Understanding Incentives and Motivators for Participation in the Youth Outcome Survey

In this brief:

We discuss different types of incentives and motivators that may be used to obtain optimal response rates for the NYTD youth outcome survey.

Target audience: Independent living coordinators

Key words: Incentives, youth outcome survey

Research on survey participation demonstrates that people are motivated to respond to surveys for three primary reasons (Singer and Bossarte, 2006):

- Altruism: Wanting to be helpful to the researcher or others who may benefit from the survey results;
- Survey Related Reasons: Interest in the topic, liking the interviewer or organization sponsoring the survey; and
- Egoistic: Motivated by money, likes completing surveys.

Surveys designed to appeal to all of these different motivations may have the most success in obtaining a high response rate. For the NYTD survey, many 17-year-old youth in foster care may be willing to participate out of interest in seeing the survey help other foster youth and/or because they have an interest in hearing about the obstacles and successes of other youth like themselves who are leaving or have left care. To the extent that States can communicate the importance of the NYTD survey in helping other youth and make the survey sound interesting and engaging, youth will be more likely to want to participate in baseline and follow-up outcomes data collection for NYTD.

> *"NYTD is giving us a chance to take ownership of our experiences through the survey and to be viewed as experts. It is critical that foster youth are engaged in all decisions being made regarding our lives; 'No decisions about US, without US.' The NYTD Survey allows me utilize my experience in foster care to make things better for future foster youth. Current and former foster youth deserve the chance for our input to be valued and acknowledged. NYTD encourages current and former foster youth to work together and take the survey to establish ownership while positively changing foster care."*
> – **JT, Former Foster Youth**

This Technical Assistance Brief, focused on assisting the reader in understanding different types of incentives and motivators for participating in the NYTD survey, is the first in a series of briefs on the topic of incentives.

Understanding Incentives

Incentives are frequently used in social science surveys to bolster response rates. In general, the research on incentives may be summarized as follows (Couper, 2008):

- Incentives increase response rates compared to no incentive;
- Prepaid incentives work better than promised incentives;
- Cash is more effective than non-monetary gifts; and
- Lotteries are less effective than giving everyone a small incentive.

When considering whether or not to use incentives to garner youth participation in the NYTD survey, States are encouraged to follow the guidance on incentives issued by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) entitled "Guidance on Agency Survey and Statistical Information Collections" (http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/inforeg/pmc_survey_guidance_2006.pdf). While these guidelines are specifically directed toward Federal agencies, States are encouraged to follow the same general principles. OMB guidelines state that all respondents should be treated equally with respect to incentives. That is, incentives should not be given solely to convert refusals, or treat specific subgroups differently, unless the plan is part of an experimental design for further investigation into the effects of incentives. While OMB generally discourages use of monetary or material incentives for Federal surveys, its guidelines explain that incentives may be appropriate for surveys of hard-to-find populations or respondents whose failure to participate would jeopardize the quality of the survey data (e.g., in panel surveys experiencing high attrition) or in studies that impose exceptional burden on respondents, such as those asking highly sensitive questions or requiring medical examinations. Youth who are no longer in foster care at ages 19 and 21 will likely fall into the category of a hard-to-find population, potentially supporting the use of incentives under OMB guidelines. States may also determine that offering incentives is advisable if it determines that there will be large non-response without a monetary incentive.

The OMB guidelines also encourage the use of appropriate nonmonetary incentives, particularly if they are related to the survey and will be of interest to respondents. For example, States might offer to provide a summary of the survey results to youth participants. States might emphasize that participation is another opportunity for youth to learn about current services that are available to them. If youth feel that the survey is a means of communicating their needs and obtaining assistance, they may be more likely to participate. Having a caseworker that stays in touch with the youth between the baseline and follow-up surveys to see if the youth has any needs the worker can address can be a very important motivator as well.

Incentives are most effective at increasing response rates when the survey topic has little relevance or is of little interest to certain groups within the respondent population (Singer and Kulka, 2004). To the extent that States can market the survey to their youth population and create interest and ownership of the NYTD survey by their youth, financial incentives will be less important for achieving a good response rate.

Determining the Type of Incentive to Use

States that decide to use monetary or material incentives will need to consider the timing and type of incentive to offer. There are three main categories to consider when using incentives:

- Prepaid versus promised incentives;
- Cash versus material incentives; and
- Lotteries versus individual incentives.

Prepaid or Promised Incentives

The research literature indicates that prepaid incentives are more effective at increasing response rates than promised incentives (Dillman, Smyth, and Christian, 2009; Singer and Kulka, 2004). Prepaid incentives do not need to be large to be effective. Prepaid token incentives of $1 or $2 have been demonstrated to increase response rates by 8% to 31% compared with no incentive (Dillman et al., 2009). James and Bolstein (1992) obtained a 71% response rate on a mail survey that provided a $1 prepaid incentive but only a 57% response rate for a promised incentive of $50 to return the completed survey. Prepaid incentives are effective because they engender a sense of obligation on the part of the respondent and because they are unexpected and bring additional attention to a survey request that could easily be ignored.

Quick Fact: North Carolina conducted a survey of youth in foster care to see what factors the youth believed would make the biggest difference in the decision to participate in the NYTD survey. While 85% felt that financial incentives were important, the second and third most important reasons (each cited by 73% of youth surveyed) were having a social worker stay in contact with the youth several times a year to see if there was anything the youth needed and taking the time to establish a good relationship prior to the youth leaving care.

Cash or Material Incentives

The literature is also consistent on the effects of cash versus gift cards and other material incentives: While gift cards and material incentives do increase response rates, they do so at a lower rate than cash incentives (Dillman et al., 2009). A meta-analysis of studies of incentives conducted by Church (1993) found that token cash incentives raised response rates by 19%, compared with 8% for material incentives. Finding a material gift that appeals to everyone in a sample may be difficult while cash has universal appeal.

Lotteries or Individual Incentives

Research on the effectiveness of lotteries or prize drawings in increasing response rates has been inconsistent with some studies finding positive results and others finding no effect (Singer and Kulka, 2004). Hubbard and Little's (2001) review of four mail surveys using lotteries as an incentive found that none of them had significantly higher response rates than the no-incentive control group. Hubbard and Little's own incentive experiment found that while a chance to win a $200 cash price resulted in an 11% increase in response rates over the no-incentive control group, providing all respondents with a $1 prepaid cash incentive was even more effective, resulted in a 28% increase in response rates over the no-incentive control group.

Porter and Whitcomb (2001) looked at the effect of different levels of lotteries ($50, $100, $150, and $200) on the participation rate of high school seniors asked to participate in a web survey. Overall, response rates in all conditions were very low, ranging from 13.9% for the no-incentive control group to 16.2% for the $100 lottery condition. Only the $100 lottery amount resulted in a response rate significantly higher than the no-incentive control group (though the increase was only 2.3%). Cobanoglu and Cobanoglu (2003) found that a prize drawing for a Personal Digital Assistant (PDA) resulted in no higher response rate than offering no incentive (20% response rate for the PDA lottery, 24% response rate for no incentive) while providing a luggage tag to everyone resulted in a 31% response rate. The highest response rate was obtained by providing both the luggage tag and the chance to win the PDA (42% response). Overall, the evidence strongly suggests that lotteries are not as effective as traditional cash incentives in encouraging survey participation (Couper, 2008; Dillman et al., 2009). However, they may be more effective than no incentive.

Other Methods for Increasing Participation in the Youth Outcome Survey

While monetary and material incentives may be an effective tool for increasing survey participation among some youth, States may want to consider other methods of increasing survey participation. These may include:

- Youth-driven marketing campaigns to obtain youth buy-in and endorsement of the survey;
- Providing survey results to youth so they can see how their peers are faring;
- Providing ongoing assistance and an extended relationship to support youth between survey rounds;
- Providing assistance to youth to address specific needs identified by the youth's responses in the outcome survey; and
- Engaging foster youth in the design of services to meet needs of youth transitioning from care and letting other youth know about these services.

Many States have partnered with youth advisory boards as they develop their plans for the NYTD survey. Foster youth can provide valuable suggestions for marketing the NYTD survey to other youth, for providing meaningful incentives for participation, and for designing best approaches for encouraging youth to stay in touch with the foster care agency between survey rounds.

Factors to Consider When Deciding Whether or Not to Use Incentives

States planning for the implementation of NYTD may want to consider the following questions regarding the feasibility and importance of providing incentives for their youth outcome survey:

- Is the NYTD survey being marketed to youth as a valuable tool to help youth transitioning from foster care?
- Do youth in foster care in the State feel personally invested in NYTD and its success?
- Has the youth advisory board been involved in the planning for NYTD?

- Have youth in the State been asked about the best ways to gain cooperation for the youth survey without the use of incentives?
- Is there a plan to provide the survey results to youth as a type of incentive?
- Does the State have the resources available to offer a token prepaid incentive?
- If promised incentives are being used, does the State have a plan for how to publicize these incentives so that youth are motivated to stay in touch to complete the follow-up survey?
- Does the State have a plan to document the effect of incentives on the response rates of different demographic groups?

In the next brief on incentives, we will discuss strategies for implementing various incentives to encourage participation in the youth outcome survey using State examples.

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