

# The Effect of Wrongly Addressed Mail on Mail Survey Response Rates

*Don Esslemont and Peter Lambourne*

The objective of this study was to provide an estimate of the number of wrongly addressed envelopes that will be returned in a New Zealand mail survey. A total of 200 households were selected from throughout the country from regional telephone directories. Each envelope contained a covering letter, a questionnaire on home heating, and a reply paid envelope. The name, Miss J P Nettlefold, was used as the fictitious addressee. To the researcher's knowledge, none of the sample households contained a person with this name or anything resembling it. Of the 200 questionnaires posted, 137, or nearly 70%, were returned. A return rate of 65% was achieved for the 180 questionnaires posted to non-rural delivery addresses. The results of this study suggest that the number of envelopes returned marked as "Gone - no address" or "Return to sender" should be multiplied by about 1.5 to provide an estimate of the total number of envelopes incorrectly addressed. The results also suggest that approximately five per cent of the total wrongly addressed questionnaires will be returned completed to the researcher, at least for surveys of this type.

Keywords: mail survey, response rates, non response bias

## Introduction

Whenever a mail survey is conducted, a certain number of envelopes are returned marked "Gone - no address" or "Return to sender". The number that are received back marked in such a way are deducted from the initial sample size when calculating the response rate for the survey.

In addition to the envelopes returned and marked as undeliverable, some questionnaires will have been thrown away or simply not returned when they have unknowingly been sent to the wrong address. Since these questionnaires never reached the correct sample member, they should usually not be treated as nonresponses, but should be recorded as 'deadwood' and the initial sample size adjusted accordingly. Unfortunately, there is no way for a researcher to determine just how much 'deadwood' should be allowed for among the non-returns.

Another problem for a researcher conducting a mail survey occurs when the questionnaire is answered and returned by a person who was not intended to be a sample member. This happens when a wrongly addressed envelope is received by a person who then proceeds to complete the questionnaire and return it. There is no way that a researcher can quantify the occurrences of this type either, and he or she must process the responses as if all returned and completed questionnaires are legitimate responses.

To date this area of research has remained practically unexplored. The only reported investigation of this problem was conducted by Hutt (SCPR 1982). Hutt posted questionnaires addressed to "Miss J P Nettlefold" to 300 addresses in the United Kingdom. Of the 300 envelopes posted, 68% were returned.

The objective of this study was to provide an estimate of the number of wrongly addressed envelopes that will be returned in a New Zealand mail survey.

## **Method**

A total of 200 households were selected from throughout the country from regional telephone directories. The sample was drawn in proportion to the population of New Zealand. Twenty of these 200 households had rural delivery addresses, while the other 180 households had street addresses, whether they were in urban or country areas. The rural delivery addresses were used to see if the rural delivery operators returned the wrongly addressed mail.

## **Procedure**

Each envelope contained a covering letter, a questionnaire on home heating, and a reply paid envelope. The questionnaire was modified from one designed by the Massey University Market Research Centre.

The name, Miss J P Nettlefold, was again used as the fictitious addressee. To the researcher's knowledge, none of the sample households contained a person with this name or anything resembling it. According to the most recent telephone directories only three addresses in New Zealand were occupied by people with the name of Nettlefold, and none of the households sampled was near any of these addresses.

No reminder letters were posted to nonrespondents, even though this is customary in a mail survey.

## **Results**

The primary objective of this research was to provide an estimate of the proportion of envelopes that are returned in a mail survey when they are incorrectly addressed.

Of the 200 questionnaires posted, 137, or nearly 70%, were returned. A return rate of 65% was achieved for the 180 questionnaires posted to non-rural delivery addresses.

Virtually all questionnaires posted to rural delivery addresses were returned. The markings on the returned envelopes confirmed a previously held opinion that these questionnaires would only go as far as the rural delivery contractor, who would return them. In the analysis of treatments the rural delivery questionnaires were ignored.

Nine of the 137 returned questionnaires had been answered, though the person who answered was not the addressee (Miss J P Nettlefold). It should be noted, however, that the subject of the supposed research, home heating, concerned the household rather than the personal characteristics of the individual respondent. It is possible that there would have been fewer responses to a questionnaire dealing with questions relating to the respondents as individuals.

## **Discussion**

The results of this study suggest that the number of envelopes returned marked as "Gone - no address" or "Return to sender" should be multiplied by about 1.5 to provide an estimate of the total number of envelopes incorrectly addressed.

The results also suggest that approximately five per cent of the total wrongly addressed questionnaires will be returned completed to the researcher, at least for surveys of this type. Surveys normally take one of two forms. Either questionnaires are sent to households or questionnaires are sent to individuals. Sometimes questionnaires are addressed to an individual with the aim of extracting information on the household. The questionnaire used in this study was of this latter type. This could have partly accounted for the nine questionnaires that were returned completed.

Since the questionnaire was on household information and not personal, the respondents may have thought they were doing this researcher a favour by completing the questionnaire. Depending on the number of questionnaires that are wrongly addressed this figure could have a significant effect on the findings of that research. This will be especially true if the people who complete the questionnaires are not members of the universe being sampled.

## **Reference**

Social and Community Planning Research (1982). Wrongly addressed mail. *Survey Methods Newsletter*, Autumn, 2.

**Don Esslemont is a Senior Lecturer, and Peter Lambourne was a graduate student, in the Department of Marketing, Massey University.**