



SURVEY FUTURES

SURVEY DATA COLLECTION
METHODS COLLABORATION

The ethics of differential incentives in surveys

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From evidence to ethics

Evidence

Differential incentives
may improve
representativeness



Ethical question

When is it fair to treat
participants
differently?



Practice

What safeguards
make the practice
acceptable?

What are the conditions under which differential incentives are ethically justified:
purpose, proportionality, transparency and accountability.

Why this matters

Equality

Everyone receives the same thank-you, regardless of circumstances or likelihood of response.



Equity

Incentives are adjusted to reduce barriers and improve inclusion — making the dataset more useful.

The ethical challenge is not “same or different?” — it is whether differences are justified, proportionate and trustworthy.

Project approach

1

Review of ethical principles

ESRC, MRS, HRA
and other funder /
professional
guidance

2

Stakeholder workshop

Survey practitioners,
funders and REC
representatives

3

Output

Practitioner guide
with principles for
using differential
incentives.

What the evidence suggests

1

Response

Incentives may increase participation among hard-to-persuade groups

2

Representation

Targeted offers may reduce non-response bias

3

Cost effectiveness

Targeted offers can be more cost-effective than blanket incentives

Ethics as a set of practical tests

1 Benefit & proportionality

Does the design improve inclusion or data quality enough to justify variation?

2 Respect & dignity

Could targeting stigmatise, label or unfairly differentiate participants?

3 Voluntariness

Could the offer unduly influence participants, especially lower-income groups?

4 Transparency & trust

What should participants be told, and when?

5 Accountability

Can the rationale be documented and defended in ethics review?

What stakeholders told us

Strong justification is the accountability test.

What stakeholders accepted

No clear objection in principle

When the rationale is strong

When the design is proportionate

Risks to manage

Perceived unfairness

Stigma or labelling

Transparency and trust

Undue influence — mainly incentive size overall

Implication: explain who receives different offers, why, and why alternatives would be less effective.

Emerging guidance for practice

- 1 What inclusion or data-quality problem is the incentive solving?
- 2 Why is differential payment preferable to other recruitment strategies?
- 3 Is the difference proportionate to burden, barriers and expected benefit?
- 4 Could targeting be perceived as discriminatory or stigmatising?
- 5 What will be disclosed, documented and reviewed?

A good ethics application should make the purpose, targeting logic, incentive level and communication plan explicit.

Main take-away

Differential incentives are not inherently unethical.

Acceptability depends on:

Justification

linked to inclusion,
representation or
data quality

Proportionality

reasonable in
relation to burden,
barriers and benefit

Governance

transparent,
documented and
reviewable

Next step

A practitioner guide to support survey designers, funders and ethics committees evaluating survey designs that involve differential incentives.

Thank you



References:

- Economic and Social Research Council. Framework for research ethics; UKRI position statement on funding ethical research.
- Economic and Social Research Council. (2026). UKRI position statement on funding ethical research.
- Health Research Authority. Guidance on payments and incentives in research participation.
- Market Research Society. Code of Conduct and research ethics guidance.
- Nicolaas, G., Corteen, E., & Davies, B. (2019). The use of incentives to recruit and retain hard-to-get populations in longitudinal studies.

Project outputs will be available at <https://surveyfutures.net/publications/>

- A literature review
- Ethical guidance on the use of incentives in surveys
- Results from an experiment testing differential incentives on the NatCen Panel