

IMPROVING PUBLIC HEALTH THROUGH SOFTWARE

For research to deliver on its promise of gathering evidence that helps guide effective policies and programs, that research must be based on honest, valid information. When surveying people, there is too often a gap between what is true and what interviewees are willing to reveal in an interview.

Researchers and technical specialists at the Population Council have been working together for the past decade to develop technical solutions to reduce distortions in research on sensitive topics. These can arise from embarrassment for failure to adhere to preventive messages to the fear of discussing sexual and other sensitive practices. Because ACASI is more private than a standard face-to-face interview, respondents may be more willing to divulge sensitive behavior.

It has now been shown that using an application created by the Population Council for an “audio computer-assisted self-interviewing” program (ACASI) helps eliminate distortions introduced by face-to-face interviews, thereby delivering more accurate data. Respondents reply to an impartial computer rather than a subjective interviewer. The application has been used in surveys about risk factors for HIV infection, school experiences, and more.

Electronic data capture is a boon to organizations collecting data in the developing world and is unquestionably the wave of the future. In addition to capturing more honest information, using hand-held or touch-screen laptop computers eliminates paper in the data-capture process. This reduces errors, time, and cost that would have been required



to convert responses from paper to an electronic format so the data can be analyzed.

Hand-held devices can be used in settings that lack basic resources, and the program works well even in areas with low literacy: people listen to the voice of the “interviewer,” using headphones to enhance privacy, and click an image or color that best describes their response.

Studies comparing ACASI interviews with face-to-face interviews indicate participants are more likely to honestly report high-risk behaviors when using the more private and confidential ACASI. It’s the difference between having to say “I had unprotected sex twice last week” out loud to a stranger or touching the number 2 on a screen.

The application is currently used by Population Council researchers for various projects and by other research institutes. To date, the Council solution has been translated for use in 13 languages in nine countries. Population Council information technology and social science specialists are experienced in describing the application and are available to discuss its development and the difference it has made—and is continuing to make—in the world.

For more information:

http://www.popcouncil.org/projects/IT_ACASI.html

<http://www.popcouncil.org/microbicides/ACASI.html>

http://www.popcouncil.org/projects/SS_AssessSexBehav.html

