

## **“If it came in the mail, I wouldn’t have even looked at it”: contact triangulation as a means to increase response rates**

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**Abstract:** Conducting survey research in the social sciences is becoming increasingly difficult as potential respondents are constantly flooded with junk mail and bombarded by telemarketers. If social scientists are to continue using surveys as a research technique, they must be sensitive to these trends and employ modified, comprehensive approaches emphasizing community contact and rapport. This paper explores this contention by examining the effect of ‘contact triangulation’ on response rates in Benito, a rural agricultural community in Manitoba’s Parkland region. Community contact, an essential aspect of successful research in rural areas, was achieved through presence and visibility in the community, a ‘knock and drop’ survey technique and the use of local media for research information dissemination. While contact with residents through the knock and drop exercise alone did not appear to impact response rates, overall, the efforts to establish community contact contributed to an acceptable response rate.

### **Introduction**

Response rates in self-completed surveys have consistently decreased in recent years (Frohlich 2002; Tuckel and O’Neill 2002). Attributed largely to intense social research, censuses, seemingly endless gallup polls, and the proliferation of telemarketing, these trends have led researchers to employ innovative means to gathering survey data. While techniques for improving survey designs were a dominant theme in the social science literature in the 1970s and early 1980s (*e.g.* Dillman 1972, 1978; Veiga 1974; Henley 1976; Heberlein and Baumgartner 1978; Eichner and Habermehl 1981; Li 1981; Frey 1983; Sheskin 1985), there appears to be a void in the literature until more recently (*e.g.* Drane *et al.* 1998; Shermis and Lombard 1999; Ruggiero 2001; McTavish and Loether 2002; Huang,

Hubbard and Mulvey 2003). The purpose of this paper is to describe an alternative technique for conducting a community-scale survey with a focus on intense community contact in an effort to increase response rates. Derived from triangulation or multi-modal research approaches, this research employs 'community contact triangulation'. Community contact, an essential aspect of successful research in rural areas, was achieved in three ways: 1) presence and visibility in the community; 2) a 'knock and drop' survey technique; and 3) the use of local print and electronic media for research information dissemination.

The paper begins by providing the context for research conducted in Benito, Manitoba, one of 32 community sites included in a national study known as the New Rural Economy Project based out of Concordia University (Reimer 2002). Between 1997 and 2002, due to financial and resource constraints, only 20 of the 32 community sites were studied. Benito was one of the sites not fully included. The Village of Benito represents a small rural community with elements of both continuity and change. In terms of bringing Benito into the NRE Project, a 'snap shot' questionnaire was developed for administration to all households in the community. The methods employed in conducting the survey and the resulting response rate are discussed within the context of research methodology. The paper concludes by illustrating the importance of incorporating innovative techniques in order to improve response rates, and therefore, the representativeness of survey data.

## The New Rural Economy Project and Manitoba

Based out of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Concordia University, the New Rural Economy (NRE) Project is a project of the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation (CRRF) that began in 1997 to examine social cohesion in rural Canada. Based on a sampling frame developed by a consortium of researchers, 32 communities in Canada were selected to be part of a 'rural observatory' (Reimer 2002; see also <http://nre.concordia.ca>). These communities were judged to be a sample reflective of rural communities across Canada (Figure 1). Indeed, the selected communities reflected each province and one territory (Nunavut), and a range of population and spatial delineations (*e.g.* villages and municipalities) and economic bases. For a variety of reasons, most importantly financial and human resource limitations, only 20 of the 32 communities were actually 'activated' for research throughout the five-year span of the NRE. In Manitoba, two sites were initially selected:

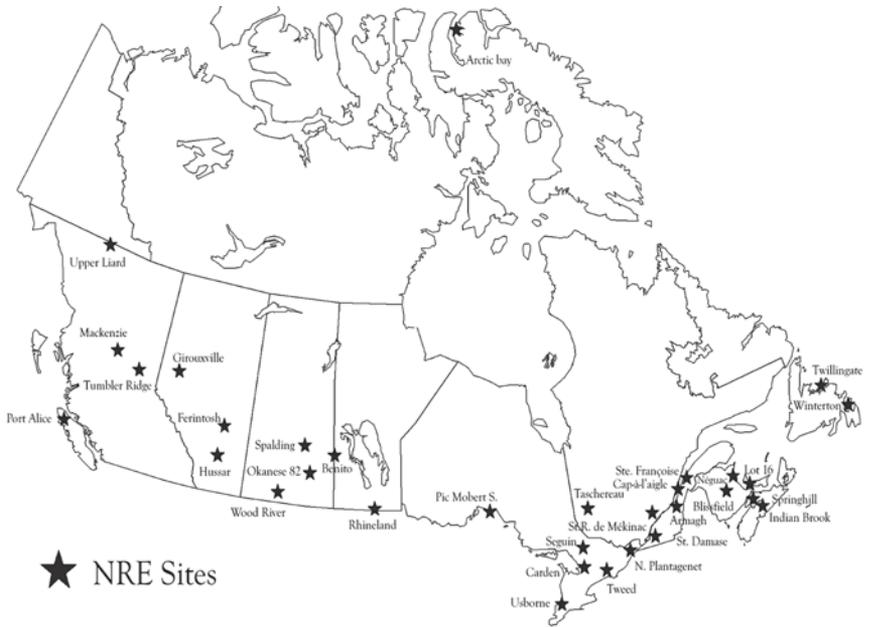


Figure 1: Map of NRE Sites Across Canada.

Benito and the Rural Municipality of Rhineland. However, only Rhineland was activated as part of the larger NRE project.

In order for the NRE work to be relevant to changes taking place in rural Manitoba, it was felt that the other site, Benito, ought to be activated. It was also an effort to create a comparable database since data had been collected in other activated NRE sites. Most particularly, in 2001, a researcher administered household survey was conducted in the 20 activated sites totaling 1,995 surveys of randomly selected households. As part of that survey, 146 households in Rhineland were interviewed. Using a local citizen as the first point of contact, approximately 850 people were telephoned for an interview. Even though 146 individuals were interviewed (the pre-selected sample was 148), the refusal rate was quite high. Of the total number of people contacted, 83% refused the request to be interviewed. This rate has a number of implications. First, the process was time consuming. Second and more important, a high refusal rate seems to challenge the representativeness of the sample. That is, who was actually interviewed? The researchers were hindered by vacation and working schedules, and a disproportionate number of seniors, arguably with more time on their hands, were interviewed. There were also spatial obstacles

as the total area of Rhineland is 923 square kilometers. Together, spatial constraints and a low response rate resulted in a financial and labour intensive survey project that was possibly not a representative sample of the municipality as a whole.

Given the low response rate in Rhineland, the researchers felt that any research in Benito should take into consideration the obstacles of the larger household survey, particularly the data gathering method. In short, the researchers decided to apply a different research approach to Benito. In contrast to Rhineland, the Village of Benito is small, covering less than one square kilometer, and the population, despite fluctuations over the past 10 years, remains relatively stable. According to the 2001 Canadian Census, the population of Benito is 415, 45% of which are 55 years of age or older (Statistics Canada 2001a).

Benito's economy has historically been dependent on the agricultural resource base that surrounds it. Cereal crops including wheat, winter wheat, barley, oats and rye, as well as canola and flax oilseeds are grown in the Benito area. In terms of diversification, between the 1996 and 2001 Census, Manitoba outpaced the rest of Canada (Statistics Canada 2001b). Benito is no exception as diversification throughout the region includes specialty crops such as field peas, favabeans, cannery seed and alfalfa seed, feed corn and lentils, as well as horses, cattle and hogs. Like other regions across the prairies, Benito has experienced first-hand changes in agribusiness. Where several large grain elevators once stood, the last was demolished in the fall of 2002. Aside from agriculture, the Benito area supports a strong logging industry, a manufacturing base and numerous local services.

## **Survey Methodology**

Techniques for employing a questionnaire-based survey are varied, including: face-to-face interview surveys, mail surveys, telephone surveys, intercept surveys, and dual mechanisms that combine any of the aforementioned (Sheskin 1985). Surveys can be self, group, or interviewer administered (Jackson 1988). While in the early 1980s, telephone surveys came into vogue (Frey 1983), the facsimile and e-mail-based survey techniques are more recent additions to survey types (Kitchen and Tate 2000; Ruggiero 2001; Shannon and Bradshaw 2002). However, they are limited to samples with access to such technologies and make it more difficult to ensure either confidentiality or anonymity. In comparing attributes of various survey methods, Czaja and Blair (1996) state that while face-to-face interviews yield the highest response rates and the lowest

sampling frame and response bias, they also cost more and take more time. The researcher is also in the best position to be aware of the respondents' understanding of the questions (Rea and Parker 1992). Given the propensity toward telemarketing, it appears that the telephone survey has become more problematic. More recently, Shannon and Bradshaw (2002) found that while electronic surveys resulted in faster responses, mail surveys had a higher response and lower undeliverable rates. Thus, it appears that there continue to be pros and cons to various survey techniques.

The Benito survey was a scaled-down version of the 26-page survey administered in the NRE 2001 Household Project, and included select questions from other surveys conducted in 2000. Jackson (1999) recommends a maximum length of 50 questions for mailed surveys. Based on experience and the survey literature (Dillman 1972; 1978; Jackson 1999; Huang *et al.* 2003), the length of the questionnaire and the time required to complete the survey were taken into account. The final instrument was limited to six pages, printed double-sided and was divided into eight topic sections with a variety of question styles.

Given that the surveys were self-administered, a variety of question types, including Likert-type (Jackson 1999) closed-ended statements as well as open-ended questions were incorporated into the questionnaire design in order to keep the respondents interested and provide them with multiple means to express their opinions, and because this format is the most appropriate technique for collecting such information. The first section addressed demographic characteristics and employment information. The second section, which was comprised of predominantly closed-ended questions, dealt with the adequacy, usage and quality of a variety of community services. Respondents could also provide commentary on each of the services. The third and fourth sections, covering economic and community change, and natural resources respectively, were comprised of mostly open-ended questions. It was believed that placing these sections mid-survey would increase the inclination to respond, given that open-ended questions are often discouraged in self-administered surveys (Bourque and Fielder 1995; Rea and Parker 1992; Jackson 1988). The remaining sections on personal action and participation, community action, leadership and Internet usage were mostly close-ended, although there was room for commentary.

In terms of sampling, the population of Benito (415), the number of households (192), and the community's geographic size made it possible to distribute the survey by hand. These community characteristics also made it possible to pilot new research approach techniques. Specifically, the researchers employed what they refer to as 'contact triangulation'.

This approach is a modification of other well-known approaches, including triangulation (Opermann 2000), case studies (Yin 1993; Hamel 1993), the Delphi technique (Bardecki 1984; Green *et al.* 1990), multi-modal research approaches utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods (Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998), and the ‘Total Design Method’ (TDM) (Dillman 1978; Huang *et al.* 2003). In varying ways and degrees, these methodologies adopt the notion of broadening the baseline from which to collect data. In the research reported here, the focus has been on broadening the initiatives that can be employed to increase the utility of survey research. In doing so, however, these other methodologies were drawn upon. First, in balancing the questionnaire between closed and open-ended responses, the multi-method approach was adhered to. Second, whereas triangulation in its purest sense refers to multiple ways to collect the same information, in the Benito survey, triangulation was adopted in the sense of using different techniques to improve response rates, thus our adoption of the term ‘contact triangulation’.

The TDM is an approach that remains a leading survey design technique described in social research methods textbooks (*e.g.* Bernard 2000; Huang *et al.* 2003). Essentially, it argues that developing a comprehensive set of procedures and steps in survey research design maximizes response rates. In revisiting Dillman’s original TDM, Huang *et al.* (2003) examined six factors affecting response rates: degree of participant interest, whether researchers understood their participants, quality of mailing lists used, selection criteria in using the mailing list, incentives adopted, and the importance of study sponsorship. For the Benito survey, interest was sought through the media contacts and covering letter, both of which outlined the importance of the study to rural communities. In terms of sponsorship, several techniques (as outlined below) were employed to ensure awareness of Brandon University.

Calahan and Schumm (1995) also examined six of Dillman’s mail survey steps: quality of covering letter, use of follow-up contact, the importance of the study, the appearance or readability of the survey, the length of the survey, and the sampling frame. They argue that based on employment of these considerations, the TDM offers both reliability and validity at a low cost. As outlined in the following, all steps apart from the sampling frame were considered in the development and administration of the Benito survey.

In the Benito study, participant interest was fostered by making prior contact. An understanding of potential respondents was sought through contact with a resident in each household. Mailing lists were unnecessary, since contact was made with each household in the community. Although suggested by others (Wilk 1993), no financial incentives were offered for

participating in the survey. However, the sponsorship of Brandon University was made clear throughout the survey design. Thus, in developing the survey for Benito, the TDM, and specifically Huang *et al.*'s view of it, was used as a reference point.

In addition to the points raised above, other initiatives were incorporated into the survey design. First, contacts were made with the local municipal office and the village council to describe the survey, its purpose, and connection to the NRE (Table 1). In consultation with Brandon University's Communication Officer, a press release was then developed and distributed to local print and radio media including the *Swan River Star and Times*, a regional newspaper serving the Village of Benito. The importance of pre-notification is also evidenced in the survey literature (*e.g.* Chebat and Pickard 1991; Schlegelmilch 1991; Faria, Dickinson and Filipic 1990; Jolson 1977). Unfortunately, the press release was not immediately picked up by local print media sources. Later, the reporter at the *Swan River Star and Times* newspaper apologized for not informing others of the impending press release before she went on holidays. Having said this, however, some community members were aware of the survey, most likely through radio news based out of Swan River or Dauphin.

**Table 1:** Survey stages, July and August, 2002.

Date	Initiative
July 9	Letter sent to municipal council
July 12	Press release sent for coverage in July 16 issue of the <i>Swan River Star and Times</i>
July 22-23	Knock and drop conducted
July 30	Advertisement placed in local paper announcing consultation
July 31 & Aug. 1	Return site visit and consultation
Aug 23	Reminder and thank-you cards mailed to all households

Bernard (2000) describes the 'knock and collect' technique whereby a survey is dropped off at a particular location for future pick-up, which is similar to the 'drop-off/pick-up' method described by Steele *et al.* (2001). A modification of this technique was employed in the Benito survey, in that surveys were dropped off at all households in the Village with an addressed, stamped envelope for return to the researchers. This 'knock and drop' technique is similar to that described by Sheskin (1985). The instrument and cover letter were placed, along with a self-addressed stamped envelope, into an envelope addressed to 'community resident'. The covering letter included a handwritten note to remind respondents of

the deadline to return their surveys. The technique of individualizing the survey is noted in the TDM (Dillman 1978; Calahan and Schumm 1995). Furthermore, as part of the survey design, attempts were made to contact each household. If residents were at home, the survey was described, and if the resident was willing, a survey was left for completion (Table 1). If contact was not achieved, the envelope was left at the home.

Visibility during the 'knock and drop' exercise was maximized by the presence of Brandon University clothing, buttons, and nametags worn by the researchers. Sponsorship has been found to influence response rates (Heberlein and Baumgartner 1978; Greer *et al.* 2000). Posters were also placed strategically throughout Benito, including at local merchants, the municipal office, the community events board, and on hydro poles. Following the 'knock and drop', an advertisement was placed in the *Swan River Star and Times* thanking residents for their participation and announcing that consultations would be held over a two day period at the local coffee shop. Finally, reminder/thank-you cards were mailed to all households in the third week of August (Table 1). Reminder cards and other attempts at follow-up have been found to increase response rates (Dillman 1972; Anderson and Berdie 1975; Etzel and Walker 1974; Drane *et al.* 1998; Greer *et al.* 2000).

Compared to the survey techniques described by Czaja and Blair (1996), the 'knock and drop' technique closely resembles mail survey techniques. Table 2 reproduces the three categories described by Czaja and Blair (1996) (mailed, telephone, and face-to-face). The 'knock and drop' technique employed in this project is described in the additional fourth column in Table 2. As noted, this technique is similar to the mail-out survey. Several important differences include the fact that the 'knock and drop' must be administered to a clustered sample, rapport can be more easily established given researcher presence in the community, and there is more personal contact. Also important to mention is that in this case, the length of data collection was similar to that of face-to-face interviews (Czaja and Blair 1996) since respondents were given less than six weeks to complete the survey. Not noted in Table 2, however, is that with the 'knock and drop' technique, researchers can be more confident that most of the questionnaires were delivered to dwellings that appeared to be occupied, whereas with mail-out surveys there are always margins of error in delivery through the post. Steele *et al.* (2001) note that their 'drop-off/pick-up' method is appropriate for small dense settlements because there is an assurance that all households are contacted. Similarly, the methodological strength of the Benito research is the lack of a sampling frame bias given that all households in the community had an equal opportunity to respond.

**Table 2:** Survey design issues.

Aspect of Survey	Mailed Questionnaire	Telephone Interviews	Face-to-Face (in-home) Interviews	Knock and drop*
<b>Administrative, Resource Factors</b>				
Cost	Low	Low/medium	High	Low
Length of data collection period	Long (10 weeks)	Short (2-4 weeks)	Medium/long (4-12 weeks)	Medium (4 weeks)
Geographic distribution of sample	May be wide	May be wide	Must be clustered	Must be clustered
<b>Questionnaire Issues</b>				
Length of Questionnaire	Short/medium (4-12 pages)	Medium/long (1/4-3/4 hour)	Long (1/2-1 hour)	Short/medium (4-12 pages)
Complexity of Questionnaire	Must be simple	May be complex	May be complex	Must be simple
Complexity of Questions	Simple to moderate	Must be short and simple	May be complex	Simple to moderate
Control of question order	Poor	Very good	Very good	Poor
Use of open-ended questions	Poor	Fair	Good	Poor
Use of visual aids	Good	Usually not possible	Very good	Good
Use of household/personal records	Very good	Fair	Good	Very good
Rapport	Fair	Good	Very good	Fair to very good
Sensitive topics	Good	Fair/good	Fair	Good
Nonthreatening questions	Good	Good	Good	Good
<b>Data-Quality Issues</b>				
Sampling frame bias	Usually low	Low (with RDD)	Low	N/A (population sample)
Response rate	45%-75%	60%-90%	65%-95%	33%
Response bias	Medium/high (favors more educated persons)	Low	Low	Medium/high (favors more educated persons)
Knowledge about refusals and noncontacts	Fair	Poor	Fair	Fair
Control of response situation	Poor	Fair	Good	Poor
Quality of recorded response	Fair/good	Very good	Very good	Fair/good
Source: Adapted from Czaja and Blair (1996)				
Note: *Column added based on present survey				

## Response Rate

Of the 192 households identified in Benito, contact was made at 104. Nine refused participation and a questionnaire was left in the door of the remaining 88 households. A coding technique was employed to classify the questionnaires completed by those where personal contact was made and those where personal contact was not made. The result was a total response rate of 32.8% (n=63). Interestingly, a slightly higher response

rate resulted from the cohort where no contact was made (36.3% or 32) compared to that where contact was made (29.8% or 31). For those respondents without contact, there was a greater propensity for the individuals to be between the ages of 18 and 54. Of those who responded and had contact with the researcher, they tended to be above the age of 55, a reflection of the time of day that contacts were attempted. That is, the 'knock and drop' was conducted during the late morning and early afternoon when those of a working age would not normally be home. Further, in making contact with those over the age of 55, it was apparent that many would not be able to complete the survey due to factors such as literacy and frailty.

While it appears that making contact had an adverse effect, the higher response rate for those not contacted could be the result of the surveys being dropped off at the door in a community with no household mail delivery. Thus, residents would perceive the survey drop as being an attempt to make contact. As noted by one resident where contact was made, "if it came in the mail, I wouldn't have even looked at!" That is, the survey was not simply bulk-mailed to a household's post office box, which is considered a less personal and less successful technique (Veiga 1974). Given the possibility that such a drop would be considered to be contact by some, the contact response rate could be higher than indicated by the study. Nevertheless, having approximately one-third of all households in Benito respond to the survey is adequate according to the literature. Bourque and Fielder (1995), for example, state that a 20% response rate is good when no incentives are included.

In this sense, the 'knock and drop' approach to community-level surveying was a success. The 33% response rate was more than adequate given the technique, the time of surveying and the population. Table 3 lists the responses from community residents as they were post-marked. Follow-up, including a return site visit and thank-you/reminder card, appear to have increased response rates. As illustrated in Table 3, in the week following the advertisement and return site visit, the proportion of total responses received increased from 27% to 59%. A further 9% were receiving following the mailing of the mail-out thank-you/reminder card. While it is not possible to verify whether these actions were responsible for all responses made during these two periods, together they accounted for 29 of the total 63 responses, or 46% of the total.

Having said this, several issues did emerge that could be considered a downfall of this specific approach, or the use of the self-administered questionnaires in general. While 78% (49) of respondents provided at least one comment in the first services section and only four failed to provide any responses to open-ended questions midway through the survey,

**Table 3:** Survey actions taken and date surveys mailed by respondents, Benito.

Survey Action	Month	Date Post-Marked	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Conducted Knock and Drop	July	Monday 22			
		Tuesday 23	4	6.3	6.3
Wednesday 24		3	4.8	11.1	
Thursday 25		2	3.2	14.3	
Friday 26		2	3.2	17.5	
		Saturday 27	1	1.6	19.0
		Sunday 28			
		Monday 29	4	6.3	25.4
Advertisement in Paper		Tuesday 30	1	1.6	27.0
Return Visit and Consultation		Wednesday 31	5	7.9	34.9
Return Visit and Consultation	August	Thursday 01	4	6.3	41.3
		Friday 02	2	3.2	44.4
Saturday 03					
Sunday 04					
Monday 05					
		Tuesday 06	6	9.5	54.0
		Wednesday 07	3	4.8	58.7
		Thursday 08	1	1.6	60.3
		Friday 09	4	6.3	66.7
		Saturday 10			
		Sunday 11			
		Monday 12	4	6.3	73.0
		Tuesday 13	2	3.2	76.2
		Wednesday 14	1	1.6	77.8
		Thursday 15	1	1.6	79.4
	Friday 16	2	3.2	82.5	
	Saturday 17				
	Sunday 18				
	Monday 19	1	1.6	84.1	
	Tuesday 20				
	Wednesday 21	1	1.6	85.7	
	Thursday 22	1	1.6	87.3	
Reminder/Thank-you cards		Friday 23			
		Saturday 24			
	Sunday 25	1	1.6	88.9	
	Monday 26	2	3.2	92.1	
	Tuesday 27				
	Wednesday 28	2	3.2	95.2	
	Thursday 29	3	4.8	100.0	
	Total		63	100.0	

Note: shaded areas denote days when Canada Post Offices were closed. Post marks in the shaded areas could be due to clerical errors at Canada Post  
 Source: Authors' Survey

there appeared to be a high propensity to omit or skip questions. In fact, of the 63 respondents, 73% (46) omitted or skipped at least one question. While this could have been due to any number of reasons including complicated question wording, being unsure of the answer, making a choice not to respond, illiteracy or simple oversight, it is impossible to know with any certainty, therefore illustrating a weakness of this technique. A high incidence of missing cases on one or many variables makes any cross

tabulation or regression-based analysis difficult to conduct and compromises the use of such variables as indices of social phenomena.

By way of example, Table 4 lists the responses given in the service provision section of the questionnaire. As noted, while in general few written comments were provided for most services, more than two-thirds of respondents provided written comments on health care. In fact, while a topic dealt with in more detail elsewhere (Walsh and Ramsey 2003), health care issues were raised in other points of the questionnaire, including the open-ended responses to the question: "What are the most important things you feel Benito should attempt to achieve over the next few years?" Thus, propensity to provide responses to open-ended questions is in part a reflection of the level of interest in the subject. The issue of interest and relevance of questions is illustrated in Table 5 where non-response ranged from 16% (10) for garbage collection to 50% (31) for high schools. The high degree of non-response to the latter is both a reflection of Benito lacking a high school as well as older respondents not having school-aged children. Together, Tables 4 and 5 illustrate a comparable level of non-response between closed and open-ended questions and statements.

**Table 4:** Resident perception of adequacy of service provision in Benito.

Service	Yes	No	Not Applicable	No Response	Number of Written Comments
Health	13	47	1	2	43
Recreation	46	7	5	5	14
Transportation	19	19	10	5	17
Government	34	16	4	9	11
Education	47	3	7	6	14
Communication	42	5	7	9	11

Source: Authors' Survey

## Research in Rural Areas: The Importance of Community Contact

As indicated earlier, conducting research in rural areas is a challenging process, given that research methods reliant on mail, e-mail and fax technology have evolved to become more efficient, cheaper and ultimately, more impersonal. Added to this is an overall societal shift in communication means including an increasing reliance on computer-based technologies (*e.g.* e-mail, chat, teleconferencing, web videos, *etc.*), rather than face-to-face contact. Even telephone survey technology includes dimensions that

**Table 5:** Perceptions of the quality of municipal services in Benito, 2002.

Service	Very Poor	Poor	Neutral	Good	Very Good	No Response
Elementary School	1	2	8	17	15	20
High School	3	1	10	13	5	31
Police/RCMP	3	7	17	17	6	13
Fire Protection	1	0	5	17	28	12
Municipal Water Supply	2	0	4	23	22	12
Municipal Sewage	2	0	6	26	18	11
Garbage Collection	0	4	5	26	18	10
Recreational Facilities	4	3	8	30	6	12
Recreation Programs	4	2	16	22	6	13

Source: Authors' Survey

are impersonal such as automated dialing systems. In smaller rural communities such as Benito, contact triangulation as a research approach can be employed to overcome these obstacles and quality contact with community residents can be achieved to increase response rates, while still keeping within the research budget.

While this research approach shows that contact did not necessarily increase the propensity for general response, it did lead to higher response rates among Benito's aging population. Given that the Canadian population is aging (Statistics Canada 2001a) and that 20% of Canada's seniors live in rural areas (Keating, Keefe and Dobbs 2001), the contact triangulation approach, including the 'knock and drop' technique could prove to be an important means to discover the needs and realities of this vital Canadian population. In doing so, however, return visits to households would be recommended as a means to clarify the survey purpose, answer any questions a potential respondent may have, and ultimately, increase response rates.

Steele *et al.* (2001) indicate that presence in the community allows exposure to local conditions and residents and ultimately, a greater understanding of the community. Undoubtedly, the presence of the researchers in Benito provided them the opportunity to understand the survey results in a more informed context. The researchers were aware of residents' perceptions and were able to interpret written comments based on other informal conversations and field notes. While telephone and mail surveys do provide an indication of what is occurring among the population under study, the absence of a researcher in the field could potentially mean that many important aspects of the respondents' reality is unobserved. This is not to say that a brief presence in the community can lead to the deep understanding often achieved through ethnographic methods whereby researchers live in the research area for months or even years at a time.

However, even a quick glimpse can lead to a sense of community conflicts, power relations, demographics, as well as the social, economic and political realities of the people living there.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

The purpose of the research was to bring Benito into the fold of a larger, national study (Reimer 2002). As such, an instrument was developed drawing from previous surveys. Based on the experience of a modified instrument and survey employment, a number of comments can be made in recommending future survey research. Building rapport is important in survey research, particularly with the elderly. While others have noted a higher response rate with face-to-face interviews (Sheskin 1985; Czaja and Blair 1996), and such a technique may be desirable, it is not always possible. The 'knock and drop' technique, while not perfect, does offer potential. One recommendation would be to drop only when contact is made. At the very least, it would eliminate the question regarding contact being personal versus contact perceived where no household mail delivery is provided. Developing a schedule that allows one to return at a different time period of the day may increase the response rate. At a minimum, more than one visit to each household could bolster response rates as well as provide the opportunity for researchers to answer questions residents may have. Finally, personally addressed covering letters should be attempted if the necessary information is available.

Regardless of the delivery method chosen, however, it is important to realize that survey research is constrained. For example, accessing people can be difficult and the interests of potential respondents can vary. Reading and comprehension levels are also variable. Simplicity is key. The instrument must be user friendly and use simple language, and researchers must accept that few people in a general population survey will provide written details. As such, closed-ended structure to questionnaires should be employed. Further impediments to survey research are more recent, such as the trends toward telemarketing and the lack of privacy that results. In short, there appears to be an increasing wariness towards surveys that researchers need to be aware of when designing their survey instruments and employment techniques. Utilization of some form of 'contact triangulation', such as that employed in this research, offers potential for survey research in the future.

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