

# How Open-Ended Comments Can Improve Establishment Surveys and Reduce Respondent Burden

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# Background

## Behavioral Health Services and Information System (BHSIS)

- Two annual censuses of specialty treatment services
  - National Survey of Substance Abuse Treatment Services (N-SSATS)
  - National Mental Health Services Survey (N-MHSS)
- Sponsored by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)
- Most comprehensive national source of data on substance use and mental health treatment facilities.
- Data used to create and update the online Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator (<https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov>).
  - The Locator is a widely used online resource that helps individuals find substance use and/or mental health treatment.

# Fielding Information

	N-SSATS	N-MHSS
Survey participants	Substance use treatment facilities	Mental health treatment facilities
Sample size	~ 20,000	~ 16,000
Response rate*	91-96 percent	88-93 percent
Mathematica began data collection	1997	2010

- Topics: treatment service availability, the number of persons receiving services, patterns of treatment service utilization, and other important treatment and policy information
- About a quarter of facilities are in both the N-SSATS and N-MHSS samples
- Time to complete each survey: ranges from 25 to 45 minutes, depending on client count collection
- Multi-mode: Web, Telephone, Mail

\*Response rates were maintained in 2020 during the global pandemic (N-SSATS 91%, N-MHSS 90%)

# “Venting” Question

Upon completion of the survey, respondents are offered the opportunity to provide open-ended comments, or as often as not, to “vent.”

The comments run the gamut from a general thank you, to data or contact updates, to very specific operational aspects of the data collection process.

The comments question has been enhanced over time to focus not only on general comments, but also perceptions of new features and other experiences respondents would like to share.

Comments have been used by SAMHSA and the project team as a planning, monitoring, and evaluation tool to take the pulse of the respondents on the changes and enhancements that have been made.

# The Comments Question

38. We value your input regarding your experience using survey features, completing the survey overall, and any general feedback you would like to provide.

Would you like to provide us with any comments regarding your experience completing this questionnaire?

ABC Clinic  
123 Main Street  
Anytown, ME 12345

Yes

No

# Colorful Examples



# Behavioral Coding

**Reviewed and coded the comments from 2013 through 2020 from both surveys**

- 8,679 comments were coded
- 22 categories were created

**Multiple categories could be assigned to each comment**

**Each comment was coded as Neutral or as a Facilitator or Challenge to completion**



# Overall Results of Behavioral Coding

Code	Facilitator	Neutral	Challenge
Complexity	13.2%	1.6%	5.0%
Prefill request	4.8%	0.5%	0.4%
Completing multiple surveys	3.6%	1.1%	1.3%
Length and duration	2.2%	0.4%	3.5%
Operational aspects	1.8%	0.8%	3.5%
Unable to edit	0.1%	0.5%	2.3%
Thank you comments	2.9%	0.0%	0.0%
Info to clarify a response	0.2%	6.1%	2.0%
Data Needed to complete survey	0.2%	1.4%	3.5%
Corrections and updates	0.1%	4.5%	1.0%
Response options	0.4%	2.0%	3.0%
Specific survey questions	0.3%	3.2%	3.0%
Verification loop	0.1%	0.1%	0.7%
Opioids and MAT	0.1%	0.6%	0.7%
Intended audience and setting	0.1%	0.4%	1.0%
Program description	0.1%	3.3%	0.6%
Progress updates	0.1%	0.8%	0.2%
Survey reminders	0.4%	0.3%	1.9%
Survey frequency	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%
Contact information	0.0%	0.7%	0.3%
Assistance request	0.7%	2.0%	1.6%
Not relevant to survey refinement	0.0%	2.8%	0.0%

# Results of Behavioral Coding

**As expected, we saw many comments relating to the length and complexity of the survey, as well as the data needed to complete the survey. There were also certain operational aspects that were suggested as improvements.**

**Some features we want to discuss today are prefilling and completing multiple facilities simultaneously.**

**Some items that we're not going to specifically address today that were useful in enhancing the survey design are around question wording, response categories, and potentially new topic areas.**

# Prefilling Survey Response Data

Based on comments indicating that specific data is stable from year to year and that respondents did not want to keep reporting that data, in 2008 we experimented with prefilling the prior year's data for questions for which we expected little to no change.

- N-SSATS began prefilling variables in 2009, and N-MHSS began in 2015.

Once we established that prefilled data was being updated, and as we received positive comments regarding prefilling, we increased the percent of variables prefilled.

Variables eligible for prefilling are those in the instrument the prior year. Variables which require data specific to that year's collection, such as the number of clients receiving services, are never eligible for prefilling.

**Percent of Eligible Variables Prefilled**

Survey	2009	2015	2020
N-SSATS	17.2%	60.7%	89.0%
N-MHSS	N/A	37.1%	96.3%

# Example of a Prefilled Question

Pre-filled with prior responses

\*1. Which of the following substance abuse services are offered by this facility at this location, that is, *abc 196 xyz 196, 2068 Highway 14*?

SELECT "YES" OR "NO" FOR EACH

	YES	NO
1. Intake, assessment, or referral	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. Detoxification	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
3. Substance abuse treatment <i>(services that focus on initiating and maintaining an individual's recovery from substance abuse and on averting relapse)</i>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. Any other substance abuse services	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

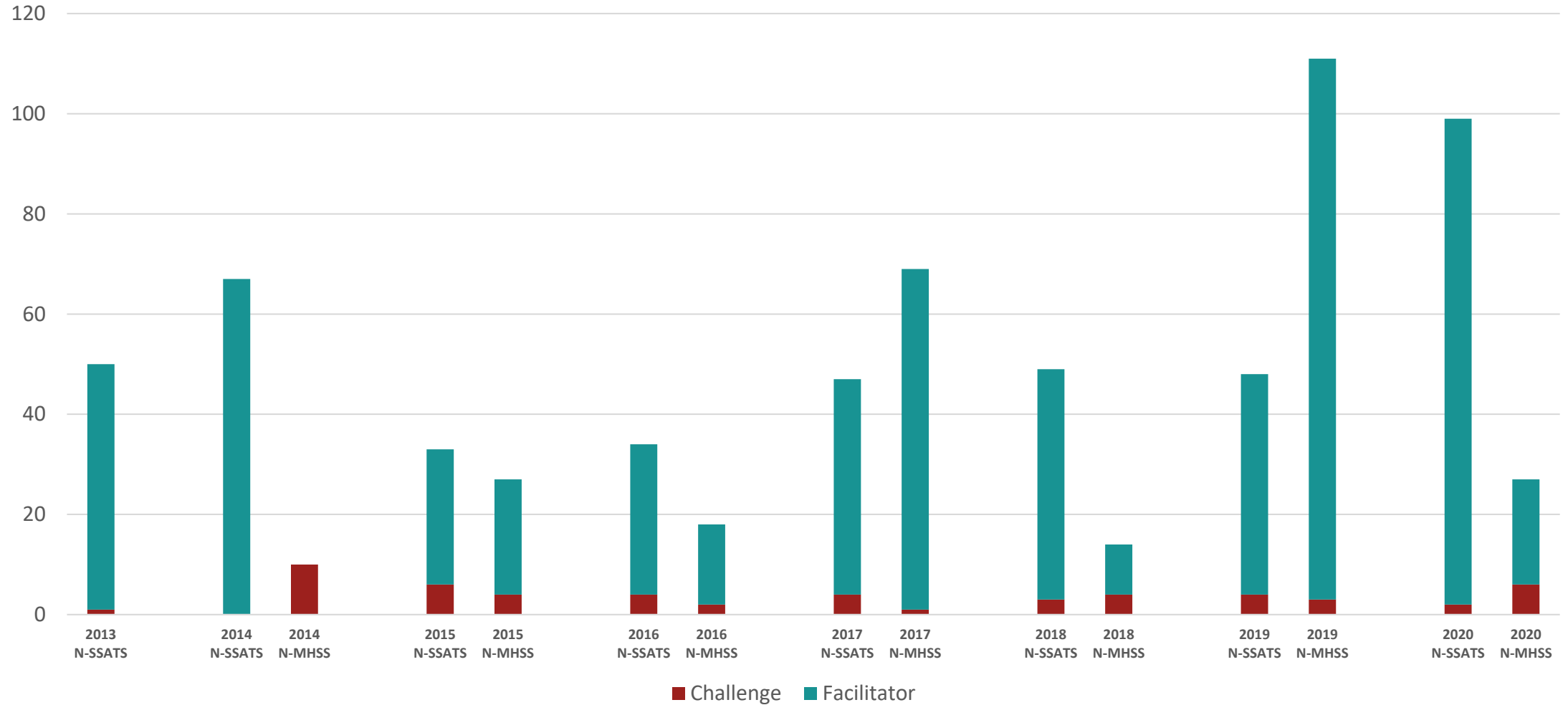
\* Information from asterisked (\*) questions may be published in SAMHSA's online Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator (found at <https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov>) and in SAMHSA's *National Directory of Drug and Alcohol Abuse Treatment Programs*, unless you designate otherwise in question 40 of this questionnaire.

Submit Page and Continue    Start Page Over

# Treatment in Other Languages

Variable	Prefilled	2015-2017	2016-2018	2017-2019	2018-2020
Language other than English (N-SSATS)	Yes	11.1%	10.9%	11.3%	11.4%
	No	23.8%	28.4%	28.7%	27.5%
Language other than English (N-MHSS)	Yes	15.6%	13.8%	11.8%	10.7%
	No	23.5%	26.3%	27.3%	20.2%
Spanish (N-SSATS)	Yes	8.8%	8.6%	8.4%	8.3%
	No	15.4%	20.5%	16.8%	14.8%
Spanish (N-MHSS)	Yes	11.6%	9.9%	9.3%	10.8%
	No	21.6%	25.5%	21.6%	20.2%

# Prefill Request Comments



# Completing for Multiple Facilities

For respondents that are responsible for completing for more than one facility, a common comment was the request to complete multiple facilities in a single session.

In 2019, a complete redesign of both surveys was undertaken to accommodate this request. The major features of the redesign included:

- Selecting more than one facility to complete in the session.
- The ability to respond via a user ID and password, for facilities that are in our database, but are not networked with the respondent's facility.
- The ability to write in and respond for a facility that is not networked, but they do not have a user ID and password.
- Allow multiple questions to be grouped together on the same web page.
- The ability to copy and paste answers from one facility to another.
- Execute all verifications and logic at the facility level.

**Overall goal: decrease burden on respondents.**

# Completing for Multiple Facilities

\*10. Does this facility offer RESIDENTIAL (non-hospital) substance abuse services at this location?

	<input type="button" value="Copy"/> Pre-filled with prior responses. Please review and update as needed. ABC Clinic - Residential Treatment 123 Main Street Anytown, ME 12345	<input type="button" value="Copy"/> ABC Clinic - Outpatient Program 123 Main Street Anytown, ME 12345	<input type="button" value="Copy"/> XYZ Clinic 456 Main Street Anytown, ME 12345
	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input checked="" type="radio"/> No	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No

\*10a. Which of the following RESIDENTIAL services are offered at this facility?

SELECT "YES" OR "NO" FOR EACH

	<input type="button" value="Copy"/> Pre-filled with prior responses. Please review and update as needed. ABC Clinic - Residential Treatment 123 Main Street Anytown, ME 12345	ABC Clinic - Outpatient Program 123 Main Street Anytown, ME 12345	XYZ Clinic 456 Main Street Anytown, ME 12345
1. Residential detoxification <i>(clinically managed residential detoxification or social detoxification, similar to ASAM Level III.2-D)</i>	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No
2. Residential short-term treatment <i>(clinically managed high-intensity residential treatment, typically 30 days or less, similar to ASAM Level III.5)</i>	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input checked="" type="radio"/> No	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No
3. Residential long-term treatment <i>(clinically managed medium- or low-intensity residential treatment, typically more than 30 days, similar to ASAM Levels III.3 and III.1)</i>	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No



# Completing for Multiple Facilities

\*23. Which of the following types of client payments or insurance are accepted by this facility for substance use treatment?

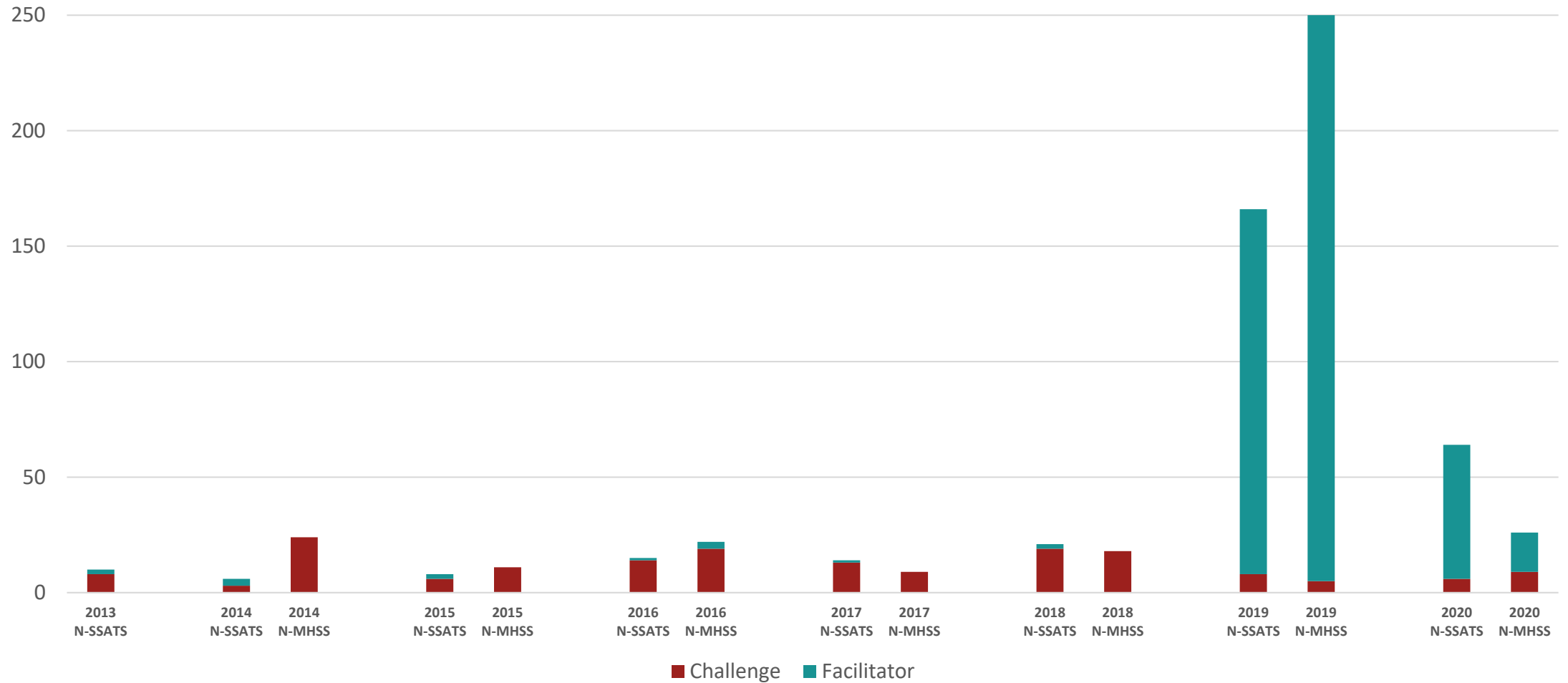
SELECT ALL THAT APPLY

✓ End Copy

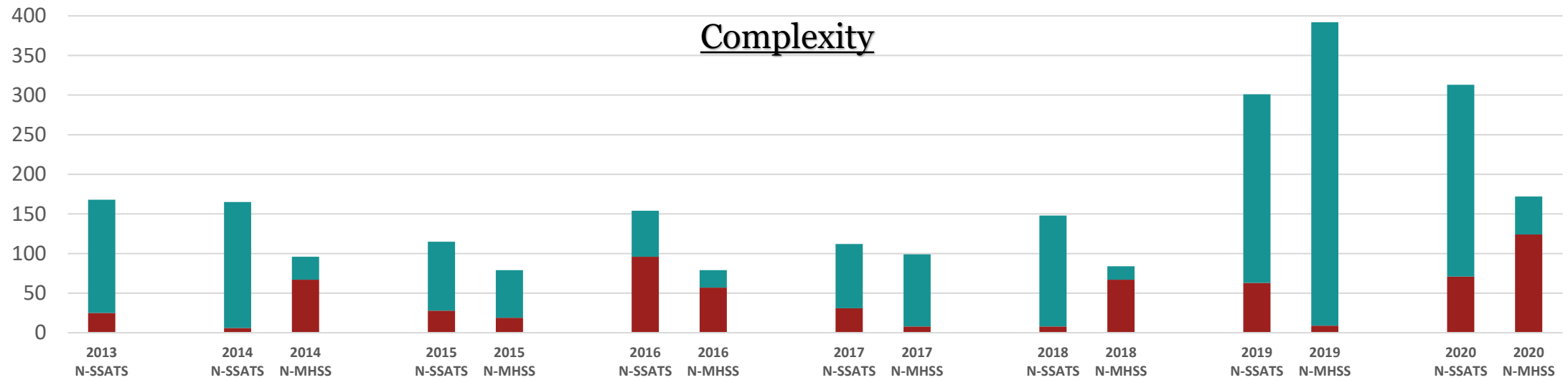
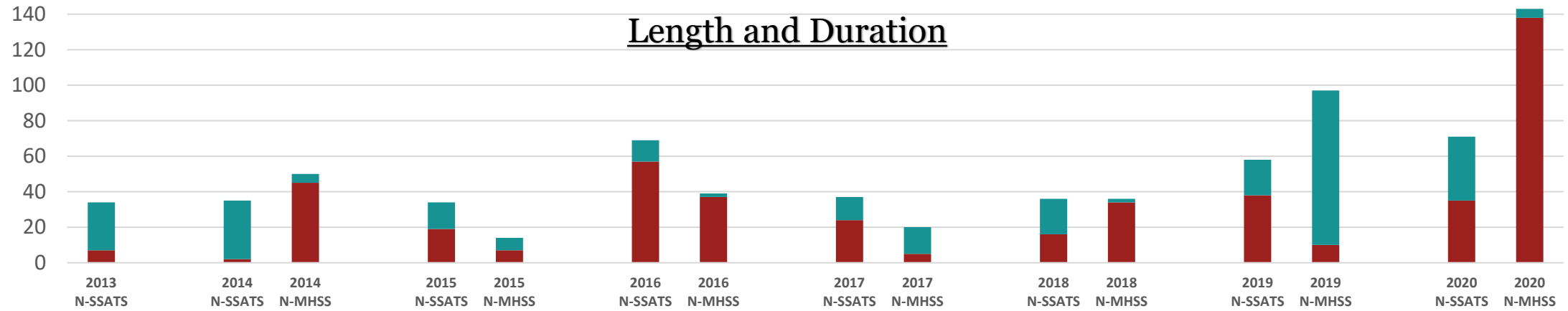
You are currently in copy mode. Click **End Copy** to continue responding to the survey.

	<p>✓ End Copy</p> <p>Pre-filled with prior responses. Please review and update as needed.</p> <p>ABC Clinic - Residential Treatment 123 Main Street Anytown, ME 12345</p>	<p>Paste</p> <p>ABC Clinic - Outpatient Program 123 Main Street Anytown, ME 12345</p>	<p>Paste</p> <p>XYZ Clinic 456 Main Street Anytown, ME 12345</p>
No payment accepted ( <i>free treatment for ALL clients</i> )	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cash or self-payment	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Medicare	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Medicaid	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
State-financed health insurance plan other than Medicaid	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Federal military insurance (e.g., TRICARE)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Private health insurance	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
IHS / Tribal / Urban (ITU) funds	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Please specify	Please specify	Please specify

# Multiple Facilities Comments



# Related Comments



■ Challenge ■ Facilitator

# Conclusions

**For a longitudinal survey, open-ended comments at the end of a survey can be useful in gauging respondent perceptions of the survey process.**

**Feedback from respondents can lead to technological advancements at key and specific times.**

**Some of the enhancements suggested by the respondents were incorporated into both web instruments. Based on comments after the changes, they did reduce survey burden and improve the user experience.**

**Although these data were from establishment surveys, using open-ended comments would be useful for other sample frames, such as household surveys.**

# Thank You!

For more information, please contact:

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