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Enhancing Household Survey Participation through Respondent Profiling: A Case Study of the 75–89 Age Group in Slovenia

Abstract

Collecting data is a crucial first step in statistical analysis, yet declining response rates in household surveys pose a significant challenge. In response, the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (SURS) implemented a respondent-centred strategy, utilising profiling and age-based segmentation to tailor communication and data collection methods. This paper details the practical application of these strategies in the 2025 Survey on the Usage of Information and Communication Technologies, which for the first time expanded its scope to include the 75–89 age group.

The results of the second phase of the project indicate that age-tailored adjustments—such as simplified invitation letters with larger fonts, specialized interviewer training, and clearly highlighted participation options—were highly effective. Notably, the 75–89 age group achieved a higher response rate (66.5%) compared to the 16–74 age group (64.2%). Findings show that while the elderly are easier to contact, they are more likely to refuse due to health reasons or require significant interviewer support to navigate complex terminology. Furthermore, the study confirms a strong preference for personal (field or telephone) interviewing among older respondents, with 57% opting for this method compared to 36% in the younger group.

The paper concludes with recommendations for further optimisation, including the further reduction of notification letters, the introduction of symbolic incentives, and possible questionnaire simplification. These findings provide a good framework for enhancing data quality and participation across all household surveys by aligning methodological approaches with respondent characteristics.

Key words: Household surveys, Data collection, Respondent profiling

Introduction

The declining willingness to participate in household surveys presents statistical offices with growing challenges, as it directly impacts response rates and reduces the quality of collected data. At the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (SURS), we are constantly looking for new, innovative ways to address these challenges. To this end, we carried out several activities, including a project in which we aimed to identify factors that can influence the willingness to participate and based on the findings, prepare concrete and highly effective measures to increase response rates.

The project's results and findings were instrumental in shifting SURS toward approaches that focus heavily on respondents and place them at the forefront. In this context, the profiling and segmentation of individuals by age and other personal characteristics became key sources of information, helping us adapt our communication with respondents, train interviewers, and tailor data collection methods. The article describes the practical application of this approach in the Survey on the Usage of Information and Communication Technologies (IKT-GOSP).

Background Information on Data Collection for Household Surveys

Based on the National Statistics Act and the respective Annual Programme of Statistical Surveys, which are the primary legal bases for data collection in Slovenia, SURS also conducts surveys of individuals, households, and family farms, carrying out an average of 9 to 12 surveys per year. Data collection encompasses preparing the sample of individuals or households included in the selected survey according to chosen areas, selecting and training interviewers, preparing communication materials, establishing contact with respondents, and the actual data collection. Data is collected with the help of external contractors (interviewers or survey companies) in the field and by telephone, as well as via online questionnaires. In practice, a combination of several of these methods is almost always used, and participation in all social, household, and family farm surveys is voluntary.

Among the household surveys is the annual IKT-GOSP survey, whose purpose is to obtain data how developed the digital society in Slovenia is: how many individuals aged 16–89 years use the Internet and for which purposes, how many of them have digital skills, and how many of their households have access to the Internet from home. The survey methodology, and consequently the questionnaire content, are prescribed by an EU regulation. Every year the content of the survey and the questionnaire has an emphasis on a specific topic from the field of digital society. Since 2018, data has been collected using a combination of web questionnaires (WEB) and computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI). Over the past four years, the response rate has been slightly above 60% (it was 61.4% in 2022 and 64.7% in 2025), with slightly more responses collected online across all years.

Target Group Analysis: Who Are Our (Non-)Participating Respondents?

In recent years, SURS has invested significant effort into identifying approaches and measures that could raise awareness about the importance of participating in statistical surveys and subsequently encourage individuals to participate. In the area of data collection, we implemented several different measures (preparation of various promotional materials, social media posts, redesign of materials, execution of a prize draw). However, one of the central and most important activities was focusing on placing the individual at the forefront by identifying their key characteristics and requirements and thereby recognizing the specificities of individual age groups.

In 2023, with the help of an external contractor, we carried out an individual profiling and segmentation project. We examined the characteristics of (non-)participants across all our social and household surveys and attempted to find their common traits, specificities, and requirements.

Based on the findings gathered through discussions with interviewers, the execution of a small pilot survey, and data analysis from conducted regular surveys, we identified seven key personas. The personas are: **"diligent"**, for whom the survey format and data collection is unimportant, **"selective"**, who would participate preferably by phone or online, **"digital"**, who would respond only online, **"waiting"**, who have not been invited yet but would participate, **"rejecting"**, who have not yet been invited but would not participate, **"former"**, who were invited but no longer participate, and **"non-responders"**, who were invited to participate but never participate. The personas differ from one another in demographic characteristics, motivation and method of participation, and technological preferences. Considering primarily their attitude toward participating in statistical surveys, we grouped them into three overarching categories.

Table: Personas and their key characteristics

Category	Segment	Share	Demographic profile	Methods and motives of participation
Participating (69%)	Diligent	22%	Generation X and Baby Boomers	Participate in all types of surveys. Motivated by social utility and the opportunity to influence change.
	Selective	24%	Women from urban areas	Participate only online or by phone. Simplicity and questionnaire quality are key.
	Digital	23%	Millennials and Generation Z	Participate exclusively online. The survey topic is more important to them than the implementing organization.
Not yet invited (24%)	Waiting	11%	Younger men without children	Would respond because they highly value SURS's credibility but have not yet been invited to participate.
	Rejecting	13%	Generation Z	Would not participate due to a lack of understanding of the importance of statistics or fear of privacy invasion.
Non-participating (7%)	Non-responders and former	7%	Various	A group that would not participate under any circumstances.

For the first two categories (participating, not yet invited), we subsequently defined the most appropriate methods for data collection, contacting, and communicating with respondents, necessary additional interviewer training, and potential additional mechanisms to encourage respondent participation (various realises on data collection, promotional materials, etc.). For the final category (non-participating), we consciously decided not to invest effort for the time being, as they would not participate under any circumstances.

In 2024, we began putting the project's findings into practice. We started by redesigning notification letters for all household surveys, and we revised and upgraded materials, information, and training for interviewers. In doing so, we sought to accommodate the specificities of each group to the greatest possible extent. Regarding communication materials, the focus was on shortening texts, highlighting the purpose and significance of data collection, adding graphical elements, and visualization, as the need for these changes was evident across all groups. For the interviewers, we prepared short educational videos and summaries of key information regarding the surveys and individual age groups. We also decided to increase the visibility of SURS, which is why we introduced a unified corporate visual identity for the materials used and began distributing small promotional gifts during large-scale field surveys. Results from previous

years show that for most household surveys, we managed to maintain response rates at the 2023 level, and in some, we even slightly increased them, thus halting the negative trend brought on by COVID-19.

Adapting the Approach in Practice: The 2025 IKT-GOSP Survey

Starting in 2025, user needs (tied to EU legislation) for the IKT-GOSP survey dictated raising the upper age limit of included individuals to 89 years. Since data had previously only been collected from the population aged 16–74, we had to include individuals aged 75 to 89 in the sample. Due to these changes, the sample size increased by approximately 500 individuals to a total of 5,000 individuals. Because of the technical and substantive complexity of the topic in this survey, we paid special attention to the newly included age group during preparations for data collection. There was a fear that this age group would have more difficulty understanding the questionnaire's content and would, consequently, refuse to participate.

We decided to explore the specific characteristics of this age group in greater detail while aiming to utilize the project's findings as much as possible. On these grounds, we decided to further adapt the notification letter. Because it concerns older individuals, we shortened the text slightly more, used a larger font, and emphasized graphical elements. Since preparations revealed that this age group was very open to participating by phone, we enabled a third method for this survey alongside online and personal interviewing: answering by phone. We also devoted special attention to interviewer training. We familiarized them with the key characteristics of this age group and prepared simplified definitions of key terms in the field of information and communication technology, along with "10 golden rules" for conducting interviews.

Despite fears regarding the complexity of the content, at the end of the survey implementation, it turned out that older respondents were not problematic in terms of responsiveness, and their response rate was very good.

Main Findings:

- The response rate among the elderly over 75 was surprisingly higher (66.5%) than in the 16–74 population (64.2%).
- Personal field interviewing predominated (57%). Those who opted for online completion (35%) more frequently used a personal computer (48%) rather than a smartphone, in contrast to younger people.
- Around 10% of respondents participated by phone, and there were no differences between age groups. However, women opted for telephone participation more often.
- Older men responded noticeably better (69.7%) and completed online questionnaires more frequently (38.0%) than older women (64.1%), who preferred the phone.
- It was easier to establish contact with women, but they declined participation more frequently.
- In urban areas and the capital, respondents preferred online interviewing, whereas field interviewing prevailed in non-urban areas (63%).
- Fewer attempts were needed to establish initial contact with older individuals (an average of 1.4).
- The average interview time was shorter (8.3 minutes), as they use ICT services less and skip more question blocks.
- Due to health limitations, 17% of individuals in this age group were ineligible. Furthermore, older individuals with less ICT knowledge required considerable support from interviewers.
- It was essential to provide layman explanations of modern concepts (artificial intelligence, digital certificates) and avoid negative terms (threat, danger).

Concluding Thoughts and Future Plans

The paradigm shift in data collection mapped out by SURS with the profiling and segmentation project in 2023 has proven crucial in addressing the challenge of declining responsiveness. Identifying the different characteristics of respondents and understanding their demographic specificities, motives for participation, and technological preferences allowed us to transition to an approach that places the individual at the forefront. Comprehensive process adaptation—from redesigning notification letters with visualization and text shortening in mind, introducing a unified corporate visual identity, to specific interviewer training—brought stabilization and, in some surveys, even reversed the negative trend and increased response rates.

The practical value of this strategic and respondent-centric approach was perfectly validated in the 2025 Survey on the Usage of Information and Communication Technologies. The findings from the initial project and further research enabled us to successfully integrate a new, specific, and more vulnerable age group. Timely adaptations—such as a larger font in letters, directing interviewers toward more layman explanations of concepts, and facilitating additional interviewing mode—proved that with a proper understanding of the target group, we can achieve high participation rates even for substantively and technically more demanding topics.

Based on these positive experiences and findings, we at SURS will continue and expand upon the charted strategy. Our primary plans mainly involve the further optimization of communication materials, the potential preparation of simplified survey content highlights, and the use of symbolic incentives or promotional gifts that would additionally motivate individuals to participate. Aligning methodological approaches with respondent characteristics has been proven to provide an excellent framework for improving data quality and maintaining participation rates in household surveys.

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