



social research UPDATE

- Social survey researchers can now look to the Internet for a wide range of resources, but they are widely spread and often hidden in organisations' web sites, making it difficult to realise the full potential of the Internet as a tool in survey research.
- Three types of resource, social survey organisation websites, data providers, and general reference resources are outlined.
- The CASS Question Bank is described in detail to show the ways in which a web site can be developed to fit survey researchers' needs.

Online Resources for Social Survey Researchers

Julie Lamb

Britain's longitudinal and cross-sectional surveys represent some of the most sophisticated data resources available to social scientists anywhere in the world. (Marshall, 2001)

There are many resources available for researchers wishing to use survey data in the UK. However, locating them can be difficult. Both survey professionals and academics have to look hard to find new information on survey developments. This *Update* introduces some of the key professional organisations and explains the resources they provide for free online.

Survey organisations usually offer an overview of their work on their web sites, which is useful in the initial stages of a research project. Researchers can also use the Internet to obtain data sets, view technical reports and user documentation for the majority of United Kingdom social surveys, and read annual reports, all without leaving their desks.

The first section of this *Update* describes the key survey organisations and what their web sites offer. The second introduces some sites that provide data and the final section examines in more depth the Question Bank, a resource developed specifically for researchers.

Finding a Survey

A wide range of survey organisations exist in the UK (see Bulmer and Sykes 1998). Table 1 lists some of the large scale, policy relevant surveys they run.

The **Office for National Statistics** (ONS) conducts a wide range of UK social surveys. Their web site offers a number of datasets that are of use to survey researchers including key data from the 2001 Census and the Neighbourhood Statistics for local area data on, for example, health and crime.

All survey work in the ONS is arranged around a number of themes, for instance, Health, and Crime and Justice. The web pages of the former Social Surveys Division provide details of each of the surveys that are conducted on each theme with brief details of the methods used, recent developments and a contact address. Often the latest report from a particular survey is available to download. The ONS are currently (Autumn 2003) being reviewed and restructured, and soon much more information will be available to researchers from the web site, including meta-data from all major social surveys, technical details of the surveys and all the annual reports.

The ONS website also provides access to a large database of statistics from recent published reports such as *Social Trends*, *Regional Trends* and *Population Trends*. There are many search options available and results can be found using key words, data sets, themes and so on. Statistics on key variables such as age and gender can also be found on the site. For example, the *Social Trends* dataset can be used to find the latest statistics on life expectancy at birth, tabulated by gender.

Julie Lamb is the Content Manager of the Question Bank, and a Research Officer in the Department of Sociology, University of Surrey. Managing the survey side of the Qb, Julie has particular experience of researching a wide range of surveys on the Internet as well as liaising with the main survey producing organisations in the UK and writing for the web. Julie is currently undertaking a part time MSc in Social Research and has a particular interest in quantitative survey methodology.

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Table 1

The **National Centre for Social Research** (often abbreviated to NatCen) carries out some of the key public sector social surveys in the UK, including the British Social Attitudes Survey and the Health Survey for England. The NatCen web site lists current and ongoing research projects, explains the main surveys and provides a contact point for each.

The **Centre for Longitudinal Studies**, based at the Institute of Education in London, has responsibility for the 1958 National Child Development Study, the 1970 Birth Cohort Study and the new Millennium Cohort Study. These are described in detail on their site. A variety of resources for each study can be found there, such as coding frames, documentation, publications related to the data and where the data can be obtained.

The **Institute of Social and Economic Research** (ISER) at the University of Essex is primarily responsible for producing and analysing UK longitudinal data. ISER works closely with the Centre for Longitudinal Studies and houses the UK Longitudinal Studies Centre, providing guidance to researchers using longitudinal data sets. ISER is responsible for the British Household Panel Survey, and details about the survey including the latest codebooks can be downloaded from their site.

Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales

Although the surveys already mentioned generally include the whole of the UK, there are also surveys carried out specifically for these regions. Further information can be obtained from the Northern Ireland Statistics Research Agency, the Scottish Executive Social Research department and the Welsh Assembly (Research and Evaluation Division).

Other key survey resources

The organisations noted above are the main survey providers in the UK, but there are many more surveys being carried out around the country. Organisations involved in market research and their web addresses

Office for National Statistics [ONS]	http://www.statistics.gov.uk
Adult and Children's Dental Health Surveys	
European Adult Literacy Review Survey	
Expenditure and Food Survey	
Family Resources Survey ¹	
General Household Survey	
Health and Wellbeing Surveys	
International Passenger Survey	
Labour Force Survey	
National Diet and Nutrition Surveys	
ONS Omnibus Survey	
Survey of People, Families and Communities	
Survey of Student Achievement	
National Centre for Social Research [NatCen]	http://www.natcen.ac.uk
British Social Attitudes Survey	
European Social Survey	
Family Resources Survey ¹	
Health Survey for England ²	
National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles	
Scottish Health Survey ³	
Survey of English Housing ⁴	
Youth Cohort Studies	
Centre for Longitudinal Studies	http://www.cls.ioe.ac.uk
British Cohort Study 1970	
Millennium Cohort Study	
National Child Development Study 1958 Cohort	
Institute for Social and Economic Research [ISER]	http://www.iser.essex.ac.uk
British Household Panel Survey	
Scottish Executive Central Survey Unit	http://www.scotland.gov.uk/csu
Scottish Health Survey	
Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency	http://www.nisra.gov.uk
Continuous Household Survey	
NI Health and Social Wellbeing Surveys	
Welsh Assembly	http://www.wales.gov.uk
Welsh Health Survey	

¹ Commissioned and managed by Department for Work and Pensions

² Commissioned by the Department for Health

³ Commissioned by the Scottish Executive

⁴ Commissioned by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister

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are listed at the end of this article.

International Links

The UK takes part in a range of International and European surveys. Researchers interested in looking at cross-national research may find the following resources helpful:

- European Social Survey:
<http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org>.
- Eurobarometer:
http://www.gesis.org/en/data_service/eurobarometer/
- International Social Survey Programme:
<http://www.issp.org>

Finding and using data

Data sets from all of the surveys mentioned above (plus many more) can be obtained through one source, the Economic and Social Data Service [ESDS], and its data provider, the UK Data Archive.

The ESDS <http://www.esds.ac.uk> is divided into four sections:

- *ESDS Government* arranges events and training days for researchers involved with Government surveys and provides a User Guide for any researcher interested in labour market data sources;
- *ESDS Longitudinal* supports researchers wishing to use longitudinal data sets;
- *ESDS International* houses and supports international data sets; and
- *ESDS Qualidata* provides qualitative data.

The Data Archive (DA) <http://www.data-archive.ac.uk> provides data from surveys free of charge if the researcher is affiliated to an academic institution and the data is for personal research use. The free NESSTAR software allows researchers to view data and do basic data analysis online. Users who are registered with the DA can browse, analyse or visualize data (for example, produce graphs and pie charts) and download data (including subsets) in a number of formats (including SPSS, STATA and SAS).

The DA also has descriptions of all major social surveys and the publications that have arisen from them, all of which can be downloaded for free without registration.

The CASS Question Bank

The Question Bank (Qb) web site was set up in 1996 as a part of the ESRC funded Centre for Applied Social Surveys (CASS). CASS provides two main facilities, a programme of short courses and the Question Bank. CASS aims to strengthen skills in survey design, data collection and analysis within the UK social science and social research communities. Further information about its short course programme can be found on the CASS web pages:

<http://socstats.soton.ac.uk/cass>.

The Question Bank is a free online resource which helps users:

- find and view questionnaire facsimiles from the main large scale UK social surveys;
- view technical material about questionnaires;
- view commentary on social measurement in specific topics; and
- find other survey measurement centres, books and resources quickly through resource links.

The Qb site has three main areas, Surveys, Topics and Resources, each with a main menu pointing to more detailed resource pages.

The Surveys main menu lists, in alphabetical order, all of the surveys on the site, <http://qb.soc.surrey.ac.uk/docs/surveys>. Users can see at a glance whether a survey is continuous, annual or ad hoc and whether it covers the whole of the UK or only Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. The dates of the questionnaires held for each survey are also on the main menu. Each survey page has a short overview of its history and methods, basic information about the survey and links to the originating organisation. This page also shows where to find the data and a 'Resource Map' of all the key links for the survey.

The questionnaires are divided into several PDF files for fast downloading. This makes it easier to search and navigate through the questionnaire. Adobe Acrobat Reader is all that is required to view the files. Questionnaires are also bookmarked for

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Contributions to social research UPDATE that review current issues in social research and methodology in about 2,500 words are welcome. All UPDATE articles are peer-reviewed.

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easy navigation throughout the whole document.

The Topics menu lists the 21 social science topic areas for which the Qb holds information <http://qb.soc.surrey.ac.uk/docs/topics>. The topics area contains commentary specially written by leading experts in the field. There are also chapters which discuss social measurement. The Qb holds extensive links to other web resources and a bibliography for further reading, organised by topic area.

The Resources Menu is arranged to help find links such as those to the Office for National Statistics Harmonisation Initiative and information about Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing.

Since its creation in 1996, the Qb has grown into a very large resource, currently holding over 28,000 pages of documentation. There are three main search strategies for finding material starting from its home page:

1. Surveys Menu – if you know which questionnaire or survey you are looking for.
2. Topics Menu – if you have a specific theme of interest.
3. APR/Smartlogick™ search engine – this search engine indexes all pages on the site allowing users to find information and questions on a specific topic or search using keywords.

Summary

There are a wide range of quality social surveys available to social researchers that are currently under-utilised due to a lack of information about them. Through the

Useful web links

Social Survey Resources

Department for Health

<http://www.doh.gov.uk>

Home Office

<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk>

British Election Survey

<http://www.essex.ac.uk/bes/>

Market Research Resources

British Market Research Bureau [BMRB]

<http://www.bmr.co.uk>

Market and Opinion Research Intl. [MORI]

<http://www.mori.com>

National Opinion Polls

<http://www.nop.co.uk>

Other Useful Research Resources

Resource Guide for the Social Sciences

<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/subject/socsci>

Economic and Social Research Council

<http://www.esrc.ac.uk>

Internet, researchers have the opportunity to find out about the survey material that is available in the UK, and download data sets to use in their own research.

As time goes on, more and more new material is being put on the web, making the researcher's task easier, faster and more cost effective, a move away from the old system of having to go to the library to find printed reports. Although this move to the web ensures that the most up-to date materials are available, they are still often hard to find, hidden within web sites with few links to other surveys in the area.

The Question Bank can point researchers in the right direction.

References

Bulmer, M, Sykes, W. and Moorhouse, J. (Editors) (1998) *Directory of Social Research Organisations in the United Kingdom*. London: Mansell.

Marshall, G. (2001) 'Addressing a Problem of Research Capacity'. *Social Sciences*, January 2001, Economic and Social Research Council.

DeVaus, D. (2002) *Surveys in Social Research* 5th Edition. London: Routledge.

This text contains a number of 'web pointers' to survey resources on the Internet.

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