

Round 26 of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1979 Cohort (NLSY79)

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The National Longitudinal Surveys (NLS) are a set of surveys that gather information at multiple points in time on significant life events of several population samples of US citizens. Sponsored by the US Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, the NLS collects extensive information on respondents' labor market behavior and educational experiences, along with information on health and well-being, family formation, criminal behavior, and substance abuse. NORC carries out survey operations for two cohorts of the NLS, the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY97) and 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY79), and for more than four decades, NLS data have served as an important tool for economists, sociologists, and other researchers.

The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979, or NLSY79, is conducted with a nationally representative sample of individuals who were born between 1957 and 1964. These individuals were in their forties and fifties during the 26th round of interviews, conducted from October 2014 to November 2015.

Round 26 of the NLSY79 resulted in 13,049 completed interviews, which amounts to a response rate of greater than 77 percent of eligible living respondents across the different sample types fielded for the survey. A number of changes were incorporated into the survey protocol for Round 26, including the incorporation of two new questionnaire sections, the use of a new Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing case management system designed to accommodate an increasing proportion of telephone interviews, and enhanced remote training of interviewers. Round 26 also marks the last round that the Child Sample, comprised of the children of NLSY79 sample respondents aged 4-14, is fielded.

NLSY79 ROUND 26 OVERVIEW

The 1979 Cohort of the National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth is one of the longest-running longitudinal studies of its size, and has been invaluable to social science researchers studying the transitions of individuals between youth, school, and the work force. The NLSY97 data is a publicly accessible resource and it can be downloaded using the online NLS Investigator. Over 6,000 publications reference and draw from the NLSY79, an indication of its enduring usefulness to researchers.ⁱ

The NLSY79 was conducted annually through 1994, and continues to be conducted biennially—once every two years. Data collection for the 26th round of data collection began on October 20, 2014, and lasted for 55 weeks. The final interview for Round 26 was conducted on November 10, 2015.

Now between the ages of 52 and 60 years of age, NLSY79 sample members are approaching retirement. Having data on

an individual's full trajectory through the work force is greatly informative for how researchers and policymakers think about this important generation and the myriad decisions that face older Americans, such as those involving health and retirement savings.

NLSY79 SURVEY DESIGN

The NLSY79 sample is designed to represent the population of all individuals born between 1957 and 1964 and living in the United States on January 1, 1979. In 1979, a representative cross-sectional sample of U.S. households was selected from a list of more than 200 Primary Sampling Units within the United States. Interviewers screened this scientifically selected sample of households to identify families with youths between the ages of 14 and 21 for the study. In addition, a set of supplemental samples were selected to provide an oversample of civilian Hispanic or Latino, black, and economically disadvantaged non-black/non-Hispanic youths, and a military

sample was selected to allow comparative civilian-military analysis. From the sampled individuals, 12,686 youths agreed to be respondents in the NLSY79 and participated in the first round of the survey. The supplemental oversamples of military respondents and economically disadvantaged non-black/non-Hispanic respondents were later dropped after the 1984 round and 1990 round, respectively, and those eligible from the original sample was reduced to about 9,600. These individuals were in their forties and fifties during the 26th round of interviews, conducted from October 2014 to November 2015.

Due to the representativeness of the NLSY79 sample, today the original NLSY79 sample members each represent approximately 4,600 people like themselves. The NLSY79 follows these respondents as they pursue higher education, move throughout the workforce, and raise families.

Since 1986, children of the women in the NLSY79 sample have also been interviewed. The Round 26 represents the final fielding of this Child Sample.

THE CHILDREN OF THE NLSY79

Beginning in 1986, the NLS program obtained funding from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) to begin to interview the biological children of the NLSY79 Main Youth female respondents. The focus of the Child Sample is on children between the ages of 4-14 during each round of interviews.

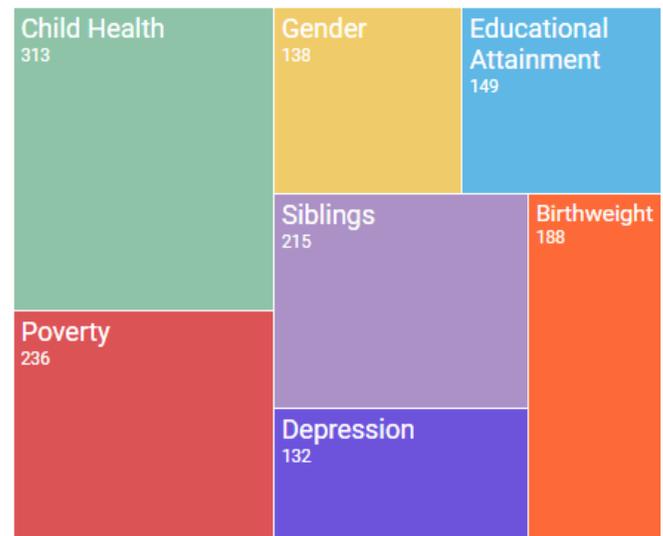
The children of NLSY79 respondents who are aged 0-14 years are assessed through a Mother Supplement questionnaire about their health and well-being; this questionnaire includes the collection of measurements such as weight and height as well as data on accidents and injuries. Starting at the age of 5 years, children are interviewed and assessed using a variety of standard cognitive performance evaluations looking at verbal and math skills, as well as memory. To accommodate this growing sample NORC adapted its data collection systems to support the sample being built on-the-fly for new children born since the date of last interview.

Children of NLSY79 respondents who exceed 14 years of age are categorized into the Young Adult sample. The Young Adult sample is split into three age groups:

1. 15-17 year olds, who require parental permission and complete a self-administered questionnaire and assessment on laptops;
2. 18-20 year olds, who do not require parental permission and simply go through a phone interview with no additional assessments; and
3. 20+ year olds who do not require parental permission and complete a phone interview which is geared toward their independence from the original familial household with no additional assessments.

NORC's work on the NLSY79 showcases its ability to continually develop sound survey protocol according to changing needs of the sample. Over the years, the Child Sample of the NLSY79 has been used to study many important topics. Some topic areas from a selection of 2016 papers contained in the NLS Annotated Bibliography utilizing data from the Child Sample are noted in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1. COMMON RESEARCH AREAS OF PAPERS USING THE NLSY79 CHILD SAMPLE



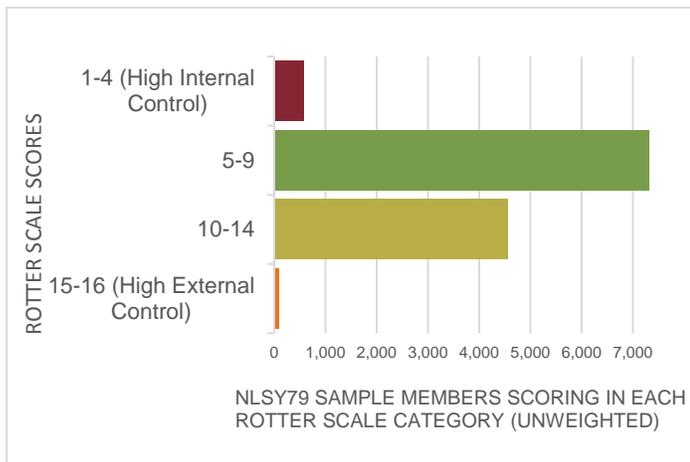
QUESTIONNAIRE CHANGES

As the respondents move throughout different life stages, new NLSY79 questions aim to elucidate important aspects of these transitions. There were two new sections in the Round 26 questionnaire. The first, Educational Expenditures, sought to identify how respondents pay the costs of education for each child, if applicable.

The second new section contained questions regarding respondents' attitudes and personalities. Some questions in this section had been seen before—for instance, a set of questions on internal/external feelings of control was incorporated into the questionnaire for the first time since 1979. These questions, which relate to the Rotter Internal-External Locus of Control Scale, are designed to measure the extent to which individuals believe they have control over their lives through forces like self-determination, or whether they feel that control belongs to chance, fate, or luck.

Figure 2 below depicts the breakdown of these “feelings of control” in 1979, presented on a scale of 1-16. Low scores represent strong levels of internal control (“Things happen because I make them happen”), and scores at the opposite end of the spectrum represent strong feelings of external control (“Things happen due to chance or luck”).

FIGURE 2. 1979 ROTTER SCALE SCORES FOR ORIGINAL NLSY79 SAMPLE MEMBERS



In 1979, most respondents reported strong feelings of internal control. With Round 26 data, researchers will be able to tell how these feelings may have changed since respondents were first interviewed.

UPDATES TO TRAINING AND FIELDING

Each biennial round of the study requires that NORC recruit, train, support, and manage 100-200 interviewers, providing appropriate materials, tools, equipment, and resources to accomplish the data collection on time, within budget, and with strong response and excellent data quality. During each round of fielding, project staff for the NLSY79 are faced with a unique set of goals and challenges to continue reaching the historically high response rates of the survey. These challenges are met through an innovative combination of field experiments and new forms of outreach to respondents. For Round 26 of the NLSY79, there were a number of important changes to interviewer training and interview administration.

First, Round 26 saw the first iteration of the NLSY79 that used a remote training of all staff via a new online training platform called Talent LMS. Talent LMS is an easy-to-use e-learning platform that allows Field Managers to track the progress of Field Interviewers through various training tasks, and ensure that staff read weekly FI memos sent out by the Central Office.

Round 26 also represented a shift to using a new D-CATI system, which refers to Decentralized Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing. The D-CATI system allowed cases to be “delivered” to Field Interviewers based on the priority level of the case, without requiring FIs to spend unnecessary time gathering contact information for various cases prior to reaching out to respondents. The switch to the D-CATI system facilitated the completion of more interviews by phone, and consequently allowed for the more effective fielding of cases.

More than in previous rounds, one of the major goals of Round 26 was to increase the proportion of cases that are fielded and completed by phone, rather than in person. Phone completes are significantly less costly and allow interviews to be completed more efficiently. There are some respondents who make the switch from in-person to phone interviews quite easily. Round 26 introduced one-time incentives to help convince marginal respondents who prefer to complete the interview in person to instead complete it by phone.

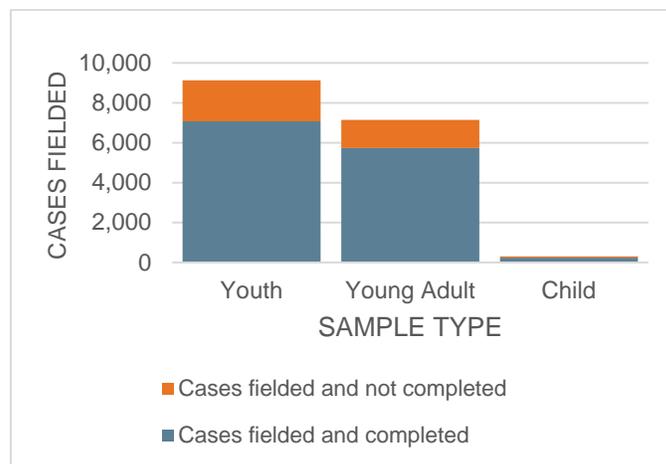
FIELD MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE

Data collection for Round 26 began with a staff of more than 150 Field Interviewers and about a dozen Field Managers overseeing the interviewers. Data Quality Field Managers were responsible for overseeing the processes of Computer Audio-Recorded Interview (CARI) review and the protocol for conducting interviews inside prisons. Field Production Managers oversaw the full data collection team. Data collection staff were selected based on past performance, geographic proximity to sample members, and having NLS experience within the last two rounds.

Flexibility in the field management structure allows NORC to operate cost-effectively at different points during data collection. While the early field period requires effective management of high volumes of relatively standard effort, the later weeks require fewer but more expert staff to pursue difficult cases. To reflect these different staffing needs, field management staff underwent several consolidations through the field period.

As a result of the flexibility and efficiency afforded by the field management structure, a response rate of greater than 77 percent of eligible living respondents, across various sample types of the NLSY79, was achieved.

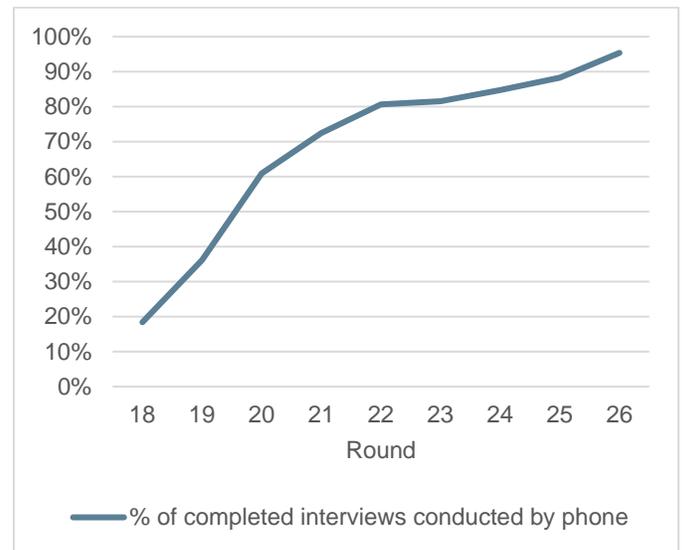
FIGURE 3. FINAL ROUND 26 CASES COMPLETED BY SAMPLE TYPE



CONTINUED IMPROVEMENTS IN ROUND 27

Many of the objectives of Round 27 are to continue positive trends and build off of the successes from Round 26 and earlier. The same D-CATI case management system is being used to field cases in Round 27, and a new electronic delivery method of providing monetary incentives to respondents completing the interview by phone is being implemented. Continued attention will be focused on effective respondent outreach, efficient use of field resources, and continued motivation of respondents to complete their interviews by phone.

FIGURE 4. NLSY79 COMPLETED CASES CONDUCTED VIA PHONE INTERVIEW, BY ROUND



¹ **Source:** The National Longitudinal Surveys Annotated Bibliography, <https://www.nlsinfo.org/bibliography-start>.