

# RESPONSE TRENDS IN EUROPE (\*)

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## 1. Introduction to the Nonresponse problem

Nonresponse is a severe problem in social statistics for many statistical offices. It makes survey estimates questionable, because of a potential and not measurable bias. It is widely heard that nonresponse rates are increasing. People are said to become more reluctant to cooperate and be more often not at home.

Although there is a lot of literature about the nonresponse problem and nonresponse causes, it seems to be very difficult to find a clear picture of response trends in different countries.

In section 2 it will be explained which definitions can be used for response and nonresponse. A number of factors can influence the response results. In section 3 these factors will be described. Response trends for surveys of statistical organizations in nine European countries will be described in section 4 and after some conclusions with respect to these trends the need of a systematic way of data-gathering will be argued in section 5.

## 2. Definition of Response/Nonresponse

As formulated by Groves (1989, p. 133), nonresponse is "the failure to obtain complete measurement on the survey sample". Using this as a definition, nonresponse can be divided into unit and item nonresponse, dependent on whether a complete record of the unit is missing or only some item(s). Also when a major part of the record is missing or when the quality of the information appears to be insufficient, one may turn such a unit into nonresponse.

Response rates have the form  $r/(r+nr)$ , with  $r$  the number of unit respondents and  $nr$  the number of nonrespondents. However, as a general formula it is an over-simplification. For sample units not visited, it is often unknown whether they are eligible (belonging to the population of interest) or overcoverage. As a consequence, the denominator may be unknown and has then to be estimated somehow. The situation is even more complex if a response rate is required at a level different from the sample unit. Formulae for response rates can be extended to include differential levels and parameters to be estimated (De Heer et al., 1990). Besides, response rates

should actually take account of possibly different probabilities of inclusion of the sample or observational units, using appropriate weights.

Unit nonresponse, to which we will restrict ourselves in this paper, can be partitioned into several components. Lievesley (1990), for instance, gives a classification into fieldwork shortfalls, sample members non-contacted, sample members unwilling to participate (refusal) and sample members unable to participate. Each class can be partitioned into subclasses, in order to have a finer classification of possible reasons for nonresponse. Although a strict distinction between the reasons is not always possible to give, one should explain which components are included for each nonresponse figure published.

The figures presented in this paper are crude, unweighted and, in view of the different factors influencing the response rate as described in section 3 of this paper, not very detailed. The figures only represent the response at the sample unit level. Sample units (addresses, households) not contacted are counted as nonresponse, although it is not known if all non-contacted sample units belong to the target population (e.g. in case of overcoverage).

## 3 Factors influencing Response/Nonresponse

Response rates presented in the international literature are mostly not so well described as to make it possible to compare these figures with others. For the comparison of response results it is necessary to have well-defined figures on nonresponse and the specific reasons why people do not respond. In order to be able to interpret differences in response rates it is also necessary to have the access to various aspects of the survey that might have influenced the response rate. Two kinds of response affecting factors will be described in this section: design factors and factors related to the interview organization and interviewers. Factors concerning the people, the (potential) respondents themselves and factors with respect to social, economical and cultural climate are not included in this paper.

### 3.1 Design factors

Design factors can be divided into sample design factors and survey design factors.

### Target population

The definition of the target population can be broad or specific. Some subgroups might be excluded. The target population might have a special relation to the subject of the survey.

### Selection of the sample or observational unit

The rules for selection of the observational or sample unit might influence response rates. It might be a quite different situation if all members of a household have to be interviewed or if only one or two members should take part and proxies are allowed.

### Subject matter

The subject matter of the survey can affect the response rate, sometimes in combination with a more specific definition of the target population. The more people are interested in the subject the more they will participate.

### Survey method

It may be more difficult to get a good response result for a panel survey than for a cross sectional survey, because participation in a panel survey can result in a higher respondent burden.

### Techniques of data collection

Telephone or mail surveys might be less threatening as face-to-face surveys, because people are not asked to admit interviewers into their homes. A telephone survey might have a better response rate than a mail survey, because respondents are personally approached by the interviewer.

### Data collection method

The choice of the data collection techniques is often related to the data collection method. The design of the questionnaire, its length and the number of documents needed determine more or less which techniques can be used. These have important implications on the respondent burden.

### Data collection period

The choice and the length of the period within which the interviewers have to do their work has its impact on the contactability of potential respondents and the workload of the interviewers.

## **3.2 Factors related to the Organization and the Interviewers**

### Characteristics of the interviewers and the interviewer staff

Characteristics of the interviewers and the interviewer staff can have some effect on

response results. It is said for example that middle-aged women are more successful than men and younger women in gaining survey participation.

### Selection and Training of Interviewers

If it is possible to recruit the best interviewers on the basis of certain criteria the response result will gain from this. Also the number of training hours and the way interviewers have been trained can affect the response result.

### Local or regional support

Local or regional fieldwork managers to support interviewers can also be very stimulating, because they can help the interviewers in difficult situations as they are also acquainted with the very specific local or regional situation as a result of their own experience.

### Quality controls, feed back, evaluations

In general, interviewers want to know how their work and their results are evaluated by the interview organization. They want to know how their work can be improved and they are open to advice. If interviewers never hear how their work is judged they will be more easily satisfied with the results they have got.

### Experience

It will be clear that an experienced interviewer will have better response results than unexperienced ones, because they know better how to act in different situations.

### Interviewer turnover rate

In connection with this aspect of experience, the interviewer turnover rate (fraction of interviewers that have been replaced by new ones) can give some indication of the experience of a interview organization. It can also give some indication whether or not the interviewers are happy to work for this organization or of their performance.

### Workload

If the workload is too heavy this might affect the performance of the interviewers. The response rate and the nonresponse bias can be affected negatively if interviewers leave difficult or far away addresses or neighbourhoods for last so that there is hardly any time left.

### Interview time

Related with the workload indicated by the number of addresses or sample units that have to be visited is the (average) time that is needed to carry out an interview.

#### Payment rates

A heavy workload and bad payment will not stimulate interviewers to get the best results. Not only the rates that are paid to the interviewers but also the rates system an interview organization uses can affect the response rate.

#### Contracts

Also the way interviewers have been contracted can influence the performance of the interview organization. Higher demands can be made upon fully employed interviewers than upon free-lance interviewers.

#### Incentives

Response results can also depend on the awards an interview organization is willing to give to the respondents. Using incentives, like presents, is a very obvious example in this field.

#### Advance letters

The use of advance letters may help the interviewers to convince people to participate. Advance letters sent on behalf of a governmental agency can give interviewers self-confidence and explain to the potential respondent that the survey is really an important matter.

#### Number of contacts

Related to the length of the data-collection period mentioned above is the number of contacts an interviewer is able to carry out trying to approach potential respondents.

#### Re-issuance

Some interviewers may not be very successful in convincing people to participate. If refusal rates are high, interviewers especially skilled in persuading people, can be asked to make a second attempt in trying to convert these refusers into respondents.

#### Public relations activities

The way people think about the interview organization might be a very important factor with respect to their decision whether or not to participate. If the public in general knows about the official task of the interview organization this can make it easier for interviewers to convince people to participate.

#### Mandatory - voluntary surveys

If the participation in surveys is mandatory on the basis of legislation this would of course lead to higher response rates. It is not only important

whether or not participation is mandatory or voluntary, but sometimes it seems to be more important how people conceive this.

## **4 Response trends in European Countries**

### **4.1 Belgium**

The National Institute for Statistics (NIS) in Belgium has two major social surveys:

- Family Expenditure Survey and (tabel 1)
- Labour Force Survey (tabel 2).

The Family Expenditure Survey (FES) is carried out with an interval of several years. The response at the start of the survey was very low: 19% in 1973 and 17% in 1987. In 1978 the initial response doubled. An explanation for this could not be found. The very low response rate of the FES in Belgium might have been caused by the very high respondent burden. Every household that participates has to report all expenses and income every month, during a whole year, in a diary. The incentive for the respondent does not seem to balance the respondent burden. The fieldwork was carried out by civil servants of the ministry of Economic Affairs during their own free-time and they were paid per interview/visit. In 1973/74 a participating household was visited every two weeks, in 1978/79 every month and in 1987/88 only three times a year. Nevertheless these changes of the support for the household apparently did not affect the drop-out rate, which was about 33% for all three FES's.

The Labour Survey (LFS) is held every year. As for the FES the fieldwork for LFS is carried out by civil servants. The LFS is in Belgium a mandatory survey. This is mentioned in the advance letter, which is sent to all sampled households. But there are no sanctions against households that refuse to participate. This might explain the fact, that the response rate for the Belgian LFS is low for a mandatory survey, as compared to other countries. There seems to be no particular trend between 1983 and 1990. The NIS could not provide data on non-response causes, such as refusals and non-contacts.

### **4.2 Finland**

The Central Statistical Office of Finland has three major social surveys: Labour Force Survey (LFS), Income Distribution Survey and Household Budget Survey. Besides there are a number of surveys (Living Conditions, Time Budget, Cultural

Table 1. Response rates for the Belgian Family Expenditure Survey (%)

	1973/74	1978/79	1987/88
Willing to participate	19	36	17
Participating during the whole period	12	22	11

Table 2. Response rates for the Belgian Labour Force Survey (%)

1983	82
1984	83
1985	83
1986	81
1987	78
1988	82
1989	83
1990	83

Activities), which are not carried out as frequently as the surveys mentioned before.

The LFS started as a mail survey in 1959. The survey was totally revised in 1976, apart from the data-collection technique. In 1983 the survey was revised for a second time. The data-collection technique changed from mail into a telephone survey with a very short interview-time (on average 8 minutes). This may have caused the drastic increase of the response rate in that year. From 1983 to 1991 the response rate decreased from about 96% to 91%, mostly as a result of increasing non-contacts. The Income Distribution Survey started in 1977. The respondent burden might be heavier than for the Finnish LFS. The subject of the survey might also be an important factor as Finnish people might not be very enthusiastic to provide income-data.

For the Finnish Household Budget Survey the sample design has varied during the years. It is obvious that the response rate for the Household Budget Survey is lower than for other surveys as a consequence of the very high respondent burden. The response rates varied during the years, without any particular trend.

Table 3. Response, Nonresponse data for Household surveys in Finland (%).

Year	Resp.	Nresp.	Ref.	Ncont.	Other
<b>Labour Force (Mail, from 1983 Tel.)</b>					
1977	69.1	30.9	-	-	-
1980	75.3	24.7	-	-	-
1982	71.8	28.2	-	-	-
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1983	95.6	4.4	1.5	2.9	-
1985	93.9	6.1	1.3	4.4	0.4
1990	92.5	7.5	1.5	5.8	0.2
1991	91.3	8.7	1.7	6.6	0.4
<b>Income Distribution (from 1984 Face-to-face)</b>					
1980	86.9	13.1	-	-	-
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1984	84.8	15.2	11.6	2.8	0.7
1985	83.7	16.3	12.9	2.9	0.5
1990	80.7	19.3	16.0	2.7	0.5
1991	83.4	16.6	12.8	3.5	0.3
<b>Household Budget Survey (Face-to-face)</b>					
1966	78.6	21.4	9.0	7.8	4.6
1971	62.0	38.0	-	-	-
1976	66.9	33.1	-	-	-
1981	74.7	25.3	22.4	2.8	0.1
1985	69.6	30.4	25.2	3.3	1.9
1990	70.2	29.8	25.8	3.2	0.8

#### 4.3 France

The INSEE (Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques) has a number of ad-hoc surveys and three continuous surveys. The figures presented in table 4 indicate that refusal rates are not increasing during the eighties as written information from the INSEE has confirmed. However it seems to be much harder to contact households in especially the Paris area. The respondent burden seems to be very heavy for all ad-hoc surveys, except the Survey on Housing, because for all those surveys more than one visit was necessary in order to complete more questionnaires.

The Survey on Rent and Taxes seems to have a low respondent burden (one visit, interview-time 25 minutes) and this seems to affect the refusal rate. The very high response rate for the French Labour Force Survey might be caused by the fact that this is a mandatory survey.

Table 4. Response, Nonresponse data for Household Surveys in France (%).

Name	Year	Resp.	Ref.	Non-cont.	Item nonres
<b>Ad-hoc Surveys</b>					
Health	1980	85	5.5	5	4.5
Transportation	1982	78	9	7	6
Contacts	1983	70	6.5	5	18.5
Clothes	1984	84	10	4	2
Housing	1984	88	7	5	-
Budget	1985	69	11.5	6.5	12
Time budget	1986	77	8	7.5	7.5
Food	1987	75	9	7.5	8.5
Leisure	1988	86	7	6	1
Durable goods	1988	82	10	6.5	1.5
<b>Continuous Surveys</b>					
Conjunct.		87	7	6	-
Rent	1986	90.4	4.8	4.8	-
Rent	1988	87	4	9	-
Rent	1992	91	4.5	4.5	-
Labour	1988	93	3	4	-

#### 4.4 Germany

The Statistisches Bundesamt (Central Statistical Office) in Germany has only two important surveys: the Micro-Census (MC) and a Family Expenditure Survey (FES). The MC is carried out every year. It is a mandatory survey and through the years the response is about 95%. In the years 1985 to 1987 the Statistisches Bundesamt carried out an experimental survey to find out to what extent response rates would be affected if the survey-participation would be changed from mandatory into voluntary (Esser et al., 1989). The results were very disappointing. The response would fall down to about 60% to 70%, which was judged to be insufficient for the purposes of the MC in Germany.

Every five year a FES is carried out. There are no consistent nonresponse figures, because the fieldwork is carried out by regional offices which have their own procedures and definitions. To establish a good sample a kind of quota sampling is used. By advertisements in newspapers people are asked to participate. Participants from the MC are also

asked to take part in the FES. Only 10% (estimated figure) of the MC-participants are willing to take part in the FES.

#### 4.5 Great Britain

The Social Survey Division of the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys (OPCS) in Great Britain carries out a great number of social surveys. The OPCS has its own interviewer-staff. In this paper figures are presented for three of the most important and continuous surveys. (Table 5). The Labour Force Survey (LFS) has a sample of 54,000 addresses. Proxies are allowed and used for about 40% of cases. Since 1986 advance letters to respondents have been used. Also a form of re-issuance is used for this survey.

The General Household Survey (GHS) has a sample of 12,000 addresses, proxies are allowed, but used in only about 5% of the cases. Advance letters are also used. For this survey there is also re-issuance.

For the Family Expenditure Survey (FES) a sample of 10,000 addresses is used. Proxies are not allowed and there is no re-issuance.

The Social Survey Division of the OPCS pays much attention to quality control and motivation of the interviewers. Selection procedures of new interviewers and training programs have been improved. Interviewers are graded according to their performance, which determines the rate of pay and the allocation of work. This and other measures (advance letters, re-issuance) might have affected response results in a positive way as can be seen in table 5.

The response rates for the GHS and LFS slightly improved between 1984 and 1991. For all three surveys there seems to be a slight decline of refusal rates and for the GHS and the LFS there seems to be also a decreasing non-contact rate.

#### 4.6 Ireland

The Central Statistics Office in Ireland has two social surveys: the Labour Force Survey, which is carried out every year and the Household Budget Survey, which is held every seven years. In Table 6 data are presented on response and nonresponse for the LFS. There is no breakdown available of nonresponse in "refusals" and "non-contacts". From the 1992 LFS onward this information will be available. The response for the LFS in Ireland is very high and there seems even to be a positive trend. The LFS in Ireland is a face-to-face survey with an interview-time of 10 to 15 minutes per household. Data is gathered on all household mem-

Table 5. Response, Nonresponse data for Household surveys in Gr. Britain (%).

Year	Resp.	Nresp.	Ref.	Ncont.	Other
Family Expenditure Survey (Face-to-face)					
1984	68	32	30	2	-
1985	68	32	30	2	-
1986	69	31	29	2	-
1987	72	28	26	2	-
1988	72	28	27	1	-
1989	73	27	26	1	-
1990	69	31	29	2	-
1991	69	31	29	2	-

General Household Survey (Face-to-Face)

1984	81	19	15	4	-
1985	82	18	15	3	-
1986	84	16	14	2	-
1987	85	15	12	3	-
1988	85	15	12	3	-
1989	84	16	13	3	-
1990	82	18	14	3	-
1991	84	16	13	3	-

Labour Force Survey

1984	81	19	11	8	-
1985	82	18	12	6	-
1986	82	18	11	7	-
1987	81	19	9	9	-
1988	83	17	10	7	-
1989	84	16	10	6	-
1990	83	17	11	6	-
1991	84	16	10	6	-

bers, but proxies are allowed. According to verbal information of the Irish Central Statistics Office the interviewer staff is very experienced and the Irish people has a very positive attitude towards survey participation. There are no questions on income data in the LFS and the subject "employment" might be of special interest to the people. This all might explain the very high response rates as compared with response rates in other countries.

Another possible explanation is the "survey tradition" in Ireland. There are not many surveys in Ireland and consequently the Irish people might not have been exposed to a demand for survey participation in the same degree as in other countries.

Table 6 Response, Nonresponse data for the Labour Force Surveys in Ireland (%).

Year	Response	Nonresponse
1983	93.9	6.1
1984	93.9	6.1
1985	96.0	4.0
1986	93.1	6.9
1987	96.2	3.8
1988	95.7	4.3
1989	95.8	4.2
1990	96.4	3.6

4.7 The Netherlands

The Netherlands Central Bureau of Statistics has about 15 social surveys, 10 of which are continuous and five are carried out with an interval of a few years. For five of these surveys data on response is presented in table 7. In the Netherlands there seems to be quite a difference between the results of face-to-face and telephone surveys. The response for telephone surveys is much better than for face-to-face surveys. Apparently Dutch people prefer to participate in short interviews by phone so that it can be finished off very quickly.

The figures for the telephone surveys indicate that there seems to be no negative trend with respect to refusals. When the Consumer Sentiments Survey changed from a face-to-face survey into a telephone survey the response rates stayed at a steady and relatively high level and the refusal rates tended to decrease. It seems that the change of data-collection technique also affected the response rates for the National Travel Survey as these rates have been about 10% higher since 1985.

The increase in the category "Other n.r." was due to a replacement of the old Cotel-system by a Blaise-Cati-system. With the latter system a more accurate registration of households that had to be contacted more than one time became possible.

The nonresponse and refusal rates are much higher for the face-to-face surveys than for the telephone surveys. The very low response for the Survey on Living Conditions (SLC) might be explained by the subject of the survey, which seems to be too general and unclear. Another important factor that affects the response in a negative way might be the selection-rule for this survey; proxies are not allowed. In 1989 the SLC changed into a CAPI-survey. Also the design of the survey changed in some aspects. Children between

Table 7 Response, Nonresponse data for Household surveys in The Netherlands (%).

Year	Resp.	Nresp.	Ref	Ncont	Other
<b>Living Conditions (fr. 1989 CAPI)</b>					
1974	72	28	17	4	7
1977	70	30	17	6	7
1983	59	41	32	7	2
1986	59	41	29	8	4
1989	48	52	36	10	5
1990	50	50	35	10	4
1991	50	50	35	10	5
<b>Health Survey (from 1990 CAPI)</b>					
1982	67	33	24	7	2
1985	64	36	26	9	2
1988	58	42	29	10	3
1989	58	42	28	10	4
1990	56	44	31	9	4
1991	57	43	30	10	4
<b>Labour Force Survey (CAPI)</b>					
1988	61	39	27	8	4
1989	61	39	26	9	4
1990	60	40	27	8	5
1991	60	40	27	9	4
<b>Consumer Sentiments (fr. 1986 CATI)</b>					
1972	71	29	-	-	-
1975	78	22	-	-	-
1980	61	39	-	-	-
1982	56	44	32	9	3
1984	67	33	25	8	1
1985	72	28	25	2	1
1986	71	29	21	7	1
1987	71	29	23	6	1
1988	68	32	25	6	2
1989	68	32	24	7	2
1990	68	32	18	11	4
1991	69	31	19	8	4
<b>National Travel Survey (from 1985 CATI)</b>					
1978	67	33	-	-	-
1980	68	32	-	-	-
1983	66	34	-	-	-
1986	76	24	14	10	-
1987	75	25	15	9	1
1988	75	25	15	9	1
1989	77	23	13	9	1
1990	74	26	13	9	4
1991	75	25	12	8	5

13 and 15 were included in the sample and have to be asked for survey participation.

The Health Survey changed into a CAPI-survey in 1990. In that year the broader introduction of the laptop computer as a instrument for data-gathering might have put some pressure on the interviewer-staff and might have influenced the performance negatively.

The respondent burden for the Health Survey and the Labour Force Survey is heavier than for the SLC, as for all householdmembers data have to be gathered. Although proxies are allowed for these surveys also the subject of the surveys might affect response results in a positive way.

The initial response for the FES in The Netherlands is also very low (20% to 25%), but somewhat higher than in Belgium. The respondent burden for the Dutch FES is also very high, but not as high as for the Belgian FES.

#### 4.8 Spain

The National Institute for Statistics in Spain has one continuous survey (Labour Force) and three ad hoc surveys. For the Labour Force Survey the National Institute has its own interviewer-staff. For the other surveys interviewers from other organizations are hired.

The figures in table 8 show very low refusal rates. It should however be taken into account, that the presented refusal rates are the results of substitution, i.e. sampled households which refuse to participate are replaced by other households. Verbal information from the Spanish National Institute for Statistics makes clear that there is a negative development in Spain with respect to survey participation. This can be illustrated with the response figures for the Household Budget Survey, which have decreased drastically. It is not known to what extent the design of this survey has changed over time.

#### 4.9 Sweden

The response results for statistics Sweden are regularly published in the form of "Nonresponse barometers" (Bergdahl et al., 1991). Extra information on the surveys and extensive explanation of the trends are found in Lindström and Dean (1986) and Lyberg and Lyberg (1990). They also discuss the various efforts undertaken for reducing nonresponse. The following paragraphs are based on their findings.

All four Swedish surveys presented in table 9 show an increase in non-contacts. It is a general finding in Sweden that it is steadily more difficult

Table 8 Response, Nonresponse data Household surveys in Spain (%)

Year	Resp.	Nresp.	Ref	Ncont	Other
<b>Labour Force Survey</b>					
1976	86.5	13.5	1.2	12.3	-
1980	91.2	8.8	1.7	7.1	-
1985	90.9	9.1	1.4	7.7	-
1990	90.0	9.9	2.2	7.7	-

**Household Budget Survey**

1973	83.5	16.5	8.0	8.5	-
1980	75.4	24.6	14.6	10.0	-
1990	63.2	36.8	21.1	15.7	-

**Housing Survey**

1986	79.5	20.5	6.6	13.9	-
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**Socio-demographic Survey**

1991	80.2	19.8	10.9	8.9	-
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to find people at home. Telephone surveys also have the problem of unlisted telephone numbers. For the Survey on Living Conditions and the Labour Force Survey the refusal rate increased as well. It is generally concluded that the survey climate has a negative trend, partly because of more public awareness of privacy. Some public debates in the mid-eighties may be responsible for this. Change of the sample design for the Income Distribution Survey would have hidden this feature from the figures. The Party Preference Survey, whose figures are not presented here, shows its highest refusal rates just for the period after the debates, 1986-1988.

Like all figures in this section, Swedish figures presented here are unweighted. Change of the design by oversampling groups that have a higher (or a lower) nonresponse rate may have had some impact on the trends. In the seventies the nonresponse rates (especially the non-contact rates) in the Labour Force Survey were much lower until proxy interviews were restricted to members of the immediate family only (Lindström and Dean, 1986). The further restriction of proxy interviews from the 1987 may be responsible for higher non-response rates since then.

The refusal rate for the Survey on Living Conditions in Sweden is relatively high, if compared

with the other Swedish (Telephone) surveys. This may be caused by the subject of the survey and the respondent burden, as the average interview-time is about 60 minutes. The higher refusal rates for the Income Distribution Survey, if compared with the other telephone surveys, might be induced by the subject: more people are reluctant to provide strict personal data on income.

**5. Conclusions**

Trends

The figures presented in this paper indicate that there is no general negative trend with respect to survey participation in Europe as a consequence of changing attitudes.

However, the figures presented in this paper are crude and so is the description of the situation.

Table 9. Response, Nonresponse data for Household surveys in Sweden (%).

Year	Resp.	Nresp.	Ref	Ncont	Other
<b>Living Conditions (Face-to-face)</b>					
1980	86	14	12	2	-
1981	86	14	11	2	1
1982	87	13	10	2	1
1983	84	16	13	2	1
1984	83	17	14	2	1
1985	84	16	12	3	1
1986	78	22	18	3	1
1987	81	19	15	3	1
1988	80	20	15	4	1
1989	80	20	15	4	1
1990	78	22	17	4	1
1991	79	21	16	4	1

**Consumer Buying Expectations (Telephone)**

1980	86	14	9	4	1
1981	87	13	7	5	1
1982	88	12	7	4	0
1983	87	13	7	5	0
1984	86	14	8	6	0
1985	85	15	7	7	1
1986	83	17	7	9	0
1987	82	18	8	10	0
1988	81	19	8	11	0
1989	82	18	7	10	0
1990	81	19	8	10	0
1991	81	19	7	12	1
1992	80	20	7	13	0



Year	Resp.	Nresp.	Ref	Ncont	Other
<b>Labour Force Survey (Telephone)</b>					
1980	93	7	4	3	-
1981	94	6	3	3	-
1982	94	6	3	3	-
1983	94	6	3	3	-
1984	94	6	3	3	-
1985	93	7	3	4	-
1986	90	10	5	5	-
1987	90	10	5	5	-
1988	89	11	5	6	-
1989	89	11	5	6	-
1990	88	12	5	6	-
1991	86	14	6	8	-

**Income Distribution (Mail, fr. 1984 Tel.)**

1980	87	13	10	3	-
1981	86	14	10	4	-
1982	87	13	10	3	-
1983	82	18	14	4	-
1984	85	15	10	5	-
1985	88	12	7	5	-
1986	86	14	8	6	-
1987	86	14	8	6	-
1988	83	17	10	7	-
1989	86	14	8	5	-
1990	81	19	11	8	-
1991	83	17	10	6	1

The period that is taken into account might be too short to draw reliable conclusions about attitudes of people. On the other hand response figures of continuous surveys, that have been carried out year after year in the same way, seem to be very good indicators for attitudes towards survey participation.

It seems, that people are not less willing to participate as they were for years ago, but that circumstances have changed. It seems to be more difficult to contact people and to find a convenient time to carry out the interview. In some countries (France, Great Britain, maybe Ireland, The Netherlands) refusal rates are not increasing. In Sweden and Finland non-contacts seem to increase more than refusals. Only in Spain there seems to be a negative trend with respect to refusals, but this is based on verbal information. Nonresponse rates are not increasing for all surveys and not in all countries. The crude findings seem to support Lievesley's (1989) hypothesis: not the attitudes of people have changed so much, but

interview-organizations have not adapted themselves enough towards changing circumstances.

Factors affecting response

The figures presented in this paper indicate, that the factors as described in section 3 (survey design, respondent burden, mandatory character, data-collection-technique, subject) have affected response results, although there are no data on the specific contribution of these factors. From the British experiences, it can be learned that factors related to the interview-organization can also play an important role. Improvement of selection and training of interviewers, of quality controls and evaluations and a well-designed payment system can motivate and stimulate interviewers to obtain better response results.

Differences between countries

There are substantial differences of response rates between countries. It is however not clear to what extent these differences can be explained by the "survey climate".

It seems, that response rates in Belgium, Germany and The Netherland are lower than in other countries. The response for the LFS in Belgium seems to be very low for a mandatory survey. Experiments in Germany showed that for voluntary surveys response would drop down to about 65%. The response rate for the LFS in The Netherlands is 60%. The response for the FES in these countries is also much lower than in other countries. In Belgium and The Netherlands this might be caused by the heavy respondent burden. However comparable response differences between types of surveys seem to exist in all countries. For example response rates for expenditure surveys are much lower than response rates for other surveys (see Table 10.). In Finland, The Netherlands and Sweden telephone surveys seem to produce higher response rates than other kinds of surveys. These two findings (a lower response level in certain countries and comparable response differences between types of surveys in all countries) might indicate, that there are also cultural differences between countries with respect to survey participation.

Need for systematic data

Data on response/nonresponse, characteristics of surveys and interview-organization in different countries are not yet available in such a way, that they can be compared very well (Belgium, France, Ireland, Spain). A better registration and agreement on definitions is necessary. For the comparison of response results it is necessary to have well-defined figures on nonres-

Table 10 Response rates (most recent) for surveys in different countries (%).

Country	LFS	SLC	Inc.	Cons.	GHS	FES	NTS
Belgium	83	-	-	-	-	17	-
Finland	91	-	83	-	-	70	-
France	93	-	-	-	-	69	78
Germany	95	-	-	-	-	10	-
Gr. Britain	84	-	-	-	84	69	-
Netherlands	60	50	-	69	-	25	76
Spain	90	-	-	-	-	63	-
Sweden	86	79	83	80	-	63	-

ponse and the specific reasons why people do not respond. In order to be able to interpret differences in response rates it is necessary to have the disposal of various aspects of the survey that might have influenced the response rate, like the sample design, the fieldwork design and organizational and situational aspects.

For this purpose a group of statisticians from different statistical agencies designed a International Household Nonresponse Survey to gather data on nonresponse rates for a number of surveys in different countries in a systematic way. Analysing these data might improve insight into the factors (related to the survey design and the interview organization and interviewers) that can cause nonresponse and into the extent these factors affect nonresponse.

(\*) The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the policies of The Netherlands Central Bureau of Statistics.

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