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A NOTE ON THE RESPONSE TO AN APPEAL FOR PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL DATA

N. J. THOMSON

University of Adelaide

It is essential that economists have access to empirical data either for testing existing hypotheses, or for giving dimension to a situation suspected to exist, but about which little is actually known. In both cases the investigator must define his population and, ideally, draw his evidence from the whole of that population or, alternatively, from a random sample of that population. In some cases however, though it may be possible to *define* the population to be investigated, in practice such a population cannot be *identified* in isolation from the rest of the community. It may be considered impractical in the use of research funds and time to attempt to identify a very small group with peculiar characteristics by conducting a field survey of the whole population of a community. For example, the author wished to measure the incidence and effects of death duties on the death of male woolgrowers in South Australia between 1961-62 and 1968-69.¹ The population could thus be adequately *defined*. However, the extremely confidential nature of estate administration precluded the *identification* of this population, let alone the identities and addresses of the beneficiaries.

At first consideration was given to approaching the state farm organizations for assistance in identifying the population of farm estates in South Australia.² However, this method of contacting the target population was rejected on two grounds. First, as the individual members of such organizations hand over majority interest in the family property to the next generation of farmers they tend to resign their membership of the association. Once this happens the organizations become ignorant of deaths in the group of family properties which achieve the greatest level of death duty avoidance. Second, to look only at the estates of members of such farm associations is to *invite* bias from the outset. For example, the members of such organizations may be more professional in their approach to farming (and capital management) than the large number of farmers who are not members of a farm organization.³

Faced with such a situation, the author decided to attempt to at least get some indication of the kinds of effects being experienced by such a lump-sum tax, even if those effects were gauged, initially at least,

¹ Thomson, N. J., 'The Incidence and Effects of Death Duties on Woolgrowing Properties in South Australia', *The Australian Journal of Agricultural Economics*, Vol. 15, No. 3, December, 1971.

² The Stockowners' Association of South Australia has a membership of 2,600. The United Farmers and Graziers of South Australia has a membership of 11,800, but many of its members are not woolgrowers.

³ Allowing for farmers who are members of both organizations, the two organizations put the figure of their combined membership as representing between 50 and 70 per cent of all family farms in South Australia.

through case studies drawn from the State in general rather than through a completely random sample. To this end, a general appeal was made through the news media for such death-duty-affected farm families to voluntarily offer their co-operation in the study. Estimates of any bias in the results obtained from these initial volunteers followed at a subsequent stage in the research.⁴ The purpose of this note is to relate the degree of success achieved in eliciting the help of the beneficiaries and in particular to indicate which medium of appeal appears to stand the greatest chance of a successful response.

The appeal for respondents was made through newspapers and radio.⁵ In each case the author outlined the kinds of problems one might expect with the imposition of a lump-sum tax like death duties and it was stressed that it was important to document actual empirical evidence of these effects on farm operations. Emphasis was placed on the extremely confidential handling of the raw data and the appeal concluded with the method by which prospective respondents could contact the investigator.

The subsequent offers of assistance received from farmers were normally made by letter and almost invariably indicated how the prospective respondent had heard of the proposed investigation. Where this was not done, respondents were asked to indicate the source of information during the course of the personal interview which formed the principal basis of the research. Several respondents reported hearing of the research both in newspapers and on the radio, but there was only one case in which the respondent was unsure as to whether it was radio or newspaper comments which actually prompted him to take the positive step of contacting the investigator. In this case the response was credited half to radio, half to newspapers.

Altogether the appeal for co-operation was made in 13 separate newspaper articles and two State-wide radio broadcasts.⁶ However, 11 of the newspaper articles were only in regional newspapers selected specifically to ensure a State-wide penetration of information on the research. These regional newspapers together could be assumed to cover the State only once. The other two newspaper reports were in a farmers' weekly with a State-wide circulation.⁷ Thus, in effect, the appeal received State-wide circulation five times; twice by radio and three times by newspaper. The response to these five appeals is summarized in Table 1.

⁴ Having made contact with volunteer respondents who had experienced the characteristics to be studied, it was not difficult to ask them during the personal interview to identify others in the district in the same situation as themselves. A number of the volunteer respondents were therefore selected at random and asked to introduce the investigator to the nearest neighbour who had experienced death duties. The two groups, initial 'volunteers' and the 'introduced' sample were then compared. See Appendix I, *Ibid.*, p. 144.

⁵ The author did not seek access to TV. There was no guarantee that TV could penetrate all areas in the State, particularly the Pastoral Zone.

⁶ The radio broadcasts were on the ABC's 'Country Hour'. The newspapers who reported the survey were: *The Chronicle* (Adelaide), *The Eyre Peninsula Tribune* (Cleve), *The York Peninsula Country Times* (Kadina), *The West Coast Sentinel* (Streaky Bay), *The Northern Review* (Jamestown), *The Islander* (Kangaroo Island), *Yorke Peninsula News Pictorial* (Yorketown), *The Border Watch* (Mount Gambier), *The Kingston Leader* (Kingston), *The Pinnaroo Border Times* (Pinnaroo) and the *Port Lincoln Times* (Port Lincoln).

⁷ *The Chronicle* (Adelaide).

TABLE 1

Response from Volunteer Respondents by Communication Media

Media	No. of Appeals for Information	No. of Respondents	Average Response per Appeal
1. Radio	2	24.5 ^(a)	12.3
2. Newspapers			
(a) Regional	1	6.0	6.0
(b) State-wide	2	11.5 ^(a)	5.8
Total newspapers	3	17.5 ^(a)	5.8

Note: (a) One respondent was unsure which medium prompted him to reply and his response has been divided equally between each.

It can be seen that there was twice the response per radio broadcast compared to each State-wide coverage by the newspapers (12.3:5.8). Since the radio broadcasts were made during the mid-day meal period it could be expected that this medium of communication is more convenient than newspaper articles which may only be read at the end of a long working day. Further, it can be safely assumed that in soliciting support for research which involves the respondent in exposing extremely confidential material the more personal approach of radio outstrips the cold and impersonal words of newsprint. When time and money preclude a personal survey of the whole farm sector to locate groups with a peculiar, isolated characteristic, such an observation is extremely valuable in the hunt for empirical data.