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Citation: Hanson, T., Reece, N., Kavanagh, C., Kirkwood, K., McGuirl, C. & Reaper, L. (2025). Recruiting for a self-completion survey where a hybrid approach is needed: evidence from the European Social Survey Round 12 Pilot in Ireland. Paper presented at the 2025 European Survey Research Association Conference, 14-18 Jul 2025, Utrecht, Netherlands.

This is the presentation version of the paper.

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Recruiting for a self-completion survey where a hybrid approach is needed: evidence from the European Social Survey Round 12 Pilot in Ireland

Tim Hanson, Nathan Reece (ESS HQ)

Clare Kavanagh, Katie Kirkwood,
Ciaran McGuirl, Luke Reaper (Ipsos B&A)

ESRA 2025 Conference, Utrecht

16 July 2025

europeansocialsurvey.org

ESS is a European Research Infrastructure Consortium (ESS ERIC)



Background

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- The European Social Survey (ESS) is preparing to transition to self-completion (web and paper) data collection
- Mixed-mode round in 2025-26 (Round 12); fully self-completion from 2027-28 (Round 13)
- Lots of feasibility testing, experimentation and piloting to assess and refine self-completion approach
- For self-completion approach, countries can either send invitation and reminder letters through the post ('postal-first') or use fieldworkers to hand-deliver materials ('fieldworker-first')
- Pilot for ESS Round 12 carried out in 2024 in two countries: Ireland and Bulgaria
- Presentation focuses on experience of the pilot in Ireland (carried out by Ipsos B&A)

Why Ireland?

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- Two main reasons why Ireland is an interesting case to pilot ESS's self-completion approach

Limited experience of carrying out equivalent data collection approaches for other surveys (doubled up as feasibility test)

Nature of sample frame and mailing provider meant that Ireland needed to use a hybrid data collection approach – postal-first for part of the sample, fieldworker-first for the other part

The two approaches (1)

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- Ireland use an address-based sample. This includes a share of non-unique addresses (around a third)
- Postcodes (Eircodes) *can* be appended to each address to make them unique
- However, the Irish postal provider will not deliver mail to addresses that can only be identified by an Eircode, unless it includes a name (which we did not have)
- Total gross sample ($n = 1,500$) therefore divided into two parts:
 - 1,040 cases (69%) assigned to postal-first approach (unclustered)
 - 460 cases (31%) assigned to fieldworker-first approach (clustered)
- Response rates of 25-30% expected

The two approaches (2)

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- Both approaches included three contacts – invitation and two reminders
- Postal-first approach included a €5 unconditional cash incentive with the invitation; €10 conditional voucher incentive offered for both approaches
- Concurrent approach used for both parts of the sample – web and paper offered from the first contact
- Letters and envelope included University College Dublin logo
- Questionnaire expected to take most people around 50 minutes to complete
- Freepost envelope for return of paper questionnaires

For fieldworker-first approach

- Role of fieldworker was to attempt contact at addresses and either hand over materials or leave them at address if no one home
- Pre-packed envelopes provided to fieldworkers for each address/contact
- Fieldworkers instructed not to carry out person selection, provide detailed information about the task, or assist with completing the questionnaire

Research questions

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1. Can ESS's self-completion approach be effectively delivered in Ireland?
2. How do sample outcomes compare between the two different data collection approaches used?
3. What was the experience of fieldworkers in delivering the fieldworker-first ('knock-to-nudge') approach?

Results and outcomes

Promising response rates for self-completion; consistent between the two approaches

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Response rate comparison between ESS Round 12 pilot approaches and ESS Round 11 face-to-face



Higher educated groups over-represented with self-completion approach

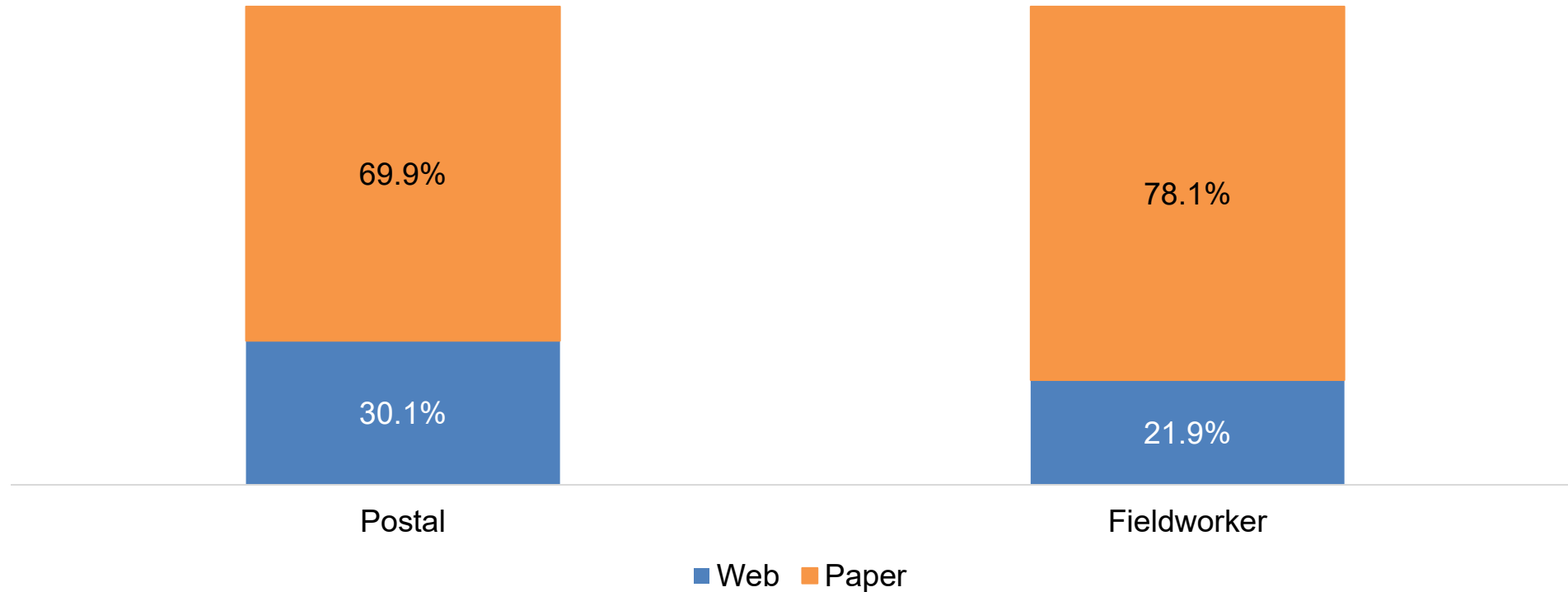
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Category	Round 12 Pilot (SC)	Round 11 (F2F)	Population
Male	43%	44%	49%
Female	57%	56%	51%
15-24	11%	9%	16%
25-34	9%	11%	15%
35-44	15%	19%	19%
45-54	21%	17%	17%
55-64	20%	19%	14%
65-74	14%	15%	11%
75+	9%	9%	8%
Tertiary level education	69%	50%	53%

Most of responses on paper (rather than web) for both self-completion approaches

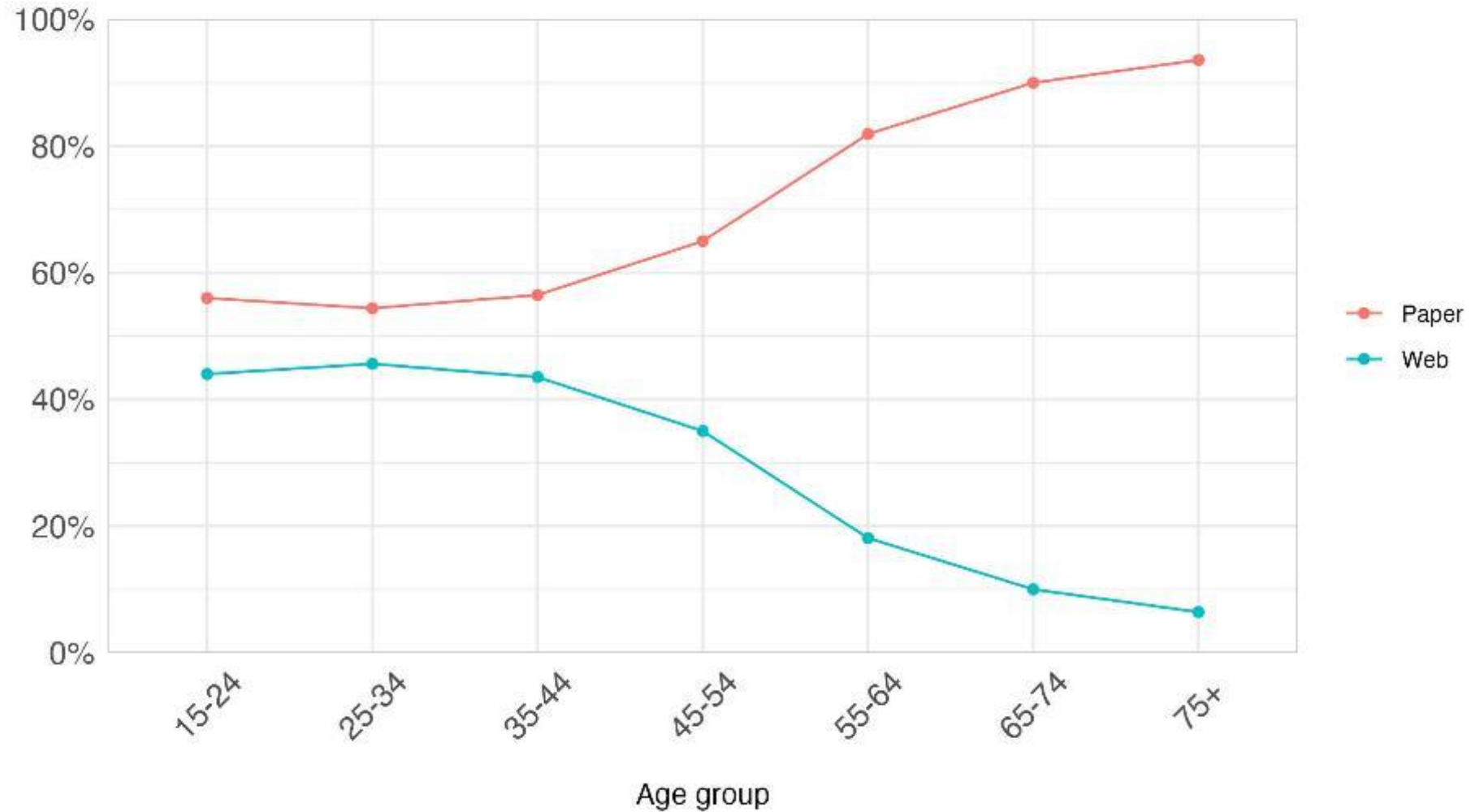
10

Proportion of web vs paper responses for each self-completion approach



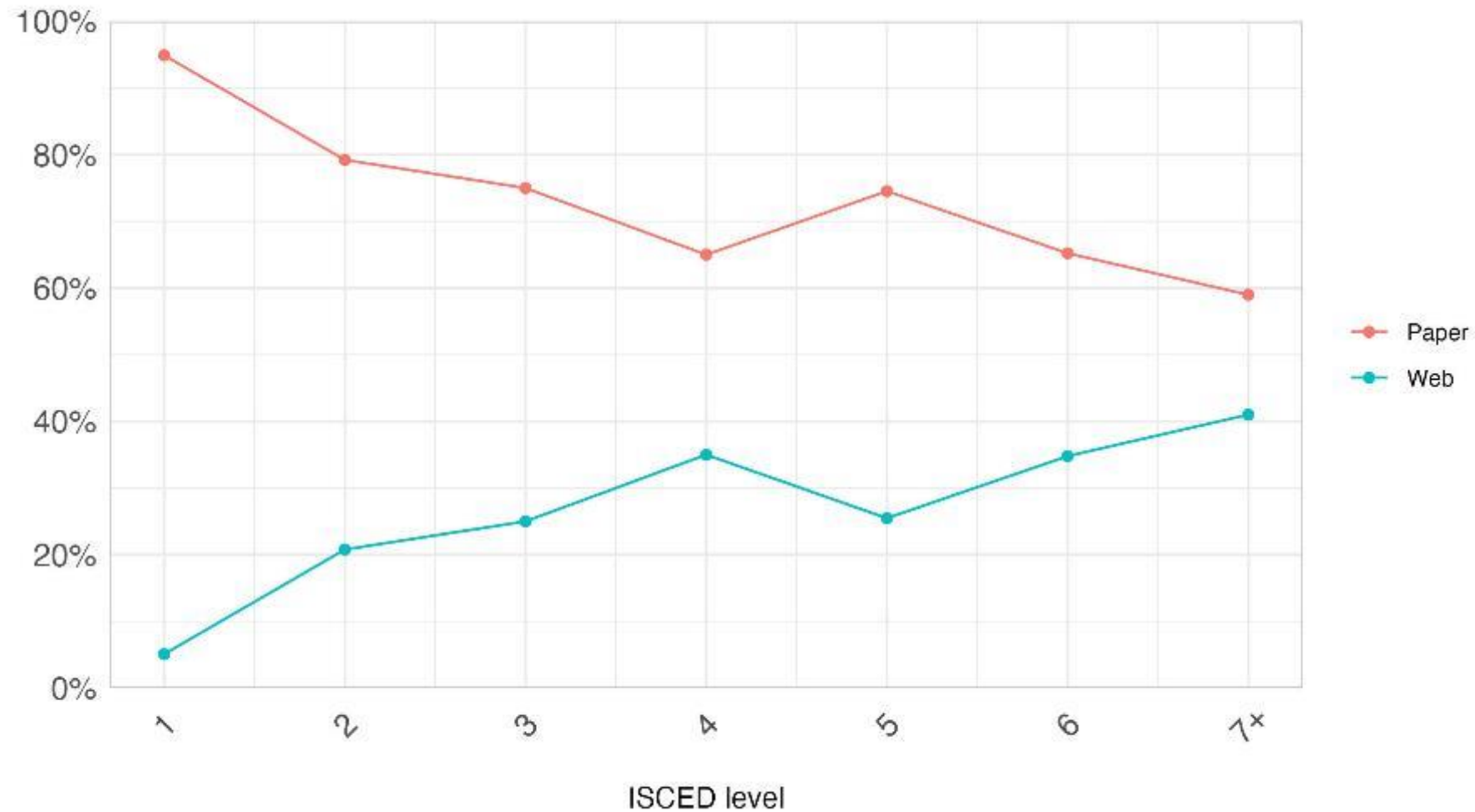
All age groups more likely to complete on paper than web

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Paper especially popular among lower educated groups

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Experience of fieldworker approach

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- Fieldworker ('knock-to-nudge') approaches quite uncommon for self-completion data collection – therefore good opportunity for learning
- Member of ESS team shadowed a fieldworker for a day during the pilot – resulted in lots of useful feedback that has influenced ESS's fieldworker guidelines
 - Importance of providing fieldworkers with pre-packaged materials
 - What to do if no one at home – and if nowhere obvious to leave package
 - Keeping interactions short and to the point (but friendly) – can give survey legitimacy and encourage participation
 - Exclude respondent selection from fieldworker role
 - Considering how to motivate fieldworkers and suitable payment for this role

Conclusions

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- Self-completion approach delivered very promising results – response rate over 40%, exceeding expectations – suggests ESS’s self-completion approach can be delivered effectively in Ireland
- Similar response rates for both approaches – but note non-experimental design
- Higher educated groups over-represented with self-completion approach
- Paper plays an important role – and not only among oldest age groups
- Crucial to get first-hand ‘in the field’ feedback from new approaches
- Piloting is extremely important – lots learnt from processes that we have built into our planning for the main stage of ESS Round 12

THANK YOU



Contact

-  tim.hanson@city.ac.uk
-  europeansocialsurvey.org
-  [EuropeanSocialSurvey](https://www.facebook.com/EuropeanSocialSurvey)
-  [European-Social-Survey](https://www.linkedin.com/company/European-Social-Survey)
-  [ESS_Survey](https://twitter.com/ESS_Survey)
-  [EuropeanSocialSurveyERIC](https://www.youtube.com/EuropeanSocialSurveyERIC)

