Best Practices to Improve TANF Survey Response Rates for the FRA Secondary School Attainment Measure

The Fiscal Responsibility Act (FRA) requires states and territories to report secondary school attainment outcomes for TANF recipients. Although this information may be available from administrative data sources, for some states or recipients, it may be necessary to gather data through surveys. This resource offers helpful guidelines and tips to improve response rates to surveys, organized into the following sections:

1. Designing the survey
2. Selecting the survey mode
3. Recruiting the participants
4. Timing the survey
5. Enhancing engagement
6. Reminding the participants

When conducting a survey with a small number of target respondents, every additional response is critical. High response rates lead to more reliable data and ensure that the experiences of hard-to-reach participants—who may differ from the majority—are not missed.

Use these simple tips to improve response rates and gather accurate, actionable insights. Appendix A provides an example of survey questions that collect secondary education information.

1 Designing the survey

- **Keep it short:** Limit the number of questions to keep completion time under 10–15 minutes.
  Pro tip: Most online platforms can estimate the completion time—use this feature to adjust your survey length.

- **Keep it simple:** Use straightforward, simple language that avoids jargon.
  Example: A technical term such as "secondary education" could be replaced or enhanced with a plain language explanation such as "high school diploma or GED."

- **Use clear skip logic:** Design skip patterns so respondents only see relevant questions based on their earlier answers.

- **Offer translation:** Provide translations into key languages based on your audience's needs.
  Pro tip: Verify that translated versions maintain clarity and are culturally appropriate.

- **Ensure quality:** Check that the survey is free of typos, awkward formatting, and confusing skip patterns.
  Pro tip: Pilot test the survey with a few participants to verify clarity and overall functionality before wider distribution.

#2 Selecting the survey mode

- **Ensure access:** Select survey modes - paper, phone, online, or text message - that best match the needs of the audience, keeping in mind that some respondents may face challenges such as limited internet/phone access, unstable addresses, and low tech or reading proficiency.

- **Offer multiple survey options:** Allow participants to choose and switch how they respond if one method isn't working.
  Example: A paper survey could include a QR code for those who prefer to complete it online.

3 Recruiting the participants

- **Justify your request:** Clearly communicate why you are asking and how their participation will drive TANF program improvements.

- **Give a clear deadline:** Let respondents know exactly when their response is needed to prevent procrastination and ensure timely completion.
  Pro tip: People are more likely to act when there's a clear, specific deadline—avoid vague phrases like "as soon as possible."

- **Assure confidentiality:** Explain that their responses are confidential and address any concerns directly (e.g., that responses will not impact their benefits).

- **Include consent language:** Provide clear and concise consent information that explains that participation is voluntary.
  Example: "By participating, you agree that your responses may be used to improve TANF services. Your information will be kept confidential and is collected only with your consent."

- **Build trust:** Use invitations from trusted sources and make sure that the invitation and the survey are clearly linked to the program.
  Example: Use official TANF program letterhead or envelopes and ensure that the sender's email address or phone number clearly identifies it as coming from the TANF program.

- **Personalize invitations:** Address the recipient by name and reference their local program.
  Pro tip: Personalize the sender by including the caseworker's or local program director's name instead of a generic institutional sender.

4 Timing the survey

- **Pick the right moment:** For online or phone surveys, schedule when participants are likely free, such as mid-week afternoons after school or work.
  Example: Although the right moment depends on the specific audience, you could consider sending survey invitations on a Tuesday afternoon when respondents have settled into their weekly routines.

- **Avoid busy periods:** Steer clear of holidays, benefit renewal dates, or times when academic or work schedules are in flux.

- **Allow enough time after exit**: Plan to conduct the survey at least one year after the end of the reporting period since the goal is to measure secondary education attainment during the reporting period or during the following fiscal year (in the case of exiters).
  Pro tip: Keeping in touch with individuals often and updating their contact information will help you improve response rates.

- **Keep the survey open long enough:** Leave the survey open for at least 8 weeks to allow time to reach hard-to-contact participants and send reminders. However, give participants a shorter deadline such as 2 to 3 weeks to encourage timely responses. Extend this deadline or send follow-ups as needed during the full fielding period.

5 Enhancing engagement

- **Offer incentives**: Provide small rewards such as grocery cards to boost participation and ease data collection. Clearly explain when and how the incentives will be provided.
  Pro tip: Select incentives that are useful and easy to redeem - e.g., a major payment card may be more appreciated than a gas card if many participants do not drive.

- **Offer support:** Provide a dedicated contact number or email for participants to reach out if they have questions.

#6 Reminding the participants

- **Follow-up**: Send one or two friendly and appropriately spaced reminders to those who haven't responded.
  Pro tip: Change the wording or mode of sending the reminder (e.g., use email and text messages) to avoid repetition.

- **Avoid over-contacting:** Keep track of who has completed the survey to prevent overwhelming the participants with multiple reminders.

APPENDIX A – SECONDARY SCHOOL ENROLLMENT AND ATTAINMENT SURVEY QUESTIONS

A1. Since [START OF REPORTING PERIOD], have you participated in any classes to prepare for a regular high school diploma, GED (General Educational Development) test, or another recognized equivalent?

1) YES
2) NO (GO TO END)
7) DON'T KNOW (GO TO END)
8) DECLINE TO ANSWER (GO TO END)

A2a. Are you currently taking GED or high school diploma classes?

1) YES
2) NO
7) DON'T KNOW
8) DECLINE TO ANSWER

A2b. Where [were/are] you taking these classes?

1) Elementary/middle school
2) High school
3) American Job Center or Career One-Stop
4) Community college
5) Church or community organization
6) A private proprietary or trade school
7) Other (please specify) _______________
97) DON'T KNOW
98) DECLINE TO ANSWER

A2c. When did you enroll in these classes?

MM/YYYY

97) DON'T KNOW MONTH	9997) DON'T KNOW YEAR
98) DECLINE MONTH	9998) DECLINE YEAR

SKIP INSTRUCTIONS: ASK A2d IF A2a=2 (NO LONGER ENROLLED IN CLASSES)

A2d. Why are you no longer taking GED or high school classes?

1) Received GED or High School Diploma
2) Took a break from taking the classes
3) School is not in session
4) Other (please specify) ________________
7) DON'T KNOW
8) DECLINE TO ANSWER

SKIP INSTRUCTIONS: ASK A2e IF A2d=1 (RECEIVED GED OR HS DIPLOMA)

A2e. When did you receive your High School Diploma or GED?

MM/YYYY

97) DON'T KNOW MONTH	9997) DON'T KNOW YEAR
98) DECLINE MONTH	9998) DECLINE YEAR

END: Thank you for completing the survey.