

Title: Labour Force Survey Response - January 2013

Categorisation

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1. Trends in LFS response rates

1.1 Long run trends in response rates for ONS social surveys are downwards. Whereas in the late 80s/early 90s, response rates of around 80% were 'normal' for household surveys, rates in the region of 60% are now common on all but a small number of surveys.

1.2 Response to the Labour Force Survey (LFS), ONS's largest household survey, has followed a similar trend. The Wave 1 response rate for the main quarterly LFS has declined from c. 80% in the mid-1990s to an average of 60% over the past 12 months.

1.3 Declining response rates are a function of both decreasing contact rates and rising refusal rates. Contact rates were for a long time relatively stable at around 90%, however in the past two years this rate has been consistently below this level. It should be noted that the field period for the LFS is two weeks.

1.4 Refusal rates have consistently increased over the same period, having more than doubled from around 12% to c. 25% over the past 20 years.

2. Factors that impact on response

2.1 A multitude of factors have been used to explain the downward trend in response rates. Some of these factors include:

- Falling contact rates attributed to: rise in single person households; rise in households where all adults are in work; rise in controlled access to properties;
- Increasing interview lengths;
- Survey overload: the salience of a survey topic has become a more important determinant of response;
- External shocks such as data losses which has impacted on trust in statistics. Evidence has suggested that such shocks usually have a short-term impact on response, albeit, when they return to trend, it will be at a marginally lower level;
- Non-participation as a means of expressing anti-government sentiments;
- General reduction in public's willingness to perform civic duty as expressed by survey participation;

- Reduced budgets which result in less appetite to administer costly re-issue exercises.
- Other short term "events" affecting contact and refusal rates such as bad weather, major events such as the Olympics.

2.2 Part of the recent decline in LFS response has been due to strategic decisions associated with tighter public finances. From 2010 it was agreed that 30% of the initial wave 1 LFS sample would be interviewed by telephone. Previously, all first interviews were completed face to face. While this change has delivered the expected cost savings, it has also resulted in a (small) decline in survey response which was anticipated (response rates are generally 10 percentage points lower when the mode of collection is telephone compared with face-to-face collections).

2.3 In addition to the above there are a number of other factors that are specific to ONS that may have had a negative impact on response rates. These include:

- An absence of change in the design of the LFS (it has remained largely unchanged since its inception), for example to adopt a mixed mode approach, Internet collection etc.
- Aging IT infrastructure supporting data collections which has resulted more lost time in the field;
- The contractual arrangements under which social survey interviewers are employed.

The impact of these factors on LFS response is largely unknown, for example, it is difficult to estimate the impact of offering web as an alternative mode of collection. There are few examples presently in the UK where a true mixed mode collection is employed on Government surveys.

3. Comparative response rates

3.1 Response rates achieved on ONS surveys are broadly in line with other UK data collection agencies. By way of an example, ONS recently worked in consortium with NatCen on the Adult Dental Health Survey where ONS achieved a marginally higher response rate (61% versus 59%). ONS Interviewers recently achieved higher response rates on a recent collaboration with Ipsos-Mori.

3.2 Higher response rates have been achieved by ONS in recent years, for example, a 75% response rate was delivered on the Census Quality Survey (CQS). This is around the level of response for the British Crime Survey - presently 78% and it has been at that level for some time. The high response rates achieved for these surveys partly reflect the salience of the topics, the amount of interviewer effort (and therefore cost) invested in the survey, and the importance placed on these surveys by the fieldwork organisations. For the CQS, the link with the Census was clearly a factor in achieving the 75% response.

3.3 The response trends shown here are broadly consistent with the evidence from other countries with respect to voluntary surveys. De Leeuw and De Heer (2004) concluded that response rates were declining across North America and Europe by approximately one percentage point per year.

3.4 Falling response is not only confined to voluntary surveys. Using the EU-LFS as an example, of the 14 MS where participation is compulsory, 9 reported a decline in response rates over the period 2003-2010 of between 2 and 8 percentage points.

4. Strategies for managing declining response

4.1 By and large the decline in survey response rates has been a steady one, inter-dispersed by a small number of step-changes. In the past, these step changes have been followed by a period of intense activity to try and restore response to its previous level. This is often successful, albeit response then goes back to its long-run trend.

4.2 Social Survey has a programme of work to tackle declining response rates which is refreshed and reviewed on a continuous basis. The table below summarises some of the main actions that have been implemented over the past three years.

Interviewer training	A more strategic approach has been adopted to the training of social survey interviewers. Interviewer Learning Programme introduced to give all new a structured 8 week programme of learning.
	Achieving Cooperation Training (ACT) for all interviewers. This refusal training developed by ONS in conjunction with [REDACTED]
	Achieving Contact Effectively (ACE) - training module designed to promote patterns of working with the aim of improving contact rates.
Incentives	Number of trials conducted e.g. conditional and unconditional incentives; vouchers; variable amounts.
Survey materials	Review and refresh survey materials on an ongoing basis. Redesigned v including dedicated link for survey respondents on ONS front page. Test alternative methods for gaining access to gated communities; new advan
Questionnaire reviews	Most surveys have been reviewed with key stakeholders to see whether for purpose. Questions have been removed as a result of this exercise. A reduce survey length where possible.
Interviewer performance	Improved performance metrics for interviewers. Under performance is m using ONS corporate procedures.
IT infrastructure	Improvements are being made to the existing IT infrastructure in order to against the risks of using aging technology to support data collection act also initiated a project to deliver improved communications with remote v interviewers - a product of this will be more timely survey information tha more responsive designs.
Interviewer contracts	Improvements in T&Cs following on from their change in status to Civil S Harmonisation of T&Cs.

4.3 In addition to the above, in conjunction with Strategies & Standards Directorate (MD), Social Survey has a programme of research to look at the impact of declining response on survey outputs. Some of the work conducted includes:

- review of reasons for non-response and non-response by Output Area Classification.
- an analysis of attrition bias between waves in the LFS
- an analysis on the sensitivity of the LFS key estimates to non-response bias
- a review of the current status of non-response across NSi's
- analysis of paradata on the LFS and Living Costs and Food survey (LCF)
- refusal follow-up study funded by EUROSTAT
- review of use of incentives
- evaluation of internet data collection for the LFS.

4.4 A the centre of the current work programme is the Census Non-Response Link Study (CNRLS). This study will:

1. Compare respondents and non-respondents using Census data where a match has been made between the addresses selected for the survey and the Census. This includes a range of uni-variate and multi-variate aggregate level socio-demographic breakdowns as well some logistic modelling.
2. Explore potential issue of bias that could be associated with non-response. Will identify the impact of non-response adjustments on key survey estimates.
3. A comparison of Census and LFS responses using data from the matched respondents from the LFS, i.e. a cross-tabulation of peoples' responses to LFS and census sources.

The current provisional timetable is to develop non-response factors for the LFS by March 2013.

De Leeuw, E. and De Heer, W. (2004) Trends in Household Survey Nonresponse: A Longitudinal and International Comparison. in: Groves, R. et. al. (eds.) *Survey Nonresponse*. New York: Wiley.

Word version of document with charts



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