

*Proxy Selection in the Health and
Retirement Study*

Documentation Report

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Ann Arbor, Michigan

2021

Funding

The Health and Retirement Study is funded by a grant from the National Institute on Aging (U01 AG009740) with supplemental support from the Social Security Administration. HRS is conducted by the University of Michigan.

Suggested Citation

HRS Staff (2021). Proxy Selection in the Health and Retirement Study. University of Michigan. <https://hrs.isr.umich.edu/publications/biblio/11406>

Proxy Selection in the Health and Retirement Study

In the HRS, respondents who are unable or unwilling to do an interview themselves are offered the opportunity to use a proxy respondent, who is usually a spouse or other family member. Use of proxy respondents helps reduce attrition bias, especially important in a longitudinal study of aging individuals (Weir, Faul, & Langa, 2011). This document provides information on proxy respondent selection and guidance to data analysts on identifying which questions in the core interview were asked of proxy respondents.

HRS respondents begin their participation in the study completing their interview on their own. The transition to needing or wanting a proxy interview is variable, but generally the need arises when respondents are unable to participate in the interview on their own because of physical or mental limitations. Less commonly, respondents are unwilling to complete the interview for a variety of personal reasons. The HRS has developed a set of guiding principles and procedures that are outlined here about when and how to assign proxy respondents to make sure a proxy respondent is needed and to ensure respondents' rights in the process.

HRS field procedures involve asking the respondent to identify a contact person that field staff can call if they are having trouble reaching the respondent. The contact person is often a spouse or partner or child. In many instances, that same person becomes the proxy respondent.

Assisted Interviews

HRS Interviewers are trained to be aware during their interaction with respondents of signs of physical or mental limitations. If these limitations are not severe but make it difficult for the participant to complete the interview, an intermediate step is to offer assistance with completing the interview. In some cases the respondent themselves might ask for help or the interviewer might ask if they want to enlist a person to help. The same guidance for selecting a proxy respondent (see below) applies to selecting a person to assist in the interview. Such assisted interviews can precede proxy interviews by one or more waves of data collection.

Identifying the Need for a Proxy Respondent

The most common scenario that leads to a proxy interview is that respondents are too ill or have cognitive impairment that prevents their completing the interview on their own. A common scenario that leads to a proxy interview is that a spouse/partner, child, other caregiver, or the contact person tells the Interviewer that the sampled participant is no longer able to do the interview, even with assistance. In that case, the Interviewer lets that person know about the option of a proxy interview. Likewise, if the Interviewer notices signs that a proxy interview may

be needed, they alert the relative or contact person to begin the discussion about the possibility of conducting a proxy interview.

A variety of physical symptoms might give rise to the need for a proxy respondent including:

- Hearing problems
- Speech problems
- Frailty due to arthritis or recovery from illness or surgery
- Severe and permanent illness
- Long-term hospitalization

Potential symptoms of cognitive impairment include that:

- The respondent continually provides contradictory responses
- The respondent refuses to answer many questions, particularly those requiring the use of memory
- The respondent does not know the answers to many routine questions
- The respondent becomes progressively agitated, upset, or confused as the interview progresses
- The respondent frequently digresses, repeats the same story, or asks the same question over and over

Note that in some instances, a proxy is required in one wave but not the next. For example, a respondent may have had a temporary limiting circumstance, such as surgery or a hospitalization, during the wave that the proxy was required. Interviewers make detailed notes each wave to help determine how to proceed in the next wave.

Informed Consent

Proxy interviews require consent of the respondent when the respondent is capable of giving consent and administrative approval otherwise which takes into account the relationship of the proxy to the respondent.

Obtaining Approval

When Interviewers suspect that a proxy interview may be required, they submit a request to their Team Leader for approval. Proxies are not assigned without notification and approval from Team Leaders. The request includes information about the severity of the impairment (observed by the interviewer or described by the spouse, child, or other contact person), whether the respondent had completed an interview in a previous wave, if a proxy reporter is available and whether this person completed or assisted with the interview in the past, and whether consent has been obtained from the respondent. Most of the time, the determination is made at this stage. Some cases are escalated to the Survey Manager for further consultation. Once approval is obtained, the Interviewer works with the respondent and other parties to determine the most suitable proxy.

Identifying a Proxy

The interviewer can identify a proxy respondent either through a respondent's suggestion or the contact's suggestions. There are several considerations in identifying proxies.

Characteristics of Proxy Reporters

- Proxy should be in regular contact with the respondent
- Proxy should understand the respondent's health status
- Proxy should be familiar with the respondent's family circumstances
- Proxy should know about the respondent's finances

Examples of proxies include spouse, adult child, another relative, family friend, primary caregiver. The Proxy is a person who is very much an "insider" in the respondent's life, especially to be knowledgeable about finances. The Proxy completes as much of the information as they can and simply replies "don't know" for areas in which they are uncertain. Due to HIPPA regulations, HRS does not use respondents' professional caregivers as proxy respondents.

Guidance for Data Analysts

The table below provides an overview at the section level of the core interview for which questions proxies answer. As shown in the table, most of the core interview is administered to proxy respondents. Within some sections, there are a few subjective questions (e.g., life satisfaction, depressive symptoms) that are not administered to proxy respondents. For measurement of cognitive status, proxy respondents receive a separate set of items in which they are asked to gauge the respondent's cognitive status and how it has changed over time.

At the question level, it is possible to check whether a proxy answered the question. The cover screen section (section CS from 1992 to 2000 and section A from 2002 onward) contains the following item that identifies the type of reporter:

A009

[Instr: Designate type of interview:]

1. Self-respondent
2. Proxy, spouse or partner is reporter, and living in same household
3. Proxy, non-spouse or partner is reporter
4. Proxy, spouse or partner is reporter, but does not live in same household

To determine which questions within a core section are answered by proxy respondents, analysts can check the codebook to see if the ask rules (that precede questions) use A009=1 (self-report) or A009=(2,3,4) (some kind of living proxy report) as a condition for getting/skipping a question or a series.

Proxies are not used for self-administered questionnaires. However, respondents may enlist the help of others in completing them. Every self-administered questionnaire has a question at the

end asking who filled out the questionnaire. For example, at the end of the 2020 Everyday Life and Well-being questionnaire, the final question is:

C4. Were the questions in Section C answered by the person to whom this questionnaire was addressed, or did someone else answer for that person? (Check one.)

Yes, the questions were answered by the person to whom the questionnaire was addressed

The questions were answered by that person's spouse or partner

The questions were answered by that person's son or daughter

The questions were answered by someone else: Please say if you are a relative, a friend, a care provider, or what: _____

Note that as the HRS is beginning to conduct some of the core survey by internet, proxies are not being used in that mode. Rather if the respondent is unable to complete the core internet survey themselves, the case is transferred to an interviewer, and the same rules for selecting a proxy apply. Finally, HRS does not ask Proxies to consent for biomarker and physical measures on behalf of the Respondent.

References

Weir, D., Faul, J., & Langa, K. (2011). Proxy interviews and bias in the distribution of cognitive abilities due to non-response in longitudinal studies: a comparison of HRS and ELSA.

Longitudinal and Life Course Studies, 2(2), 170–184. <https://doi.org/10.14301/lcs.v2i2.116>

HRS QUESTIONNAIRE SECTIONS
By Interview Type

X = Section is asked

Grayed out = Section is skipped

Section		Core	Proxy	Exit	Post Exit
A/A2	Coverscreen	X	X	X	X
B	Demographics	X	X	X	
C	Physical Health	X	X	X	
D	Self and Proxy Cognition	X	X	X	
E	Family Structure and Transfers	X	X	X	
F	Parents and Siblings	X	X		
G	Health Services/ADL/IADL/Helpers	X	X	X	
H	Housing	X	X		
I	Physical Measures and Biomarkers	X			
J	Employment and Job History	X	X	X	
J2	Pensions	X	X		
J3	Retirement Satisfaction/SS				
M1	Disability (Re-Interview R)	X	X		
M2	Disability (New R)	X	X		
N	Health Insurance	X	X	X	
P	Expectations	X			
Q	Income and Assets	X	X		
R	Asset Change	X	X		
S	Widowhood/Divorce	X	X		
T	Wills and Life Insurance	X	X	X	X
U	Asset Reconciliation	X	X		
W	Social Security Permission	X	X		
V	Experimental Modules*	X			

*In general Experimental Modules are not administered to living proxy respondents, but it is possible in any given wave to have a module that does allow (or is designed for) proxies.