

Authors

Christopher Blattman
The University of Chicago

Julian Jamison
University of Exeter

Margaret Sheridan
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Measuring the measurement error:
A method to qualitatively validate sensitive survey data*

Christopher Blattman Tricia Gonwa Julian Jamison
Katherine Rodrigues Margaret Sheridan[†]

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Abstract

People may under-report sensitive and risky behaviors such as violence or substance abuse in surveys. Misreporting correlated with treatment is especially worrisome in causal analysis. We develop and test a survey validation technique that uses intensive qualitative work to check for measurement error in random subsamples of respondents. Trained local researchers spent several days speaking with and observing respondents within a few days of their survey, validating six behaviors: four potentially sensitive (crime, drug use, homelessness, gambling) and two non-sensitive (phone charging and video club expenditures). Subjects were enrolled in a randomized trial designed to reduce poverty and anti-social behaviors. We find no evidence of underreporting of sensitive behaviors, partly because (we discovered) stigma in this population is low. Non-sensitive expenditures were underreported, however, especially by the control group, probably because of strategic behavior and recall bias. The main contribution is a replicable validation method for observable, potentially sensitive behaviors.

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[†] Blattman (corresponding author): Columbia University SIPA and Political Science, 480 W 118th St., New York, NY 10027 (cblattman@columbia.edu); Gonwa: The World Bank, 1818 H St. NW, Washington, DC 20433 (j.gonwa@gmail.com); Jamison: Office of Research, Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, 1700 G St. NW, Washington, DC 20552 (jllison@gmail.com); Rodrigues: Columbia University SIPA, 480 W 118th St., New York, NY 10027 (kar2109@columbia.edu); Sheridan: Harvard Medical School (Boston Children's Hospital), 1 Autumn Street, AU 528, Boston, MA 02215 (margaret.sheridan@childrens.harvard.edu).

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