



STATISTICS DIRECTORATE

Cancels & replaces the same document of 22 May 2003

OECD Short-Term Economic Statistics Expert Group

STESEG TASK FORCE ON TIMELINESS AND BENCHMARKING

TIMELINESS, RESPONSE BURDEN AND COOPERATION WITH RESPONDENTS AT STATISTICS DENMARK

Paris, 26-27 June 2003

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Submitted to the Expert Group under item 5 of the draft agenda.

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JT00145794

TIMELINESS, RESPONSE BURDEN AND COOPERATION WITH RESPONDENTS AT STATISTICS DENMARK

In Denmark the production of statistics is centralised at Statistics Denmark. A very considerable volume of statistics is based on administrative registers. About 50 surveys, primarily in the division for business statistics, are based on questionnaires. Except for a few, it is compulsory for the enterprises to participate in these surveys.

In the period 1995-2000 Statistics Denmark has focused on especially 3 topics regarding how to conduct surveys in general. The issues have been:

- Timeliness
- Response burden
- Cooperation with respondents - a question of quality.

Timeliness

The question of timeliness was one of many goals presented in a corporate plan, Strategy for Statistics Denmark from 1995 covering the period 1995-2000. The goal had two dimensions. The first one was to reduce the release time every year by a certain percentage for respectively monthly, quarterly and annual statistics. The other part was for all statistics to fulfil certain minimum standards, which were easy to remember, namely:

- Monthly statistics have to be released not later than 2 months after the end of the reference period
- Quarterly statistics have to be released not later than 3 months after the end of the reference period
- Annual statistics have to be released not later than one year after the end of the reference year

These goals covered all statistics, *e.g.* both statistics based on administrative registers and surveys based on questionnaires.

For most of the economic short-term indicators, the second part of the goal was already fulfilled right from the beginning. So for these statistics the goal was primarily to reduce release time.

The results have been evident. In the following table 1, the raw percentage changes in release times in the period 1996-1999 are shown.

Table 1. Percentage changes in release times 1996-1999. Statistics Denmark¹

	All statistics statistics	Business
Monthly surveys	-18 %	-33 %
Quarterly surveys	-16 %	-9 %
Annual surveys	-21 %	-22 %

Most of the statistics covered in the Short-Term Regulation are categorised under the division Business Statistics, but not, for example, employment statistics.

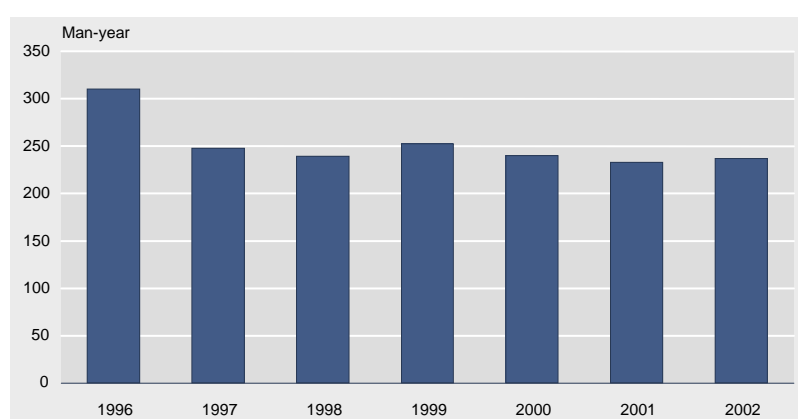
The next two issues are only dealing with surveys based on questionnaires.

Response burden

From the middle of the 1990's there has also been a political discussion about the response burden imposed on enterprises. The discussion has been general. Of all the administrative burdens imposed on enterprises, it turned out that the proportion of Statistics Denmark amounted to about 6 percent.

It was a surprising small proportion, but Statistics Denmark decided as a consequence of the discussions to make annual calculations of the response burden. The burden is measured as the number of data reports multiplied by estimated time consumption for each data report. The time estimates are based on assessments conducted by the trade organisations.

In the following figure the results are shown:



Response burden 1996 to 2002

The figure shows that after a decline in 1997 the burden has almost remained at the same level. The increase in 1999 was caused by a total survey of forests, which is conducted every 10th year.

¹ In the years 2000-2002 the release-time has declined further but at a slower pace

The overall dominating survey is the foreign trade survey, which amounts to 2/3 of the total response burden, which reached 237 man-years in 2002. Totally the number of reports amounted to about 370 000 in 2002. Without reducing the burden on foreign trade, it is difficult to reduce the overall response burden; and this is even more difficult in times of comprehensive demands, and maybe also future demands in the field of economic short-term statistics.

Statistics Denmark's goal expressed in Strategy 2006 is that different initiatives (*e.g.* electronic questionnaires) should lead to a lower response rate for existing statistics.

Cooperation with respondents - a question of quality

How to deal with the respondents is another issue that has been discussed and much work has been performed over the years from 1995. The question is indeed a question of quality. A good and efficient cooperation with the enterprises ensures first that the questionnaires are filled in correctly, second that the reports are sent back timely for inclusion in the results of the survey.

The question of improving the efficiency of contacts with the respondents has been important to Statistics Denmark, although it is a fact that the majority of the surveys based on questionnaires, are compulsory. Because of this, the response rate right from the beginning has had a high level, *i.e.* around 95-98%. For voluntary surveys the level varies depending on which branches are involved, but it is still fairly high (82 – 95%).

In spite of these high response rates, it has been important to set up common guidelines for all questionnaire-based surveys. From the beginning of the 1990s, there was a tendency to decentralize many of the functions connected to conducting a survey. This did indeed result in a major improvement, but the decentralizing process had, to a certain degree, also the consequence that common rules were suddenly replaced by rules for each statistics.

Consequently, an internal committee dealing with these questions was set up in 1996. In this committee all major surveys are represented. The main goal is to draw up common standards to secure a fair treatment of all respondents. The result of this work was a guideline.

The guideline focused on 5 areas. These were:

1. Motivating respondents

- Information in advance

- Folder about each survey

- Cooperation with Trade organisation

- Etc.

2. The questionnaires

- Explanations on form, if possible

- Pilot surveys

- Different methods of data collection

Common design

Etc.

3. Reminder policy

Standard rules for respectively monthly, quarterly and annual surveys

Mixture of methods (mail, telephone, recommended letters)

About 300 cases annually submitted to the police

Etc.

Scope: fair and equal treatment in all surveys

4. Handling of questions from respondents

Contact person on the form

Quick and satisfactory replies

Etc.

5. Feedback to respondents

Offer to send, *e.g.* a news release

Direct feedback on the next form

Etc.

Since 1 January 2001 statistical information can be obtained free from the StatBank Denmark (www.statistikbanken.dk). This can change the feedback-policy in the future.²

The work in the committee is still continuing and more and more common standards are developed, *e.g.* all kinds of letters. The work is supported electronically via Intranet. The committee is also the forum where new experiences are discussed.

Conclusions

The conclusion from the Danish experiences is:

Focus on timeliness can reduce release times to a certain point. (After that other means should be taken into consideration, if necessary to reduce further.)

² In 2003 the number of publications we freely offer the respondents has decreased and will almost disappear from next year.

It is a very good exercise to calculate the annual response burden. It enhances the consciousness of being careful with new or added questionnaires. On the other hand, it is not always easy in a more and more demanding world in regard of statistics to secure a non-increasing response burden.

The question of how to cooperate with the respondents is also a question of quality. Although, it is difficult to measure it is unquestionably a good area to continuously improve. The results are increased efficiency - and at the same time respect and understanding for the respondents work are shown. To find new ways creative thoughts are necessary all the time.