

ONS' Sexual Identity Project – Progress Update November 2008

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) was made aware of a strong user requirement for information on sexual identity. As a result the sexual identity project was established in 2006 with the following objectives.

- Question development – the development of a question (or set of questions) on sexual identity that can be used on social surveys and possibly for use in equality monitoring purposes
- Question testing & implementation – to test and evaluate (both quantitatively and qualitatively) the questioning to ensure that where possible they meet user requirements; are acceptable to respondents; and provide information of reasonable quality/accuracy. If acceptable questioning can be developed, it will be added to the Integrated Household Survey (IHS), which combines most ONS continuous household surveys into one. This will allow for experimental estimates of the size and characteristics of the lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) populations to be produced and evaluated.
- Guidance – to provide guidance for those wishing to administer the questioning, and those wishing to analyse the data.

Both the question development and the question testing and evaluation phases of the project have now been completed. As a result, from January 2009, ONS will be introducing a sexual identity question within the constituent surveys that make up the IHS. These are:

Annual Population Survey
Labour Force Survey
English Housing Survey
Living Costs and Food module (formerly Expenditure and Food Survey)
General Lifestyle module (formerly General Household Survey)
Opinions module (formerly Omnibus Survey)

Question Development Phase

Defining the concept of sexual orientation/sexual identity

Sexual Orientation, as defined by the *Equalities Act 2006*, refers to 'an individual's sexual orientation towards - (a) persons of the same sex as him or her (b) persons of the opposite sex, or (c) both'. Research shows that the concept of sexual orientation encompasses different dimensions, including attraction, behaviour, fantasy, emotion and identity.

The definition of the concept that needs to be measured and the understanding of user requirements have been, and continue to be, developed by ONS through the user/stakeholder group and the expert research group. These groups first met in the summer of 2006 and continue to operate via meetings, as well as providing advice and comment through correspondence and one-to-one discussions. Based on the views of these groups, ONS aimed to develop questioning to measure respondents' self-perceived sexual identity. That is, how respondents would categorise themselves in terms of their sexual identity, rather than how other people might categorise them.

In May 2007 a paper was presented at the 62nd Annual Conference of the American Association of Public Opinion Research. The paper entitled 'In search of a question on sexual identity' discussed the background to the project, the data collection issues surrounding implementation, and the proposed methodology to be employed on the project. The paper is available on the National Statistics website at:

A review of sexual identity/orientation questions on other surveys

A review of the experiences of organisations, both in the UK and internationally, which have recently administered survey questions about sexual identity/orientation was undertaken. The first report 'UK experiences of administering survey questions on sexual identity/orientation' was published in January 2008, while the second paper 'Review of international organisations' experiences of administering question on sexual identity/orientation' was published in May 2008. Both publications are available on

the ONS website at: www.statistics.gov.uk/about/data/measuring-equality/sexual-identity/question-development.asp]

Internationally estimates of those responding as LGB were between 4.6 per cent and 0.9 per cent while UK estimates varied between 3 per cent and 0.3 per cent.

Focus groups studies

Six focus groups were held throughout October and November 2007 to investigate people's attitudes to being asked questions on sexual identity, particularly in the context of a general purpose household survey that included questions on a range of social topics. The focus groups consisted separately of heterosexual men, heterosexual women, gay men, gay/lesbian women, bisexual men and bisexual women. The groups explored topics relating to the conceptualisation of sexual identity/orientation; terminology used and understood; administration in different contexts; confidentiality and acceptability. Results of the focus group studies were published in September 2008, and are available on the ONS website at: [/www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/measuring-equality/sexual-identity-project/quest-dev/index.html](http://www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/measuring-equality/sexual-identity-project/quest-dev/index.html)]

Question testing & implementation

NS Omnibus Survey trials

Periodically since July 2006 a series of trials have been carried out on the National Statistics (NS) Omnibus Survey to test different versions of sexual identity questions and different ways of administering these questions in a survey context. Results of the first two trials were published in January 2008; the third trial in June 2008 and the fourth and final trial in September 2008. All reports can be found on the ONS website at: www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/measuring-equality/sexual-identity-project/quest-test-and-implem/index.html]

Full quantitative pilot

In April 2008 a prototype question was progressed into a six month field trial on the ONS' General Lifestyle Survey (GLF). The trial utilised a split sample design (where half the sample is asked the sexual identity question and the other half is not asked). The pilot was conducted to assess any potential impact on response rates and whether the question would work in a concurrent interview setting, where several household members may be interviewed at the same time.

The ONS felt it important that the question should be introduced onto the component surveys of the IHS at the earliest opportunity. As a result, a preliminary report was produced using data from the first four months of the GLF pilot in order to inform any decision to add a question on sexual identity to ONS surveys. The preliminary report was published in December 2008, on the ONS website at : www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/measuring-equality/sexual-identity-project/quest-test-and-implem/index.html]

A final report relating to the pilot will be published early in 2009.

Proposed survey questioning on sexual identity, with rationale for design

Informed by the research conducted so far, a sexual identity question has been designed for use on the Integrated Household Survey (IHS). This document specifies the question wording, response categories and the question administration that will be used, both face-to-face and over the telephone. It also provides an explanation of the design. The report was published in December 2008, on the ONS website at: www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/measuring-equality/sexual-identity-project/quest-test-and-implem/index.html]

Cognitive interviews and in-depth enquiry

Cognitive testing takes place in the course of one-to-one interviews. It explores the mental process by which respondents reach an answer to a question and in so doing it can show whether or not the question is working as intended.

Cognitive interviews in relation to the sexual identity question were conducted between June and August 2008 and were combined with in-depth enquiry to further explore conceptual and administration issues related to the question sets, where appropriate. Small sub-groups for which it was unfeasible, or inappropriate, from a methodological perspective to include in the focus groups were covered at this stage of the project, for example, those in the youngest and oldest age-groups, those with certain religious or cultural beliefs, those living in more rural communities, those with compound diversity issues, such as severe disabilities, and the transgender community. Results of the cognitive interviews and in depth enquiry will be published in early 2009.

Proxy responses

On some surveys people answer questions on behalf of somebody else in their household; these are known as 'proxy' interviews/responses. ONS has been investigating the consequences of asking, or not asking, the sexual identity question by proxy. The investigation involves assessing the proportion of proxy interviews that are taken on the main ONS surveys and how the characteristics of proxy respondents differ from those of other respondents. Analysis completed so far has mapped the demographic characteristics of proxy respondents, including their relationship with the person in the household who answered on their behalf. Further work is being conducted to assess whether proxy respondents differ systematically from respondents who are interviewed in person to assess the likelihood of the estimates being biased if the question were not asked by proxy. This is because observations from the focus groups show widespread objection to others in the household providing a response on their behalf or vice versa. A report on this work will be available in early 2009.

Precision and reliability of estimates at regional and local levels

Analysis is being undertaken to assess the number of years of IHS data that would need to be pooled to produce reliable regional and local level LGB estimates to an acceptable level of statistical precision. It is planned to publish results of this work in spring 2009.

Future work

User guide

The aim is to provide guidance to both users of statistics, and those organisations collecting data on sexual orientation. A draft report will be prepared by early 2009 with the aim of publishing in spring 2009, after peer-reviewing by the expert research and the user/stakeholder groups.

Data quality review (2009 – 11)

As this will be the first time that a question on sexual identity will be asked on a large-scale survey in Britain, the quality of the data will be monitored closely over the first few years of implementation. This will include an evaluation stage, where over this period (2009-11) it is envisaged that a statistical evaluation report will be published alongside the release of data as experimental statistics. The first set of estimates of the LGB population is expected to be available in autumn 2010.

PROJECT MILESTONES

QUESTION DEVELOPMENT	
'In Search of a Question on Sexual Identity' Paper	Paper published May 2007
Review of UK experiences of administering survey questions on sexual identity/orientation	Report published January 2008
Review of the legislative context	Report published May 2008
Review of international organisations experiences of administering survey questions on sexual identity/orientation	Report published May 2008
Cognitive testing	Testing ran between May – July 2008 Report will be published early 2009.
QUESTION TESTING AND IMPLEMENTATION	
NS Omnibus Survey Trials 1 & 2	Report published January 2008
NS Omnibus Survey Trial 3	Report published June 2008
NS Omnibus Survey Trial 4	Report published September 2008
Focus groups	Report published September 2008
Full quantitative trial on ONS General Lifestyle Survey (GLF)	The trial ran between April and September 2008. The preliminary report using the first four months data was published December 2008. Results of the full trial to be published in early 2009.
Proposed survey questioning on sexual identity, with rationale for design	Report published December 2008
Proxy response report	Report to be published early 2009
Estimating precision and reliability report	Report to be published early 2009
Sexual identity question added to the constituent surveys of the IHS	January 2009
USER GUIDANCE	
Guide on collecting data on sexual identity	Scheduled for spring 2009
DATA QUALITY REVIEW	
Experimental statistics first release	Scheduled for autumn 2010
Statistical evaluation report	Scheduled for autumn 2010

Contacts

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References

Published reports and latest information on the ONS Sexual Identity Project is available on the National Statistics website at:

Website

www.statistics.gov.uk/about/data/measuring-equality/sexual-identity/default.asp