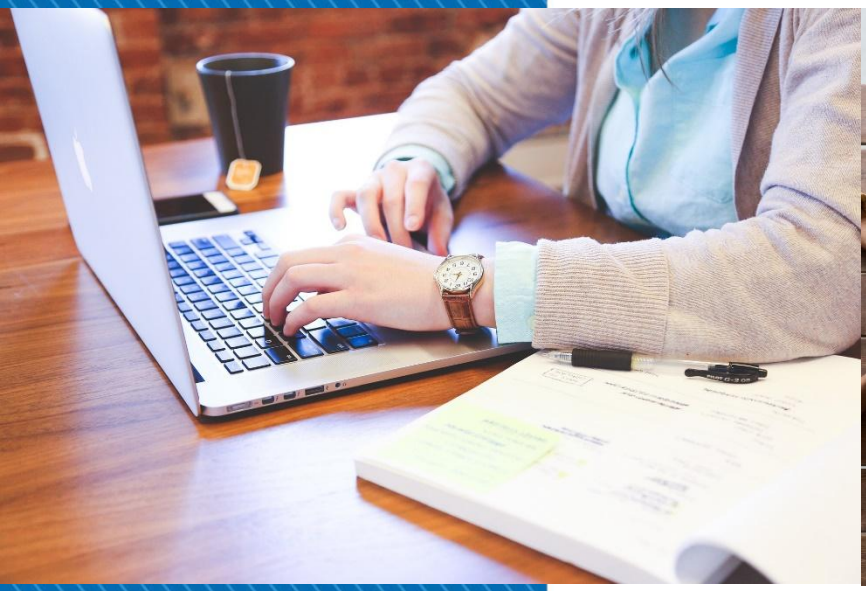
Practical Strategies to Increase Survey Participation in the Settlement Sector

PROSPECTS





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Since its establishment in December 1991, SRDC has conducted over 550 projects and studies for various federal and provincial departments, municipalities, as well as other public and non-profit organizations. SRDC has offices located in Ottawa and Vancouver, and satellite offices in Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, and Saskatchewan.

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WHY SURVEY RESPONSE RATES MATTER

Many newcomer-serving organizations rely on surveys to demonstrate outcomes, meet funder reporting requirements, improve services, and better understand participants' experiences. However, the quality of survey findings depends not only on the questions that are asked, but also on who responds.

When response rates are low, survey results may not accurately reflect the experiences of all participants. This is particularly important when surveying newcomers, as language barriers, literacy levels, activity limitations, and trust in institutions can affect survey participation. Research has found that immigrant and newcomer populations are at greater risk of nonresponse and survey attrition over time, potentially affecting the representativeness of findings. [journals.plos.org], [lensym.com]

The goal is not simply to collect more surveys but to collect information that accurately reflects the experiences of all program participants, including those who may be harder to reach.

Understanding Why People Complete Surveys

People are more likely to complete surveys when they (Dillman Tailored Design Method):

- *See value in participating*
- *Trust the organization asking*
- *Find the survey easy to complete*

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS ABOUT INCENTIVES

One of the strongest findings in survey research is that incentives increase participation. Studies have found that both monetary and non-monetary incentives improve response rates, although monetary incentives tend to have the greatest impact. Research also shows that guaranteed incentives of a lower amount generally outperform prize draws or lotteries. [europepmc.org, journals.plos.org], academic.oup.com]]

Modest Incentives Can Work

Research suggests that incentives[1] do not need to be large to be effective. Small, guaranteed incentives often provide a good balance between cost and increased response rates. [europepmc.org], [academic.oup.com]

Research also shows that guaranteed incentives generally outperform prize draws or lotteries. [journals.plos.org], [europepmc.org]

Examples of financial incentives

- $10–$15 grocery gift card
- Transit card or pass
- Coffee shop gift card
- Small e-transfer payment

Small financial incentives are particularly valuable when sample sizes are small, follow-up surveys are planned and working with populations where reciprocity is culturally important.[2]

Examples of non-financial incentives

- Resource kits or newcomer information packages
- Refreshments during survey completion
- Child-minding during survey activities
- Notebooks, tote bags, or other small thank-you gifts
- Certificates of appreciation

In many cultures, acknowledging participants' time and contributions is an important sign of respect. Modest incentives may therefore be viewed not only as compensation for time, but also as a gesture of appreciation and reciprocity.

1 Please note that specific funding conditions may restrict the types of survey incentives that can be offered. Organizations should consult with their funding providers to ensure that survey incentives are considered eligible expenses.

2 If the survey targets staff within organizations, financial incentives may be less relevant, particularly when survey participation is considered part of their job responsibilities.

STRATEGIES THAT WORK

No single strategy will maximize response rates. The strongest results come from combining several approaches that reduce barriers and build trust.

1. Build Trust and Reduce Concerns

Trust is one of the most important factors influencing participation.

Some newcomers may come from contexts where sharing personal information carried risks or where interactions with institutions were stressful. Participants may be concerned about how information will be used, who has access, how confidentiality is protected, or whether it could affect services. Use an informed consent form to clearly explain:

- Why information is being collected
- How the information will be used
- Who will have access to it
- How confidentiality will be protected
- That participation is voluntary
- That services will not be affected by survey responses
- When the survey will be administered, how often participants may be contacted, and any honorarium or incentive that will be provided, if applicable.

Participants are often more willing to respond when surveys are introduced by trusted staff such as settlement workers, instructors, case managers, or program facilitators.

2. Make Surveys Easy to Complete

Participants are more likely to complete surveys when they are simple, accessible, and relevant.

Keep Surveys Short and Relevant

Long surveys increase respondent burden and reduce participation. Ask only for information that is needed for reporting, evaluation, or service improvement.

Use Plain Language

Questions should be written in clear, straightforward language regardless of participants' education or language proficiency. Avoid technical terms, jargon, and complex wording.

Don't Assume Translation Is Enough

Even well-translated surveys may contain concepts that are interpreted differently across cultures (e.g., sense of belonging, mental well-being, confidence).

Whenever possible, review translated surveys with individuals familiar with the target population.

Address Literacy Barriers

Not all participants will be comfortable completing written surveys, even in their preferred language.

Consider offering:

- Staff-assisted surveys[3]
- Phone surveys
- Verbal administration

3. Make Participation Convenient

Reducing practical barriers to accessibility can greatly improve participation rates and ensure more voices are included.

Different participants have different needs and preferences. Consider offering multiple survey formats: online, phone, in-person, and staff-assisted options.[4]

[3] Organizations should exercise care when selecting an individual to assist with the survey process, particularly if the survey assistant is a staff member of the organization. Respondents should perceive the survey assistant as both trustworthy and impartial. This helps ensure that respondents feel comfortable providing honest and accurate responses.

[4] Please note that survey format may influence how respondents answer certain questions, particularly those involving subjective opinions or personal perceptions. Analysts should exercise caution when

Ensure Surveys Are Mobile-Friendly

Many newcomer participants access surveys primarily through their phones. Mobile-friendly survey formats can improve completion rates.

Collect Information at Natural Program Touchpoints

Survey participation is often highest when surveys are integrated into existing program activities.

Consider collecting information:

- At intake
- During program participation
- At program completion
- During scheduled follow-up contacts

Waiting until participants have disengaged from services often results in lower response rates and more missing data.

4. Stay Connected with Participants

Maintaining contact with participants is especially important when follow-up surveys are required months after a program has ended. Update and maintain phone numbers, Email addresses, preferred language, and preferred contact method.

Use Reminders

Follow-up contacts are one of the most effective ways to increase response rates. Research suggests that one or two reminders can substantially improve participation rates and reduce nonresponse bias. Too many reminders, however, can become burdensome and discourage participation. [academic.oup.com]

comparing responses collected through different survey formats, as the results may not be directly comparable.

Explain Why Feedback Matters

Participants are more likely to respond when they understand how their feedback will be used. Explain how survey findings help improve services, support funding applications, strengthen programs, or advocate for community needs. Sharing survey results or published reports with participants can also reinforce the value of their contributions and demonstrate that their feedback is being used in meaningful ways.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS WHEN SURVEYING NEWCOMERS

While many survey practices apply to all populations, a few considerations are particularly important when working with newcomers.

Survey Familiarity

Some participants may have little experience completing surveys and may be unsure how to respond.

A simple introduction can help:

"*There are no right or wrong answers. We are interested in learning about your experiences and opinions.*"

Respect for Authority

Some participants may be reluctant to criticize programs or staff because they wish to be respectful or are concerned that criticism could affect services.

To encourage honest feedback:

- Normalize constructive criticism
- Explain that positive and negative feedback are equally valuable
- Reassure participants that their responses will be kept confidential and will not affect their access to services

Language and Accessibility

Providing surveys in participants' preferred languages and offering multiple completion methods can improve both participation rates and data quality. Budget for translation if needed.

Recognize the Importance of Reciprocity

In many cultures, reciprocal relationships are highly valued. A modest incentive or thank-you gift may be viewed not simply as payment, but as recognition of participants' time, effort, and expertise.

FINAL MESSAGE

No single strategy is sufficient to maximize survey participation. The most successful newcomer-serving organizations combine multiple approaches: building trust, reducing burden, using plain language, improving accessibility, maintaining participant relationships, sending reminders, and offering modest incentives where resources allow. Monetary incentives typically produce the largest gains, but non-financial approaches are also important contributors to survey success. [journals.plos.org], [europepmc.org], [academic.oup.com]

- By embedding these practices into everyday operations, organizations can collect more complete and representative data, strengthen outcome reporting, and ensure that the experiences of clients are accurately reflected in program findings.

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