Useful Information about the Labour Force Survey

Contents

Introduction

This information is intended to answer a number of commonly asked questions about the Labour Force Survey and the Annual Population Survey. It does not replace any existing guidance on the surveys, but aims simply to provide some additional background about the surveys.

What is the LFS?

The Labour Force Survey (LFS) is a survey of households living at private addresses in the UK. Its primary purpose is to provide information on the UK labour market which can then be used to inform labour market policies. The LFS provides the official measures of employment, unemployment and economic inactivity, as well as information on a wide range of related topics such as occupation, training, hours of work and personal characteristics of household members aged 16 years and over.

Why do we ask the main LFS over 5 quarterly waves?

(a) We need to meet the required the sample without spending too much money

The LFS needs to successfully interview approximately 50,000 households per quarter.

This means that as we have 5 waves, we need to interview nearly 17,000 households at wave 1.

Introducing **fewer waves** would mean that we would have to interview **more households at wave 1.** Most Wave 1 interviews are Face to Face, so more wave 1 interviews would significantly increase LFS costs.

(b) The LFS needs to measure change from one quarter to the next

The LFS is designed to measure quarter on quarter changes. The best way to measure this change is to have the same people in both quarters.

Quarter 1 Quarter 2

W5 W1

The above shows that under the current 5 wave structure, there are around 80% of the same people in the LFS for 2 quarters (the other 20% are the waves 1s who move in to replace the wave 5s).

Here we can see that the in Quarter 1, wave 1 is shown by the blue man. He appears again in quarter 2 as a wave 2.

In contrast, the wave 5 in quarter 1 does not appear again in quarter 2 – we replace these people with brand a new wave 1 in quarter 2.

If we had fewer waves, then there would be less of the **same people** across two adjacent quarters. This would mean our measure of change would become less reliable and less accurate.

(c) The main LFS is used to measure change across the year

The current 5 wave structure means that a household's final interview falls a year on from their first interview:

W1	W2	W3	W4	**W5**
January 1st 2013	April 1st 2013	July 1st 2013	October 1st 2013	**January 1st 2014**
First interview	Second interview	Third interview	Fourth interview	**Final interview**

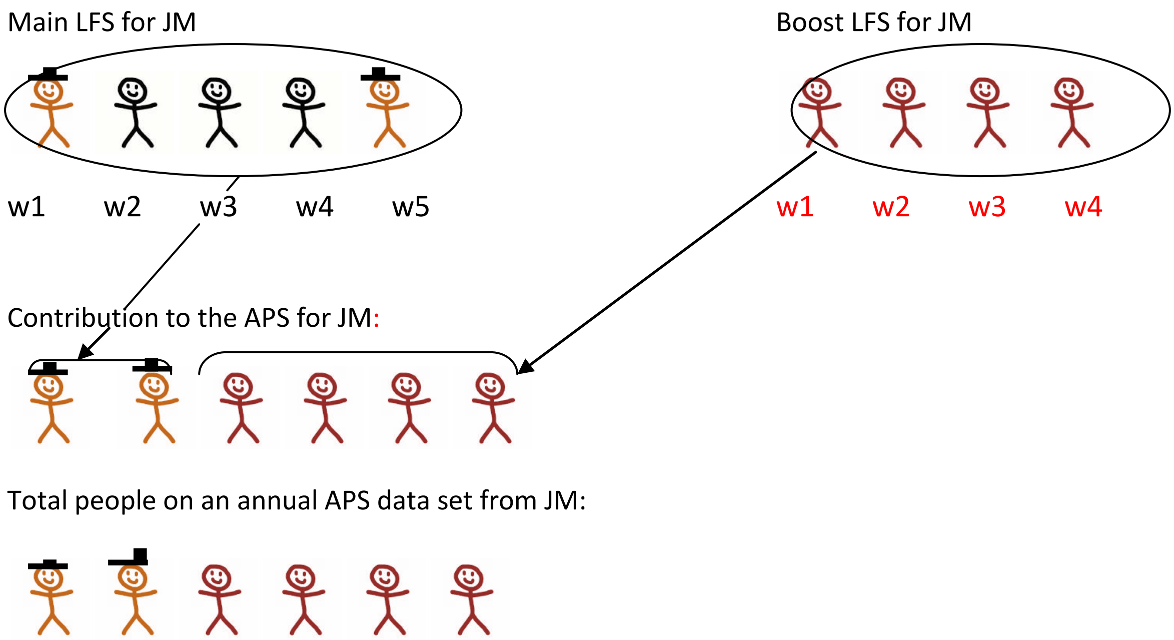
Some of our users find this useful as they are then able to measure how a person's employment status, for example, has changed across the year. 5 waves allow users to do this type of analysis.

What is the Annual Population Survey (APS)?

The APS is often quoted in the media. As an LFS interviewer, you directly contribute to these figures. This is because the LFS questionnaires (both main and boost) are used to collect the information for the APS.

The difference between the APS and the LFS lies in the way the data sets are constructed after the questionnaire data has been collected.

The APS brings together waves 1 and 5 **main** LFS respondents from each quarter in the year and all the boost respondents from the **same** adjacent quarters into one big data set.



We would then repeat this for AJ, JS and OD.

The LFS and the APS have different uses. As stated above, the LFS is used to measure change across the year. The main use of the APS is to measure **annual levels** in smaller geographical areas (such as county).

Why do we ask the LFS Boost over 4 waves?

a) Why not 5 waves like the main LFS?

As above the boost is used to create the annual dataset and used to measure annual **levels** not **change.** So a wave 5 which is necessary to measure change for the LFS is not required for the APS.

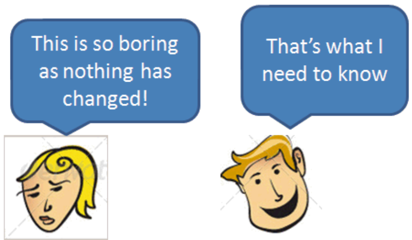
b) Why 4 years?

Like the main LFS, introducing **fewer waves** would mean that we would have to interview **more households at wave 1.** Most Wave 1 interviews are Face to Face, so more wave 1 interviews would significantly increase LFS costs. This is also the longest that we felt we could keep people in the survey.

Why do we ask the same questions over and over?

As mentioned above, the main LFS is interested in measuring change. In order to know if anything has changed, we need to ask previously answered questions again.

It is important to remember that as well as measuring change, we are equally interested in people whose situation has stayed the same.



We are aware that there are some groups of respondents who are unlikely to change their answers to certain questions across the waves (such as asking older people their qualifications). We are investigating ways to improve this in the questionnaire.

a) Why don't we roll forward information for most questions on the boost?

Research has shown that to get the best measure of short term change you should tell a responder what they said at a previous interview – this is called **dependent interviewing.**

This is why we use this for the main LFS.

The boost questionnaire is not designed to measure change (and definitely not short term change!) so therefore dependent interviewing is not used.

Why don't we return to households that only consist of people aged 75 and over after wave 1 on the main LFS?

The main LFS' primary use is to measure employment and related topics (such as education).

It is unlikely that there will be many people in households consisting of **people aged 75 and over only** who are in the labour force. Therefore, the decision was made in 2010 that it was not cost effective to return to this group of people for the main LFS.

Also, we do not want to over burden respondents when there is no need.

So why do we return to households that only consist of people aged 75 and over for the boost LFS?

The boost questionnaire is used for the APS.

The APS is used to measure migration and other population statistics where the whole of the UK population measures are important (including the 75 and overs).

Why do we ask so many questions?

The majority of the current questions on the LFS are used on a regular basis by our customers, including the Bank of England, more than 10 government departments (100 analysts alone at the Department of Work and Pensions use our data) and over 1000 users in academia and other organisations. For example, LFS/APS data is used for informing education policies, policies relating to agency workers and health and wellbeing indicators. EuroStat is another main customer where we are legally obliged to provide the data to them.

But how do we know if the answers from certain questions are actually being used?

At the LFS steering Group meetings in March and September each year we hold a workshop with our key customers to go over the questions and see if there is still a need to include them in the questionnaire.

New questions undergo extensive testing.

We are currently looking at the education questions as they can be somewhat repetitive.

We are always looking to improve the questionnaire ensuring that it is no longer than needed and that the routing and wording of the questions makes sense. We always welcome your feedback on this.

Why don't we collect any information about voluntary work on the LFS?

We have received feedback that those who do voluntary work feel offended that the LFS doesn't collect information about their voluntary work.

We appreciate that this puts interviewers in a difficult position.

We have been asked why we don't add a question(s) asking this information. As we are working hard to make the questionnaire shorter, we do not want to put a voluntary work question in the questionnaire if there isn't a real call for it from the LFS Steering Group.

An interviewer suggested that LFS Research could put together a statement that interviewers could use to try and explain (and therefore placate) respondents who get annoyed by the fact that we don't collect any information about the voluntary work they carry out. The below is a response to that request.

Suggested Statement:

According to international definitions, there are 5 types of work and "employment" is just one of these. The LFS' main objective is to gather information about those who are in employment. Voluntary work is another type of work, and information about those who volunteer is collected on other surveys and organisations such as the:

Community Life Survey (England)
Wales Council for Voluntary Action (Wales)
Volunteer Development Scotland (Scotland)
Scottish Household Survey (Scotland)

As the above statement says, there are strict international definitions about the different types of work. The LFS is focused on employment, which is only one of the five different types of work defined. The LFS is therefore not the appropriate mechanism to collect information about voluntary work (which is another of the five types of work). This is not to say this information is not valuable, but it is collected in a different way, elsewhere.

There is a similar explanation for why grandparents looking after their grandchildren aren't classed as unpaid family workers.

From an employment point of view (which is what the LFS is interested in) we are interested in unpaid family workers who do work related to a *business* run by another family member (as emphasised in the question text). Grandparents do not fall into this category.

Going back to the 5 types of employment, looking after family members and dependants does not fit into the 'employment' category - it fits into another ("own use production work") so once again, the LFS is not the appropriate mechanism to collect this information.

Why does the questionnaire change every quarter?

Unlike other surveys you may work on, the LFS is designed to change every quarter.

(a) Quarterly Specific Questions

Some of the questions on the LFS questionnaire are quarterly specific, as analysts do not need this information for every quarter of the year. An example of this is the Accidents at Work module (JM only).

Quarterly specific questions will appear in the same quarter every year.

We encourage our users to identify questions that do not need to be asked every quarter, in order to reduce the over all length of the questionnaire over the calendar year.

(b) Removed Questions

Similarly, we encourage our users to identify questions that are not being used– and we subsequently remove them from the questionnaire.

(c) New Questions

New questions put forward by users may only need to appear in one quarter of the year. The users and the LFS team work together to find a quarter that they are both happy with.

(d) Amendments

An error in a question, either in the wording or the routing, may have been identified when analysing the data. Rather than allow this error affect a year's worth of data, we make the amendment so that the next quarter's data will be correct.

Questions are also changed so that they are up to date, such as the recent change in the Benefits system where Universal Credit has replaced a number of other benefits.

Are new questions tested at all before they go into the questionnaire?

New questions undergo extensive testing before going into the LFS questionnaire. We hold an annual Dress Rehearsal exercise where interviewers carry out a modified LFS survey to around 1000 households that contains the new questions. The feedback and data from this exercise is used to improve the questions and accompanying guidance.

Why is it that some questions are restricted to certain waves?

(a) They are APS questions

Waves 1 and 5 of the main LFS contribute to the APS. If a question is required on an APS data set only, there is no point in us asking this question in waves 2, 3 and 4 of the main LFS as the data will not be used.

(b) They are wave one only questions

Certain questions (such as the religion questions) only need to be asked once in a respondent's LFS lifetime – we are not interested in recording whether this changes. We keep the information the respondent gives us during their first interview for the rest of the LFS interviews.

(c) They are EuroStat questions

Some questions required by EuroStat only need to be asked in wave one. EuroStat data is used for comparison purposes across European countries rather than measuring change across the quarters.

Why do we ask questions in such a rigid way?

We need all different types of respondents to understand the questions in the same way. This is because EuroStat needs to collect the information the same way in all member countries so that they can publish international comparisons. This is why the questions are asked in a rigid, factual manner. If we leave the questions open to interpretation then the data we collect will be prone to error.

This is also why we ask you to ask the question as worded during the interview, even if you think you know the answer. This is the only way we can guarantee that everyone has the opportunity to be asked the question in the same way.

We are sometimes cautious to change the question wording of a well established question on the LFS as this will probably affect any measurements of change.

For example, some customers have used the same variable in their analysis since 2000. If we were to suddenly change the question wording and there is a jump in the data, we won't know if this is a genuine jump, or whether this jump is a bi-product of the new question wording.

The questions relating to employment status are particularly sensitive for the above reason.

Of course, there are occasions when improving the question wording outweighs the need for continuity. When this occurs, we try to measure the discontinuity caused by the new questions and reported back to users.

Why does the EuroStat Adhoc Module sometimes have similar or even identical questions to the main LFS?

The EuroStat Adhoc Module is set each year by EUROSTAT, the organisation who manages statistics across the European Union.

EuroStat are generally quite specific in what they require. Even though we may ask a similar question, EuroStat may require different answer categories to the existing LFS question. However, we can’t alter the existing LFS question as this is required by other users. This means that we have to run both questions.

A EuroStat question may sometimes look identical to an LFS question – in these cases it’s normally the routing behind the questions that is different.

Can’t we use administrative records instead?

We already make use of some administrative data, using the Higher Education Statistics Agency records to replace some of our qualifications data. However the administrative data is:

- Often not directly applicable
- Comes too late
- Legally not available for us to provide to our users (under review at the moment)

Going forward we would love to where possible make use of more administrative data.

Why am I sometimes sent to interview at an ineligible address (such as a shop)?

Shops and other ineligible properties are identified by looking at the number of mail items delivered to that property each day. If a property receives more than 25 mail items each day then they are taken out of the sample. This does mean however that some small businesses and shops will remain in the sample file.

We currently have no other way of identifying these properties (as well as vacant properties and second homes). An alternative enhanced address file is being looked into, but this is still currently under development.

Why are most wave 1 interviews face to face?

Although (as previously stated) face to face interviewing is more expensive that conducting a telephone interview , for most wave 1 interviews face to face interviewing is the only way to ensure good response rates and good quality information.

- **A good quality phone number** (a number by which it is easy to obtain contact with the respondent) is not always available for a wave 1.
- Refusal rates are usually higher for telephone interviews as it is **easier to say no over the phone** – we want to avoid this at wave 1.
- Some would state that face to face interviews are the **most accurate** because the interviewer can see the responder and therefore better evaluate their circumstances e.g accommodation.

Why do we no longer make specific appointments on the telephone in the TO?

Analysis conducted during the development of the new call scheduler suggested that making specific appointments was not particularly effective: The findings from this analysis suggested that

- Making a specific appointment did not mean that a respondent was more likely to respond when contacted at that specified time
- Most respondents forget the appointment time they had agreed to 3 months earlier
- Some respondents may even deliberately provide a time they know they are unavailable in order to avoid any further contact.

How do wave one TO interviews have telephone numbers?

The simple answer is we use an outside source for the telephone matching process (UK Changes).

Once the quarterly sample addresses have been selected for the LFS (main and boost), a spreadsheet is created of those addresses which is then put through the UK changes website which does the matching. When the matching is complete, an email is automatically returned outlining the match statistics, and assuming the match rate is typical of what we would expect, the matched file can then be purchased and downloaded. The matched telephone numbers are then added back on to the main sample.

As an example of match rate, for the last run quarter for LFS, the percentage matched was around 25%.

Why aren't certain questions allowed to be asked of proxies?

For certain questions the data has been shown to be inaccurate when collected by a proxy.

As you are aware, some questions on the LFS are more opinion based (such as the wellbeing questions) and it would not be appropriate to ask a respondent to answer these questions on behalf of another person.

Why can't non-relatives be asked to carry out a proxy interview?

Similarly, analysis has shown that data collected by non-relatives tends to be inaccurate.

Why do we strive to get interviews with addresses that are continually non contacts? Why can't we just ask a neighbour for an interview instead?

The respondents chosen to be part of the LFS are part of a **random sample of addresses** chosen to represent the general population. If we swapped one respondent’s address for another, the sample would go from being random (see Fig3 page 11) to being biased (see Fig 2 page 11) As those agreeing to take part will often be different to those who don’t, every effort must be made to gain an interview with those who are previously non contact.

You may think calling non contacts of previous waves for the current waves is useless – but it is worth noting non contacts in waves 1-4 make up 1-10% of the co-operation rate at wave 5.

Why are there Checks and Signals on the LFS?

Checks (sometimes known as Hard checks/errors) will not allow the interview to continue when an impossible answer or impossible combination of answers is given. In this way the answers provided by the respondent will be more accurate.

An example of a hard check is present in the new veteran question. It is impossible for a respondent to leave the armed forces in the future or when they were younger than 16.

Signals (sometimes known as soft checks/errors) will allow the interview to continue but a pop up will appear when an answer or combination of answers seems unlikely (but not impossible)encouraging the interviewers to check that the answer is correct before continuing. Again in this way the answers provided by the respondent will be more accurate.

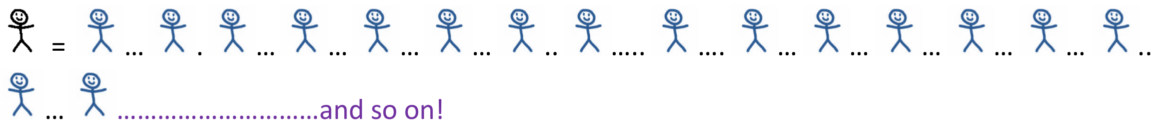
An example of this would again be in the new veteran questions. If the respondent gives an answer that means they left the armed forces more than 50 years ago a signal will appear for this answer to be checked.

Why are response rates important?

(a) We want to make accurate estimates

Our LFS Sample goes on to represent the UK population every quarter. The more people we contact, the more representative and therefore more accurate our data becomes.

Currently, one respondent roughly represents 600 people of the population.


…………………………and so on!

(b) We don’t want there to be bias in our estimates

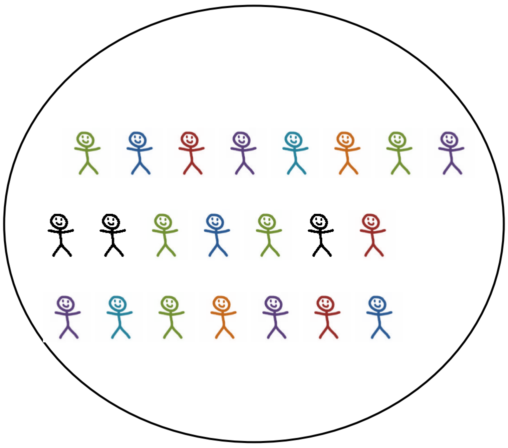
We want our data to accurately represent **different groups** of the UK population.

The way our sample is chosen (random process) is the best way of ensuring that every group in the population has an **equal chance of being sampled.**

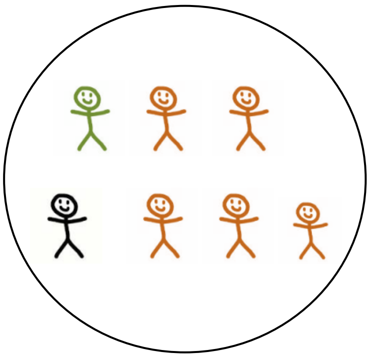
However, we can not guarantee that they will agree to take part.

The more people we interview (i.e. the higher the response rate) the more likely we are to capture lots of different groups of the population.

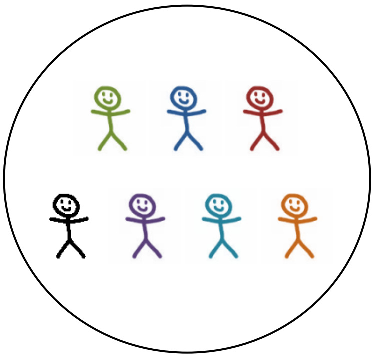
POPULATION: Fig 1



BIASED SAMPLE: Fig 2



UNBIASED SAMPLE: Fig 3



(c) **We need enough responders in order to carry out detailed analysis**

Our users are interested in carrying out analysis on small sub groups of the population in small geographical areas. We need enough responders in order to carry out these calculations.

Why don't we use specific survey materials or use the survey name?

Research has shown that some responders think that the Labour Force survey is something to do with the Labour Party, or if they are retired or out of work, nothing to do with them. They may therefore refuse to take part.

How will a web mode work on the LFS?

The LFS questionnaire is currently being adapted to be asked online which will take some time as it will be self completion by the general public rather than being completed by trained interviewers who will often have years of experience.

It is still very early days but, the aim is to ask a responder to take part on the web for all 5 waves – if they don't sign up, then it will be face to face for wave 1 and telephone thereafter. We hope 10-25% will sign up to the web.

There may also be the options for those respondents who are face to face for wave 1 to be web based for waves 2-5.

Why can't we have more show cards on the LFS?

We have to be very careful when introducing show cards. This is because if questions are asked one way in the field (using a show card) and a different way in the TO (no show card) then this may introduce mode affect in our data. This is something we want to avoid. So why show cards for certain questions ?

Show cards are currently used for the following questions:

- tenure
- nationality
- ethnicity
- religion
- sexual identity

This is because these are regarded as sensitive questions e.g the Interviewers may be interviewing a respondent when other members of the household are present and they may not want others to know about their sexual identity. They are also only asked in wave one, where the majority of interviewers are face to face.

How long does it take for the respondent's interview to get published?

It does depend at what point in the month a respondent is interviewed (and if it's the main or boost). For the main LFS, it's around 5-10 weeks

For example
- respondent completed interview for 41E on 3rd Feb......data published 16th April
- respondent completed interview for 41I on 14th March....data published 16th April

For the boost it's longer....as the datasets aren't released so promptly (as there's more information to process).

How long is an address taken off the Postcode Address File after being interviewed?

For main LFS cases:

If an address has start date of 01/07/2013 (and therefore finishes on 01/07/2014), they will be not be available on the PAF again until 30/09/2017.
i.e. they have a break for 3 years and 3 months before they can potentially be chosen again (assuming they responded in the last wave).

For boost LFS cases it's slightly different:
If an address with a start date of 01/01/2015 (therefore an end date of 01/01/2019) they will not be available on the PAF again until 31/07/2020
i.e. they have a break for 1 year and 6 months before they can potentially be chosen again (assuming they responded in the last wave).

What is the process for asking a query?

The LFS research team always welcome queries from interviewers and strive to improve the questionnaire and guidance alike. In order to help answer queries in a timely fashion they should always be submitted through your Manager who will try to answer your query, if they can't it will be passed on to the LFS field office. These queries will then get recorded on the queries log by the LFS Field Office and brought to the attention of the research team. Responses will also get recorded in this log; this allows answers to any queries to be used to inform improvements to the questionnaire and/or Q by Q.