



Department for
Digital, Culture
Media & Sport

Community Life Survey, England 2016-17

Online/Paper Estimates Technical Note

Introduction

The Community Life Survey (CLS) is a survey of adults in England which tracks the latest trends and developments across areas that are key to encouraging social action and empowering communities. The objectives of the survey are to:

- Provide robust, nationally representative data on behaviours and attitudes within communities to inform and direct policy and action in these areas;
- Provide data of value to all users, including public bodies, external stakeholders and the public, engaging with end users to refine and develop the survey as appropriate, and;
- Underpin further research and debate on building stronger communities.

The CLS was commissioned by the Cabinet Office in summer 2012, following the end of the Citizenship Survey, and incorporated many of the same measures to continue the time series. Following the move of the Office for Civil Society from the Cabinet Office to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in 2016, the survey is now managed by DCMS.

For the years 2012-13 to 2015-16, the survey continued to use a face-to-face methodology but a self-completion online/paper survey methodology was investigated during this time to reduce costs.

Following thorough [testing](#), the CLS has moved to an online and paper mixed method approach from 2016-17 onwards, with an end to the current face-to-face method. This should provide substantial cost savings, whilst aligning with digital standards and increasing survey capability, such as sub group analysis through increased sample size. The subjective nature of the questions covered by the CLS also lends itself better to self-completion methodology due to the potential interview biases that are present in face-to-face data collection.

In a [recent consultation](#), users told us how important time-series analysis was. Substantial testing took place to assess the impact of this change on the ability to conduct trend analysis, which included collecting online/paper data for three years, from 2013-14 to 2015-16, alongside the official face-to-face data collection. We have presented this online data together with the parallel face-to-face data in the statistical release and accompanying tables to facilitate trend analysis.

Data Collection Methodology

The sampling methodology for the face-to-face data collection involved cluster sampling postcode sectors, before randomly sampling households within each selected postcode sector. While this is a good method for face-to-face data collection, as it makes the interviewer's task more efficient, it can lead to more variance between potential samples than an unclustered sample as individuals within clustered postal sectors will tend to have similar characteristics. For all years of the online/paper data collection, an unclustered

stratified random sample of addresses was drawn from the Royal Mail’s postcode address file.

In 2016-17 the sample design for online data collection was updated to increase the proportion of questionnaires completed by black and minority ethnic groups (BAME). The revised design used strata defined by local ethnic mix.

For both online/paper and face-to-face data collection, introduction letters were sent to each address that had been sampled. For the interview survey, this letter alerted the householder to the visit of an interviewer and provided an opportunity to opt out of the survey in advance. For the self-completion survey, the letter provided the details required to access the online questionnaire (url, user name and passcode) as well as the telephone order line for obtaining a paper version. For the online method, up to two reminder letters were sent to each address to maximise response, and in 2015-16 and 2016-17 paper surveys were sent physically in the post to a targeted subset in a second reminder pack.

Under the interview survey model, the interviewee lists all household residents (aged 16+) and this is entered into a computer script where one resident is randomly selected for interview. As this random allocation does not work well without an interviewer, for self-completion two selection mechanisms were tested. In 2013-14, half the households sampled were asked in the introduction to select the adult with the “last birthday” and half were asked to select the adult with the “next birthday”. However it was found that around a quarter of respondents (26%) were not the “correct” respondent i.e. the sampling instructions were ignored as the survey was not completed by the person with the right birthday. As this casts doubt on the representativeness of the sample, an “all adults” design, which allowed all adults (up to a practical maximum of four) the opportunity to complete the questionnaire, was deployed from 2014-15 onwards.

More information on this change can be found [here](#).

There are differences in the sample sizes for the different methods and also between the years of online/paper data collection. A larger sample can be targeted at a lower cost using the online/paper mode compared to that of face-to-face. The online/paper sample in 2014-15 and 2015-16 are lower as, in these years, the samples were the minimum required to ensure a time series should the method for CLS switch from face-to-face (which had not been decided then).

Table 1 – CLS sample sizes for face-to-face and online/paper, 2013-14 to 2016-17

	Face-to-face	Online/paper	Online	Paper ¹
2013-14	5,105	10,215	9,387	828
2014-15	2,022	2,323	2,226	97
2015-16	3,027	3,256	2,233	1,023
2016-17	-	10,256	7,365	2,891

1. Paper questionnaires were sent out in second reminder pack in 2015-16 and 2016-17 to increase response rate

Implications of differing approaches

Questionnaire

The online questionnaire and paper surveys were designed to mimic the face-to-face version as far as possible, although mode constraints meant this was not always possible. For example, questions in the face-to-face survey, which were designed to be read out by an interviewer, or where responses were presented on a show card, were re-phrased in the online/paper version to suit a self-completion context.

One of the most significant differences is the presentation of ‘Don’t know’, ‘Prefer not to say’ and other spontaneous response options. In the face-to-face mode, these codes are only used when the respondent specifically volunteers them as an answer. This could be replicated somewhat with the online questionnaire, as these response options only appear on the screen if they tried to click forward to the next question without selecting an answer. However, hiding certain responses on the paper question was not an option. Generally, ‘Don’t know’, ‘Prefer not to say’ and other spontaneous options were not included on the paper questions, except where it was expected that the use of these codes would be at least 5%.

There are also fewer questions on the paper questionnaire compared to the online questionnaire. This is partly because the survey involves filtered questions which increase the physical size (and printing cost) of the paper questionnaire. These can be difficult for respondents to follow and the printed length of the full questionnaire also makes the task for the respondent seem bigger than it is, which might increase the risk of non-response.

Response rates

The response rate to the online/paper survey is significantly lower than the response rate to face-to-face survey and the risk of non-response bias is greater. This is partly because there is no interviewer to encourage the respondent to be engaged, which can also lead to higher levels of drop-outs (individuals who exit the survey before coming to the end of the questionnaire).

Table 2 – Response Rates

	Face-to-face	Online/paper	Online	Addition due to paper
2013-14	61%	27%-28%	25%-26%	1%-3%
2014-15 ¹	59%	19%	18%	1%
2015-16 ^{2,3}	61%	25%	17%	8%
2016-17 ³	-	21%	15%	6%

1. From 2014-15 onwards, we moved from the single adult per household design to the all adult design

2. From 2015-16 onwards, paper questionnaire were included in the second reminder pack

3. The response rate has been calculated excluding cases removed through the validation process, and those sampled that were ineligible address (e.g. non-residential address or communal establishment).

Population coverage

Compared with the face-to-face survey, the self-completion sample is more likely to comprise everyday internet users, high earners, owner-occupiers, native English speakers and the more highly educated. The paper questionnaire option helps bring in non-internet users, although take-up of these questionnaires on request is low and there is minimal improvement in sample profile unless included with a targeted subset of reminder packs.

As mentioned above, an ethnic minority boost was included in the sample in 2016-17 to allow more reliable results for ethnic minority groups to be produced. However, it is worth noting that response amongst many of the different ethnic populations is lower than the general population.

Statistical techniques, such as weighting allows us to (partially) compensate for both the impact of a low response rate and the coverage of population.

Impact on results

There are some differences between the estimates generated by the two data collection approaches during the parallel runs. Although this is expected, as mode effects tend to be larger for questions about values or behaviours where there is a clear societal norm or ideal, it does effect the ability for users to append the new 2016-17 online estimates onto the face-to-face estimates to create a time series.

There is also a wide variation in the impact on different questions. 34% of the variables explored (17 of 50) generate similar responses regardless of mode, having a difference of less than 1 percentage point (ppts), 28% differ by over 5ppts and 6% by over 10ppts. The full list of variables explored, and the average differences over 2013-15, between online/paper and face-to-face collection can be found in Annex A.

Conclusion

Overall [testing](#) concluded that sample composition differences appear to have minimal effect, and due to the lack of interviewer effects, a self-completion mode is thought to yield more honest answers. Although it is difficult to determine whether this is the case for all variables, interviewers are likely to have a stronger effect on questions with clear societal norms or values, which make up the vast majority of questions on the CLS. It is therefore likely that self-completion would generate more accurate results than face-to-face if there are no strong selection effects (as the evidence suggests).

Based on the variation in the results discussed above that are generated from online and face-to-face estimates, we have published the online data for 2013-14 to 2015-16 alongside the new 2016-17 estimates to allow users to conduct trend analysis. The estimates are available in our data tables for those variables we publish. The Community Life Survey statistical release focuses on the 2016-17 online/paper estimates and any changes from previous online/paper data, going back to 2013-14.

The micro data of the online/paper 2013-14 to 2016-17 estimates will be made available on the UK Data Archive to allow users to carry out any additional analyses.

Annex A – Average difference between online/paper and face-to-face estimates

Variable name and question text	Response	2013-14 to 2015-16 (each year equally weighted)		
		Face-to-face	Online/paper	F2F- online/paper
BetWors On the whole, do you think that over the past two years this area has got better or worse to live in or would you say that things haven't changed much?	1 The area has got better	17%	14%	+3.4%
BetWors On the whole, do you think that over the past two years this area has got better or worse to live in or would you say that things haven't changed much?	2 The area has got worse	18%	21%	-3.3%
BetWors On the whole, do you think that over the past two years this area has got better or worse to live in or would you say that things haven't changed much?	3 The area has not changed much	65%	65%	-0.1%
Gemppar1 Employee participated in volunteering scheme	1 Yes	16%	11%	+5.9%
GivAmt2 Amount giving to charity excluding values over £300 (Mean)		£22	£21	+£0.58
GivAmtB2 Amount given to charity (Banded)	1 £0-4	19%	19%	-0.6%
GivAmtB2 Amount given to charity (Banded)	2 £5-9	19%	18%	+0.8%
GivAmtB2 Amount given to charity (Banded)	3 £10-19	24%	25%	-0.9%
GivAmtB2 Amount given to charity (Banded)	4 £20-49	25%	25%	+0.4%
GivAmtB2 Amount given to charity (Banded)	5 £50+	13%	13%	+0.3%
Givech3 Given money to charity in past 4 weeks	1 Yes	75%	78%	-3.5%
LonOft How often do you feel lonely?	1 Often/always	4%	5%	-0.7%
LonOft How often do you feel lonely?	2 Some of the time	13%	15%	-2.7%
LonOft How often do you feel lonely?	3 Occasionally	18%	23%	-4.7%
LonOft How often do you feel lonely?	4 Hardly ever	33%	33%	-0.2%
LonOft How often do you feel lonely?	5 Never	32%	23%	+8.2%
PCSat Generally speaking, would you like to be more involved in the decisions your Council makes that affect your local area?	1 Yes	42%	50%	-7.9%
SbeGB_R How strongly do you belong to Britain (2 categories)	1 Very/fairly strongly	87%	84%	+2.9%
Sbeneigh_R How strongly do you belong to your neighbourhood (2 categories)	1 Very/fairly strongly	71%	58%	+13.4%
SFavN Whether agree or disagree that: I borrow things and exchange favours with my neighbours	1 Definitely agree	20%	13%	+7.3%
SFavN Whether agree or disagree that: I borrow things and exchange favours with my neighbours	2 Tend to agree	25%	28%	-3.8%
SFavN Whether agree or disagree that: I borrow things and exchange favours with my neighbours	3 Tend to disagree	19%	26%	-6.7%
SFavN Whether agree or disagree that: I borrow things and exchange favours with my neighbours	4 Definitely disagree	36%	32%	+3.3%
Slocsats Satisfaction with local area as a place to live	1 Very satisfied	44%	33%	+11.1%
Slocsats Satisfaction with local area as a place to live	2 Fairly satisfied	42%	46%	-4.1%
Slocsats Satisfaction with local area as a place to live	3 Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	9%	14%	-5.1%
Slocsats Satisfaction with local area as a place to live	4 Fairly dissatisfied	4%	6%	-1.6%

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Slocsat Satisfaction with local area as a place to live	5 Very dissatisfied	2%	2%	-0.3%
Stogeth_R Whether local area is place where people from different backgrounds get on well together (2 categories)	1 Tend to/definitely agree	87%	80%	+6.5%
WellB1 On a scale from 0 to 10, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays (Mean)		7.79	7.00	+0.79
WellB2 On a scale from 0 to 10, how happy did you feel yesterday (Mean)		7.63	7.02	+0.62
WellB3 On a scale from 0 to 10, how anxious did you feel yesterday (Mean)		2.70	3.40	-0.70
WellB4 On a scale from 0 to 10, to what extent do you feel that the things you do in your life are worthwhile (Mean)		8.00	7.30	+0.70
Zcivcon1 Civic consultation at least once a month	1 Yes	2%	1%	+0.5%
Zcivmon1 Civic participation at least once a month	1 Yes	4%	3%	+0.7%
Zcivpar1 Civic participation in last 12 months	1 Yes	31%	36%	-4.2%
ZCivren Any civic activism in the past 12 months	1 Yes	9%	9%	-0.2%
Zformon Formal volunteering at least once a month	1 Yes	27%	24%	+3.0%
Zforvol Formal volunteering in last 12 months	1 Yes	41%	40%	+1.4%
Zihlpmon Informal help at least once a month	1 Yes	35%	29%	+5.7%
Zinffor Formal or informal volunteering in the last 12 months	1 Yes	71%	67%	+4.2%
Zinfform Formal or informal volunteering in the last month	1 Yes	47%	41%	+6.2%
Zinfol Informal help in last 12 months	1 Yes	61%	55%	+5.8%
ZLocInv1 Whether been personally involved in helping out with local issue/activity	1 Yes	18%	16%	+1.5%
ZLocPeop1 Whether aware of local people getting involved in a local issue/activity	1 Yes	36%	34%	+2.3%
ZPAffLoc Can you influence decisions affecting area	1 Definitely / tend to agree	35%	26%	+8.9%
Zpconsul1 Any Civic consultation in past 12 months	1 Yes	16%	17%	-0.6%
ZPInfl How important is it personally for you to be able to influence decisions in your local area	1 Very/quite important	69%	58%	+10.9%
Zschatnf Frequency of chatting to neighbours more than to just say hello	1 At least once a month	77%	74%	+2.8%
ZSPull To what extent would you agree or disagree that people in this neighbourhood pull together, SPull collapsed	1 Agree	64%	59%	+4.4%



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