

A Weekly FAX from the Center for Substance Abuse Research

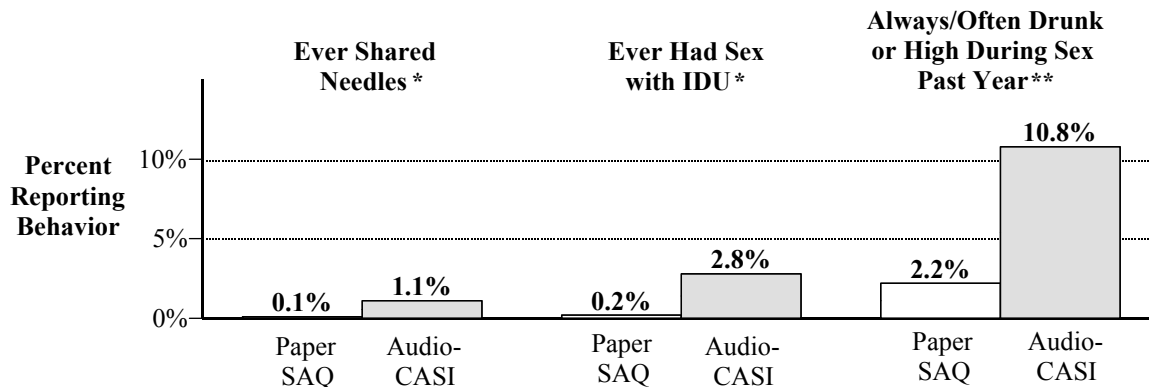
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Computer-Assisted Surveys Increase Reporting of Sensitive Behaviors

A major obstacle to estimating the prevalence of deviant behaviors has been that studies based on self-reports often lead to underestimates because people are reluctant to report sensitive or stigmatized behavior. While self-administered questionnaires (SAQs) have been thought to provide more privacy, and thus more accurate reporting of sensitive behaviors, audio, computer-assisted self-interviews (audio-CASI) may be more effective in accurately measuring these behaviors. As part of the 1995 National Survey of Adolescent Males (NSAM), males aged 15 to 19 were randomly assigned to complete a survey using either a traditional paper SAQ or an audio-CASI (in which the respondent listened through headphones to spoken questions and pressed keys on the computer to respond). Respondents using the audio-CASI were significantly more likely than respondents using the paper SAQ to report sensitive behaviors, such as drug use, sexual activity, and violence. For example, 2.8% of the audio-CASI respondents reported ever having sex with an injecting drug user, compared to 0.2% of the paper SAQ respondents. The researchers conclude that these estimates are likely to be “more accurate than previous estimates derived from data collected in less private interview contexts” because audio-CASI reduces “the underreporting bias known to affect such measurements” (p. 871).

Percentage of U.S. Males (Aged 15-19) Reporting Selected Behaviors, by Mode of Survey Administration, 1995

(N=1,672)



*p ≥ 0.05; **p ≥ 0.01

SOURCE: Adapted by CESAR from data from CF Turner, L Ku, SM Rogers, LD Lindberg, JH Pleck, and FL Sonenstein, “Adolescent Sexual Behavior, Drug Use, and Violence: Increased Reporting with Computer Survey Technology,” *Science* 280: 867-873, May 8, 1998. For more information, contact Charles Turner at 202-728-2080.