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A random walk around Britain: a critical assessment of the random walk sample as a method of collecting data on the public's citizenship information needs

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the second stage of the Citizenship Information research project, funded by the British Library Research and Innovation Centre: a national survey, by personal doorstep interview and using the random walk sample method, of the citizenship information needs of almost 900 members of the UK public. The paper provides a critical evaluation of all aspects of the methodology. It discusses: the design and testing of the interview schedule; the sampling methodology employed; the process, and associated difficulties, of recruiting and training interviewers; and the subsequent success rate of the random walk method, together with the problems encountered by interviewers. It also explains why the researchers found it necessary to devise a unique set of guidelines on the random walk method. When compared with national figures, the random walk method reached greater proportions of women, the elderly and retired, those running a home, and those in the lower social classes. The paper argues that, as these are groups that may be deemed to face social exclusion through a lack of access to information, then the survey results are particularly revealing and significant.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The Citizenship Information research project (1997-1999), funded by the British Library Research and Innovation Centre, investigated the extent to which members of the public in the United Kingdom have expressed or unexpressed needs for citizenship information, and explored their preferred routes to the acquisition of such information. Citizenship information, as defined by the authors, is:

> *information produced by or about national and local government, government departments and public sector organisations which may be of value to the citizen either as part of everyday life or in the participation by the citizen in government and policy formulation.*

The project also investigated both the suitability and approachability of the public library, among other agencies, for the user seeking citizenship information. Throughout its duration it sought to adopt a person-centred, phenomenological approach which considered information needs in relation to the everyday life of individuals and the ways in which they attempt to make sense of the world around them.

A paper presented at the ISIC2 Conference, in Sheffield in 1998 (1), reported on the first stage of the project: a questionnaire-based survey of almost 1,300 members of the public, designed to elicit preliminary data on their use of and need for citizenship

information. These questionnaires were distributed in public libraries, Citizens Advice Bureaux (CABx) and other generalist information and advice agencies throughout the 13 regions of the UK. However, the response rate in the libraries (69.4%) was considerably higher than that in the CABx (40.5%) and, in particular, the other advice agencies (8.3%). Staff in the CABx and the other agencies suggested three major factors responsible for the poorer responses in these organisations: the lack of a central dissemination point for questionnaires; their clients' often highly wrought emotional states; and poor literacy levels in some clients. While the resultant sample was, in terms of demographic characteristics, fairly representative of the UK population, the employed respondents came to a greater extent proportionally from the professional and managerial classes than for the UK as a whole. The sample also consisted largely of library users (i.e. 75.3% of the respondents). It was felt, therefore, that dissemination of the data collection tool by this method had had a negative impact on the generalisability of the results by skewing the representativeness of the sample, and that it was important to utilise a methodology that would ensure better representation of non-members of the public library service in the second stage.

The second stage of the project was another national survey of the citizenship information needs of the public, this time by personal doorstep interview. These interviews aimed to elicit more qualitative, extended and individual responses, and to form a more in-depth and less pre-determined set of data than that produced by the first survey by questionnaire, where greater use had necessarily to be made of closed questions with a predetermined range of potential responses. It was also felt that interviews would allow more in-depth understanding than the questionnaire, which some argue can be superficial and unrevealing (2). By conducting the interviews at people's homes, away from the 'institutional' setting of the first survey, the researchers also aimed to overcome any deficiencies in the initial survey by reaching the less literate respondent, economically inactive groups and those from lower social grades. This paper will provide an in-depth methodological discussion of this second stage.

METHODOLOGY

Design of the interview schedule

In designing the interview schedule and in considering the survey methodology, the project team drew upon the experiences and results of previous large-scale surveys of information need. Particularly influential were the survey of 1,300 Baltimore households conducted by Warner *et al* in 1973 (3), and the 1977 survey of over 200 Sheffield residents carried out by the University of Sheffield (4). Data collection tools applied in both were critically examined and used as a basis for developing the interview schedule.

The interview schedule itself paid particular attention to national and local government issues and to 'survival' information (i.e. information to help people overcome the problems that occur in day-to-day life), and sought to probe further the concept of the well-informed and active citizen. It also examined attitudes to the use of Information and Communication Technologies and of public libraries and other sources of public information. Prior to the survey taking place, the researchers tested

the interview schedule on members of the Aberdeen public, and these pilot results were fully analysed in order to reveal any design deficiencies. An important issue which emerged here was a requirement for the interviewee to feel comfortable in admitting to having had problems and a need for survival information. Those respondents in higher social classes, in particular, did not see themselves as requiring survival information. With this in mind, the interview schedule was designed in order to elicit openly the views of respondents as to the nature of citizenship information, rather than impose a preconceived and limited conception; the interview schedule, therefore, did not contain a definition of citizenship information. In maintaining such an open approach, it was hoped that this would encourage respondents to give and discuss real examples of information need.

Recruitment of interviewers

To conduct the interviews, the project team employed undergraduate and postgraduate librarianship and information studies (LIS) students from library schools throughout the UK. This approach had been an integral part of the methodological plan since the very beginning of the project, as was a desire to have both the Stage 1 and Stage 2 surveys conducted in the same geographic areas. With this in mind, care had been taken to ensure that the Stage 1 questionnaires had been distributed in towns and cities which hosted a library school.

To recruit the interviewers, the researchers approached members of staff at strategically located library schools who were asked if they could recommend a suitable, capable and interested LIS student to conduct interviews in their particular area. Using this method, interviewers were recruited for 10 of the 13 UK regions. Interviewers were found for a further two regions following an advertisement on the *Library and Information Studies Students and Prospective Students (LISSPS)* electronic mailing list hosted by the UK Office for Library and Information Networking (UKOLN) at the University of Bath. Finding an interviewer for the final region to be covered - the South East - proved more problematic, and was finally resolved by sending a volunteer student from the Robert Gordon University to live and work in the area for a three-week period. Unfortunately, in one region - Merseyside - health problems prevented the appointed interviewer carrying out the survey within the prescribed timescale; and as time constraints also prevented the project team from finding a suitable replacement, the Merseyside portion of the survey had to be abandoned. As Merseyside, in official terms, is a relatively new region, having been part of the old North West Standard Planning Region until 1994, and as the new North West region *was* covered as part of the survey, it is believed that the absence of Merseyside did not severely affect the overall geographical coverage of this exercise.

It was planned initially that each interviewer would be employed for a four-week period, a week of which would be spent carrying out preparatory research, leaving three weeks in which to conduct the appropriate number (i.e. 75) of interviews. However, due to concerns that some interviewers, having the relative security of a four-week contract, might be less than conscientious about completing the desired quota, it was decided to pay them only on completion of the interviews. The agreed amount was, therefore, divided into three equal instalments, each instalment being paid on receipt of a batch of 25 satisfactorily completed interview schedules. A

limited amount of money was also made available to cover any public transport expenses incurred when travelling to and from the areas in which the survey would take place.

Prior to the commencement of the survey, each interviewer was visited and briefed personally by a member of the project team. During these sessions, the interviewers were informed about the aims and objectives of the Citizenship Information project as a whole and the Stage 2 survey in particular. The interview schedule itself was discussed question by question. They were also given detailed instructions on the preparatory work required, the survey methodology to be employed and the procedures for submitting completed interview schedules. In addition, the interviewers were provided with a comprehensive set of printed guidelines which also detailed the survey methodology and the submission requirements.

It is believed that the LIS background of the interviewers proved advantageous in that it provided them with an understanding of, and an insight into, the research that might not have been found amongst students of other disciplines. A number were investigating particular aspects of information policy and/or public information as part of their studies and therefore had a personal interest in the project. Certainly, from the briefing sessions with the project team, all interviewers appeared more than capable of conducting the exercise; and the end results of their efforts - the completed interview schedules - suggested that few real problems were encountered.

Identification of electoral wards in which interviews would take place

Each interviewer was provided with data for their allocated town or city taken from the 1991 UK Census Small Area Statistics (SAS). More specifically, these were details from Table 1 (Population bases) and Table 90 (Social class as defined by occupation of household head) of the SAS. These data had been obtained from the Manchester Information Datasets and Associated Services (MIDAS), now the Manchester Information and Associated Services (MIMAS), run by Manchester Computing at the University of Manchester (5).

Using the data provided, each interviewer was asked to identify five local government electoral wards in which the survey would take place, with a view to conducting 15 interviews in each ward. In an attempt to reach a broad cross-section of the public, each interviewer was effectively asked to identify and conduct interviews in the ward containing the highest percentage of residents belonging to Social Classes IV and V (partly skilled and unskilled occupations), the ward with the lowest percentage of Classes IV and V, and three other wards spread across the cumulative population figures for the town/city. It should be noted here that the Social Classes described in this paper are those defined in the Standard Occupation Classification (6), but that this classification is to be replaced by a new National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) in 2001 (7).

Table 1 (representing the electoral wards in the London Borough of Camden) illustrates how each interviewer identified the three 'other' wards, where the selected wards appear in shaded rows. The wards were listed in descending numerical order according to the percentage of their households belonging to Social Classes IV and V, and cumulative population figures were also calculated. The total population figure

(170444 in the Camden example) was initially divided by four, and the resulting figure was then multiplied by one, by two and also by three (the resultant figures for the Camden example being 42611, 85222 and 127833). The interviewer then identified the three wards in the table where the cumulative population figures were closest to these three figures (in Camden these were Grafton, St. John's and Fortune Green).

Ward	% Social Class IV and V	Ward Population	Cumulative Population
Somers Town	35.6	6704	6704
St. Pancras	29.1	4752	11456
King's Cross	22.8	6993	18449
Castlehaven	20.9	5462	23911
Priory	18.0	6624	30535
Gospel Oak	17.7	6037	36572
Grafton	17.1	6000	42572
Kilburn	16.9	9461	52033
Caversham	16.8	6002	58035
Regent's Park	16.1	8692	66727
Brunswick	15.7	3990	70717
Holborn	15.6	5892	76609
St. John's	13.9	5960	82569
Camden	13.2	7288	89857
Bloomsbury	10.7	6749	96606
South End	9.7	6084	102690
Highgate	9.1	10517	113207
Adelaide	8.7	8306	121513
Fortune Green	8.6	5290	126803
Swiss Cottage	8.6	9163	135966
West End	8.3	5762	141728
Hampstead Town	5.6	4995	146723
Fitzjohns	5.1	5189	151912
Frognal	3.4	5831	157743
Belsize	3.2	7780	165523
Chalk Farm	2.6	4921	170444

Table 1: Selected electoral wards (London Borough of Camden)

The nature of this ward selection methodology meant, of course, that the interviewers were inevitably going to have to visit less advantaged areas, and some were understandably cautious about the prospect of conducting the survey in certain wards. Belfast, in particular, was regarded as containing a number of 'no-go areas'. With this in mind the interviewers were instructed that, if they were of the belief that visiting one of the identified wards was likely to prove hazardous, then they should choose the ward either immediately above or below it in the table of descending percentages of

Class IV and V residents. The interviewers were to follow similar instructions should they have discovered that any of the identified wards had 'disappeared' (perhaps absorbed by surrounding wards) due to local government reorganisation in the period since the 1991 census. In the event, however, choosing alternative wards was not necessary and the survey was conducted in all of the originally identified wards. The full list of wards in which the interviews took place is illustrated in Table 2, where ward category 1 is the one containing the highest percentage of Classes IV and V, and ward category 5 is the one containing the lowest percentage of Classes IV and V.

Table 2: Electoral wards in which interviews took place					
Town/city (Region)	Ward Categories				
	1	2	3	4	5
Aberdeen (Scotland)	Tillydrone	Quarryhill	Victoria	Duthie	Harlaw
Aberystwyth (Wales)	Aberystwyth West	Aberystwyth South	Llanbadarn Fawr	Faenor	Aberystwyth East
Belfast (N. Ireland)	Duncairn	Woodstock	Water Works	Knock	Stranmillis
Birmingham (W. Midlands)	Nechells	Weoley	Oscott	Perry Barr	Sutton Vesey
Brighton (S. East)	Moulsecoomb	Tenantry	Regency	St. Peter's	Westdene
Cambridge (Eastern)	Abbey	Arbury	Market	Petersfield	Trumpington
Camden (London)	Somers Town	Grafton	St. John's	Fortune Green	Chalk Farm
Loughborough /Charnwood (E. Midlands)	Woodthorpe	Birstall Stonehill	Shepshed West	East Goscote	Birstall Netherhall
Manchester (N. West)	Benchill	Moss Side	Burnage	Rusholme	Didsbury
Newcastle (N. East)	Sth. Gosforth	Wingrove	Fenham	Walkergate	Walker
Sheffield (Yorks & the Humber)	Park	Brightside	Sharrow	Stocksbridge	Ecclesall
Weston-super-Mare (S. West)	W-super-Mare South	W-super-Mare Ellenborough	W-super-Mare Ashcombe	W-super-Mare North	Hutton

Although alternative wards were not required, there remained some concerns about the interviewers' personal security whilst conducting the survey. Some interviewers, therefore, indicated that they would be accompanied by a friend or partner when working in particular areas; while in two locations, Newcastle upon Tyne and Weston-super-Mare, pairs of interviewers were employed, with the agreed payment being divided equally between the two.

Other preparatory work

In addition to identifying the electoral wards in which the survey would take place, the interviewers were instructed to carry out other preparatory work. Firstly, they were asked to find and obtain copies of ward maps outlining the boundaries of their particular wards, thus preventing them straying into neighbouring wards during the course of the survey. Secondly, each interviewer was instructed to establish the political party(ies) of the councillor(s) who represented the chosen wards, as well as the political composition of the local council as whole. These details were required as the project team wished to investigate whether or not there was a relationship between the responses of the interviewees and the party allegiances in the areas in which they lived.

The random walk method

The survey methodology employed during the course of this exercise was the random walk, also known as the 'random route' or 'point and route' method. Although commonly used in market research, a search of the professional literature suggested that this method had not previously been used in information seeking/needs research. The basic principle of the method is that interviewers start at a randomly chosen address within a particular area and thereafter follow a set of rules to obtain the subsequent addresses. Despite an extensive literature search, however, only the barest details of the types of instructions generally given to interviewers using this method could be found: for example, that interviewers should conduct an interview at every nth address in a street and should alternatively turn left and right into other streets when he/she meets them (8). As a result, the project team had to devise a unique set of guidelines for the interviewers and these are outlined here.

Each interviewer was instructed to select one particular street in the electoral ward as a starting point, preferably in a predominantly residential area near the centre of the ward. He/she then had to proceed along the left-hand side of this street, as he/she faced it, attempting to obtain an interview at every 7th household on that side of the street. If the interviewer was unsuccessful in obtaining an interview at a particular household, then he/she had to try the very next house on that side of the street, and if that was unsuccessful then the house next to it had to be tried, and so on. After an interview had been successfully completed, however, the interviewer had to revert to visiting every 7th household.

When the interviewer first reached a junction between two streets, he/she had to turn left, keep to the left-hand side of this new street and maintain the systematic approach of visiting every 7th household. At the next junction encountered, however, the interviewer had to turn right, but again keep to the left-hand side of the new street. At subsequent junctions, he/she had to alternate between left and right turns, but always had to keep to the left-hand side of the street entered.

If the interviewer reached the end of a cul-de-sac, or if the street he/she was on reached the boundary of the ward, he/she had to return along this same street, but on its other side (this, of course, would still be the interviewer's left-hand side, as he/she would be facing in the opposite direction). Once he/she reached the beginning of this street again, though, he/she had to turn out of it the same way as it was entered. For example, if the interviewer turned left to enter a cul-de-sac, he/she also had to turn left when exiting it, as this took him/her towards 'new' streets and households. After exiting the street, however, the interviewer had to revert to alternate left and right turns at street junctions.

Each interviewer was advised that a block of flats should be treated as 'another street', where he/she could potentially conduct an interview in every 7th flat within the block. With small blocks containing two flats on each floor, he/she was instructed to firstly attempt an interview with the occupant of the ground floor flat on the left (as he/she faced the building). If this attempt was unsuccessful, then the ground floor right flat had to be tried, then if necessary the first floor left flat, and so on, until a successful response was obtained. If the attempt was successful, then he/she had to move on

another seven households and attempt an interview there. This, of course, may have meant moving on to an adjacent block of flats, or an adjacent row of individual houses on that side of the street.

With large blocks of flats containing more than two flats on each floor (e.g. tower blocks and skyscrapers) the interviewer was instructed to visit the flats, ground floor first, in a clockwise direction starting from the main lift- or stair-well, until an interview was successfully completed. Again, once a successful response had been obtained, he/she had to move on another seven households. This may have been in the same block of flats, an adjacent block of flats or in an adjacent row of houses. If the interviewer was unable to successfully complete an interview within a block of flats, he/she was instructed to move on to the very next house or block of flats on that side of the street.

When the systematic approach resulted in the interviewer being faced with a shop or other commercial premises, he/she had to continue moving along the street until the next private household was reached. The procedures were then those described above.

It was acknowledged that some householders might be willing to be interviewed, but not at the particular time of the interviewer's visit. With this in mind, the interviewers were advised that 'appointments' for interviews at a later date or time should be made at their own discretion, and that they should bear in mind how convenient it would be for them to return to the household(s) at the suggested time(s).

To summarise, then, the basic rules were that an interview should be attempted at every 7th household, that the interviewer should always be on the left hand side of a street, and that he/she should alternate between left and right turns at junctions. These procedures were followed until the interviewer had completed 15 interviews in that ward. If the interviewer had finished interviewing for the day, but had not yet completed the quota of 15 interviews in that ward, then he/she had to resume the next day's random walk at the exact location at which the previous day's walk finished.

Response rate of the random walk method

As has already been indicated, each interviewer was asked to complete 15 interview schedules in each of their five allocated wards - a total of 75 interviews in each town/city. All were successful with the exception of the Birmingham interviewer who fell two schedules short of the desired quota, therefore 898 interviews were successfully completed. The interviews took place between May and November 1998. Just over 88% of the interviews took place on weekdays, with the remainder being conducted on Saturdays or Sundays. While no detailed data was collected on the times at which the interviews took place, most would have been conducted during normal working hours (i.e. 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.). As a result, the random walk method tended to reach greater proportions of members of the public not in active employment, of which more is discussed below.

The vast majority of the interviews lasted for between 15 and 30 minutes, although there were reports of some lasting for over one hour. The general impression received was that the longer interviews tended to be with older people, perhaps living alone,

who appeared to be pleased to have the interviewer's company. Overall, however, the interviewers appeared to be happy with the interview process, and while some rather reticent respondents were encountered, no unfortunate experiences were reported.

Whilst the survey respondents were guaranteed anonymity, each one was asked if they could provide a daytime telephone number at which they could be contacted. On receipt of the completed interview schedules, a member of the project team then rang a random sample of these numbers in each town/city to confirm that the interviews had been carried out satisfactorily. On completion of this probity check, the interviewers then received payment for the work done.

During the course of the survey, each interviewer was asked to complete a form, using the simple 'five-bar gate' method, which recorded the total number of households visited in each ward, the number of successful interviews and the reasons why no interviews could be made at the other households. These were subsequently analysed by the project team to measure the response rate of the random walk method.

On average, each interviewer had to visit 570 households in order to successfully conduct 75 interviews. This was an overall response rate of 13.2%, or in other words one successful interview obtained at approximately every eighth household visited. The response rate in the individual towns/cities varied dramatically, however, with the best response rate of 28.2% occurring in Weston-super-Mare (i.e. 266 attempts; one interview at every 3.5 houses visited), and the worst rate of 5.9% being in Birmingham (1243 attempts; one interview in every 16.6 homes visited).

The main reason for unsuccessful interview attempts was that there was no-one at home at the time of the visit. Overall, two-thirds (66.7%) of the unsuccessful attempts were due to there being no-one at home, although in the individual towns and cities this figure ranged from 41.9% in Weston-super-Mare to 70.8% in Birmingham.

A further 29% of the unsuccessful attempts were due to residents refusing to be interviewed. In this respect, Aberystwyth appeared to be the most welcoming location with just a 15% refusal rate, while Weston-super-Mare had the highest refusal rate of 55.5%. Interestingly therefore, while the Weston-super-Mare interviewers completed the desired quota with the least number of interview attempts, their unsuccessful efforts contained the greatest percentage of refusals.

Overall, 3.5% of interview attempts were thwarted by the premises being completely vacant; while a further 0.8% were abandoned because there was not a responsible adult at home. It should be pointed out here that the survey was limited to individuals aged 16 years or over, and that the very first question on the interview schedule related to the age of the respondent. The interviewers were instructed that, should they begin an interview with an individual aged under 16, then the interview should be immediately but politely brought to a halt.

The only other reason for unsuccessful interview attempts was reported by the Manchester interviewer, who indicated that in two households visited no-one could speak English.

The interviewers were also asked to report any local events or factors which they believed may have influenced the response rate to the survey, and two interviewers provided possible reasons. The Aberystwyth interviewer felt that the response rate in two of the wards might have been affected by simultaneous household visits being made by Jehovah's Witnesses and by members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Manchester interviewer, meanwhile, encountered a higher than average 'no-one at home' percentage of 76.3% in the Moss Side ward, and discovered that the local football team, Manchester City, were playing at home that day.

Demographic details of random walk survey sample

The demographic details of the sample were compiled and compared with those of the Stage 1 questionnaire respondents and with the demographic profile of the UK as a whole.

Gender and age group. Table 3 indicates the gender and age group of the random walk survey sample, together with that of the first survey. As can be seen, 61.1% of the respondents were female, while 38.6% were male - a significantly greater female to male ratio than that in the first survey (50.5% to 48.7%) and than the national figures of 51% to 49% (9). The age group variables are those used in the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy standard for Public Library User Surveys (10). However, these age groups differ from those appearing in Office for National Statistics publications, such as *Regional Trends* and *Social Trends* (which also differ from each other), so a direct comparison with national percentages was not possible. What can be said, though, is that the proportion of older respondents in the random walk survey sample (i.e. 40% aged 55 or over) was substantially greater than that in the first survey (26.2%) and the national percentage, in 1996, of 26% (11).

Table 3: Gender and age group of respondents										
	Survey 1: Questionnaire					Survey 2: Interview schedule				
	Male	Fem.	NS	Total		Male	Fem.	NS	Total	
Age group	No.	No.	No	No.	%	No.	No.	No	No.	%
< 15	10	21	-	31	**2.4**	-	-	-	-	**-**
15-19*	37	61	1	99	**7.7**	18	24	-	42	**4.7**
20-29	126	120	1	247	**19.1**	72	72	-	144	**16.0**
30-44	177	190	1	368	**28.4**	75	149	-	224	**24.9**
45-54	90	111	-	201	**15.5**	40	82	1	123	**13.7**
55-64	82	76	1	159	**12.3**	54	77	1	132	**14.7**
65-74	71	54	3	128	**9.9**	52	75	-	127	**14.1**
75+	33	16	3	52	**4.0**	35	66	-	101	**11.2**
Not specfd	4	4	1	9	**0.7**	1	4	-	5	**0.6**
Totals	**630**	**653**	**11**	**1294**	**100**	**347**	**549**	**2**	**898**	**100**
%	**48.7**	**50.5**	**0.9**			**38.6**	**61.1**	**0.2**		

* 16-19 in Survey 2

Status. Table 4 illustrates the status of the respondents in both surveys. Just over 56% of the random walk survey sample were economically inactive (i.e. student, retired, running a home or permanently unable to work), considerably greater than the proportion in the first survey (41.5%) and slightly greater than the national figure of 51.1% (12). However, as the national figure also includes all people under 16, who were excluded from this random walk survey, then it becomes clear that the respondents came to a greater extent proportionally from the economically inactive adult groups than for the UK as a whole.

Table 4: Status of respondents				
	Survey 1: Questionnaire		**Survey 2: Interview schedule.**	
Status	**No.**	**%**	**No.**	**%**
In paid employment	446	34.5	259	28.8
Self employed	95	7.3	61	6.8
Seeking work	177	13.7	65	7.2
Retired	269	20.8	307	34.2
Running a home	86	6.6	119	13.3
Student	182	14.1	78	8.7
Status not specified	39	3.0	9	1.0
Totals	**1294**	**100**	**898**	**100**

Social class. In both surveys, the respondents who were either in paid employment or self employed were asked to specify their occupation. Those who did specify an occupation were allocated a social class using the Standard Occupational Classification. These are detailed in Table 5, together with figures for the UK as a whole (13). Compared with the Stage 1 survey, the random walk sample contained a slightly larger proportion of respondents with professional and managerial occupations (+4.0 percentage points), a considerably smaller proportion with a skilled occupation (-12.9 points), and a higher proportion of partly skilled and unskilled occupations. Compared with national figures, the random walk sample contained a larger proportion of professional and managerial occupations (+16.8 points), smaller proportions of skilled occupations (-18.0 points), but almost identical proportions of partly skilled and unskilled respondents (+1.2 points). As was expected, given the methodology used, there were generally higher proportions of professional and managerial occupations in ward categories 4 and 5 (see Table 2), and higher proportions of partly skilled and unskilled occupations in ward categories 1 and 2.

Table 5: Social class of employed respondents					
	Survey 1 Questionnaire		Survey 2 Interview schedule		National Figures
Social Class	No.	%	No.	%	%
I Professional, etc.	39	9.5	49	17.0	6.0
II Managerial & Technical	159	38.9	102	35.4	29.6
III(N) Skilled non-manual	114	27.9	55	19.1	22.4
III(M) Skilled manual	41	10.0	17	5.9	20.6
IV Partly skilled	42	10.3	48	16.7	15.7
V Unskilled	14	3.4	17	5.9	5.7
Totals	**409**	**100**	**288**	**100**	**100**

Ethnic group. 6.2% of the respondents belonged to an ethnic minority group. This was a smaller proportion than that in the first survey (7.7%), but remarkably close to the 1996 national percentage of just under 6% (14).

Disabled respondents. Respondents were asked if they would describe themselves as disabled, and 13.1% indicated that they were disabled in some way. This was a larger proportion than that questioned in the first survey (9.5%), but still relatively close to the most recent national estimate of 11% (15).

Respondents in rural areas. 16.7% of the random walk sample resided in rural areas (i.e. areas designated as rural by the Office for National Statistics and the General Register Office for Scotland). This was slightly higher than the proportion of rural residents in the first survey (14.7%), but slightly lower than the 1995 national figure of 18.2% (16).

Educational attainment. The random walk survey respondents were asked about the highest level of education they had completed. Just over a quarter (25.3%) had completed an undergraduate or higher degree, while 22.6% had completed a further education course. Just over half (51.3%) had received no education beyond school.

Public library membership. 72.5% of the respondents indicated that they were a member of a public library. This is higher than the national figure of 58% cited by the Library and Information Commission in 1997 (17). No direct comparison can be made with the first survey, as this question was not asked, although 75.3% of Stage 1 respondents were *using* a public library when handed a questionnaire.

When compared with the first survey, then, the random walk sample methodology reached a greater proportion of those not in active employment: women, the elderly, the retired and those running a home. It also reached slightly higher proportions of people living in rural areas and individuals with partly skilled or unskilled occupations. Given that these are groups deemed to be in danger of social exclusion (18), then the results are especially revealing. They also complement those of the first survey where a more dynamic and arguably more 'informed' group of respondents was achieved.

CONCLUSIONS

The random walk methodology is deemed to have been successful in achieving a fair representation of those UK groups deemed in danger of exclusion and in complementing the demographics achieved by the dissemination method adopted in Survey 1 (i.e. questionnaires distributed in public libraries, CABx and other agencies). The researchers therefore feel confident about the generalisibility and representativeness of the research findings, and believe that valid conclusions can be drawn from these findings.

The administration of the methodology has been discussed in detail in this paper in order that its effectiveness may be critically evaluated. From the authors' investigation of previous research, it may be deemed a failing that often insufficient detail is provided for methodologies to be replicated and for subsequent researchers to learn both from the failings as well as the strengths of a particular approach.

The random walk method may be applied on any scale, from a small, local project to the national or even international level. The administration of a large scale project is a complex business and much effort must be made by the research team to ensure consistency in the application of the data collection tool and that interviewers are well supported and safeguarded from potential harm.

It is therefore crucial that the interviewers are well trained and understand the significance of the research questions and the nature of the responses required. In this respect, the LIS background of the interviewers employed during this project is believed to have been advantageous. It is also important that the interviewers are provided with a comprehensive set of instructions which contain preordained solutions to all anticipated problems.

It is important to remember, too, that the success of the research is dependent upon the interviewers fulfilling their obligations, and that the researchers may run the risk of being let down by unreliable interviewers. In this respect, it is also important to check the probity of the interview execution, and to introduce a method of confirming that the interviews have been carried out satisfactorily (in this case a random sample of follow-up telephone calls).

The random walk method ensures a systematic and consistent approach which leaves no room for individual bias in approaching or avoiding particular homes or individuals. It also ensures that no bias is shown towards particular groups in the community, yet it recognises the significance of the neighbourhood or community in shaping the way people behave and think about things.

It might be particularly recommended where the researcher wishes to reach less mobile and participative individuals, as well as those members of the public who lack the means or capacity to communicate readily with others (e.g. those without a telephone). Questioning people on their doorstep also allows for a more in-depth exploration of everyday information need than would be possible through a self-administered questionnaire.

It should be remembered, however, that there may be situations where a poor response rate is encountered; and that other factors, such as local sporting/social events and other household visiting/interviewing campaigns, should be taken into account when considering the adoption of the random walk approach.

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A random walk around Britain: a critical assessment of the random walk sample as a method of collecting data on the public's citizenship information needs

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A random walk around Britain...

Rita Marcella and Graeme Baxter

Citizenship Information:
a Definition

Citizenship information is information produced by or about national and local government, government departments and public sector organisations which may be of value to the citizen either as part of everyday life or in the participation by the citizen in government and policy formulation.

Questionnaire Survey (1)

- **Distributed in libraries, Citizens Advice Bureaux (CABx) and other advice agencies**

- **Dissemination in all 13 UK regions**

- **Overall response = 1294 (45.7%)**

- **Response rate in libraries (69.4%); CABx (40.5%); other agencies (8.3%)**

Questionnaire Survey (2)

- **75.3% of total responses were from library users**

- **Sample generally representative of UK population as a whole, but contained greater proportions of people from Social Classes I and II (professional and managerial occupations)**

Survey by Doorstep Interview (1)

- **A 9-page interview schedule**

- **Tested in Aberdeen**

- **Interviews conducted by LIS students**

- **Conducted in 12 of the 13 UK regions**

- **Payment on completion of batches of schedules**

- **Interviewers briefed personally by project team *and* given comprehensive printed guidelines**

- **Interviewers given 1991 Census Small Area Statistics data**

- **Each interviewer asked to identify 5 local government electoral wards, and to conduct 15 interviews in each ward**

Survey by Doorstep Interview (2)

The Random Walk Method

- **Every 7th household**

- **Always on the left-hand side of a street**

- **Alternate left- and right-hand turns at junctions**

- **Special instructions for cul-de-sacs, ward boundaries, blocks of flats, shops and offices, etc.**

Random Walk Method: Response (1)

- 898 interviews completed

- 88% on weekdays; 12% at weekends

- Most lasted 15-30 minutes

- On average, 570 households visited to obtain 75 interviews (i.e. one in every 8 households visited)

- Main reasons for 'failures':

  – No one at home 66.7%

  – Interview refused 29%

- Probity check - random telephone calls

Random Walk Method: Response (2)

When compared with the first survey, the random walk method reached greater proportions of:

- those in Social Classes IV and V (partly skilled and unskilled occupations)

- women

- elderly people

- retired people

- disabled people

- those running a home

- people living in rural areas