This article assesses the validity of responses to sensitive questions using four different methods. In an experimental setting, the authors compared a computer-assisted self-interview (CASI), face-to-face direct questioning, and two different varieties of randomized response. All respondents interviewed had been identified as having committed welfare and unemployment benefit fraud. The interviewers did not know that respondents had been caught for fraud, and the respondents did not know that the researchers had this information. The results are evaluated by comparing the percentage of false negatives. The authors also looked for variables that might explain why some respondents admit fraud and others do not. The proportions of respondents admitting fraud are relatively low, between 19 percent and 49 percent. The two randomized response conditions were superior in eliciting admissions of fraud. A number of background variables, notably gender, age, still receiving benefit, and duration and perception of fraud, are related to admitting fraud. Although the randomized response conditions performed much better than face-to-face direct questioning and CASI, the percentage of respondents admitting fraud is only around 50 percent. Some possible reasons for this are discussed.

I. INTRODUCTION

In both the United States and Europe, the issue of the welfare system has received growing attention in recent years, and efficient fraud control is generally seen as an integral component of the welfare system. Therefore, accurate information on the types and extent of welfare and unemployment benefit fraud is extremely relevant for policy decisions. However, it is difficult to obtain valid and reliable information in this area. If standard survey research is used to assess fraud, respondents will often refuse to take part, or, if they do take part, they will often not answer truthfully, especially when they have committed fraud.

The problem of obtaining valid and reliable information is not unique to fraud. Posing a direct question in an interview tends to give poor results (Sudman and Bradburn 1979; Lee 1993). A few examples from the Netherlands illustrate the point. Junger (1989, 1990) compared police records with the answers to a direct question in a face-to-face interview. She showed that Dutch adolescents report only 60 percent to 70 percent of all offenses for which they have ever been caught by the police. When attention was restricted to the most recent year, only 23 percent of all adolescents in her research admitted their offenses, with important differences according to ethnic background. For instance, respondents with a Turkish background reported only 9 percent of their offenses. In an investigation of unemployment benefit fraud using face-to-face direct questioning, Elffers, Robben, and Verlind (1989) found that 43 percent of those respondents who had been caught for fraud did not admit this. In telephone interviews with people already caught for vehicle tax fraud, Berghuis and Kommer (1982) found that only approximately 10 percent admitted evading this tax. Hessing, Elffers, and Wiegel (1988; see also Elffers, Robben, and Hessing 1992), using face-to-face direct questioning, report that 70 percent of their respondents denied ever having evaded income tax, while in fact all their respondents had been found guilty of this offense.

Survey methodologists have generally hypothesized that a major source of error in reports of sensitive behavior is deliberate misreporting (Jobe et al. 1997), and validity studies have indicated a pattern of underreporting for socially disapproved items (for a concise summary, see Droitcour et al. 1991). Likewise, Dutch surveys on moonlighting are plagued by false answers. Moonlighters receiving unemployment benefit may be less inclined to cooperate with survey research on moonlighting than those who have a job, since the former group is more at risk. Apart from juridical punishment, moonlighters also risk losing part of their income (Van Eck and Kazimier 1990; see also Koopmans 1988). It is clear that posing a direct question about welfare and unemployment benefit fraud in an interview is of limited value. To combat respondents’ underreporting of socially disapproved behavior, survey methodologists have developed a number of different measurement procedures designed to ensure the confidentiality of the answers and reduce potential respondents’ concerns on self-presentation. When surveying sensitive topics, researchers often used self-administered questionnaires, either in the form of a postal survey or as a questionnaire handed out by the interviewer. Compared with face-to-face interviews, self-administered questionnaires evoke a greater sense of privacy and lead to greater self-disclosure (Sudman and Bradburn 1979; Tourangeau and Smith 1996). Survey research has shown that compared with interviews, self-administered questionnaires produce more valid reports of sensitive behavior and fewer socially desirable answers in general (e.g., Aquilino 1994; Hochstim 1967; Siemiatycki 1979; Turner, Lessler, and Devote 1992; for a meta-analysis, see De Leeuw 1992).

However, self-administered questionnaires have a serious drawback: Only relatively simple questionnaires can be used (Dillman 1978). Computer-assisted self-interviewing (CASI) overcomes this problem and makes it possible to use very complex questionnaires without the aid of an interviewer.

In CASI, the interview program takes over the questionnaire logic and question flow. Respondents simply read each question from the screen and type in an answer, so they are no longer burdened with complex routing instructions. An interviewer may bring the computer to the respondent’s home, or the respondent may be invited to a data collection site equipped with computers. Generally, an interviewer or fieldworker is present to assist at the start, but the respondents...