

Address-Based Online Surveying

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ABOS stands for address-based online surveying, a method developed by Kantar that allows online surveying of a random sample of the general public instead of a panel of people who like completing questionnaires.

In this way, we overcome the principal barrier to online social research – unrepresentative samples – while retaining many of the measurement, speed and cost advantages over interview-based alternatives.



Data from a random sample of the population, not a self-selected panel

We draw random address samples from the same database we use for the ONS Crime Survey of England & Wales. Random samples have multiple advantages over samples drawn from panels:

Every eligible person in the country has a chance of being asked to take part. Unlike with a panel, the sample is not restricted to the same relatively small set of people familiar with - and keen to do - online surveys. Consequently, the risk of sample bias is much lower.

Quoted margins of error have a much stronger theoretical basis if the sample is drawn from the full population using random methods than if it is drawn from a self-selecting panel.

Panel members take part in lots of surveys, making them familiar with the format but also keen to take short-cuts. They tend to be less attentive than random sample respondents for whom the experience is more novel. Panel 'conditioning' is not a risk with such random samples.



In focus:

The DCMS Community Life Survey

The DCMS Community Life Survey utilises the ABOS method to collect official statistics on levels of community cohesion and engagement.

The core design is simple: a stratified random sample of addresses is drawn from the Royal Mail's postcode address file and an invitation letter is sent to 'the residents' of each one, containing four usernames and passwords plus the URL of the survey website. Every individual aged 16+ who is resident in the sampled household can log on using this information and complete the survey as they might any other online survey. Once the questionnaire is complete, the specific username and password cannot be used again, ensuring data confidentiality from others with access to this information.

Paper questionnaires are used as a supplementary mode of data collection for those who are offline or otherwise unwilling to complete the questionnaire online. Two reminders are sent to each address and a £10 shopping voucher is given to all who take part.

As noted above, the sample of addresses is stratified, and – for the Community Life Survey – different sampling fractions are used in each stratum. The strata are defined with respect to their local ethnic mix so varying the sampling fractions between strata allows some control over the ethnic profile of the sample.

The (design-weighted) estimated response rate for the 2017-18 survey was 20%. Although this is lower than can be achieved using an interview-based design, we have strong evidence that the non-response bias is not appreciably greater.

The gateway for more information about the Community Life Survey can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/community-life-survey--2>



● ABOS reaches the offline ten percent

One in ten of the UK population does not use the internet, and this can be as high as one in two of those aged 75+. With ABOS, we can offer an offline alternative to the online survey.

This is usually a paper version of the questionnaire, but we can also offer a parallel telephone or face-to-face interview survey of the offline population if preferred. Kantar's expertise in all data collection methods means we can construct a truly bespoke design for you.



No location, scale or major timing constraints

ABOS studies can be of almost any scale because they are not limited by the commercially-determined parameters of a managed panel or, alternatively, by interviewer location and headcount.

They can also be as local as you need; we have carried out ABOS studies of people living in the streets around Liverpool's Anfield stadium as well as specific postcodes in London, Halifax, Leeds, Bradford, Plymouth, Luton and other towns and cities. No online panel can do the same.

ABOS fieldwork takes four to eight weeks, depending on design specification but irrespective of location or scale. Although other methods can give you a quicker turnaround than ABOS, none can give you this with equivalent sample quality and tailored design.



Greater respondent honesty compared to interview surveys

Interviewers still collect the data for most random sample surveys. However, several recent academic studies have demonstrated that interviewers affect the data they collect, either through their own idiosyncrasies or through subtle presentational choices on the part of their respondents.

ABOS studies do not suffer from this effect, and will tend to provide more honest data, especially if the topic is sensitive. Kantar's work to integrate online data collection into several complex longitudinal studies has given us critical knowledge about how to retain the benefits of clarification and reassurance that interviewers provide to their respondents.



Fewer barriers to participation

Our ABOS studies benefit from Kantar's global programme of user-centric design which ensures the questionnaire presentation is modern, and suitable for all devices and operating systems.

If you need it, we can offer versions of the questionnaire in different languages and can also implement technical adaptations for those with limited visual or motor functions.

A benchmark for other online studies

ABOS uses random sampling methods, so the data it produces is more likely to be accurate than equivalent data from an online panel survey. However, the speed and cost advantages of an online panel survey will sometimes make it the most suitable option despite quality concerns.

One way to enhance the quality of an online panel 'tracker' survey is to commission a parallel ABOS study to benchmark the results.

The alternative - benchmarking to an interview survey - has a technical drawback: the same people may answer the same questions differently online than they would in an interview.

Benchmarking to a higher quality study that uses the same data collection mode is a much safer option than benchmarking to a study that uses a different mode. In this respect, ABOS provides the perfect 'sense-check' for a time series drawn from online panel survey data.

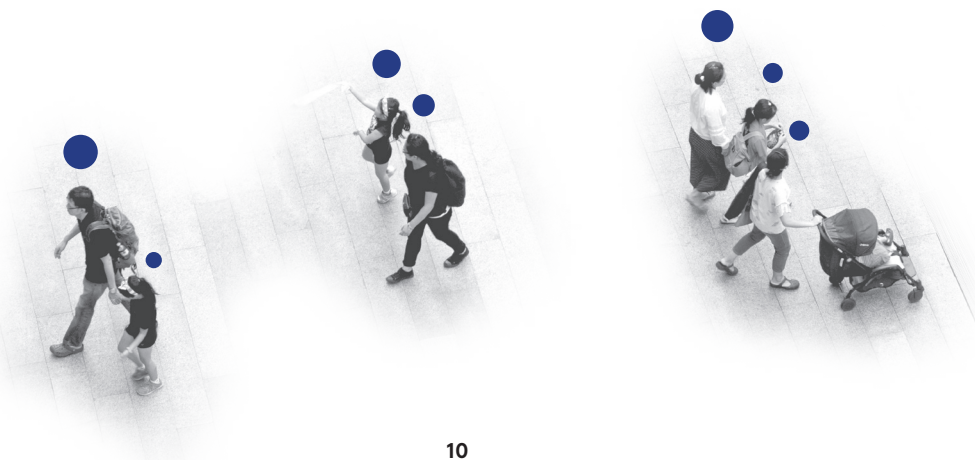


A tailored method trusted by our clients

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), Sport England, the Financial Conduct Authority, HMRC, and the BBC are all using ABOS for important time series studies.

In each case, we designed a transition phase as the study switched from its prior method to ABOS. For the DCMS Community Life Survey we carried out a three-year multiple-stranded development study to provide a bedrock of methodological evidence for this source of official statistics.

Each of these designs benefited from the others, allowing us to iteratively improve the general ABOS design as well as to tailor specific elements for each client. We can do the same for you.



Find out more

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For a thorough introduction to ABOS methods, please visit <http://the-sra.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/social-research-practice-journal-issue-03-winter-2017.pdf>