

Survey Gremlins: Using Name Generators to Elicit Social Networks

Interviewer Effects, Web Effects, and Panel Conditioning

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What is a Social Network Name Generator?

“From time to time, most people discuss important matters with other people. Looking back over the last six months, who are the people with whom you discussed matters important to you?” (US General Social Survey)

Research Questions

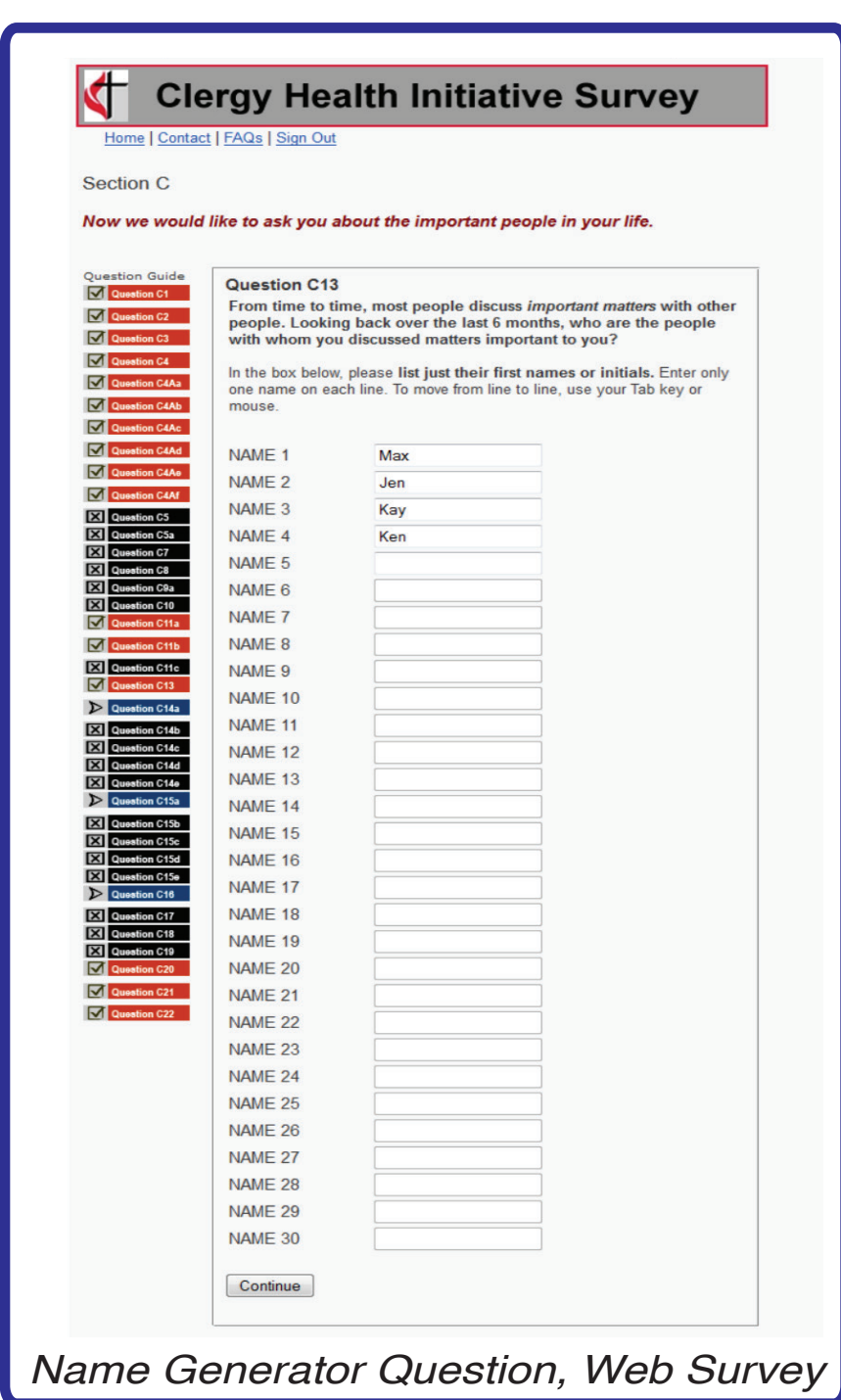
- 1 • Does the implementation of social network name generators in an online versus a telephone survey create different patterns of response?
- 2 • Are **interviewer** effects present in network name generators delivered via telephone?
- 3 • Does asking a name generator repeatedly to a panel create problems?

Background

- Name generators are a popular way to elicit a respondent's friends and social connections
- US General Social Survey contains one of the longest running social network name generators¹
 - Follow up questions ask for the characteristics of **first five people** named
- Name generators have several known problems:²
 - Interviewers skip the questions to reduce the survey length
 - Respondents understate the number of friends to reduce survey length
- Research demonstrates that the same questions given to the same respondent over time can introduce systematic variation in results (panel conditioning)³

Data

- 1,726 North Carolina clergy surveyed in 2008, 2010 and 2012
- Survey Modes:
 - 2008: phone (652), web (999), mail (75)
 - 2010/12: web
- 95%, 87% and 81% response rate



Number of confidants named by interviewer.

Panel A		Network size	
Interviewer	N	Mean	SD
1	45	4.4	2.5
2	213	6.1	4
3	143	5.0	2.6
4	32	5.8	3.8
5	82	7.3	4.5
6	130	6.9	3.6
7	7	6.5	5.7

References and Acknowledgments

This study was funded by the Rural Church Area of the Duke Endowment. The data for this study were collected by the very capable staff at Westat.

[1] Burt, R. 1984. "Network items and the General Social Survey." *Social Networks*, 6:293-

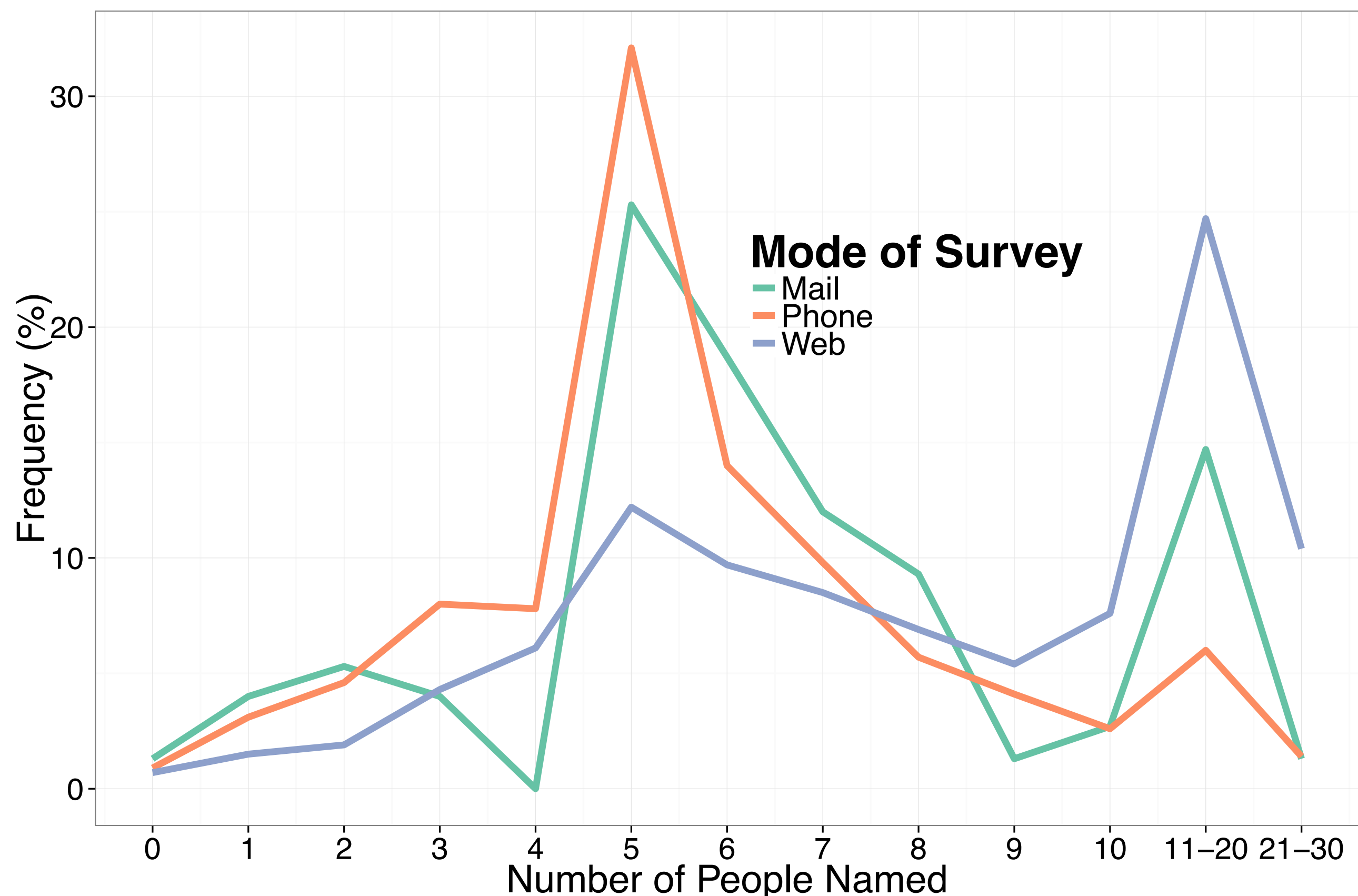
[2] Paik, A and Sachagrin, K. 2013. "Social Isolation in America: An Artifact." *American Sociological Review*, 78:339-

[3] Warren, J.R. and Halpern-Manners A. 2012. "Panel conditioning in longitudinal social science surveys." *Sociological Methods and Research*, 41: 491-

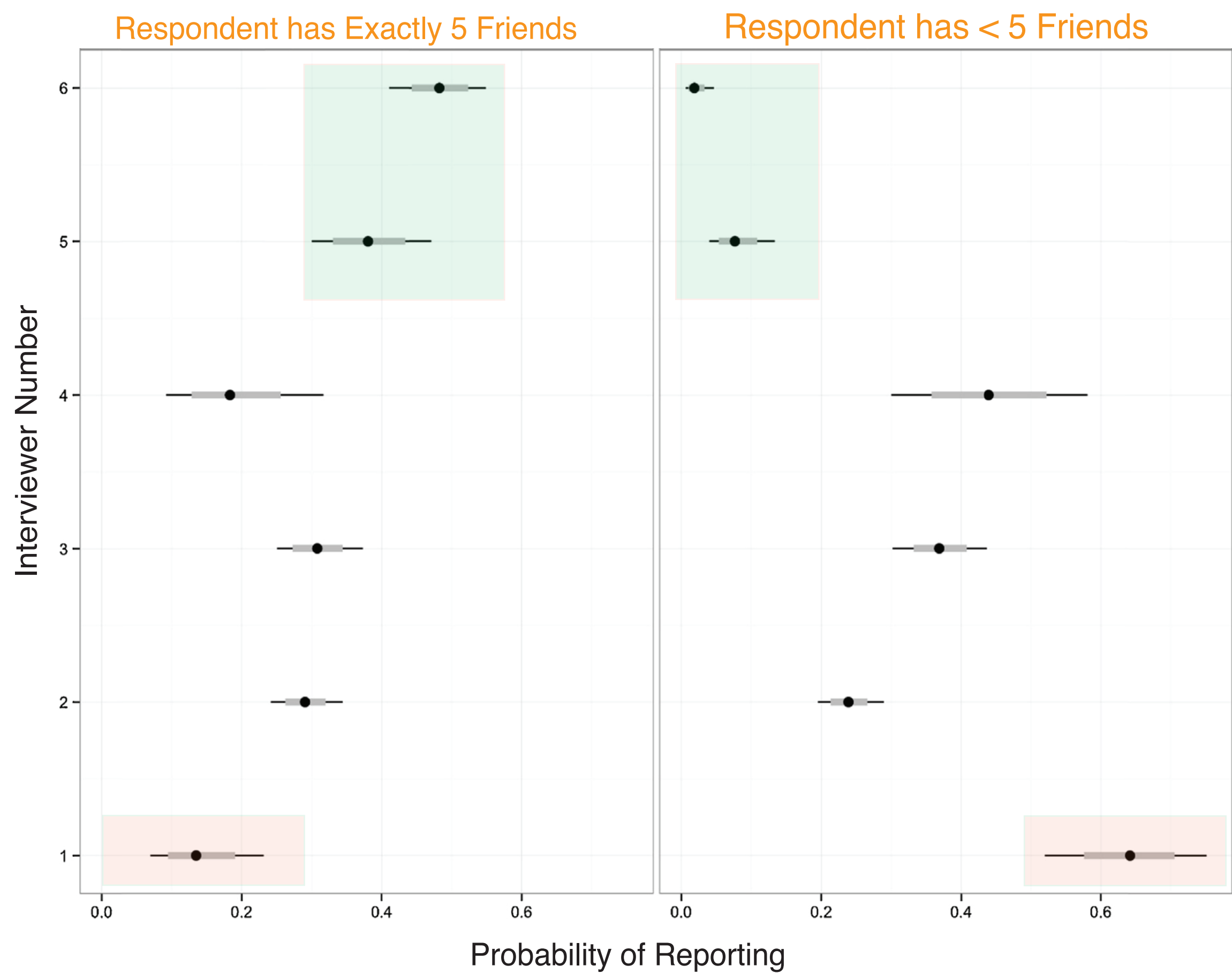
[4] Bearman, P. and P. Parigi. "Cloning headless frogs and other important matters: Conversation topics and network structure." *Social Forces*, 83: 535-

Results

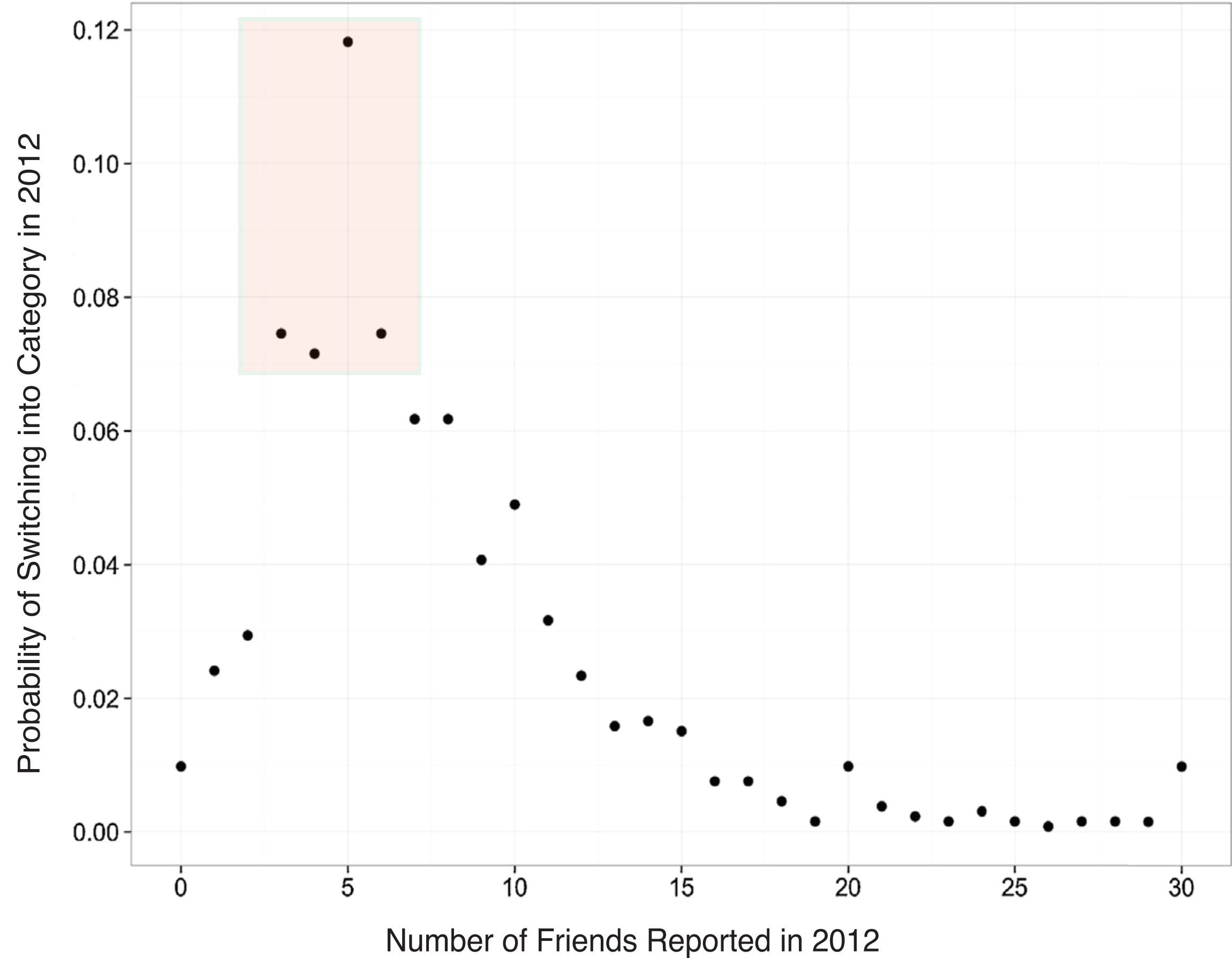
Frequency of Reporting a Given Network Size by Mode of Survey Administration



Probability of Respondent Reporting Exactly 5 or Less than 5 Friends by Interviewer



Probability of Switching Into a Response Category in 2012 Not Given in Either 2010 or 2008 Waves



Key Findings

- **Web survey: many more people report 10 or more friends**
- Two interviewers appear to prompt to receive 5 names (# receiving follow up questions about each person named)
- One interviewer appears not to prompt at all
- **Interviewees change their response patterns over time and report having 5 friends**

Discussion

- Larger number of friends on web vs. phone could result from:
 - Interviewers not prompting once five names received
 - Lack of visual cues in phone survey made task more difficult
 - Design of web questionnaire encouraged respondents to fill in all available boxes
- Interviewer fatigue/shortcutting is an important data quality issue
 - Strong evidence of uneven prompting by interviewers
 - Interviewers take cues from survey to decide when/how much to prompt
- After a period of two years, respondents appear to remember the limit on followups
 - Population stable on demographics: change in reporting, not real change in social networks
 - Challenges common wisdom that respondents forget survey questions over time
- Because clergy view many conversations about “important matters” they give a lot of names
 - Adds to growing literature questioning the validity of important matters name generators⁴

Recommendations for Practice

- For panel surveys: don't limit the number of names to which followup questions will be applied
- Use focused name generators to mitigate against very large list of names
- Carefully monitor interviewer behavior on name generator questions during data collection
- For web surveys: collect names one at a time and display names already given

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What is the Duke Clergy Health Initiative?

The Duke Clergy Health Initiative is an \$18 million, seven-year program intended to improve the health and well-being of United Methodist clergy in North Carolina. It surveys clergy on a variety of health and occupational related outcomes.

