Share of immobiles in travel diary surveys
A review

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Share of immobiles in travel diary surveys: A review

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Abstract

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Keywords

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1 Motivation

Persons, who have been approached for a survey, say a travel diary, have a range of alternatives for their response:

- To refuse consistently
- To refuse initially, but to participate partially/fully in a later initial refuser - survey1
- To refuse initially, but to participate partially or fully later, still to the original instrument
- To participate partially, i.e. omitting certain objects/items on purpose
- To participate fully, while maybe omitting some objects/items by chance, forgetfulness or lack of understanding2.

Travel diaries surveys are a group of related surveys including:

- a household survey addressing the description of the household and its resources
- person survey(s) covering the socio-demographic and mobility-related characteristics of each household member, plus their work and school locations
- a vehicle survey describing the vehicles of the household and their usage

and finally

- Diaries for each household member requesting a report of the activities/movements of each person for a specified period.

The response burden implied in the first three surveys is mainly determined by the survey designer and the number and difficulty of the items requested, in particular as the number of vehicles and persons to be described does not vary so greatly. This is not true for the diaries, as the respondent has to decide, how many activities or movements (objects), he or she wants to report. The number and complexity of the items requested for each object should have an influence on this decision (see for example Axhausen, Köll, Bader and Herry, 1997). The

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1 The alternative term non-response-survey is confusing and therefore not used.

2 Lack of understanding by the respondent is a problem of the designer not of the respondent.
complexity is defined by both the number of items and, in particular, the requested format of 
the report: tours, trips, stages or activities; here then also the definition of activity and the 
thereby implied number of activities and in turn trips (Axhausen, Forthcoming).

A respondent, who reports to have been immobile on the reporting day, is a problem for the 
survey analyst. Has this person indeed not left the house or is the person using this as a way to 
reduce the response burden ?

The problem is actually more general, as the analyst has always to consider the question, 
whether the respondent has omitted objects (tours, trip/activities) or weather the respondent 
has aggregated activities into larger groups, thereby omitting trips. Examples are the tour to 
the restaurant for lunch during a working day, the drop-off activity during the morning com-
mute or the shopping tour, actually involving a range of stops/activities during the 90-120 
minutes of its duration; strictly speaking each a trip/activity in its own right.

If these decisions are taken at random by the respondents, in particular, are unrelated to the 
number of objects they would have to report, then modelling results are unbiased (see Polak 
and Han (Forthcoming)), although the constants will always be biased downwards; as one has 
to assume that no – very few - respondents invent and report additional, not actually per-
formed trips/activities.

The share of immobiles has a special importance in this context, as it has an immediate and 
strong impact on the mean number of reported objects (trips/activities) (See Figure 1). A 
number of recent multiday surveys, mostly involving the payment of incentives has raised the 
issue, what a reasonable share of immobiles should be: 7-10% or 15-20% person-days?

The German Panel (7 day diary) reports about 8% (Chlond, Lipps, Manz and Zumkeller 
1999), the 6-week Mobidrive – survey 6% (Axhausen, Zimmermann, Schönfelder, Rindsfüser 
und Haupt, 2002), a 12-week diary in Zürich 10% (Schlich, Kluge, Lehmann and Axhausen, 
2002). Finally a sample of GPS-tracked cars in a small Swedish town was not moved in the 
study area for 23% of the 50'000 observed days, which includes stays out-of-town or days 
when the car owner only used other modes.
Figure 1  Mean number of trips/person-day by share of immobiles in the sample

Source: Current sample of surveys

The purpose of this paper is to document current knowledge about immobility rates and to relate them to characteristics of the surveys involved. Clearly, as with all meta – analyses, these characterisation will be rougher and less complete than one would like, but in the absence of a proper public data archive more is not possible.

2 Expectations

Based on the general understanding of the response processes in general, and in travel diaries in particular, one would expect certain relationships to hold, at this point some of them contradictory, or at least in need of reconciliation:

- Postal – based surveys should have higher rates of immobility, as the respondents can assess their response burden reasonably accurately in advance and can consider their response strategy
Surveys with higher response rates should produce higher shares of immobiles, as they involve both more true immobiles and persons, which use immobility as a soft non-response.

Long-duration surveys should be more attractive to more active persons, thereby reducing reported immobility rates.

Incentive payments should reduce the rate of false immobiles, as the gift places a stronger social obligation of full reporting on the recipient.

Activity-based surveys, which cover in-home activities, should reduce the share of immobiles, as something has to be reported in any circumstance.

Activity-based surveys, which cover only out-of-home activities, should not differ from movement-based surveys.

Surveys involving personal contact during data retrieval (CATI, face-to-face) should have a higher share of omitted objects (tours, trips, activities), rather than immobility.

Surveys with higher shares of older people should have higher shares of immobiles (See Figure 2).

Surveys during the winter months should report higher shares of immobility.

Weekend only surveys, respectively surveys involving weekend days should report higher shares of immobility.

Countries with longer statutory vacations and more legal holidays should report higher shares, as some analyses do not separate these categories of no out-of-home activity.

3 Upper and lower limits

Travel diary survey exclude normally as a matter of policy a number of groups, because their sampling is difficult:

Persons in common accommodation, such as hotels, hostels etc.

Persons living in communal quarters, military barracks, student dormitories, retirement homes etc.

Persons staying in hospitals and similar institutions.

Persons living in prisons or other closed and semi-closed institutions.
Figure 2  Share of immobiles by age for selected surveys

Figure 3  Share of immobiles by age for selected surveys
It is unclear at this point, what impact these omissions have on the estimate of the share of immobile travellers in an area. The balance will depend on the relative share of persons in the last two categories in comparison with the first two categories. Still, it is important to realise that the numbers derived from a travel diary exclude certain – by definition – immobile people systematically: people staying in hospitals and people living in closed institutions³.

The sampling frame is, as implied before, limited to residential addresses. For an estimate of and upper or lower bound one would need to know, how many persons living at residential addresses are not able to leave the house. Gant (2002) cites UK evidence for this share: 8% of the disabled population is housebound according to an official national survey. The definition of disability used covers 11% of the UK population, which would result in estimate of 1% of the residential population being homebound. Adding another 1% for people with long-term illnesses plus the low estimate of 6% immobiles found in the long-duration surveys, we would obtain a lower bound of 8% for the share of immobiles.

Assuming conservatively that in addition to the homebound the 40% of UK disabled using wheel chairs and walking aids leave the house only every second day, one would obtain a share of 3%. Again adding 2% for long-term illness and a high estimate of 10% from the long-duration surveys, one obtains an upper bound of 15%⁴.

The range of 8-15% suggested by these rough estimates is well below the majority of the studies collated for this paper. If true, it would indicate a substantial share of hidden non-response, which would need to be corrected for to obtain correct estimates of trip making or activity participation.

### 4 Data set

³ See [http://www.kcl.ac.uk/depsta/rel/icps/worldbrief/highest_prison_population_rates.html](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/depsta/rel/icps/worldbrief/highest_prison_population_rates.html) for details on prison population. The US rate of 0.7% nationally is noticable.

5 Analysis

6 What now?

7 Acknowledgements

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- Carlos Arce (NuStats, Austin)

<< I hope that we can add more names later>>

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8 Literature


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