

RELIABILITY OF ESTIMATES OF RETURN OF LOST LETTERS AS A MEASURE OF PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO TAKING HUMAN LIFE¹

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Summary.—An analysis of letters distributed in cities and smaller rural communities in north and south Florida ($n_s = 400$ and 448) showed return rates among several addressees were slightly but significantly correlated ($r_s = .10$ and $.10$) so very small interpoll agreement is present.

Milgram, Mann, and Harter (1965) developed the “lost letter technique” as a way to measure public opinion toward political groups and other institutions. These investigators utilized a large number of stamped envelopes addressed to different fictitious organizations and which were dispersed in various public places. Passersby could either ignore a seemingly lost letter, respond to it but not take it, or pick it up and take it for possible return in the mail. Thus, passersby were given a chance to act in regard to an object, i.e., the lost letter, with social and political attributes. Milgram, *et al.* (1965) hypothesized that the action of passersby indicates something of how they related to that object, i.e., by mailing the lost letter they aid the organization in question; by disregarding or destroying the letter they hinder it. Thus, each passerby defined his attitudes toward an organization(s) by the nature of the action taken.

Several studies of attitudes about various death-related actions, including the death penalty and euthanasia have been undertaken. Beswick (1970) and Sawyer (1982) reported that attitudes toward the death penalty and mercy killing and the death penalty and euthanasia, respectively, were interrelated. Both Finlay (1985) and Ward (1980) suggested that persons who have more accepting attitudes toward euthanasia will have more accepting attitudes toward capital punishment.

Poll A used a total of 400 lost letters with return address affiliations of Floridians in Favor of the Death Penalty and Floridians to Abolish the Death Penalty. Two hundred letters for each of two affiliations for *return* addresses

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were distributed in public places in north Florida: half within the cities' limits of Jacksonville or Jacksonville Beach in Clay and Duval Counties (population $M=714,273$) and half in each of 18 smaller rural communities in Gadsden, Holmes, Jackson, Leon, and Walton Counties in north Florida (M populations = 2,863). Letters were distributed during the 2-mo. period of July and August, 2000.

Poll B used a total of 448 lost letters with return address affiliations of Floridians in Favor of Voluntary Euthanasia and Floridians Opposed to Voluntary Euthanasia. For each of two affiliations for *return* addresses 224 letters were distributed in public places in south Florida: half within the cities' limits of Palm Beach/West Palm Beach in Palm Beach County (M populations = 86,138) and half in 10 smaller rural communities (M populations = 4,689) in Glades, Hendry, Highlands, Martin, Okeechobee, and St. Lucie Counties surrounding Lake Okeechobee. The return rates for these various measures in the two experiments were intercorrelated using Phi correlation coefficients.

Both of the correlations were statistically significant. The rate of return for the Floridians in Favor of the Death Penalty addressee correlated with the return rate for Floridians in Favor of Voluntary Euthanasia addressee ($r = .10$, $n = 424$, $p < .05$). Similarly, the rate of return for Floridians to Abolish the Death Penalty addressee correlated with the rate for the Floridians Opposed to Voluntary Euthanasia addressee ($r = .10$, $n = 424$, $p < .05$). These rates, as measures of public opinion, do correlate positively with one another, suggesting that rates of return have some very small interpoll reliability, based primarily on the very large *ns*.

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