Cabinet Office

Consultation

Community Life Survey: Development and implementation of online survey methodology for future survey years

Overview

The Survey

The Community Life Survey was commissioned by the Cabinet Office in summer 2012, with the aim to track the latest trends and developments across areas that are key to encouraging social action and empowering communities, such as volunteering, charitable giving, community cohesion and civic engagement. It provides robust, nationally representative Official Statistics, on an annual basis, that are used to inform and direct policy, and underpin further research and debate on building stronger communities. The 2012-13, 2013-14 and 2014-15 surveys were delivered by TNS BMRB and involved approximately 6,600, 5,100 and 2,000 (respectively) face-to-face interviews of adults (16+) in England.

Why change the existing approach?

Whilst the face-to-face survey is effective in providing robust and nationally representative data, and although costs have been reduced as far possible in the three survey years, the approach of the face-to-face interviews remains an expensive and resource intensive undertaking. In light of this, and considering the significant appetite for the survey data and the importance of this data set, the Cabinet Office embarked on development work, in line with the Government's Digital by Default agenda, to explore the feasibility of delivering the survey through online methods, offering the opportunity to improve convenience for users, pursue efficiency savings and increase the survey's sample size.

Ensuring the quality of the data

To inform the decision on a potential change of survey methodology, the Cabinet Office commissioned TNS BMRB to carry out a series of methodological projects, which ran alongside the 2012-13, 2013-14 and 2014-15 face-to-face surveys. The aim of this work was to test the feasibility of an innovative online survey, including an assessment of whether the quality of data can be maintained using an online approach. These tests were completed in four stages, and the work included;

- **Stage 1:** initial testing and refining of the field model for online survey delivery.
- **Stage 2:** a larger scale web test to further refine the fieldwork model.
- **Stage 3:** testing an all-adult in one household sampling approach, instead of one selected at random, and
- **Stage 4:** understanding differences between online and face-to-face surveys by drawing stronger conclusions on the relative impact of sample effects vs mode effects.

An overall report was collated bringing together findings and conclusions from across the whole programme of methodological research. A summary of the key findings is presented below and the full report is available online.

Summary of key findings from the online development work

Overall, the findings from the web development work suggest that an online survey methodology would be a viable option, providing cost efficiencies with an increased sample size. However, they also indicate that switching to an online survey will necessitate a break in the time series for the data, ceasing the ability to make comparisons back to 2001 (Citizenship Survey).

This is primarily because of the differences in the way that individuals respond to questions online, when compared to face-to-face, meaning that results from the online survey differ to those from the face-to-face, and therefore both surveys will not be directly comparable.

Whilst a break in the time series limits data users ability to track trends over time, the research suggests that, in addition to efficiency savings and a larger sample size, there is also no evidence that the online survey results are any less accurate than those from the face-to-face interviews. The challenges associated with a break in time series could also be further mitigated, as it may be possible to include data from the experimental online work, meaning that a new time series could start from 2014-15 (this is currently being explored).

Further detail on findings from the tests in relation to the fieldwork model, data quality, sample profile and compliance and fraud are summarised below:

Fieldwork model: In stages 1 and 2 of testing, fieldwork features for an online methodology were tested, which helped refine a best-practice model. A random probability stratified sample was deemed best, drawing addresses from the Postcode Address File (PAF), with survey invitations issued by letter. Up to two reminder mailings were also issued to those who did not respond in the previous round.

Online questionnaire content was designed to mimic the face-to-face version as far as possible, with adaptations made when restricted (e.g. certain questions that were usually read aloud by the interviewer were re-phrased for the web/postal version to suit self-completion). A number of enhancements to the questionnaire were made to improve user experience and face-to-face / web comparability, including, how ‘don’t know’ and ‘prefer not to say’ questions were presented.

Data quality: There was no evidence to suggest people were rushing the questionnaire, and evidence suggested people used the same level of care to complete the questions in the face-to-face interviews. More negative findings include: lower levels of engagement with the online survey, a higher dropout rate and more 'don't know' and refusal answers. However, there is no evidence that these results are any closer / further from the respondents 'true' opinions than the interviews.

In general, when comparing the standard web / postal survey with the face-to-face survey, there is no evidence to suggest any level of concern about reduced data quality / increased levels of survey satisficing.

Response rate and sample profiles: The tests showed that the response rate for the web/postal survey is significantly lower than face-to-face (28% compared to 60%), which means that the risk of non-response bias is much greater. Additionally, there are a number of demographic biases in the web only sample, including bias towards those who are highly educated, high earners, home-owning and native English speakers, but overall denotes no less accuracy than face-to-face surveys. Weighting can eliminate these demographic biases, but sample bias will remain.

The tests explored ways to increase response rates including through the use of incentives and inclusion of a postal alternative. These showed that response rates increase with the value of an incentive (when comparing £5 to £10 on condition of completing survey), with unconditional incentives achieving a higher response rate than conditional. The inclusion of a postal alternative questionnaire also increased response rate, however it did not improve the sample profile greatly. The addition of up to two reminder letters were found to have a significant impact on response rate, with the number of respondents almost doubling between the first and second mailing. However, the response rate remains significantly lower than the face-to-face interviews.

A further set of experiments, in stage 4, were devised to estimate the relative contribution of mode vs. sample in explaining the difference in results between the web/postal survey and the interview designs. The evidence suggests that the difference in data collection mode is responsible for the majority of the mismatch (see sample vs. mode report for more details)**,** meaning that if the same sample of individuals were to complete both surveys, there would still be inconsistent results.

It is suggested, and based on wider evidence, that the online survey approach is likely to produce more accurate results for most (but not all) survey questions. However, it must be noted that the lower response rate obtained for the online survey compared to the interview survey might add a small degree of bias to some estimates.

Compliance and fraud: To reduce the level of non-compliance, all adults in a household (up to 4) were asked to complete the online survey, and although evidence suggests there is a small degree of fraudulent completion associated with four adult households, an 'all adults' approach is recommended. However, this should be combined with stronger fraud-deterrents, such as household size validation (re-contacting respondents) and questionnaire data validation (flagging questions completed quicker than the recommended minimum). These deterrents are currently being developed.

Consultation on future approach

The Cabinet Office invite views on the proposed future approach to an online methodology and the opportunities and implications a potential change in methodology might have, given the results from the development work. The results of this consultation will influence the future of the Community Life Survey (beyond 2015-16, if commissioned) and all responses will be considered in light of the intended aims and objectives of the survey, financial budget, budgeted questionnaire length, timing and coherence constraints. A response to this consultation will be issued in due course.

Deadline for Response: 02/01/2016

How to respond: Please send responses (preferably by email) to: communitylife@cabinetoffice.gov.uk. Please make reference to the consultation questions below in your response.

The Community Life Survey Team, Cabinet Office, 4th Floor Blue zone, 1 Horse Guards Road, London, SW1A 2HQ.

Consultation questions

a) What are your organisation's current uses of the survey?
   i. The topic areas you find most useful?
   ii. The analysis you need to undertake, and the purpose for which you currently use the Community Life Survey data?
   iii. The current frequency of the Survey and your need for time series?
   iv. The sample sizes you require, both overall and for subgroups, to effectively utilise the survey data?
   v. The sample boosts you require (if any)?
   vi. The outputs you find most useful, and why?

b) What would be the implications of stopping the Community Life Survey, for your organisation?
c) What impact will changing to an online methodology for data collection, and the subsequent change in time series, have for your organisation (if any)?
d) What, if any, specific concerns do you and your organisation have around the online methodology and is there any further information that could help reassure you?
e) What support and technical advice may help you adapt to any change in methodology?
f) Are you aware of other organisations/teams working on switching to online methodologies? If so could you provide contact information?
g) Any further comments?