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Forumsbeiträge

Simon Schmidbauer, Jonathan Uricher, Miriam Hedwig Lorenz, Sonja Haug, Marion Laging, and Thomas Heidenreich

Survey Methodology for Sampling Refugees in Shared Accommodation – Lessons Learned from two Surveys in Germany

Abstract

In Germany refugees are often housed for extended periods in shared accommodation. These facilities host a large proportion of the refugee population after arrival and serve as important sampling frames for empirical research. At the same time, they represent a distinct and evolving field of study focusing on living conditions and residents' experiences. However, research in this area faces numerous methodological challenges. In quantitative studies, issues of representativeness arise—both in relation to the overall refugee population and to residents within the facilities. Additionally, the heterogeneity of the target group impacts survey design, data collection, and analysis. This article aims to support researchers planning studies in this field. Drawing on two research projects by the authors, we compare methodological approaches to sampling and interviewing. We highlight challenges encountered and provide recommendations on aspects such as multilingual instruments, access to the field, and the importance of understanding residents' specific living situations.

Keywords: survey methodology, refugees, asylum seekers, shared accommodation, Germany

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Methodik der Befragung von Geflüchteten in Gemeinschaftsunterkünften – Erkenntnisse aus zwei Befragungen in Deutschland

Zusammenfassung

Geflüchtete werden in Deutschland oft für längere Zeit in Gemeinschaftsunterkünften untergebracht. Diese Einrichtungen beherbergen einen großen Teil der Geflüchtetenpopulation nach ihrer Ankunft und dienen als wichtiger Stichprobenrahmen für empirische Untersuchungen. Gleichzeitig stellen sie ein eigenständiges und sich entwickelndes Forschungsfeld dar, das sich auf die Lebensbedingungen und die Erfahrungen der Bewohner:innen konzentriert. Die Forschung in diesem Bereich steht jedoch vor zahlreichen methodologischen Herausforderungen. Bei quantitativen Studien stellt sich die Frage der Repräsentativität – sowohl in Bezug auf die gesamte Geflüchtetenpopulation als auch auf die Bewohner:innen der Einrichtungen. Außerdem wirkt sich die Heterogenität der Zielgruppe auf das Studiendesign, die Datenerhebung und die Analyse aus. Dieser Artikel soll Forschende unterstützen, die Studien in diesem Bereich planen. Wir vergleichen methodische Ansätze für Stichprobenziehung und Befragung anhand von zwei Forschungsprojekten der Autor:innen. Wir beschreiben die Herausforderungen, auf die wir gestoßen sind, und geben Empfehlungen zu Aspekten wie mehrsprachige Instrumente, Zugang zum Feld und die Bedeutung des Verständnisses der spezifischen Lebenssituationen der Bewohner:innen.

Schlagwörter: Befragungsmethoden, Geflüchtete, Asylsuchende, Gemeinschaftsunterkünfte, Deutschland

1. Introduction

In Germany, refugees are typically housed for extended periods in shared accommodation such as camps or collective centres (Baier & Siegert, 2018; Haug & Schmidbauer, 2022; Tanis, 2020, 2022). These facilities host a large proportion of refugees after arrival, serving as a key sampling frame for research (Haug et al., 2019). In addition, shared accommodation is a distinct field of research, focusing on living conditions and resident experiences (Baier & Siegert, 2018; Siegert, 2021).

However, detailed documentation of how surveys are methodologically and ethically implemented in this setting remains scarce (Hinchey et al., 2023). As refugees in shared accommodation represent a hard-to-reach population with specific vulnerabilities and constraints (Enticott et al., 2017; Wenzel et al., 2022),

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practical methodological guidance from real-world research is essential to prevent other researchers from unnecessary trial-and-error and ensure methodologically rigorous data collection.

Building on previous work (Enticott et al., 2017; Haug et al., 2019; Kohlenberger et al., 2017; Röder et al., 2018), this paper fills that gap. First, we describe the methodological basis of survey research with refugees to underline the relevance of conducting surveys in shared accommodation. Subsequent, we summarize the aims and approaches of two recent projects that collected primary data in the field. We highlight fieldwork experiences on questionnaire development, survey preparation and implementation, as well as data processing and analysis. With our conclusion, we identify key challenges, discuss methodological alternatives, and provide field-specific guidelines for future research.

2. Data Collection from Refugees Living in Shared Accommodation in Germany

Defining the survey population is crucial in refugee research. "Refugees" may include those self-identifying as such, people who have fled their country, asylum applicants, or those with humanitarian residence status (Haug & Schmidbauer, 2022). Each definition leads to different sub-populations and sampling possibilities, which must be considered when interpreting the data (Röder et al., 2018). Refugees are a rare, hard-to-reach and diverse population, which is why researchers face major challenges when collecting data (Enticott et al., 2017; Wenzel et al., 2022). Also, their composition changes rapidly, as seen in the recent shift toward arrivals from Ukraine and Russia, so representative samples of the total refugee population can quickly become unrepresentative. For efficiency, studies often focus on major groups such as Syrians (Röder et al., 2018; Weinmann et al., 2019).

In the absence of a national population register, the standard approach of survey research in Germany is two-stage sampling with municipalities as primary and residents as secondary sampling units. This approach is restricted in its utility for sampling specific migrant groups due to the limited information contained in municipal population registers (Salentin & Schmeets, 2017). Consequently, costly screening interviews are necessary to identify the target population. To mitigate costs, prior classification and multistage stratified random sampling using place of birth or citizenship and name-based procedures may be employed (Schnell et al., 2013). Other techniques like settlement and telephone sampling face similar

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constraints. Therefore, the best possible sampling frame for refugees in Germany is the central register of foreigners (AZR), which until August 2021 was restricted exclusively to scientific projects of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (Haug et al., 2019; Kühne et al., 2019; Schnell et al., 2013). However, the AZR is often not up to date, includes invalid cases, excludes naturalized persons, and provides only general information, limiting its utility (Haug et al., 2019; Wenzel et al., 2022). Due to these challenges, many studies use smaller sampling frames or non-probability samples (Haug et al., 2019; Kohlenberger et al., 2017; Röder et al., 2018; Wenzel et al., 2022), for example residents of shared accommodation, students of integration or language courses, members of migrant organisations, or social media users. Also, snowball sampling and time-location sampling are common. Respondent-driven sampling is promising for surveying hard-to-reach groups but is so far rarely used in the German context (Weinmann et al., 2019).

Two arguments are central for the use of shared accommodation for sampling. First, refugees are housed in shared accommodation upon arrival in Germany, e.g., initial reception centres and longer-term facilities. Due to legal restrictions and limitations on the housing market, they often live in these facilities for many years (Baier & Siegert, 2018; Tanis, 2020, 2022). In 2016, 46 % of refugees arriving since 2013 lived in shared accommodation. Two years later, 25 % had still not moved out (Tanis, 2020). Thus, the residents are a good approximation of the newly arrived refugee population, though this changes over time and varies by group. For instance, Ukrainians were more quickly integrated into private housing due to the EU mass influx directive and significant support from civil society (Siegert et al., 2023). Second, shared accommodation impacts refugees' well-being and health. Shared living, overcrowding, and limited resources affect physical and mental health, with stressors like lack of privacy and potential conflicts contributing to anxiety and trauma (Dantas & Amado, 2023). Also, the social integration of residents of shared accommodation is both lower and slower than that of those who have already had the opportunity to move out (Siegert, 2021). Therefore, studying these settings is essential for understanding their specific challenges and helps tailor support and integration policies.

In summary, researchers conduct surveys in shared accommodation facilities because these represent a suitable sampling frame for refugees and are a relevant research topic. In doing so, they face complex challenges concerning sampling, survey mode, questionnaire design, survey implementation, and data processing, all of which are contextualized by research ethics. By synthesizing our field experiences and decision-making processes across two distinct primary data col-

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lections, we aim to complement the existing scholarly discourse and provide a foundation for future research projects.

3. Project Summaries

3.1 DePaGe – Democracy Acceptance and Participation of Refugees

"Democracy Acceptance and Participation of Refugees" (DePaGe), funded by the Bavarian State Ministry of Science and the Arts, addresses refugees' attitudes toward democracy and political participation, acknowledging their backgrounds in autocracies and the importance of participation for integration (Haug & Schmidbauer, 2025; Schmidbauer et al., 2024; Schmidbauer, 2025). The mixed-methods approach of the project combines a qualitative survey of experts and two quantitative surveys of refugees in language courses and in shared accommodation. The latter will be in the focus of this paper.

3.2 PraeWi – Prevention Measures and Knowledge Transfer within Social Work regarding Risky Substance Use for People with Refugee Experience in Transitional Housing

„Prevention Measures and Knowledge Transfer within Social Work regarding Risky Substance Use for People with Refugee Experience in Transitional Housing" (PraeWi) funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research, addresses hazardous substance use among refugees in shared accommodation. The project aims to develop, implement, and evaluate a multi-component prevention concept, beginning with a comprehensive needs and resources analysis, including a mixed-methods cross-sectional study. Refugees are considered especially vulnerable to hazardous substance use due to migration-related stressors, but research and evidence-based practice are limited (Lorenz et al., 2021; Uricher et al., 2023).

4. Lessons from the Field

4.1 Sampling Design and Survey Preparation

Surveys in shared accommodation typically select facilities and attempt complete enumeration (e.g., Deger et al., 2017; Haug et al., 2019; Röder et al., 2018).

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As reaching respondents is difficult, these are often ad hoc, non-probability samples, having unknown inclusion probabilities and being biased (Kohler et al., 2019; Valliant, 2020). In general, the less known about the target population, the more difficult it is to gain insight into it. Sample quality improves with better approximation to the target population and understanding of inclusion mechanisms (Wenzel et al., 2022). Therefore, a pragmatic data collection is necessary, as non-probability samples can still provide valuable insights (Kohler et al., 2019). The selection of sampling units requires careful consideration, as decisions made at this stage fundamentally limit the generalizability of the data.

In late 2019 / early 2020 DePaGe aimed at a complete enumeration of residents in state-run shared accommodation facilities in six Bavarian cities (Hemau, Ingolstadt, Landshut, Munich, Nuremberg, Regensburg). The cities were selected by population size to control for possible differences in structural areas within Bavaria. In Munich, the survey was limited by the administrative district to the five largest facilities, reducing the city sampling frame from about 3700 to 1266 residents. The planned survey in Nuremberg (~1540 residents) was cancelled due to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, resulting in a total sampling frame of 3129 residents (2120 adults) (Schmidbauer, 2025).

In late 2022 / early 2023 PraeWi cooperated with Stuttgart's social welfare office for data collection, which aimed to ensure diversity in resident composition (country of origin, age, gender, family situation) and accommodation type. Of all shared accommodation facilities (~8900 residents) a total of 26 above average sized facilities were preselected (~4200 residents). To represent the heterogeneity of the providers, two facilities of each of the six organizations were then randomly chosen for the sample. Additionally, a specialized facility for refugees with substance use or psychiatric disorders was included, leading to a final sample of 13 facilities (~1700 residents, 1080 adults) (Lorenz et al., 2024). PraeWi also aimed for complete enumeration.

In our research projects the decision-making-processes are based on collaboration with gatekeepers such as authorities and facility managers. As we had expected based on the methodological literature (Haug et al., 2019; Kohlenberger et al., 2017; Röder et al., 2018) and our previous experience in the field, it is crucial to build trust, adapt to the respective circumstances, and find pragmatic solutions. For example, DePaGe had only restricted access to the facilities in Munich. For pragmatic reasons, weighing sample size versus possible differences of facilities, only the five largest facilities were selected. The time and the effort required for these processes should not be underestimated, especially when dealing with

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state actors, where hierarchical official channels and distributed decision-making powers can prolong the process.

Collaboration is also necessary for planning fieldwork (e.g., agreements on procedures for distribution, collection, and processing of questionnaires) and for collecting meta-data (e.g. for assessing which questionnaires are needed or for post survey adjustments). The communication processes varied greatly between facilities. For example, some gatekeepers set strict requirements regarding the times at which field workers were allowed to enter the individual facility, the items they were allowed to carry with them, or the transmission of field workers names, and the need to carry identification.

Furthermore, data protection must be taken into account from the outset, which is crucial due to the vulnerability and power imbalances resulting in mistrust of participants towards authorities as well as the data protection requirements of the responsible decision makers of the facilities (Block et al., 2013; Davidson et al., 2024; Fox et al., 2020; Haug et al., 2019).

4.2 Questionnaire Design

The diversity and heterogeneity of the resident population require sophisticated approaches to survey design and implementation, particularly with regard to the availability of multiple languages and the cultural adaptation of research instruments (Röder et al., 2018). Direct translations often fail to capture cultural contexts, potentially leading to misunderstandings, requiring culturally adaptation to ensure validity and comparability. Involving native speakers of the target populations in the process is indispensable to achieve authentic translations that ensure cultural alignment. A culturally sensitive initial questionnaire facilitates translation. Simple, clear questions and visual aids improve comprehension. Moreover, pre-testing can identify ambiguities or cultural sensitivities not obvious in design (Stathopoulou et al., 2019). Choosing between different survey modes depends on participants' literacy and access to technology. Written surveys offer anonymity but are difficult for those with low literacy, online surveys add further barriers. Face-to-face interviews provide depth but can be burdensome. Mixed-mode approaches, switching between self-administered and interviewer-administered formats, help include participants with lower education or language skills. The different modes require careful questionnaire design and piloting to ensure data quality (Wenzel et al., 2022).

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DePaGe was able to draw mainly on instruments that had already been translated, but the questions had to be adapted to the survey mode. The remaining instruments had to be translated in full into the required languages. The team employed dyads or triads of native-speaking translators with refugee backgrounds and worked with an iterative translation process. PraeWi adopted a similar approach, utilizing psychometric scales already validated in multiple languages and working alongside professional translators. Despite using validated multilingual scales, varying cultural perceptions, such as cross-cultural differences in understanding mental health constructs, can lead to measurement challenges, as psychological distress is often expressed and interpreted through somatic symptoms in many non-Western cultures (Kirmayer, 2001). In the DePaGe survey, response rates were particularly low for questions on political topics. The personal interviews revealed that respondents found these questions challenging due to uncertainty regarding the appropriate evaluation criteria, given the differences between the political system of Germany and their country of origin. Both projects found that many residents lacked experience with surveys, leading to misunderstandings or social desirability bias. Another finding is that questionnaire length and complexity must be carefully balanced. Response times varied widely. For the DePaGe survey, the estimated completion time was about 15 minutes, but some respondents took up to four times as long. In the PraeWi survey, questionnaire completion differed from 20 to 90 minutes with an estimated time of 40 minutes. Explanations include individual differences in educational background, (digital) literacy, and experience in answering questionnaires as well as spatial distractions such as loud music, other people in the vicinity or time pressure (Hinchey et al., 2023). While long or complex questionnaires can overwhelm respondents in shared accommodation, researchers must minimize response burden while maintaining measurement quality (reliability, validity, comparability). This balance is context-dependent, shaped by the population's literacy, research objectives, and topic sensitivity.

4.3 Survey Implementation

Informed and voluntary participation is a central ethical challenge when surveying residents of shared accommodation due to asymmetric power relations, limited privacy, and institutional embeddedness within control systems (Block et al., 2013). Context-sensitive approaches are required that go beyond procedural compliance (Fox et al., 2020; Hugman et al., 2011). Residents may fear that declining

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participation could affect their refugee status or access to services necessitating repeated reassurance of voluntariness and culturally appropriate information provision through professional interpreters (Davidson et al., 2024; Hugman et al., 2011). Gatekeepers, while practically necessary for establishing contact, risk reproducing power asymmetries. It is essential to ensure that they understand that their role is strictly limited to enabling access and not to recruiting participants (Fox et al., 2020; Sulaiman-Hill & Thompson, 2011). Incentives can motivate but must be used carefully to avoid bias. Incentive provision requires calibration to function as appropriate recognition rather than primary motivation, avoiding "undue influence" particularly acute given material deprivation (Fox et al., 2020).

In both projects, multilingual posters and flyers were used to promote the survey in advance and to encourage participation. Although their effectiveness especially among illiterate people is questionable, they complement personal contact, which can be intimidating. This is based on the assumption, that clear information about the purpose of the survey and its independence from the authorities helps to build trust among residents (Haug et al., 2019). Other studies employing primary data collection with refugees have used comparable multi-faceted recruitment strategies. Common approaches include partnering with trusted community organizations for participant introduction (Fête et al., 2019), employing culturally matched staff and communicating in participants' preferred languages (Hinchey et al., 2023), and combining written materials with personal contact to establish trust (Fête et al., 2019; Sulaiman-Hill & Thompson, 2011).

Though both aiming for a complete enumeration, our projects used different recruitment processes while entering the field. The survey mode of DePaGe was primarily self-administered paper-and-pencil, offered in seven languages (Amharic, Arabic, English, Farsi, French, German, Tigrinya). Multilingual field workers visited all units from door to door, distributed the questionnaires, assisted as needed, and offered face-to-face interviews for illiterates. Field work materials in all survey languages were used to explain the survey objectives and instructions for filling out the questionnaire. If the participation threatens to fail during initial contact, the team must work well together to successfully interview the individual. 377 residents took part in the survey, giving a response rate of 17.8 % with only minor differences between the city samples. About 20 % of DePaGe's participants were interviewed rather than self-completing the questionnaire.

PraeWi used a survey instrument in seven languages (Arabic, English, Farsi, French, German, Russian, Turkish) with a self-administered online and offline mixed-mode design. The survey was implemented on two days in each facility's common room. Because peer support networks can improve participation (Enti-

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cott et al., 2017), the project collaborated with important stakeholders in the field and the workforce of the facility. As no language mediators were used in the field, multilingual flyers were prepared to overcome potential language barriers, containing key facts about how to participate, information about incentives, and data protection as well as a QR code to participate. Due to an online first strategy, nearly all participants used the digital questionnaires, either on their personal devices or on tablets provided by the research team, and only seven participants (3.8 %) used paper questionnaires. With 185 participants, a response rate of 17.1 % was achieved, with only slight differences between the facilities.

In comparison to studies at the time of the high influx of refugees in 2015/2016 we encountered more difficulties reaching respondents due to educational and labour market integration. Interestingly, both projects accomplished very similar response rates though different approaches (17.1 % versus 17.8 %), with minor differences across locations, and higher response rates in the afternoon. Our impression is that, rather than conducting a complete enumeration, we mainly interviewed the least integrated members of the already less integrated population of residents of shared accommodation. This must be taken into account in interpreting results. Also, despite the extensive efforts to ensure the inclusion of as many residents as possible, some could not be interviewed because they could not speak, read, or write any of the languages covered.

The different approaches each have their own advantages and disadvantages which must be weighed in face of ethical standards, especially concerning voluntary and informed consent. Experienced field workers with native language skills and with refugee background but without personal ties to potential respondents are valuable but difficult to find. DePaGe made good experiences using existing pools of language interpreters and peer networks for recruitment. Due to lack of professional field workers, the survey teams of both projects had to be trained in survey techniques and research ethics. This included understanding the potential psychological impact of certain questions and being prepared to provide information on support services if needed. The field workers themselves may need psychological support due to the risk of re-traumatization of participants. Also, to hire fitting native-language field workers, researchers must know the composition of nationalities in the individual shared accommodation in advance. Additional challenges include refugees' reluctance to share information, primarily due to trauma or past persecution experiences. Researchers must weigh the need for participation against refugees' sensitivities and adopt culturally attuned invitation methods. Despite the challenges such as scepticism about the survey and limited experience with filling out questionnaires, field workers and information materi-

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als often helped by clarifying the aims and content of the study, which led to successful data collection. Especially if field workers are used for face-to-face interviews multiple methodological and ethical considerations must be considered. Staff and peers can encourage participation but may create (perceived) pressure (Enticott et al., 2017). In both projects, it was advantageous to be present in person during the survey in order to be able to respond appropriately to problematic situations, e.g., to intervene in the event of ethically questionable behaviour of the facility staff, to provide emotional support, or to make professional referrals. Field logs were used in both projects to track incidents, facilitating quality assurance, ethical reflection, and systematic process improvements.

4.4 Data Processing and Analysis

As DePaGe worked with paper questionnaires, respondents' answers first had to be digitised. The data entry process involved plausibility checks and was assisted by native speaking translators for answers to open ended questions and annotations. This process was time-consuming and required the research team to make specific decisions. Thanks to its online-first strategy, PraeWi did not have to spend time on this task.

Researchers need to critically examine the generalizability of their data. Comparing the demographic characteristics of the respondents with the data on the residents of the facilities and population parameters can help to assess the extent to which the sample is representative. If metadata (e.g., age, gender, citizenship) are available, weighting can enhance representativeness and adjust for sampling biases but also possibly add error (Valliant, 2020). DePaGe faced difficulties in accessing data on all facilities due to privacy concerns of gatekeepers. PraeWi received data but decided against weighting due to the small sample size and limited information available. On top of that, both projects faced high shares of missing data, which can compromise the analysis and the validity of the findings. Imputation methods are sometimes required to address these gaps, but they must be carefully chosen and implemented to avoid introducing bias. Finally, interpreting results within the context of shared accommodation living conditions is crucial. Extrapolating findings to other refugee settings mandates consideration of the environment-specific nuances in data collection. Clear methodological reporting and limitations are important for research credibility and reproducibility.

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5. Conclusion

Sampling refugees is a complex methodological challenge. The heterogeneity of the population and diversity of research questions preclude universal solutions. Instead, refugee research requires flexible, context-specific approaches adapted to particular sub-populations and fieldwork constraints. However, this should not deter researchers from this important field of study. A central challenge is the tension between practical feasibility and survey research standards. Researchers must balance fieldwork constraints, such as time, resources, literacy, and ethical considerations, against the imperative to maintain data quality, construct validity, and methodological comparability. Based on the present methodological literature (Enticott et al., 2017; Haug et al., 2019; Kohlenberger et al., 2017; Röder et al., 2018) and our lessons learned, we recommend the following adaptive strategies for questionnaire design, survey preparation, implementation, and data analysis.

Checklist for Refugee Surveys in Shared Accommodation

Questionnaire design:

- Provide questionnaires in all relevant languages: Use existing multilingual instruments and native speakers for iterative translation.
- Use short, simple questions: Avoid complex or abstract content to reduce non-response and missing data.
- Ensure translations are culturally sensitive, not just linguistically accurate.
- Weigh effort versus benefit for each language: For some groups, alternatives (e.g., Arabic, English, French) may suffice. Consult native speakers.

Survey preparation:

- Ensure the target group definition matches the sampling frame.
- Identify and contact key gatekeepers (decision-makers, facility managers) early and maintain clear communication.
- Collect all available resident information (for weighting, interpreter selection). Explain data needs and ensure data protection.
- Identify supportive institutions and individuals in the field.
- Establish a code of conduct for all involved to ensure smooth, ethical processes.
- Anticipate field situations: Train teams and consider psychological support services.

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Survey implementation:

- Use native speaker language mediators.
- Offer personal interviews for those unable to read/write.
- Ensure an on-site decision-maker is always available.
- Collect metadata (e.g., date, time, language, survey mode, staff involved, incidents).
- Consider incentives to motivate participation.
- Account for respondent heterogeneity: Plan longer survey periods, conduct surveys on different weekdays and at different times of the day, and prevent double participation. Note that personal interviews take longer than self-administered questionnaires.
- Use existing field structures (volunteers, staff) cautiously to support the survey, as they may introduce bias and always uphold methodological and ethical standards.

Data processing and analysis:

- Translators may be needed post-survey for open answers or comments.
- Expect high non-response and low item response rates, resulting in small samples for analyses.
- Plan for non-response in advance: Post-hoc sampling frame data for weighting is rarely available. Imputation requires suitable auxiliary variables. Always check plausibility, as both weighting and imputation can add or reduce bias.

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