

HM Courts Service (HMCS) User Survey

Technical note on publication of 2007/08 results

Year 1 (2006/07) results from the HMCS User Survey were published in November 2007. A technical report, summarising key aspects of the survey design, was published alongside these results, and is available here:

www.justice.gov.uk/docs/technical-report-survey-design-year1.pdf

The survey was designed to cover a three-year fieldwork programme and therefore most of the survey design information it contains remains relevant to the operation of the survey during year 2 (2007/08).

However, certain design changes have been made which affect the composition of the survey sample for the year 2 (2007/08) and year 3 (2008/09) fieldwork periods. It also discusses the implications for comparing results from year 1 with those from these later years.

Changes to sample composition

The original intended distribution of interview days across the three years of the survey was as follows:

Year 1 – 400 days

Year 2 – 715 days

Year 3 – 715 days

A key factor in the original sample design was the survey's ability to produce robust results at HMCS area level on an annual basis. However, while it was generally recognised that the sample size would be inadequate to produce robust results for any areas smaller than this, there remained a considerable appetite within HMCS for results at court level.

The survey team therefore undertook to assess options for the production of court level results of some sort during year 2 of the survey's operation, and resources were set aside for this purpose. Various approaches were considered, including the operation of a paper-based 'handout' survey which would be analysed centrally but administered locally by court staff.

However, it was decided that the most effective use of the available resource would be an expansion of the main exit survey. This would be carried out via a targeted allocation of extra interview days to enable the production of court-level data for as many court sites as possible. There were 155 additional days available for this purpose in both year 2 and year 3 of the survey, increasing the total number of interviewing days to 870 in each of these years. While it would not be possible to cover all court sites in this way, this approach has the major advantage of imposing no substantive burden on any court staff. Furthermore, it ensures that all court-level results are on a consistent basis, fully comparable with (and indeed integrated as part of) the main national exit survey.

Following discussion, it was decided that a threshold of 50 interviews in a given survey year would be sufficient to produce court-level results. Such results would obviously have wide margins of error (90% confidence intervals of +/- 10 percentage points) but would allow court managers to benchmark their own sites against area, region and national-level norms on an indicative basis.

Known interviewing rates suggested that 50 interviews would normally be achieved in the large majority of courts which received 4 or more interview day visits in a year. The available extra interviewer days were therefore allocated to maximise the number of courts which reached this threshold of 4 interviewer days. Upon completion of this process, there were around 135 courts that met the required threshold in both year 2 and year 3 of the survey's operation.

Typically, these were HMCS's largest and busiest courts. While they only account for just under 25% of the number of operating HMCS court sites, they account for more than 45% of its court rooms and (although cross-jurisdictional workload measures are imprecise) are believed to account for a majority of HMCS's overall workload.

The courts that received the extra allocation, and therefore increased their proportionate representation in the survey sample, tended to be medium to large courts. These would have received 2 or 3 interviewer days per year under the original sample allocation, and would therefore only require a small boost to reach the 4-day threshold set for the production of court level data. The smaller courts (which would have received 0 or 1 interviewer days under the original allocation) were typically not included in this 'boosting' process, and nor were the very largest courts which would have met or exceeded the 4-day threshold under their original sample allocation, without any boost being required.

Implications of the change for year-on-year comparisons

This process has altered the composition of courts, and therefore of court users, within the year 2 and year 3 samples in comparison to year 1. By increasing the interviewer days allocated to larger courts, the representation of smaller courts (and their users) within the sample has been proportionately reduced. A consequence of this change is that the proportion of Crown Court users increased, and the proportion of Magistrates' court users decreased (on a self-reported basis), from the year 1 to the year 2 sample.

The magnitude of the shift is small, but not negligible, and is summarised in the following table.

HMCS user survey

Answers to question "What type of court did you attend today?"

	Year 1 - 2006/07		Year 2 - 2007/08		Overall satisfaction* in 2006/07
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	
Civil	922	18%	2,220	19%	87%
Family	713	14%	1,493	13%	85%
Crown	847	17%	2,439	21%	82%
Magistrates	2,006	39%	3,980	35%	73%
Civil appeal	24	0%	42	0%	88%
Criminal appeal	31	1%	71	1%	90%
Administrative Court	36	1%	27	0%	89%
Probate	41	1%	52	0%	83%
Other	384	7%	689	6%	86%
Don't know	64	1%	383	3%	80%
Not stated	53	1%	123	1%	77%
Total	5,121		11,519		80%

* - % "very" or "fairly" satisfied with service received overall

This table includes overall satisfaction estimates for the 2006/07 survey as a means of illustrating the likely effect of the change on year-to-year comparisons of results.

Overall user satisfaction during 2006/07 was estimated at 80% (actually **80.1%** before rounding), rising in 2007/08 to an estimated 83% (actually **83.1%** before rounding). The year-on-year difference in estimates is therefore **3.0 percentage points**.

If the **Year 1** satisfaction results by court type (shown in the above table) had been repeated identically on the **Year 2** sample, the overall satisfaction percentage would have risen from **80.1%** to **80.5%**. This implies that **0.4 percentage points** of the **3.0 percentage points** annual difference can be accounted for by the change in the allocation method and the resulting change in the sample composition in respect of court type.

We can therefore conclude that the remaining **2.6 percentage points** of difference is a result of other factors. There may be other issues of sample composition also having an effect here, but the increase in overall satisfaction is visible across all key court types and user groups (see main report) and therefore does appear to be genuine.

The effects of the change in sample composition, while apparently small, should nonetheless still be borne in mind when making year-to-year comparisons of the survey results.