

## Labour Force and Annual Population Surveys User Conference 2020

### Summary notes from discussion session 'LFS and COVID'

12.10-13.00, 24 November 2020

Answers from Martina Helme (ONS), Salah Merad (ONS), Bob Watson (ONS)  
Notes by Sarah King-Hele (UK Data Service)

#### Migration and grossing weights in 2020

**Q – In 2020 the numbers of UK born people estimated using grossing weights in the LFS shoots up – this is because the population projections used to create the grossing weights stay the same but there has been negative migration, likely from particular sub-groups e.g. non-UK. Can ONS tweak the population projections to help with this?**

A – There is no externally validated data source to measure levels of migration so LFS grossing weights used in 2020 do not take negative migration into account. There may be better information about migration in the future but ONS cannot estimate population changes without relevant information and in particular data about how migration breaks down by sub-groups.

The effect observed is likely to apply to other categories such as country of birth and ethnicity variables.

We are considering whether other options or versions of population figures are possible, but there is nothing immediately available that suggests a quick solution, or change of method.

#### Tenure weighting

**Q – Does the tenure weighting introduced this year due to COVID mean there's a bias towards economically inactive, not working, students?**

A - Tenure weighting uses tenure across the country so it might not be perfect, particularly in London where there are different patterns of housing tenure (more so than across other regions). However, adding tenure into the weighting should have reduced the level of bias in the estimates of economically inactive and the unemployed. It's unclear what the impact on the estimates of the number of students is. ONS are investigating whether using regional tenure information for the weights would be better. Any new weights based on this work are likely to be some months away.

#### New COVID questions including access to them

**Q - How confident are you that the 'Jbaway' variable captures furlough? Could you use the word 'furlough' in questions to better get information?**

A – 'JbAway' and 'Wrking' have the same question text as in previous years but with additional instructions to the interviewer since COVID. Where respondents have been suspended temporarily, Wrking=no and JbAway=yes. For those that permanently lost their jobs, jbAway=no.

Additional COVID related questions might help identify respondents who are on furlough. However, whilst various possible combinations give a reasonable track of how furlough has moved over time, nothing gives similar levels to those suggested by the administrative data. The introduction of part time furlough has made it harder to distinguish respondents on furlough using the LFS.

New questions due to COVID were added at very short notice and questions can only be changed every 3 months with no time for the usual cognitive testing (that usually takes about 6 months).

ONS used 'furlough' as a response in the 'JbAway' question from July 2020. However, ONS are unclear whether furlough is language that would be understood by everyone or whether all respondents would understand the same version of furlough.

**Q – The working from home question doesn't make clear whether the respondent is able to work from home.**

A – The 'home' question, 'Do you mainly work from home?' doesn't distinguish between those who are working from home at that moment or whether it is due to COVID. It probably measures a hybrid. There were changes in July 2020 and will be further changes in January 2021.

**Q – Why are the new variables about COVID on the LFS only available via the ONS Secure Research Service (SRS) and not in the data at the UK Data Service? Is it because of a disclosure risk?**

A – No, there was no time to test the new questions so the collected data resulting from some of these questions is still considered experimental. Once ONS is confident about the reliability of the data collected through these new COVID variables, these can be released for the UKDS and SRS datasets.

**Q – Can ONS provide a 1 page list of all the new COVID variables with the documentation to the data, once it is available, so that users don't have to hunt for this information?**

A – Yes, this information can be provided together with the usual documentation (once the data are made available via the UKDS).

## **Benefits**

**Q - Under-reporting of benefits in the LFS – can you capture more benefits online?**

A – There is always an undercount of benefits. This may be down to different reasons such as the respondent not willing to provide this information, not being able to recall, or not being aware. The link to admin sources to improve this data is work that is still under development.

## **Weekly estimates**

**Q – How robust is it to look at weekly estimates in LFS?**

A – It is not very robust due to small sample sizes and the geographical clustering of the sample (use of area stunting in the sampling design). Weekly estimates can be used to find large movements/shocks, but they should not be used to look at more gradual changes week by week. They can also be used to look at trends over time.

Answer from attendee: Can do confidence intervals, though.

**Q - Can ONS provide formulas to produce CIs for weekly analyses?**

ONS can provide the design effect for key variables, which will allow users to produce CIs.

**Incentives for LMS and LFS****Q – There’s a £25 incentive for the LMS. Does this mean that the response rate is higher in the LMS than in the LFS where there’s only a £10 incentive?**

A – The two aren’t comparable as the LMS data are collected in a different mode. ONS has tested a range of incentives for LFS (£5 vs £10 where £10 was significantly more effective), and for the LMS (including monetary and non-monetary incentives, conditional and unconditional) For example, a totebag as an unconditional incentive was trialled on the LMS and found to be very effective, when testing this on one of our off-line surveys the results were not as promising.

**ONS code for derived variables and tables****Q - Is there a policy across the ONS to provide code so that users can recreate analyses precisely when they use ONS data i.e. a code library? This could be for smaller surveys at first then work up to larger surveys like LFS?**

A – There is no wider policy about sharing code at the ONS.

The ONS Labour Market team can supply code for tables on request, but can’t answer large numbers of queries about this.

**Q – Could code be shared in the documentation on the UK Data Service website with the data? Could we have the code for LFS derived variables, or key derived variables? Or to produce tables?**

A – There are flow-charts for derived variables available as part of the published user guides on the ONS website. ONS will consider providing the code for derived variables if this is deemed practical.

It is not straightforward to provide code for tables as ONS use a data warehouse approach so the code for some table may not be easy to provide.

**Q – Can we have a contact at the ONS to share code or ask questions about the questionnaire etc?**

A – For code about tables, contact: [labour.market@ons.gov.uk](mailto:labour.market@ons.gov.uk).