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What has the Pandemic revealed about the transition to online data collection?

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Pre-pandemic

- Some surveys transitioned from interviewer modes to online data collection; for example
 - ESRC-funded longitudinal surveys (e.g. UKHLS, UK Cohort studies)
 - The Community Life Survey (Department for Digital, Media & Sport)
 - The Active Lives Survey (Sport England)
 - The Labour Market Survey (Office for National Statistics)
- All of these examples involved development work to aid the transition

During the pandemic: repeat ad hoc surveys

■ **POSTPONED**, for example

- European Social Survey (ESS)
- National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyle (Natsal)
- Both of these proceeded with survey development work

■ **TRANSITIONED TO ONLINE**, for example

- British Election Study (BES) which was half-way through its fieldwork period when face-to-face interviewing was suspended
- British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA) which is carried out every year from 30 Oct 2020 to 7 Dec 2020

During the pandemic: continuous surveys

- Complex requirement that rely on interviewers such as bio-measures, occupation coding, etc
 - **PAUSED**, for example the Health Survey for England (but proceeded with survey development work)
- Other continuous surveys tended to transition to telephone interviewing using different sampling/contact approaches:
 - **Telephone follow-up** among previous wave respondents (e.g. Crime Survey for England & Wales, National Survey for Wales)
 - Fresh sample of addresses with **postal opt-in for telephone interview** (e.g. Family Resource Survey, National Travel Survey, English Housing Survey, National Survey for Wales)
 - Fresh sample of addresses with (postal opt-in for telephone interview and) **interviewer contact on doorstep** to boost response to telephone interview

During the pandemic: longitudinal surveys

- Mixed mode designs that included face-to-face data collection dropped face-to-face and continued with their other modes (e.g. Understanding Society continued with online and telephone)
- Transitioned from face-to-face to consecutive telephone and online data collection (e.g. Growing up in Scotland)
- Some use of CAVI (computer-assisted interviewing) while deferring most data collection until it is possible to carry out face-to-face interviewing (e.g. English Longitudinal Study of Aging, British Cohort Study, National Child Development Study)

'New' approaches that emerged during the pandemic

■ Push-to-telephone

- Address-based sample, postal contact, opt-in for tel interview

■ CAVI (Computer-Assisted Video Interviewing)

- Address-based/longitudinal sample, postal video instructions, tel contact
- Mixed results – very few people agree to video interview; slightly easier to use in longitudinal surveys but not as a standalone mode

■ ESS Electronic Questionnaire

- To be used alongside online data collection
- User-friendly questionnaire on tablet for those without access to internet or not able/willing to complete a questionnaire online

■ Knock-to-nudge

- Interviewer contact on doorstep (socially distanced) to encourage household members to complete online or telephone interview

Pre-pandemic constraints and concerns remain an issue

- Dependency on address-based sampling for random probability samples of the general population
 - i.e. Postcode Address File and AddressBase
 - Other than face-to-face, the only other viable contact mode is postal
- Response rates and risk of differential non-response bias
 - Response rates for postal opt-in are considerably lower than F2F
 - Responding sample more skewed to those with higher qualification levels, middle-aged, high income, etc compared to F2F
- Measurement differences
 - Existing questionnaires optimised for face-to-face administration
 - Long, complex, etc

Time series

- Cannot disentangle changes in survey estimates due to time/pandemic and switch in mode
 - Selection effects
 - Measurement effects
- As we return to face-to-face interviewing, carry out a parallel run of the pandemic approach and the face-to-face approach?
 - No takers so far.....

Transitioning to online – the verdict

- It is possible to transition from interviewer-administered modes to online
- There are constraints and concerns that have not disappeared
- Suitability of online data collection will depend on the key requirements of survey commissioners for quality but also budget and timeliness
- Transitioning a survey to online data collection should involve methodological research and development
- More funding for methodological research and development in this area is required – let's not lose momentum post-pandemic!

And finally...

- Signs are that face-to-face interviewing will return for many major surveys
- We now know that we can switch modes if we have to (but not yet with the confidence in the quality that we would like)
- Key areas to invest in (my 'wish list'):
 - Development and secure access to sampling frames that are better suited for selecting random probability samples of the general population
 - Future-proofing surveys so that the data collection instruments are portable across modes (thus making it possible to pivot between different contact methods)

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