

YouGov: Social and Government research

There is a greater demand for social research in an uncertain time

The world has changed rapidly in 2020 as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and there is much for social researchers to investigate and explore with global populations. Whether it is gathering insights to support emotional and physical wellbeing, data to understand emerging and intensified social inequalities or exploring changes in lifestyles. All require robust social research, driven by the best quantitative statistics and supported by rich qualitative data that gives in-depth insights into the different types of social change.

As a global public opinion organisation, YouGov is privileged that so many people around the world share their views and behaviours with us every day. At this time we're putting that full focus on gathering [information about COVID-19](#), asking people to [share their experiences](#) of the global pandemic and using that unique insight to [provide health organisations with data](#) that helps them understand and fight the spread of the virus.

Social survey data is being collected online to mirror how lives are lived

Due to social distancing restrictions implemented in most countries around the world, face-to-face research is nearly impossible. These times of social distancing and increased social isolation can leave social researchers finding that society itself has moved to somewhere beyond the reach of traditional research methods.

Online research is common place in market research and it is now an equally viable option for social research in most cases. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic there had been a shift from when face-to-face interviewing was the obvious data-collection mode for academic and government-funded social surveys.

One of the most prominent examples of this shift in approaches being the strategy adopted by Office for National Statistics (ONS) and driven through their Data Collection Transformation Programme (DCTP) which identifies the following as a workstrand:

'Moving survey data collection online, changing existing processes so that survey data is predominantly collected using online methods rather than existing use of paper, telephone and face-to-face interviews; non-online methods would only be used where there is an exceptional reason to do so¹.'

There is a commitment to conduct the 2021 Census online. Life has been consistently moving online. The vast majority of people communicate, shop, work and learn online. The digitisation of many parts of everyday life and that same digitisation of social research, that can understand how lives are lived, is a rapidly progressing concept.

A move to online research provides an opportunity to reassess traditional design

Collecting market and social research through an online mode is different to the traditional modes of data collection.

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<https://www.ons.gov.uk/aboutus/whatwedo/programmesandprojects/datacollectiontransformationprogrammedctp>

One of the impacts of decades-long use of face-to-face interviewers to collect survey data has been the development of questionnaires that rely on interviewers to motivate and help respondents to produce full and accurate answers.

Moving to greater use of online surveys can allow researchers and policy makers to reevaluate how to collect data and explore what the role is for major social surveys alongside integration with other administrative data sources. Through online research methods the future of social research can be:

1. Shorter
2. Simpler
3. Respondent centric
4. Questions optimized for mode

Online research is now a mature mode of data collection and one which YouGov has evolved. During the past two decades, we have focused on developing our smarter alternatives to traditional market and social research techniques by improving the connectedness and functionality of our data collection techniques.

Representativeness of online samples that can go beyond standard demographics.

Achieving representative samples is broadly akin to stirring the soup. A non-scientific survey is like an unstirred vat of soup. A chef could drink a large amount from the top of the vat, and still obtain a misleading view if some of the ingredients have sunk to the bottom.

Just as the trick in checking soup is to stir well, rather than to drink lots, so the essence of a scientific poll is to secure a representative sample, rather than a vast one. To get the right mix of people in your sample you need to have access to a very large pool of people that cover all the different types of people in society (or your population of interest).

YouGov has a UK panel of over 1,800,000 British adults who have signed up to undertake research. These people cover a wide range of ages, gender, social grade, ethnicity and tenure. Our panel is large enough to enable us to select nationally representative samples that reflect the actual breakdown of the population on the key demographics of age, gender, region, social grade and ethnicity.

The YouGov panel contains an extensive store of contextual information: age (from date of birth – allowing for full year of age and any age bracket to be created); gender; ethnicity; sexuality; religion; housing tenure; working status; household income; personal income; social grade; educational attainment; terminal age of education; marital status; household size; children in household; region – geo-coded from postcode through the Postcode Address File so we have all PAF geography coded information including – parliamentary constituency, urban / rural classification, local education authority, local authority etc.; Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD – decile, quintile); ACORN and MOSAIC.

But the YouGov online panel sample frame goes beyond those ‘standard’ demographics to provide access to a whole wealth of other socio-economic and lifestyle variables that can be used to profile people and devise representative samples. The data held in our single connected panel dataset would allow us to identify people with very low internet use or those with access to more basic mobile phones as a way of creatively devising samples that cover the full spectrum of our communities.

Social research at YouGov

The YouGov approach to market and social research is a globally renowned source of public and consumer opinion. We work with many of the world's largest brands and public sector organisations to deliver robust and insightful data. Utilising advanced techniques and the power of the internet to reach over people all the world.

Reverting back to the current Covid-19 pandemic, social research is relevant to so many aspects of the current crisis. There is a clear mandate that policymakers and social researchers can have access to communities to understand how people have and will be affected. YouGov can confidently provide that access.

Below are three examples of major social research studies undertaken using the YouGov approach to social research:

Estimating the social value of the Post Office Network

YouGov was commissioned by BIS to run a project exploring how consumers and SMEs value the Post Office network and to place an economic value on the social contribution of the network.

The project included a literature review, eight face to face focus groups with a diverse of urban and rural consumers, those with disabilities and with lower incomes, four online focus groups with sole traders and SMEs and 12 in-depth interviews with sub-postmasters. The quantitative phase was a multi-modal approach, formed of a 5,000 person online survey, a 250 person parallel face to face survey with the offline population, a 750 person online survey with sole traders and SMEs. The survey explored usage and non-usage, the market context and a series of *choice based experiments to derive valuations* across categories of service provided.

Due to the SGEI commitments and the nature of the Post Office customer base it was essential that vulnerable consumers were included. This came through firstly in the design of the qualitative phase with 8 face to face focus groups that engaged with a diverse audience. Secondly our approach to quantitative sampling is informed by many of the same sensitivities. Key demographic factors are: income (less than £15,000 p.a); age (over state pension age); urban / rural classification; and deprivation. Having all of these variables in place means that we can sample for a representative survey according to these most important demographics and with a total sample size of 5,000 our sub-group analysis and valuations are strong.

To further ensure the inclusion of vulnerable consumers we created a parallel version of the survey to be administered face to face to those with low or no internet usage. Analysis of this survey of 250 people serves as a check against which we can measure the main survey for significant differences – given a common age and socio-demographic profile.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-office-network-social-value>

Legal Needs of Individuals

On behalf of the Legal Services Board and The Law Society YouGov was commissioned to deliver the Legal Needs of Individuals survey in 2019. Legal needs surveys track how individuals respond when faced with a problem that can be resolved using a legal process. Informing civil justice policies require robust evidence from an individual's perception.

The project was the largest ever study of legal need in England and Wales and delivered an online survey of 28,000 individuals across England and Wales, drawn from the YouGov panel. The sample provided coverage across 32 different areas of 'legal need' (some with incidence levels in the general population of 1%) as well as across a vast array of demographics. In total c.2,400 18-24 year olds, c.2,100 75+ year olds, c.6,600 people with low education levels, c.2,600 BAME, c.9,100 disabled people and c.14,000 people with a household income of less than £32,000 took part in the research study.

The survey was a complex social study that involved multiple routes through the survey dependent on previous experiences. The modular approach was developed with leading academics in the legal needs field and is the first survey of its type to be completed in line with OECD guidance on legal needs surveys.

The insights were analysed in a summary and detailed report that provides an understanding of what issues people face and why they behave as they do when faced with a legal issue.

<https://www.legalservicesboard.org.uk/news/largest-ever-legal-needs-survey-in-england-and-wales>

British Election Study

This is an ongoing study funded by ESRC that YouGov executes in partnership with the University of Manchester and University of Oxford, examining long-term trends in British voting behaviour, political preferences and values; exploring engagement in political activity and examining consequences of election.

The British Election Study is one of the most prestigious public opinion studies in the UK and dating back to 1964 is longest running social science survey in the country. The data collected as part of the study is available publicly, providing a rich data source for universities and the public alike. The data is cited in hundreds of academic papers each year and is a vital resource in understanding electoral behaviour in the UK.

YouGov is in the process of completing the twentieth wave of the 2014-2023 element of the long running study using our online panel. The project is a panel study where the same respondents are re-contacted each wave to allow monitoring of individual level change. We survey 30,000 British adults each wave, making it one of the largest public opinion studies. Due to the care and attention YouGov gives to its panellists, we are able to achieve a wave-on-wave retention rate of over 80% for this study, while still maintaining a representative sample of adults living in Britain, both nationally and politically. The size of our panel means we can reach sufficient numbers of harder to reach groups, despite the large overall sample size.

Our in-house survey design system is suitable for the complex questionnaire design which allows for political experiments including split samples and conjoint analysis, as well as dividing respondents in the current waves by groups created in previous waves.

Due to the volatility of British politics over the last decade, we have had to respond to changes in timings and requirements with very little notice, including responding to two snap elections and an EU referendum campaign. Most recently, we conducted a three-wave general election element in November/December 2019 that was originally scheduled for 2022. This involved designing, implementing and collecting over 90,000 responses across three 25 minute surveys with a lead in time of just four weeks.

All publically released data from the British Election Study is found here:

<https://www.britishelectionstudy.com/>