

SBC Monitoring Guidance

Short Message Service and Interactive Voice Response Surveys

What are Short Message Service and Interactive Voice Response Surveys?

Short message services (SMS) and interactive voice response (IVR)-based surveys can be effective monitoring methods for programs or interventions. Both types of surveys are administered remotely through mobile devices to reach general or specific populations in a given coverage area and can be utilized over the course of a program or intervention on a recurring basis. SMS surveys send survey message prompts and receive participant replies through text messages. Alternatively, IVR-based surveys utilize pre-recorded, interactive audio messages delivered via automated phone calls. A designated IVR system calls participants and plays pre-recorded questions or prompts that progress through survey questions in response to participants' verbal answers or keypad response entries. It is important to note that these monitoring methods are distinct from text-in or call-in services that provide information to users, which is considered more programmatic; SMS and IVR-based surveys are distinctly for data collection purposes.

When Should You Use SMS/IVR Surveys?

SMS/IVR surveys are effective in many situations as they do not require in-person data collection. They can be effective methods to use with geographically remote or vulnerable populations since they do not require transportation to communicate with participants or compromise participant anonymity. Additionally, this cost-effective method does not require the large costs that are often associated with hiring, training, and dispatching enumerators to monitor a program or intervention in person.

However, SMS and IVR surveys limit the number of questions and the type of responses that can be gathered from participants. A maximum of 8 to 12 questions is often recommended for a successful response rate, with response rates falling precipitously as the length of the survey increases. Furthermore, potential responses are recommended to be pre-coded, thereby limiting participants' response options, although this can also improve response rates as well as facilitate data analysis. It is also important to consider the financial burden these surveys might place on respondents, such as potential costs of replying to text messages or taking phone calls.





STRENGTHS

- Rapid feedback from participants.
- Ability to set up automatic responses and follow up questions.
- Cost-effective monitoring method at large scale.
- Can make participants feel valued by asking their input as well as disseminating results to them.
- Can be useful in reaching vulnerable or hard-to-reach populations.



WEAKNESSES

- Less likely to reach those living in low connectivity areas as reach is determined by mobile access.
- Takes time and capacity to script survey and outsource them to call centers.
- Does not easily accommodate lengthy questions due to limits in the number of characters used in question and responses.
- Designing simple, efficient message trees/call flow for participants can be difficult.
- Generalizability of findings can be challenging as it is often difficult to generate a comprehensive sampling frame and properly execute random sampling.

Comparing SMS and IVR

SHORT MESSAGE SERVICE	INTERACTIVE VOICE RESPONSE
Participants can answer in almost any situation as they are not required to listen to audio-recorded questions	More inclusive of semi-literate and illiterate respondents, but require participants to listen to audio-recorded questions
Low cost	Medium cost
Usually receives less responses than IVR surveys	Usually receives more responses than SMS surveys

Ethical Considerations

Primary audiences that include vulnerable populations such as women and children, men who have sex with men, mobile populations, or people living with HIV may not have access to their own mobile device or may not reside in an environment conducive to SMS/IVR responses. In these cases, SMS/IVR surveys may unintentionally expose them to unnecessary risk or result in a low survey response rate. Additionally, potential costs associated with texting or phone calls should be considered and appropriately compensated to ensure no undue financial burden is placed on participants.

Resources

[Cost benefits comparison of IVR, SMS, and phone survey methods](#)

A video produced by MERL Tech that thoughtfully and concisely discusses the considerations for IVR, SMS, and other mobile surveys.