

Measuring, managing and reporting respondent burden at the Office for National Statistics, UK

Adam Tucker

Head of Survey Control & Compliance Unit, Office for National Statistics, Government Buildings, Cardiff Road, Newport NP10 8XG, adam.tucker@ons.gsi.gov.uk

Abstract

National Statistical Institutes are increasingly providing more accurate reports on respondent burden information and seeking methods to reduce the burden placed on businesses and individuals. The purpose of this paper is to share how we, at the Office for National Statistics measure and report on respondent burden and how we manage survey changes in relation to burden. The work we do meets the UK Code of Practice, Principle 6 on Proportionate Burden. We measure respondent burden through sending compliance surveys to respondents, gathering pertinent information to enable us to accurately calculate burden in money (business surveys) or time (social surveys). We seek to use paradata from online collection methods and investigate how the use of administrative data can reduce burden. We annually report the total cost of respondent burden from ONS surveys, and across all UK Government departments. We seek to manage changes in burden through consulting on any changes to ONS surveys, ensuring that changes made are appropriately measured in comparison to any increase in burden it will incur. We hold seminars with wider UK government departments to share best practice on managing burden.

Keywords: Response Burden, Proportionate Burden

Background

Firstly, to define what burden is, according to the OECD¹ it is “The effort, in terms of time and cost, required for respondents to provide satisfactory answers to a survey².”

The Code of Practice for Official Statistics² governs how statistical agencies in the United Kingdom produce official statistics. Specifically, Principle 6 of the Code is titled “Proportionate Burden”, stating “The cost burden on data suppliers should not be excessive and should be assessed relative to the benefits arising from the use of statistics.” Also, the European Statistics Code of Practice³, states under Principle 9, Non-Excessive Burden on Respondents “The reporting burden should be proportionate to the needs of the users and should not be excessive for respondents.”

¹ <https://stats.oecd.org/glossary/detail.asp?ID=4457>

² <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/osr/code-of-practice/>

³ <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/quality/european-statistics-code-of-practice>

Measuring Respondent Burden

The methodology⁴ for measuring respondent burden in the United Kingdom was established by a cross government taskforce in 2010 and has been used ever since. The methodology covers both surveys to businesses and surveys to households and individuals and is to be used for both statutory and voluntary surveys.

Surveys to businesses are calculated as;

$$\begin{aligned} \textit{burden} = & \\ & \left[\{n_{\text{resp,main_surv}} \times \textit{med}(t_{\text{main_surv}})\} + \{n_{\text{val,main_surv}} \times \textit{med}(t_{\text{val}})\} \right] \times \textit{hourly_rate} \\ & + \\ & [prop_{\text{external costs}} \times n_{\text{resp,main_surv}}] \times \textit{med}(\textit{external cost}) \end{aligned}$$

A monetary cost is calculated based on the time taken to complete the questionnaire / interview, an appropriate hourly rate and external costs incurred. Subsequent contact to validate responses is also included since it contributes to actual burden on respondents.

Surveys to households and individuals are measured as;

$$\textit{burden} = n_{\text{resp,main_surv}} \times \textit{med}(t_{\text{main_surv}})$$

For surveys of individuals and households, respondent burden is calculated on the basis of time taken. The financial element is excluded from the calculation.

Monitoring Burden Changes

Survey Changes

The Survey Control & Compliance team (SCCU) manage all requests to make a change to a survey or requests for a new survey to be generated, to ensure that any impacts on respondent burden are considered and that any requests for new data and increased burden is justified.

⁴ <https://gss.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Guidance-on-Calculating-Compliance-Costs.pdf>

The team also work with the survey owner to calculate any changes in burden and talk through options for how the burden can be reduced.

The team also ensures that all of the teams involved in the process are made aware of changes, Data Collection Methodology, who ensure that a questionnaire is tested as required and that the wording is appropriate and also the Survey Processing Centre are consulted so that they can check that any changes are considered from a more technical point of view, that margins are not affected and any new requests can be scheduled into the printing cycle.

Compliance Reviews

To ensure that respondent burden costs are kept up to date, we undertake a programme of compliance reviews, where surveys are reviewed once every three years (for Monthly/Quarterly surveys) or once every five years (for Annual surveys). A separate survey is sent to a subsample of the main sample, asking questions which enable us to calculate the burden, using the above equation.

Separately to this, where a new survey is introduced or a substantive change is made to the survey, a compliance review is run to assess the impact of the change on the burden, adding the compliance questions to the end of the main survey.

Reporting Burden

As per principle 6 of the Code of Practice, which states “Report annually the estimated costs of responding to statistical surveys and strive to develop methods that will reduce the costs to...organisations or people.” The SCCU team coordinate the collection of compliance costs for all surveys across the Government Statistical Service (GSS) and publish these in an Online List of Government Statistical Surveys (OLGSS). This is published annually at the end of the financial year and contains a wealth of information such as Survey name, owner, sample size, response rates and compliance costs amongst others.

Separately to this, SCCU also provide support the wider GSS though holding bi-annual seminars to share best practice and innovative ideas for the development of survey burden measurement. SCCU also manage a network of Survey Control Liaison Officers across government who act as survey control points for their respective departments. SCCU provide them with tools to do this, through the GSS website.

Future development

As we look to move more and more surveys online, we are working to move the collection of compliance data online also, which will give us more accurate measurements of time spent completing the surveys, which through this new measure of accuracy may reduce the compliance cost, though this may not be actual burden reduction, but reduction through more accurate measurement and also through the use of paradata.

We are also working to develop a new methodology to measure burden of non-survey data collection methods, as we understand that the traditional paper survey was the main collection method considered when the methodology was written.

Also we are planning to undertake a user review to produce a new commentary on how burden changes year to year, looking to engage with our users, to ensure any commentary meets their needs and is fit for purpose, also providing meaningful examination.