

Round 16 of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 Cohort (NLSY97)

Holly Hagerty | Graduate Research Assistant, Economics, Justice and Society

The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97) is a nationally representative sample of 8,984 young men and women who were born between 1980 and 1984. These individuals were in their late twenties and early thirties during this 16th round of interviews, conducted from November 2013 to July 2014. Before Round 16 of the NLSY97, respondents were interviewed every year. Round 16 of the NLSY97 marks the first time the survey has been conducted biennially, with respondents being interviewed every other year. The transition to biennial interviewing was made to reduce costs and respondent burden.

This transition presents several important challenges for future NLSY97 rounds, such as how to best keep in touch with respondents during “off” years, or how to format questions asking respondents to recollect life changes over a longer period of time.

Along with these challenges came significant opportunities to improve Round 16 processes. Questionnaire sections on schooling, training, income, and employment were shortened to reduce respondent burden, while other sections and modules were placed on rotation to reduce questionnaire length. With biennial interviewing, it becomes important to collect extremely accurate locating data for each respondent. In line with the goal of maintaining clear and successful lines of communication with NLSY97 respondents, the respondent website was updated regularly during Round 16, to feature news stories and scholarly research using NLSY97 data. The website was also used to communicate with respondents about project updates, and collect new contact information from respondents. As a result of these efforts, Round 16 featured higher levels of respondent engagement with the website relative to previous rounds.

Round 16 also introduced several changes in targeted respondent outreach. For the first time, Field Interviewers used project-issued iPhones to reach out to respondents via phone calls and text. Email scripts were used more extensively than in prior rounds. All respondents received a \$10 “biennial bonus” in addition to the \$30 base incentive for Round 16. These new enhancements were successfully fielded in the Round 16 pretest, which exceeded its goal for completes.

Round 16 of the NLSY97 resulted in 7,141 completed interviews, which amounts to a response rate of greater than 81 percent of unblocked, living respondents. Interviewing produced a total of 314 Non-Interview Respondent (NIR) returns, which refers to respondents who were previously classified as unlocatable, blocked, or hostile refusals, who were brought back into the study in Round 16. This is the largest number of NIR returns since Round 13, and amounts to an NIR return rate of approximately 20 percent.

ROUND 16 OVERVIEW

The main objectives of the NLSY97 Round 16 were to collect high-quality data from each respondent, while controlling costs, protecting respondent confidentiality, and continuing the NLSY97 tradition of high response rates. Targeted respondent outreach methods, such as text messaging, helped NLS project staff achieve these objectives. As data collection switches from an annual to biennial basis, it is even more important to collect accurate contact information for the NLSY97 sample. The NLSY97 respondent website plays an

essential role in this process. Respondents submitted 400 website updates during Round 16, more than triple the number of website updates received during Round 15.

Scheduled to begin in mid-October 2013, Round 16 data collection for the main sample was delayed by the partial government shutdown of Fall 2013. Data collection began on November 4, 2013, and lasted for 38 weeks. The final interview was conducted on July 24, 2014.

NLSY97 SURVEY DESIGN

In 1997, a representative sample of U.S. households was selected from 200 Primary Sampling Units for the National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth, 1997 cohort (NLSY97). Interviewers screened over 90,000 households in these PSUs to identify families who had children between the ages of 12 and 16. From these identified families, 8,984 youths agreed to be respondents in the NLSY97. NORC has conducted annual interviews with these individuals since they were selected.

Due to the representativeness of the NLSY97 sample, respondents represent on average 1,900 other individuals who were born between 1980 and 1984. The NLSY97 follows these respondents as they pursue higher education, move throughout the workforce, and create families. These data can be hugely informative for how researchers and policymakers think about this important generation.

FIELD MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE

Round 16 began with a staff of 150 Field Interviewers, 10 Field Managers, and two Field Production Managers. These staff were selected based on past performance, geographic proximity to Main cases and having NLS experience within the last two rounds.

New to Round 16, two Quality Control Field Managers were also introduced to the field management structure. The two Quality Control FMs oversaw international and state/federal prison cases, and provided a variety of important support task to all field staff. Additionally, these Quality Control FMs worked with FIs to give feedback on interview sessions that had been recorded with Computer Audio-Recorded Interview (CARI) software.

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 two consolidations. In February 2014, field staff was consolidated down to five FPMs and one FM. A second consolidation occurred in April 2014, with field staff reduced to three FPMs and one FM. By the end of June 2014, there were 34 active interviewers in the field.

Round 16 is the second iteration of the NLSY97 with fully-remote training of all FI staff via online training software, Moodle. In Round 17, the remote training process will be conducted via an online learning management tool, Talent LMS.

All Field Interviewers are maintained with at least 10% CARI review of all of their completed cases over the course of the round. During Round 16, 861 cases had recordings reviewed for a 12.05% CARI review rate of all completed cases.

As anticipated, the shift to biennial fielding resulted in more cases that needed locating prior to initial respondent contact. In total, project staff processed 2,184 locating requests covering 1,384 cases during Round 16. Relative to Round 15, which processed 1,300 requests covering 870 cases, this represents a significant increase in locating activities.

Round 16 also saw a marked increase in the number of incoming respondent communications that were received during data collection. Throughout Round 16, field interviewers and project staff processed 1,981 incoming respondent voicemails, texts, emails and website updates, which amounts to a 49.8% increase over Round 15 communications from the same sources.

Despite the shift to biennial fielding, project contact with respondents reached new milestones for web contact and text messaging. In particular, respondents submitted over 400 updates to the respondent website in Round 16, increasing from approximately 100 updates in Round 15. Additionally, text messages from respondents to field staff increased from 164 in Round 15, to over 250 text messages in Round 16.

Respondents commonly ask if we will ever conduct the interview in a web-based format. In Round 16, we introduced a pilot program to test how the internet can be used to collect data in the NLSY97. One-fifth of the sample was asked to provide more substantive information on the respondent website, answering similar questions to those that appear in the NLSY97 interview. This web test was conducted to help us understand how the Internet could possibly be used as a data collection tool in future rounds.

QUESTIONNAIRE CHANGES

Several changes were made within the Round 16 questionnaire to address problems that respondents may face because of the longer spacing between interviews. The first of these problems is related to quality of respondent recollections. Respondents may have difficulty recalling accurate details of their life experiences across a longer reference period. The second of these problems is related to the quantity of recollections. There is simply more information to recall over the new, longer reference period, which increases respondent burden.

As much as possible, the questionnaire was adapted to reduce these sources of burden by reducing the types of events about which extensive detail was collected. For example, some very short jobs or cohabitation spells would no longer be asked about at the same level of detail. Where possible, choices were aligned with practices from the NLSY79, which has been biennial for almost 20 years.

Two sections were removed from the questionnaire between Rounds 15 and 16. The first, "Political Participation," asked respondents about their voting behavior in the 2010 election. The second, "Tell Us What You Think," contained several questions about respondents' attitude toward risk.

CONTINUING TRENDS

Round 16 continued several important data collection trends from prior rounds. These have increased the speed and ease of inbound respondent communication to project staff.

- Text messaging as a mode of respondent contact:** The National Longitudinal Surveys are one of the few NORC projects to utilize text messaging as a means of initial contact from respondents. In the advance letter and advance email for each round, respondents are given the opportunity to text their full name to project staff to signal readiness to set up their interview. The NLSY97 has responded to increasing respondent preference to be contacted via text message. Internal administrative software contains records of previous respondent contact, which encourages Field staff to contact respondents by text if they have preferred this contact mode previously.
- Quick Response (QR) codes:** Individuals in the age range of NLSY97 participants have the highest rates of cell phone ownership and text messaging (Smith, 2011). Round 16 materials have evolved to reflect these changing habits. For the first time, Round 16 advance letters featured QR codes. Respondents could scan these codes with their smartphones to navigate directly to the respondent website.

Figure 1 (See *Appendix*) presents changes in hours worked per case by round, for Rounds 5-16 of the NLSY97. Round 16, shown in black, conforms to the general trend of increasing hours per case over time during each round, as easy-to-reach respondents are interviewed first, before more effort and hours are allocated to contacting more difficult respondents later in the fielding period.

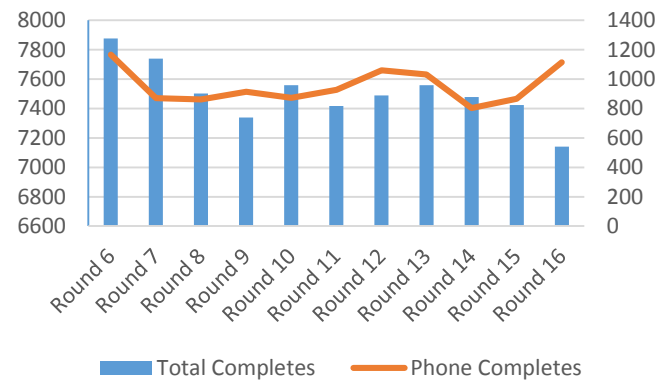
DATA COLLECTION CHANGES

The switch to biennial fielding is the most significant change in data collection processes for Round 16. Interim mailings and emails were sent before the start of data collection, to alert respondents to the change and request their updated contact information.

- Biennial bonus:** To popularize the shift to biennial fielding and encourage participation in Round 16, respondents received a one-time biennial bonus of \$10 in addition to the \$30 base fee and NIR bonus, if applicable. An NIR (Non-Interview Respondent) bonus refers to an extra fee given to the respondent if he or she did not complete the NLSY interview in the prior round.
- Prepay experiment:** Round 16 pioneered an innovative prepay experiment for 320 respondents who had completed the interview in Round 14, but not Round 15. These respondents received \$10 cash as a bonus pre-payment in their advance letters, with the goal of bringing them back into the study for Round 16. The prepay experiment was successful in reaching 57.2 percent of these respondents who had missed Round 15.
- New email scripts:** Field Interviewers utilized several new email scripts during Round 16, which helped tailor respondent contact between different modes. Many of these email scripts were based on existing voicemail scripts.

- Higher phone rate:** In addition to the data collection changes mentioned here, Round 16 also resulted in a higher phone interviewing effort, particularly in the final weeks of data collection. The overall phone interview rate for Round 16 was 15.6%, relative to an 11.6% rate for Round 15. Figure 2 presents changes in modes of completion between Rounds 14-16 for the NLSY97. Round 16 has a lower in-person completion rate, and a higher phone completion rate, than the previous two rounds.

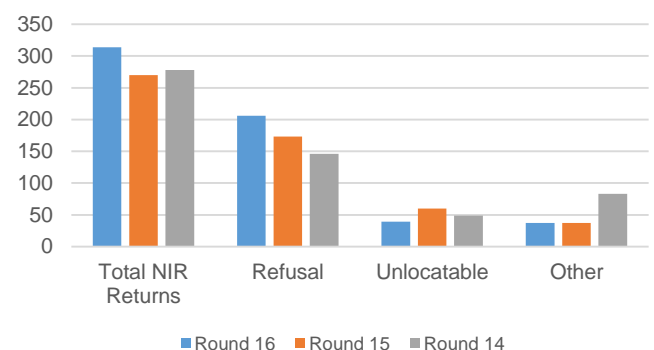
FIGURE 2. TRENDS IN PHONE COMPLETION, ROUNDS 6-16



One particular hallmark of Round 16 data collection was a high return rate for respondents who, for various reasons, had not been interviewed in the prior round. These are referred to as Non-Interview Respondents (NIR), and the rate at which we complete successful interviews with these respondents is the NIR return rate. With 314 NIR returns, Round 16 had the highest NIR return rate since Round 13.

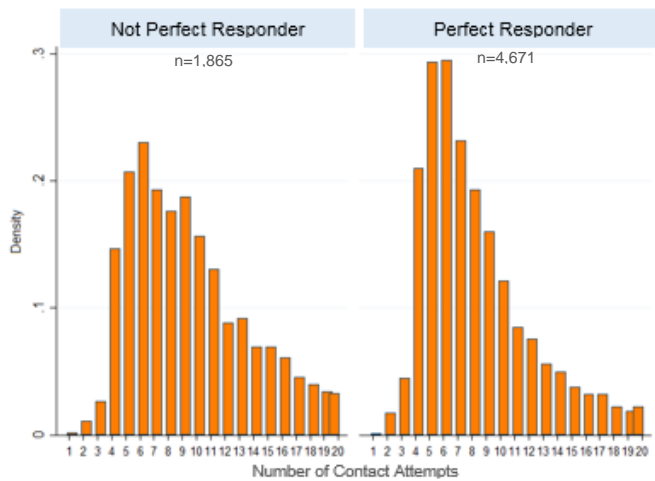
Figure 3 breaks down NIR returns into category of NIR return by round for Rounds 14, 15, and 16. In Round 16, field staff converted more refusals relative to Rounds 14 and 15, but experienced more difficulty finding and interviewing respondents who were unlocatable in Round 15. The “Other” category contains respondents who didn’t complete their Round 15 interviews for other reasons, such as incapacitation or incarceration in a facility that did not permit interviews. In Round 16, a number of previously blocked respondents were re-released into the field. Completes from this category are also represented in the “Other” category for Round 16.

FIGURE 3. TRENDS IN NIR RETURNS BY TYPE, ROUNDS 14-16



It is also useful to examine the number of times field staff reached out to respondents before completing a successful interview. Figure 4 presents this information, broken down by whether each of the 7,141 completed cases corresponded to a perfect responder. A perfect responder refers to an NLSY97 participant who has completed the interview every round since 1997.¹

FIGURE 4. NUMBER OF ROUND 16 CONTACT ATTEMPTS BEFORE COMPLETED INTERVIEW, BY PERFECT RESPONDER



These data support the idea that perfect responders, on average, take fewer contact attempts, and lower levels of field staff effort, to complete their interview. For perfect responders, the median number of contact attempts preceding a completed interview is seven contact attempts. For non-perfect responders, this value is nine contact attempts.

A stated goal of Round 17 is to stabilize the commitment of these perfect responders to the NLSY. Future analysis can examine the role of outreach methods, incentive types, and interviewer characteristics in reaching and retaining these perfect attenders, and re-engaging non-perfect responders.

LOOKING FORWARD TO ROUND 17

As the first round to be completed after the transition to biennial fielding, Round 17 will test how well the systems put in place during Round 16 help us communicate with NLSY97 respondents.

Many of the objectives of Round 17 are to continue positive trends from Round 16 and earlier. Field staff will continue to build targeted outreach strategies for respondents, such as incorporating text messaging for respondents who have shown preference for this mode of communication. NLS staff also aim to add more interactive features to the respondent website. These efforts will help increase respondent familiarity and engagement with this important tool, particularly to track new contact information between rounds.

Protocol for locating respondents evolves as we complete the transition to biennial fielding. For instance, national change of address requests expire after one year, so interim locating efforts must be conducted between rounds.

Although field staff attempted to reach all respondents via advance mailing and email to inform them of the shift to biennial fielding, there may be respondents in Round 17 who are unaware of the transition to a biennial fielding structure. As a result, field staff may encounter some confusion during the locating and initial respondent contact phases of fielding for Round 17.

The structures are in place for Round 17 to build off of the successes of Round 16. With continued attention to targeted respondent outreach and efficient use of field resources, Round 17 data collection can continue to bring in response rates upwards of 80 percent, with particular attention to maintaining perfect attenders and bringing non-interviewed respondents back into the study. Round 17 Data collection is anticipated to start in the Fall of 2015.

Source: Smith, A. 2011. Americans and text messaging. *Pew Internet and American Life Project Report*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center.
<http://www.pewinternet.org/2011/09/19/americans-and-text-messaging/>

¹ For this visualization, outliers have been removed. Outliers are observations with number of contact attempts that is more than 1.5 times the interquartile range above the third quartile value of contact attempts. In these data, the interquartile range is 6 contact attempts, and the third quartile value of contact attempts is 12. An outlier observation is one in which it took

more than 21 contact attempts to complete an interview. This removes 605 of 7,141 completed cases, or approximately 9.8% of the sample of completed cases.

Appendix

Figure 1. Hours Worked Per Case for Rounds 5-16 of the NLSY97

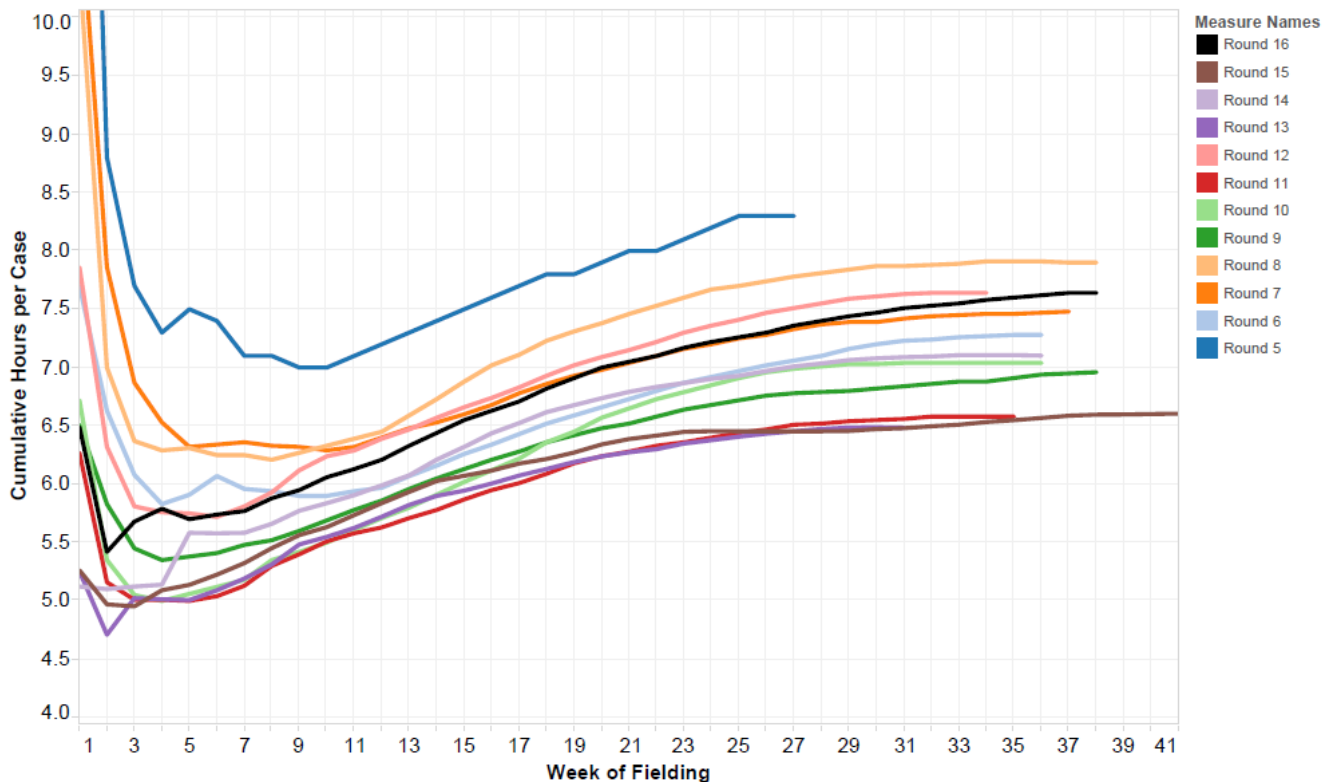


Figure 2. Trends in Phone Completion for Rounds 6-16 of the NLSY97

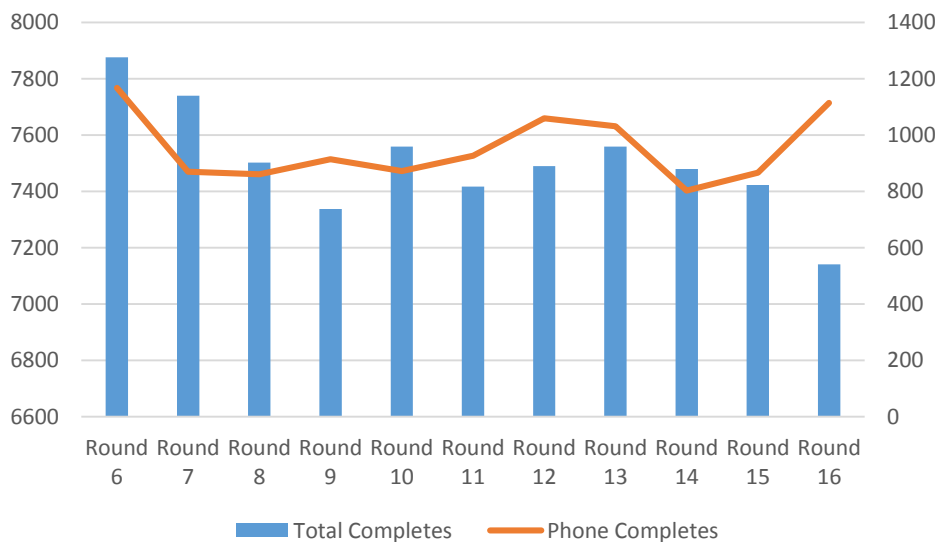


Figure 3. Trends in NIR Returns by Type for Rounds 14-16 of the NLSY97

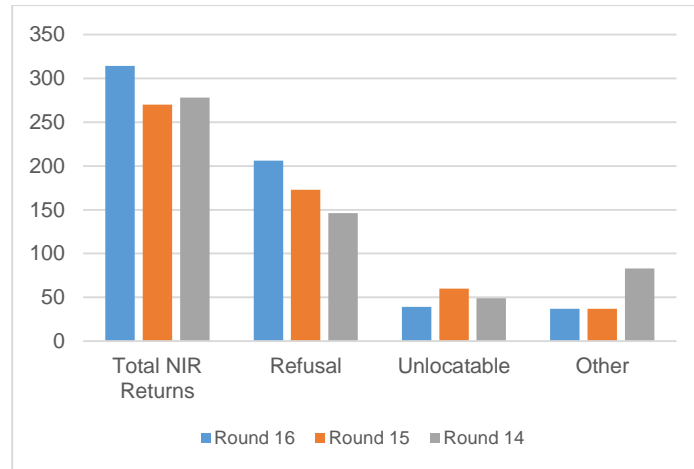


Figure 4. Number of Round 16 Contact Attempts for Completed Cases by Perfect Responder Status

