# Field Procedures in the European Social Survey Round 7: Enhancing Response Rates

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## 1 Introduction

## 2 Interviewers

2.1 Selecting interviewers: experience and training

2.2 Briefing interviewers about all aspects of the study

2.3 Interviewer assignment sizes and overall workload

2.4 Payment of interviewers

2.5 Monitoring interviewers’ progress

## 3 Reducing the number of noncontacts

3.1 Number, timing and mode of calls

3.2 Length and timing of fieldwork period

## 4 Minimising the number of refusals

4.1 Advance letters

4.2 Respondent incentives

4.3 Converting people who initially ‘refuse’ participation

## 5 Unable and other reasons for nonresponse

## 6 Specification, references and literature

6.1 Specification, guidelines and related documents

6.2 References

6.3 Background literature

6.3.1 General

6.3.2 Interviewer characteristics and nonresponse

6.3.3 Interviewer training

6.3.4 Establishing contact

6.3.5 Minimising refusal

6.3.6 Respondent incentives

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Earlier versions of this document relating to previous rounds of fieldwork are available at [www.europeansocialsurvey.org](http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org).
1 Introduction

One of the distinguishing features of the European Social Survey (ESS) is its high methodological standards aiming at 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 countries, and to ensure that the people interviewed in each country closely represent the country’s total population. Nonresponse bias is one impediment to national and cross-national representativity. ESS Headquarters (based at City University), the Core Scientific Team (CST) of the ESS (together called HQ-CST), National Coordinators (NCs) and survey agencies work closely together to pursue representativeness and optimal comparability, enhance response rates and minimise nonresponse bias.

This document outlines how fieldwork procedures may enhance response rates. Some procedures form part of the Specification for ESS ERIC Member and Observer countries and, as such, should be adopted in each country. Other issues discussed in this paper, however, are recommendations or suggestions, and implementation will depend on the national survey design and the national context. Wherever possible, countries should take into account experiences from previous rounds of the ESS to improve fieldwork and response rates in the present round.

In the Specification for ESS ERIC Member and Observer countries (European Social Survey, 2013, p. 23), a minimum target response rate of 70 per cent in each country has been outlined: ... the minimum target response rate - after discounting ineligibles... should be 70%. All countries are expected to aim for the 70% response rate or – at least – plan for a higher response rate than in the previous round. NCs will discuss with the Sampling Expert Panel which national target response rate will be used in designing the sample and preparing the fieldwork. This national target response rate will be based on response rates in previous rounds, and feedback from the FWQ team on past deviations in fieldwork, and may require increased efforts and improvements in the fieldwork design. Survey agencies should cost their surveys with this response rate in mind and consider what steps may be required to achieve it.

The effectiveness of different approaches may well vary between different countries, with different norms, cultural settings, geography, and traditions (see Johnson et al., 2010). The HQ-CST is therefore very happy to discuss or advise on fieldwork procedures to be adopted within particular countries.

Section 6 of this paper comprises three sets of references. Section 6.1 lists official ESS documents that outline procedures that have to be followed or guidelines in particular areas. These documents are indicated by number: e.g., Round 7 Specification for ESS-ERIC Member and Observer Countries is henceforth referred to as 6.1(1) – which indicates that the reader should refer to Section 6.1 of this paper and locate document number 1 on the list. Section 6.2 lists the references mentioned in the text of this document. Section 6.3 provides background literature on different aspects of nonresponse enhancement, mainly focused on face-to-face surveys. Where possible, a link to the literature is provided.

Nonresponse does have different causes and different measures can be taken to enhance the response rate. To minimise the potential for nonresponse bias the following issues should be taken into account:

a) Response enhancing measures can affect subgroups 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 nonresponse should take account of such issues. Response enhancing efforts should therefore target groups who are disproportionately underrepresented as a result of design issues. When
reissuing refusals in order to convert them into productive interviews, you might, for example, consider trying to convert some of those who appear to be the more reluctant, since less reluctant people often tend to be more similar to those who have already agreed to be respondents.

b) Enhance response across subgroups
One of the main difficulties with nonresponse is the difference in characteristics between respondents and nonrespondents. 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 enhance levels of response amongst all groups of the population and to bring response rates to a consistent level across subgroups, if possible. This is also why the HQ-CST does not allow substitution of addresses or individuals, nor is it in favour of oversampling in areas where response rates are expected to be lower².

c) Close monitoring of response rates is necessary
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 the necessary information, though some survey agencies use their own monitoring system (6.1(2,4)). In the latter case, care should be taken that the monitoring system allows for enough detail to detect problems during fieldwork in time.

d) Distinguish between types of nonrespondents
There are three basic types of nonrespondents:
- **Noncontacts**: those who cannot be contacted during the fieldwork period;
- **Refusals**: those who are contacted, but refuse to participate;
- **Other nonrespondents**: those who are contacted and might be willing to participate, but cannot do so, for example because of illness or language problems.

Previously, the last group was assumed to be much smaller than the other two, but in fact the share of nonresponse for "other” reasons is quite substantial in a number of ESS countries. Obviously, different measures are required to deal with each of these groups of nonrespondents. After discussing broader issues of interviewer selection, training, workload, monitoring and payment (Section 2), this document focuses separately on possible ways to minimise noncontacts (Section 3), refusals (Section 4) and nonresponse due to other reasons (Section 5).

e) Carry out 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% of respondents, 5% of refusals and 5% of cases where no contact with the sampled person was made (noncontacts and ineligibles) (6.1(1)).

² Oversampling in difficult areas has been used in the ESS in previous rounds (e.g., see Pickery and Carton, 2008). It is not recommended, however, as this strategy will have no impact on nonresponse bias and ignores the need for “balanced” response rates.
2 Interviewers

2.1 Selecting interviewers: experience and training

There is a considerable body of evidence that shows that different interviewers achieve different response rates (see 6.3.2). 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 sex, do not seem to play a major role in affecting response rates. Experience should ideally be combined with general interviewer training (see also 6.3.3).

Recommendations:
- Attempt to enhance response rates by selecting experienced and well-trained interviewers. Experience includes experience of conducting random sample surveys, selection of respondents within households (if necessary), and having been trained in persuasion, refusal avoidance and refusal conversion strategies, tailoring and maintaining interaction, and (if necessary) the use of CAPI software.

2.2 Briefing interviewers about all aspects of the study

“All interviewers must be personally briefed by the NC or members of the research team from the survey agency before carrying out an assignment, drawing on detailed interviewer instructions prepared by the HQ-CST” (6.1(1)).

ESS interviewers are expected to have received training in and to have experience of conducting face-to-face surveys among random samples. To prepare them for ESS Round 7 they should receive a specific in-person briefing. It should be noted that interviewer training is different from a briefing, in which specific instructions for a particular survey research project, such as description of the project, questionnaire and rules, are presented. ESS briefings should cover in detail respondent selection procedures, if applicable, and recording of the contact process using the model contact forms, including the coding of interviewer observation data.

They should also enable interviewers to practise asking questions from the survey, facilitated by guidance provided by the HQ-CST. Care should be taken to ensure that less experienced interviewers also receive training on general interviewing and contacting techniques. The HQ-CST has prepared guidelines on issues to include within the personal briefings and written instructions for interviewers (see 6.1(5)).

It is important that the personal briefings – and accompanying written instructions – do not only focus 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 for less experienced or less well-trained interviewers. In countries with high levels of refusals, briefings should cover additional 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. All interviewers will also need to be briefed on the coding of observable data (6.1(7)).

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 from earlier rounds. Interviewers might also find this information useful when ‘selling’ the survey to target persons. It is important that interviewers feel that their role in the ESS process is essential and 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 that sufficient remuneration is also a strong motivating factor.

**Recommendations:**
- One day or half day personal briefing sessions of all interviewers by the NCs and survey agency, covering all aspects of the field procedures and the interview (essential for complying with the Specification for ESS ERIC Member and Observer countries).
- Include a session on doorstep introduction and discussions on encouraging participation.
- Provide interviewers with information on the use of the survey data.
- Motivate interviewers to deliver good work, convey the importance of the survey, and boost their confidence about their ability to ‘sell’ the survey.

2.3 Interviewer assignment sizes and overall workload

“Interviewers’ assignment sizes (workload) should not exceed 24 issued sample 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 sample units and any proposed deviation in this area must be discussed with the CST in advance” (6.1(1)).

To be effective and efficient, interviewers should be assigned a certain number of sample units, but too large a workload can stand in the way of a high response rate and finalising a survey within the required period. Interviewer progress should be closely monitored, and their remuneration should be adequate.

**The amount of work allocated to each interviewer can affect the response rates.** The assignment size will affect the amount of effort an interviewer can apply when attempting contact and securing cooperation. 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. 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 the interview and survey estimates. See for example Loosveldt and Beullens (2013) on the large effect of interviewers on interview duration.

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. Controlling interviewer workload may of course be difficult if interviewers are working for more than one organisation or more than one study during the fieldwork period.

**Recommendations:**
- Discuss the workload of interviewers with the survey agency, to avoid conflicts of interest.
- 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 noncontacts and refusal conversion.

2.4 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 cooperation, and the amount of record keeping demanded of the interviewer (including the
completion of Contact Forms and the collection of neighbourhood observations). Of course, an attractive pay rate relative to the pay on other studies is always advantageous.

There are several ways of providing interviewers with bonus payments. Firstly, bonus payments for achieved interviews above a certain response rate target may have a positive effect. 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 could be taken into account. Secondly, interviewer bonuses for timely work on the ESS assignment could be considered. 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. Finally, interviewers who are issued difficult cases in the refusal conversion phase might also receive some additional payment. However, any bonus system must be perceived as being fair otherwise it can lead to resentment.

Survey agencies usually have standard pay arrangements, which they are unlikely to want to amend for a particular study. Two standard policies are to pay interviewers an hourly rate or 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. On the other hand, payment per completed interview (only) might be an incentive for undocumented substitution, and a disincentive to complete contact forms and observe neighbourhood characteristics for nonresponding individuals.

**Recommendations:**

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

2.5 Monitoring interviewers’ progress

Close monitoring of fieldwork progress will allow for the early identification of difficulties. “NCs should monitor the progress of fieldwork, including the response rates in different regions, among different subgroups (where possible), and by different interviewers. .. In addition, fieldwork monitoring includes the submission of fieldwork projections, at least one month prior to the start of fieldwork and the submission of a fortnightly report on fieldwork progress and response to the HQ-CST” (6.1(1)).

Before fieldwork starts survey agencies need to provide projections of how many interviews they expect to be completed each week (or – at a minimum – per fortnight) (6.1(3)). During the fieldwork period, the agencies should provide **fortnightly or – even better – weekly progress reports.** These reports should contain as **essential information** i) an overall breakdown of the issued sample and ii) an appraisal of the overall response rate. This information can then be compared to the projections to identify possible problems and the need for action. **Important additional information** includes response rates for regions, demographic subgroups or interviewers, and information about reissues.

If possible, NCs should try to obtain some interim data sets of achieved interviews or of contact form data during the fieldwork period. If such data are available, NCs should monitor the average length of interview for each interviewer and investigate interviewers who are outliers in case this indicates quality problems. To facilitate these progress updates, interviewers should be encouraged to return all interviews and all records of refusals and other nonresponse promptly to the survey organisation.

For detailed recommendations about what is essential or useful to include in these reports see the ‘Progress checking’ guidelines (6.1(4)). These guidelines also contain guidance on what NCs 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 NCs regarding fieldwork progress.
- During the fieldwork period NCs must provide fortnightly reports on response progress to their CST contact person (essential in order to comply with the Specification for ESS ERIC Member and Observer countries).

3 Reducing the number of noncontacts

“The proportion of noncontacts should not exceed 3% of all sample units” (6.1(1)). Meeting this target will involve considerable efforts on the part of the interviewers and the survey agency. Below we detail some ways of minimising noncontacts. Additional literature on this topic is listed in 6.3.4.

3.1 Number, timing and mode of calls

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

According to the ESS Specification (6.1(1)) “ESS interviewers have to make at least four personal visits to each sample unit before it is abandoned as non-productive
- on different days of the week and times of day,
- of which at least one must be at the weekend and one in the evening
- 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 and brochure, will be face-to-face. Once contact with a household has been established, or after four unsuccessful personal visits, 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. At least one in person visit to each sample unit is still required in order to collect information on the dwelling and neighbourhood. Interviews may under no circumstances be conducted over the telephone.”

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 (see also Luiten, 2013, chapter 8). 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 the previous rounds (see Stoop et al., 2010) show that people are harder to reach in some countries than in other countries. In order to bring down noncontact 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 noncontacts and/or
they do not make the evening and weekend calls required (see e.g., Matsuo et al., 2010). NCs in countries with too high noncontact rates and/or limited contact efforts should discuss this issue with their survey agency, in order to improve compliance in Round 7.

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 must be visited in person. In addition all interviews themselves must be conducted face to face.

Recommendations:
- When the progress reports on fieldwork (see Section 2.5) reveal a high noncontact rate, participating countries should check whether the interviewers adhered to the specified call schedule or not. If the call record information is not available as an interim dataset during fieldwork, this may on occasion require that contact forms be checked on site at the survey agency by the NC team.
- Based on experiences from previous ESS Rounds, we suggest that some countries consider raising the minimum number of calls and changing the timing of the calls.

3.2 Length and timing of fieldwork period

“The ESS fieldwork period will last at least one month within a four-month period between 1 September and 31 December 2014. As of Round 7 every country will be expected to start fieldwork in September 2014” (6.1(1)).

Short fieldwork periods lead to a higher proportion of noncontacts. 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 noncontact rate of 3%. Longer fieldwork periods also make it possible to approach people who are away for longer periods (on holiday, abroad, in hospital). Whenever a temporary absence has been recorded by the interviewer, a re-contact should be planned when the sample unit is back home (if this information is available) or after a few weeks. To make this possible it is important that all sample units are visited as early as possible within the fieldwork period.

Finally, longer fieldwork periods allow for more refusal conversion attempts (see Section 4.3). Interesting evidence on the effects of longer fieldwork periods is given by Sztabiński et al. (2009).

Note that a joint fieldwork period in all ESS countries guarantees that the reference period of the ESS data is kept comparable, which is particularly important for an attitudinal survey like the ESS. It minimises the chance of major events impacting on survey results differentially across countries. In the previous rounds of ESS, the number of countries deviating from the prescribed fieldwork period has increased. This is partly the result of funding decisions being made too late in some countries and partly it is the consequence of a sub-optimal definition and use of the fieldwork period in a number of countries.

Recommendations:
- When deciding on the concrete fieldwork start and end dates in a country try, as far as possible, to take national context into account. Major holiday seasons could be problematic in some countries, although in other countries this might be a good time to find people at home.
- Try to minimise interference by other competing large scale surveys conducted by the survey organisation during the same period (see Section 2.3).
- Ensure that optimal use is made of the agreed upon fieldwork period. In particular, try to ensure that interviewers will work in all areas from the very beginning of the fieldwork period.
4 Minimising the number of refusals

In face-to-face surveys, refusals are often the main factor behind nonresponse (Stoop et al., 2010). This is especially worrying when reasons for refusal are related to the topic of the survey (e.g., those interested in politics more often cooperate in surveys on political issues). There are many studies on reasons for refusal, and how to minimise refusal and maximise cooperation (see 6.3.5). Here we will focus on three survey design issues, namely the use of advance letters, incentives for respondents and refusal conversion. The important issue of interviewer training in persuasion strategies and refusal avoidance has already been discussed in Sections 2.1 and 2.2.

4.1 Advance letters

A letter sent in advance of an interviewer call usually has a positive effect on the response rate, although there can be exceptions (see Luiten, 2011). 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 it means that their first contact with the sample person or the sample household is not totally unexpected.

If the sample frame is one of named individuals, the advance letter should 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.

Care should be taken to ensure that the time span between the arrival of the letter and the visit or call by 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 from the ESS intranet (6.1(8)). This document also provides some suggestions for countries who intend to use a leaflet in addition to the advance letter. It will always be necessary to adapt the letter and the leaflet to the national situation.

Recommendations:

- Use an advance letter, personalised with the individual name if possible, or the address. Include the letters in interviewer work packs, 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.

4.2 Respondent incentives

There are numerous examples of studies that show that – even modest – ‘rewards’ help to improve the response rate (see 6.3.6). Evidence exists that incentives in particular help to motivate target persons who are not interested in the survey topic. If an incentive is to be used in a country, there is a decision to make whether to give the incentive unconditionally 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.

3 In many countries, personalising a letter by addressing the recipient with “Dear Mr. Smith” is considered as good practice. However, in former Communist countries such as Poland, this way of addressing a target person might not be the best way to ensure participation.
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.

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 the composition of the sample. If poorer people are usually underrepresented in the achieved sample, monetary incentives might reduce nonresponse bias. If poorer people are already overrepresented, however, incentives might even increase the potential for nonresponse bias on survey estimates.

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.4

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.

**Recommendations:**
- Consider using an incentive to raise response rates.
- Be aware that incentives – as other response enhancing measures – might have an effect on non-response bias, as well as on response rates.

4.3 Converting people who initially ‘refuse’ participation5

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.6 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. Persuading initial refusals to cooperate not only increases the response rate, it can also lead to smaller nonresponse bias if the converted refusals were more similar to final refusals than those respondents who cooperated without first refusing.

Analyses of previous ESS Rounds reveal differences in refusal conversion efforts and in success rates across countries (Stoop et al., 2010). Thus every country should check its results thoroughly, and discuss with the survey agency ways to improve the effectiveness of the procedures used. In ESS 5, e.g., more than 10 countries obtained an increase in the response rates of more than 3 percentage points through their refusal conversion efforts. One country even achieved an increase of 15 percentage points (Matsuo & Loosveldt, 2013, 36). However, there is no evidence that the refusal conversion efforts also helped to improve the socio-economic representativeness of the final samples.7

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4 While this procedure is apparently cost-effective, it raises the concern that initially co-operative respondents would perceive this as unfair.
5 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”.
6 In some countries, such conversion attempts are restricted by data protection laws.
7 There is no indication from ESS data that converted refusals provide poorer-quality data in terms of measurement errors.
This may partly result from the fact that in a lot of ESS countries refusal conversion aimed mainly at ‘soft’ refusals. The ideal would be to re-approach all refusals, as far as ethically possible and financially feasible. In practice, however, often only a subsample of refusals can be re-approached. In this situation, a critical question refers to the way the subsample should be selected. The answer to this question will differ depending on the aims that are pursued through the refusal conversion efforts.

If the main goal is to increase the response rate, the most promising strategy is to concentrate on ‘soft’ refusals and to try to convert as many of the ‘easy’ cases as possible. However, this will typically not help to reduce potential nonresponse bias (it may sometimes even increase bias) (Beullens & Loosveldt, 2012). Another strategy is to re-approach a random subsample of all refusals. By doing this, one will usually end up with a lower response rate than when re-approaching only ‘soft’ refusals. This approach is better suited, though, if one wants to use the resulting data to investigate whether the sample is affected by a nonresponse bias or not. A different solution would be to find out which groups are underrepresented before refusal conversion (e.g. men, big city dwellers), and specifically aim refusal conversion efforts at the underrepresented groups. This could make the final sample more balanced, and it could also help to improve estimates for other substantive survey variables, provided the demographic variables are not only related to the response propensity but also to the substantive survey variables.

If these efforts are really expected to result in a more balanced sample and a better representation of the population this could compensate a slightly lower response rate than would have been feasible by targeting the less ‘difficult’ cases (in our example: women and rural area dwellers). Given the complexity of the issue, the HQ-CST and the Fieldwork Team are happy to discuss alternatives with countries during the fieldwork planning process. Please note that oversampling to compensate for expected low response rates is not allowed.

When refusal conversion efforts are to be made, a decision has to be taken as to who makes the conversion attempt. Analysis of ESS contact forms data confirms the recommendation known from the literature that conversion cases should be reissued to another interviewer. Where possible that interviewer should also be more experienced. 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. The analysis of ESS data also indicates that the chances of success are higher, if one waits two or three weeks before re-approaching an initial refusal (see Beullens et al, 2009; Stoop et al., 2010). Besides changing interviewers, (personalised) persuasion letters or incentives for refusal conversion (see above) can also be helpful.

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 target persons 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 (see also Sections 2.1 and 2.2).

**Recommendations:**
- Interviewers should be familiar with effective techniques to avoid refusals, and/or this should be included in the interviewer training.
- In particular, countries with low (interim) response rates should try to attempt to convert as many refusals as feasible into an interview. The ideal would be to re-approach all refusals, as far as ethically possible and financially feasible.
- If possible, a different and experienced interviewer (maybe an interviewer of different sex or age group) should carry out the conversion attempt.
5 Unable and other reasons for nonresponse

While it is generally assumed that noncontact and refusal are the main reasons of nonresponse, ESS results show that quite a number of target persons do not participate because they are not able or for other causes (Stoop et al., 2010).

There are several reasons why a person cannot participate in the survey. Firstly, a language barrier may stand in the way of an interview. Although in the ESS translations are required for each language used as a first language by 5% or more of the population, speakers of other languages may not be able to answer the survey questions. Note that in these cases the ESS does not allow the minor language speaker to be substituted by a household member who does speak the survey language, nor does it allow proxy interviews (where someone answers the questions on behalf of the target person) to be conducted. In addition, the ESS does not allow the interviewer or another household member to translate the questions ‘on the fly’. It is felt that the loss in terms of representativity and measurement error – were this procedures allowed – counterweighs the loss in terms of nonresponse error. Therefore, a language barrier implies nonresponse.

The second case of not being able is when the target person is mentally or physically unable to participate, or ill or sick when the interviewer visits. In these cases too substitution and proxy interviews are not allowed. If the inability to participate is a temporary condition because the person is not well, sick, ill or in hospital but may recover within a few days or weeks, the interviewer should come back after a certain period and find out if the target respondent can be interviewed at that time. Note that a mental or physical inability or illness or sickness does not mean that a sample unit is ineligible. It could just mean that the target person is unable to answer the survey questions.

There are also “other” reasons for nonresponse. One “other” reason could be that a case is not issued. In other cases it is not always clear what these reason are. To improve fieldwork in future rounds and to assess the impact of nonresponse it is recommended to keep these “other” reasons to a minimum. If a person is not available during the fieldwork period, this would be classed as ‘noncontact’, rather than ‘other’. If it is not possible to arrange an appointment during telephone recruitment (even when no explicit reason is given) this is a refusal rather than “other” as would be the case in a face-to-face approach. In this case the sample units should be visited face-to-face and asked for cooperation (see Section 3.1).

Recommendations:
• If the target person is not well, the interviewer should come back after a few days or weeks.
• If no appointment can be set up over the telephone, the interviewer should make a face-to-face visit.
6 Specification, references and literature

6.1 Specification, guidelines and related documents

The following documents will be available at http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/intranet/nc/


(2) ESS Contact forms: available on request from ess@city.ac.uk

(3) ESS Round 6 Fieldwork Progress and Round 7 Projections (including a template that should be used to submit fieldwork projections)

(4) ESS Round 7 Progress reports from survey organisations

(5) ESS Round 7 Project Instructions (for CAPI and PAPI)

(6) ESS Round 7 Interview briefing instructions – three documents (ESS Interviewer Briefings – Notes on standardised interviews; Best Practice and ESS scenarios on conducting standardised interviews and ESS Practice Interview – for interviewer briefings

(7) ESS Round 7 Explanations and instructions for completing ESS contact forms & Guidelines for Collecting observable data

(8) ESS Round 7 Advance letter template: will be provided


6.2 References


6.3 Background literature

6.3.1 General

6.3.2 Interviewer characteristics and nonresponse

6.3.3 Interviewer training

6.3.4 Establishing contact
6.3.5 Minimising refusal


6.3.6 Respondent incentives


