to the study difficulty and with respect to the pay on other studies.*

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<sup>3</sup> Additionally or alternatively you might consider interviewer bonuses for timely work on the ESS assignment. Some ESS countries, for example, have had positive experiences with a bonus system that takes into account of when interviewers start contacting their sample units, when they return their first interviews and by when they complete their assignment.

### III Reducing the number of non-contacts

*“The proportion of non-contacts should not exceed 3 per cent of all sampled units.” [ESS Specifications, Round 4]*

Meeting this target will involve considerable efforts on the part of the interviewers and the field control team. Below we detail some ways of minimising non-contacts.

#### a) **Number, timing and mode of calls**

There is a considerable body of evidence showing that surveys which insist on several calls at different times of day, on different days of the week, and over an extended period of time have lower non-contact rates.

–The ESS specifies a call schedule that includes *“at least four personal visits by interviewers to each sampling unit before it is abandoned as non-productive, on different days, of which at least 1 must be at the weekend and 1 in the evening. These visits should be spread over at least two different weeks. Similarly, to allow difficult-to-contact people to be located, the fieldwork period should not be less than 30 days. ... The first contact with potential respondents, following a possible advance letter, will be face-to-face. Once in contact with a household, interviewers may make (or change) appointments by telephone. The one exception to this is where the country’s sample is one of named individuals with telephone numbers. Here the first contact may be made by telephone, in order to make appointments to visit the respondent. However, the country has to provide acceptable evidence that the response rate will not be damaged. Sampled individuals without a listed phone number should be contacted face-to-face. Where those with telephone numbers cannot be contacted by phone the same number of in person visits is still required. Interviews may not, under any circumstances, be conducted over the telephone..”* [ESS Specifications, Round 4]

In order to ensure that the above call schedule is adhered to (because interviewer preferences sometimes do not mirror these patterns) control and checking of the call scheduling may be necessary. The interviewers are required to record the time, day, mode and outcome of all the calls they make in the contact forms. Where the contact forms are not used to monitor fieldwork an alternative system providing this information needs to be in place.

Analyses of the contact forms data from ESS Rounds 1 to 3, show that people are harder to reach in some countries than in other countries. In order to bring down non-contact rates to an acceptable level, countries where this applies should consider raising the minimum number of calls above four. Besides that, the analysis indicates that a number of countries do not even adhere to the minimum required number of four call attempts to non-contacts and / or they do not make the evening and weekend calls required (see Response Based Quality Assessment, [Round 1](#), [Round 2](#) and [Round 3](#)). In these instances response rates clearly suffer. National Coordinators in these countries should discuss this issue with their survey organisation, in order to improve compliance in Round 4.

The preferred mode of first contact in the ESS is face-to-face. Please note that even in countries with samples of named individuals with telephone numbers, all individuals without an available phone number **and all non-contacts and refusals obtained by telephone still have to be visited in person**. In addition all interviews themselves must be conducted face to face.

Recommendations:

- *When the progress reports on fieldwork (see Section II) reveal a high non-contact rate, participating countries should check whether the interviewers adhered to the specified call schedule or not. This may on occasion require that contact forms are checked on site at the survey organisation by the National Coordination team.*
- *Based on experiences from ESS Rounds 1 to 3, we suggest that some countries consider raising the minimum number of calls and changing the timing of the calls. Further details can be found in the Data Quality Assessment Report based on analysis of Round 3 contact forms (see links above).*

**b) Length of fieldwork period**

*“The main fieldwork period will last for at least one month within a four-month period between 1 September and end December 2006 .... Only in special circumstances within a particular country would deviations from this timetable be allowed and only following prior agreement with the CCT.... to allow difficult-to-contact people to be located, the fieldwork period should not be less than 30 days.” [ESS Specifications, Round 4]*

**Truncated fieldwork periods lead to a higher proportion of non-contacts.** Thus, the ESS allows a fieldwork period of up to 4 months and a minimum of one month to help counter this problem and increase the chances of achieving a maximum non-contact rate of 3 per cent. Longer fieldwork periods also allow for more conversion attempts on refusals (see Section IV).

Recommendation:

- *Ensure that optimal use is made of the stipulated fieldwork period. In particular, try to ensure that interviewers will work in all areas from the very beginning of the fieldwork period.*

## IV Minimising the number of refusals

### a) *Advance letters*

**A letter sent in advance of an interviewer call usually has a positive effect on the response rate.** It can serve several purposes, addressing a variety of issues known to affect survey participation. The advance letter can be used to

- explain the purpose of the survey,
- identify the sponsor and the survey organisation,
- include or announce any gifts or incentives and provide information about them,
- alert the respondent, or household, to expect a call from an interviewer.

In most cases, interviewers value the use of an advance letter, as their first contact with the sample person or the sample household is then not totally unexpected.

If the sample frame is one of named individuals, the advance letter can be addressed personally to the selected individual. If using a sampling frame of addresses or households, the effect of an advance letter may be diluted, as the individual to be selected may not receive or read the letter. However, once the household has been selected the interviewer can still post or drop the letter at the household before the first contact attempt.

**Care should be taken to ensure that the time span between the arrival of the letter and the call of the interviewer is not too long.** Sometimes the best way to do this is to instruct interviewers to send the letters in a way that matches their planned work pattern (rather than sending the letters centrally at the start of the fieldwork period).

A guide on how countries might draft an advance letter for respondents is available [here](#)<sup>4</sup>. This document also provides some suggestions for countries who intend to use a leaflet in addition to the advance letter.

#### Recommendation:

- *Use an advance letter, personalised with the individual name if possible, or the address. Include the letters in interviewer workpacks, and instruct them to organise posting them a few days before they intend to contact the address.*
- *If an attempt is being made to contact a household a long time after the initial letter was sent (for example with a reissue) then consideration should be given to sending a second letter*

### b) *Respondent incentives*

There are numerous examples of studies that show that – even modest – **‘rewards’ help to improve the response rate.** If going down this route, there is a decision to make whether

- to give the incentive to all sampled individuals prior to them agreeing or not to take part in the survey, or
- to make the incentive conditional on them agreeing to participate in the survey.

According to the existing literature, unconditional prepaid incentives seem to be more effective than conditional incentives paid upon completion of the interview. Thus, eliciting feelings of obligation from the unconditional incentive is more effective than rewarding participation.

Also, cash incentives appear to work better than non-monetary incentives.

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<sup>4</sup> This example was provided for Round 3 of the ESS.

It may be necessary to monitor the extent to which monetary incentives disproportionately encourage the participation of people with low incomes compared to those with high incomes and thereby have an effect on nonresponse bias. If poorer people are usually underrepresented in the achieved sample, monetary incentives might reduce nonresponse bias. If poorer people are already overrepresented, incentives might even increase the nonresponse bias.

Offering a choice of different types of incentives might attract people from a more diverse background. This might help to reduce an existing nonresponse bias and counteract the potentially selective effect of offering one specific incentive.

In some cases it may be sensible to restrict incentives to areas where response tends to be low, e.g. big cities, in order to increase response in these difficult areas. In other cases, the use of incentives might be restricted to individuals who initially refuse to participate.<sup>5</sup>

To come to a decision on whether or not to use an incentive you have to judge the relative time and cost advantages of using an incentive versus not. Incentives may mean less interviewer time in persuading respondents to participate or less time in refusal conversions. The reduction in interviewer time – and thus costs – must be weighed against the cost of providing incentives.

*Recommendation:*

- *Consider using an incentive to raise response rates.*
- *Be aware that incentives might have an effect on nonresponse bias, as well as response rates.*

**c) *Converting people who initially ‘refuse’ participation***<sup>6</sup>

In order to maximise response rates, and minimise refusal rates, **all participating countries should consider trying to ‘convert’ people who initially refuse to participate in the survey**, by persuading them to reconsider.<sup>7</sup>

When refusal conversion efforts are to be made, a decision has to be taken as to who makes the conversion attempt. In general, it is strongly recommended that conversion cases should be reissued to another interviewer. Where possible that interviewer should also be more senior. This requires that experienced interviewers (“refusal converters”) are available and that a system is in place to allow the transfer of the contact form information collected by the first interviewer to the second interviewer.

When reassigning a case to a different interviewer, it might be worth considering gender or age matching between converter and refuser. Besides changing interviewers, (personalised) persuasion letters or incentives for refusal conversion (see above) can be helpful.

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<sup>5</sup> While this procedure is apparently cost-effective, it raises the concern that initially co-operative respondents would perceive this as unfair, if they have contact with other respondents that were interviewed only after a first refusal. This might be problematic if several people in a small community are sampled.

<sup>6</sup> We use the term “refusal conversion” because it is widely used in the methodological literature. This is not intended in a legal sense of “refusal”. It could perhaps be more appropriate to talk about “repeated attempts to persuade initially reluctant persons to reconsider the survey request”.

<sup>7</sup> In some countries, such conversion attempts are restricted by data protection laws. Another issue where the legal situation in the country has to be considered is interviewing minors (such as the younger people in the ESS frames). In some countries, not only the young person but also his/her parents have to consent to the survey request.

As refusals are often influenced by the circumstances and the mood of the potential respondent at the time of the initial survey request refusal conversion attempts can often be quite successful. Analyses of the ESS Rounds 1 to 3 data reveal differences in refusal conversion efforts and in success rates across countries<sup>8</sup>. Thus every country should check its results in Rounds 1 to 3 thoroughly, and liaise with the survey organisation about ways to improve the effectiveness of the procedures used. As a general rule, we should keep in mind that **"refusal conversion" is only the second best way to deal with refusals: the better route is "refusal avoidance"**. Inexperienced interviewers in particular often prompt many "soft refusals" by pressing the respondents to make a decision too quickly. Training should help interviewers to identify situations when a refusal is likely and provide them with exit strategies before a refusal is explicitly given. Interviewers can then return at a more convenient time when they are more likely to get cooperation. Specific techniques on how to avoid refusals should be part of interviewer briefings.

Recommendation:

- *Interviewers should be familiar with effective techniques to avoid refusals. In particular, countries with low (interim) response rates should try to attempt to convert as many refusals as feasible into an interview. If possible, experienced interviewers should carry out the conversion attempts.*

## **Literature**

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<sup>8</sup> See 'Data Quality Assessment' reports [Round 1](#), [Round 2](#) and [Round 3](#).