

RELIABILITY OF ESTIMATES OF RETURN RATES AS A MEASURE OF PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO VIOLENCE¹

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Summary.—An analysis of letters placed in Mobile, Alabama and Sioux Falls, South Dakota ($n_s = 500$ and 600) showed return rates among the several addressees were essentially uncorrelated ($r_s = -.11$ to $.08$) so interpoll reliability is lacking.

In 1965, Milgram, Mann, and Harter developed the lost letter technique as a research method to indicate unobtrusively public opinion toward various institutions, political organizations, and groups. It was assumed that the address would influence the treatment of the letter by the finder, i.e., mail it or disregard it. Thus, the rates of return served as a measure of public opinion toward these political groups and institutions. Bridges, Anzalone, Ryan, and Anzalone (2002) attempted to expand the limits and applicability of the lost letter technique as a tool for inferring public opinion about both noncontroversial and controversial social issues. This was important because the technique, in conjunction with significance testing to establish nonequivalence between treatments (Dunnett & Gent, 1977, 1996), offers a promising approach to the crude and unobtrusive means of assessing public attitudes especially about new divisive social issues. Unlike previous studies, the addressees' affiliations represented social issues that were all either relatively noncontroversial (includes controls) or relatively controversial (includes controls). The present polling study used relatively controversial (including controls) addressees' affiliations representing antiviolenace activist groups.

Poll A used a total of 500 lost letters with return address affiliations of Alabama State Coalition Against Sexual and Domestic Violence, Medical Professionals Against Firearm Violence Project, Postal Employees Against Workplace Violence Project, Alabama Alliance for the Prevention of School Violence, and Alabama Lesbian & Gay Anti-Violence Project. One hundred letters for each of five affiliations for addressees were distributed in public places within the city limits of Mobile, Alabama (population = 200,206). Letters were distributed during the fall months of 1999. Mobile is located in Alabama on the Gulf Coast adjacent to Florida and is culturally dissimilar to Sioux Falls (Poll B) which is located 1,275 miles away in the southeastern corner of South Dakota.

Poll B used a total of 600 lost letters with return address affiliations of South Dakota State Coalition Against Sexual and Domestic Violence, Medical Professionals Against Firearm Violence Project, Postal Employees Against Workplace Violence Project, South Dakota Alliance for the Prevention of School Violence, and South Dakota Lesbian & Gay Anti-Violence Project. One-hundred twenty letters for each of five affiliations for addressees were distributed in public places within the city limits of Sioux Falls (population = 116,720). The return rates for

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these various measures in the two polling experiments were intercorrelated using *phi* coefficients.

The Alabama rate of return for the Postal Employees Against Workplace Violence Project addressee correlated with the South Dakota rate of return for the Postal Employees Against Workplace Violence Project addressee ($r = -.25$, $n = 220$, $p < .001$). However, the rates of return for the remaining addressees of letters distributed in Alabama, i.e., the Alabama State Coalition Against Sexual and Domestic Violence, Medical Professionals Against Firearm Violence Project, Alabama Alliance for the Prevention of School Violence, and Alabama Lesbian & Gay Anti-Violence Project, did *not* correlate with the rates of return for the like-addressed South Dakota letters, i.e., South Dakota State Coalition Against Sexual and Domestic Violence, Medical Professionals Against Firearm Violence Project, South Dakota Alliance for the Prevention of School Violence, and South Dakota Lesbian & Gay Anti-Violence Project addressees ($r = -.11$, $n = 220$; $r = -.10$, $n = 220$; $r = .04$, $n = 220$; $r = -.08$, $n = 220$). With one exception, these rates, as measures of public opinion, do *not* correlate significantly with one another, suggesting that these rates of return do *not* show interpoll reliability.

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