

PERSPECTIVES

A NEWSLETTER ABOUT SURVEY RESEARCH FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT MANAGERS AND ELECTED OFFICIALS

How to sign up for The NCS

If you have an introductory packet from ICMA, you can fill out the enrollment form and send it to National Research Center, Inc; please include a check for \$5,600 which is a portion of the Basic Service (\$9,600) at that time. Your check initiates The NCS process. You will be added to the next available Class of participants, unless you specify a different Class. NRC will send a packet of information** containing several FAQ sheets, background information on The NCS™, your timeline and a Worksheet Packet. The Worksheet Packet will guide you through the steps to customize your survey, write policy questions, and choose Add-On options where needed.

If you do not have the Introductory Packet from ICMA, you can use the enrollment form on the back of this newsletter.

You can also contact Heather Locke at NRC for additional information or an invoice at any time: heather@n-r-c.com.

**We are happy to get materials to you even faster by sending electronic copies of all files if you prefer. Just let us know!

Introducing our changes to The NCS™

Like proud homeowners, we attend to the maintenance and update of The National Citizen Survey™ (The NCS). As The NCS is entering its seventh year, we have evaluated scores of possible improvements to the questionnaire, analysis, and report that have come from National Research Center, Inc. (NRC) survey professionals and our clients. We have selected those changes that we believe will improve The NCS without losing the core qualities that The NCS participants have admired over time—ease of use, quality of methods, comprehensiveness of coverage, and clarity of reporting.

IMPROVEMENTS TO THE QUESTIONNAIRE

We have added a variety of questions to enhance attention to civic engagement, a characteristic of community that more and more is identified as a foundation for good government. Such questions include whether residents participate in religious or spiritual activities, participate in clubs or civic activities, provide help to a friend or

neighbor, and visit with immediate neighbors. We refreshed questions about Internet use that were quickly becoming outdated; we moved from questions about accessibility of service to availability of services in order to avoid ambiguity, and we reduced redundancy and imbalance by including about the same number of questions for each service, and by minimizing the negative tilt of problem statements that covered the same ground as service evaluation questions. We also included natural environment and livable cities indicators, such as cleanliness of community, variety of housing options, overall quality of business and service establishments, and preservation of natural areas such as open space, farmland, and greenbelts.

No change comes without concerns about loss of parts of the questionnaire that grew from a history of quality. We anticipate that you will see the overall value in the improvements we have made.

The table below summarizes topic areas that were changed.

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Items changed	Topic areas
Items added	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preservation of the natural environment • Civic engagement • Smart growth/new urbanism/"livable cities" • Residential stability • Affordable housing
Items altered	<p>Changed wording to provide more reliable and comparable data</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changed "Access to" to "Availability of" • Moved questions from "problems" to service evaluation • Streamlined Internet questions to be more appropriate to today's users than to those in the early 2000s
Items removed	<p>Removed items that were redundant with other questions in the survey, affected too few jurisdictions, or were more appropriately included in a specialty survey</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lengthy/repetitive code enforcement questions • Lengthy/repetitive parks and recreation questions • Demographic questions that were unnecessary



Who we are

Thomas I Miller, Ph.D., is the president of NRC. He received a Ph.D. in research and evaluation methods from the University of Colorado. He has worked in state and local government since 1977. With Michelle Kobayashi, he wrote, *Citizen Surveys: How to do them, how to use them, what they mean*, published in 2000 by ICMA, Washington, D.C. Tom founded National Research Center, Inc. in 1994. He has designed, overseen, and written results of hundreds of research and evaluation projects and presented his findings to a wide variety of audiences, both academic and lay. He has written about survey research in journals devoted to public management, including *Public Administration Review*, *Journal of the American Planning Association*, *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, *Planning Commissioners Journal*, *Management Science and Policy Analysis*, and *Governing*. Believing that low-cost, quality surveys are an important part of local government management, Tom has spent years developing The NCS questionnaire and protocols.

Heather Locke, M.A., is The National Citizen Survey™ director. Heather earned a master's degree in religious studies from the University of Colorado at Boulder and undergraduate degrees in religion and French. Her experience is in research, management, coordination, customer service, and teaching. Heather manages all of The NCS surveys—including working closely with interested jurisdictions and those who participate. She oversees the survey process through questionnaire customization, data collection, and report writing, as well as post-report consultation on interpretation of results and next steps.

Damema Mann, B.A., is The National Citizen Survey™ associate director. Damema earned her bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Vermont. Her experience and skills include marketing, management, and customer service. Damema is involved in all aspects of The NCS, from customizing surveys to data analysis and report creation. She also maintains the normative database for NRC.

Erin Caldwell, M.S.P.H., is a senior research associate at NRC. Erin has a master's degree in public health with an emphasis in research methods and statistics. She has over 10 years experience as a senior researcher and research manager working in and for local government. She has designed and conducted scores of citizen surveys, needs assessments, policy studies, and program evaluations. Erin helped to develop The NCS.

Shannon Hayden, M.A., senior analyst, earned her undergraduate degree in sociology from The Colorado College and a master's degree in educational psychology (emphasis on research and evaluation methodology) from the University of Colorado at Denver and Health Sciences Center. Shannon has been involved in dozens of citizen surveys at NRC, working as a project manager and on all aspects of the projects, including survey instrument development, overseeing data collection, and analyzing and reporting the data. She helped develop The National Citizen Survey™ and oversaw the beta site testing of this project. Her

background includes a number of years in marketing. She continues to contribute technical assistance and analysis to The NCS.

Lee Tyson, B.A., analyst, has a bachelor of arts in anthropology and English from the University of Connecticut. Lee has assisted NRC principals on projects with myriad topics, including parks and recreation, older adult needs assessments, transportation, policy studies, and code enforcement. She has worked extensively with The NCS staff in developing reports and normative comparisons. ■

Resources on the Web

At icma.org/NCS, there are a variety of resources on surveying your citizens.

- PowerPoint suitable for presentation to elected officials
- Sample surveys and reports of results
- NCS enrollment form
- Feature articles

The National Citizen Survey™ (The NCS) is a cost effective system for conducting comprehensive surveys of local residents and an important benchmarking tool that allows comparison among communities. The NCS begins with a customizable survey with core questions important to your community.

National Research Center, Inc. (NRC) is one of the leading survey research and performance measurement teams in the United States, focusing on the information needs of the public sector.

The principals of NRC have authored several articles about citizen survey research methods, as well as a book on the methods of citizen surveying *Citizen Surveys: How to do them, how to use them, what they mean* published by the International City/County Management Association in April 2000.

ICMA advances professional local government worldwide. Its mission is to create excellence in local governance by developing and advancing professional management of local government. ICMA (International City/County Management Association) provides member support; publications, data, and information; peer and results-oriented assistance; and training and professional development to nearly 9,000 city, town, and county experts and other individuals and organizations throughout the world.

The National Citizen Survey™ is the latest in a long series of initiatives created by NRC to further public trust and confidence in local government and improve the management of local government services.

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ANALYSIS AND REPORTING ENHANCEMENTS

In addition to changes made to the questionnaire template, we have worked extensively on new analyses for the reports that include a more extensive executive summary, benchmark comparisons integrated into the main body of the report, calculations of housing cost stress, and a more detailed report of transportation modes for commuting. We also have introduced a new analysis, called Key Driver Analysis (KDA), that identifies those departments that most “drive” or influence the rating of overall service quality. We present the KDA findings in an “Action Chart™” that allows clients to see not only what the key drivers are, but also how services are trending over time and in comparison with other communities. Also, the report text is more interpretive, and the summary measures for quality ratings have been simplified for even greater clarity than before. Overall the report has an updated look and improved ease of use.

We are certain that you will find that the newly fashioned NCS provides you with the best value available in survey research. Like those you serve, we appreciate your drive to include the voice of residents in local government management, and we look forward to working with you in the years to come.

EGFP vs. Satisfaction

Q: When I am considering how to write survey questions, should I use a satisfaction scale or a quality scale? Why does The National Citizen Survey™ use “excellent, good, fair, poor” for many of its questions rather than “very satisfied to very unsatisfied?”

A: The temptation of some service and product providers is to test customer opinion by asking about satisfaction. Many local governments describe their citizen surveys as “customer satisfaction surveys.” Much has been written about the link between customer expectations and satisfaction such that higher expectations make for lower satisfaction. In the public sector compared with the private sector, service expectations tend to be middling or low. Let’s face it, most local government customers don’t come to the building permit counter with the excitement of fans in line for an iPhone. The hope for customer satisfaction in local government is a low threshold goal sometimes requiring only the smallest step to fulfill. As

private sector examples, compare the lower expectations for government service to the high expectations in the auto, telephone, or restaurant industries.

When local government customers are asked to report their “satisfaction,” they most often report being “very” or “somewhat” satisfied. When using these ratings for monitoring performance, government stakeholders risk being misled. The satisfaction of a citizen may be a weak endorsement for the quality of a service that is delivered poorly but better than the citizen expected. Because too many residents expect relatively little from local government—having been influenced over many years to believe that government is inefficient, cumbersome, and inept—any rating of satisfaction (including “very satisfied”) may be a low rating indeed.

To measure government performance, it is better to ask residents directly what kind of performance they have observed. Residents are reasonable judges of service quality, whatever their own expectations or demographics (see, for example, Gregg G. Van Ryzin, Stephen Immerwahr and Stan Altman, “Measuring Street Cleanliness: A Comparison of New York City’s Scorecard and Results from a Citizen Survey,” *Public Administration Review*. 68 (March/April 2008): 295–303).

Our own research has demonstrated that satisfaction questions (using a five-point “very satisfied” to “very dissatisfied” scale) and quality questions (using an “excellent,” “good,” “fair,” “poor” scale) do not elicit the same service evaluation from respondents. The correlations between pairs of ratings for the same services asked in separate parts of a survey using these two different rating scales were not high. Not only did residents consider each type of question to be different, but results of the research demonstrated that residents reported being somewhat more satisfied with the same service whose quality they rated somewhat lower.

Performance measurement is about understanding how well government performs, and that requires measures of both of how hard we try and how well we do. How hard we try is monitored in common process and output metrics that track quality *service delivery*, such as police response times, bus maintenance expenditures per mile driven, and tons of recyclable materials collected. How well we do is tracked with surveys of residents about the outcomes of our service delivery that tell us about *service receipt*, such as ratings of the quality of the

The NCS™

Info Corner

Calendar for new Classes

June–October 2008

We have “classes” for groups of participants beginning at the start of each month. In order to be considered for a certain class, you need to send in your enrollment form and check approximately two weeks prior to the start date. We will consider “late arrivals” contingent on space available in each class. We are happy to work with your schedule as much as possible!

JUNE

Enrollment deadline: June 2
Data collection: July 14–Aug 18
Draft reports: Sept 8
Completion: Sept 29

JULY

Enrollment deadline: June 30
Data collection: Aug 11–Sept 15
Draft reports: Oct 6
Completion: Oct 27

AUGUST

Enrollment deadline: August 4
Data collection: Sept 15–Oct 20
Draft reports: Nov 10
Completion: Dec 1

SEPTEMBER

Enrollment deadline: September 1
Data collection: Oct 13–Nov 17
Draft reports: Dec 8
Completion: Dec 22

OCTOBER

Enrollment deadline: September 29
Data collection: Nov 10–Dec 17
Draft reports: Jan 5, 2009
Completion: Jan 19, 2009

police, bus system and recycling. When you want to know how well you are performing, ask about quality. That’s what you’re driving at. ■

What You Get with The NCS
Basic Service includes:

- Copy of **Citizen Surveys: How to do them, how to use them, what they mean**, by Miller and Kobayashi, published in 2000 by the International City/County Management Association, Washington, D.C
- Customized survey form and mailing envelopes with jurisdiction name, logo, and local contact
- Choice of services to be surveyed
- Addition of three optional questions
- Three mailings to 1,200 randomly selected households: pre-survey post-card and two mailings of the survey instrument
- A margin of error (95 percent confidence interval) of no more than +/- 5 percentage points around any given percent
- Data input and cleaning
- Statistical analysis of survey results
- Written report illustrated with tables and graphs summarizing the survey results
- Comparative norms for service evaluations
- Certificate of survey authenticity
- Technical assistance by phone and email
- Add-on options for further reports and customization including cross-tabulations, in-person presentation, larger survey sample, translation into different languages, etc.
- Debriefing call

ENROLLMENT FORM

Last Name _____ First Name _____

Title _____ Organization _____

Mailing Address _____ City (abbreviate if necessary) _____ State _____ Zip _____

Phone _____ Fax _____

Email Address _____

To order, send this completed form with payment to:
 The National Citizen Survey™ • National Research Center • Attn: Heather Locke
 3005 30th St. • Boulder, CO 80301

PRICING

Product	Price	Description
Basic	\$9,600	Includes creation of survey instrument and materials, printing and mailing to 1,200 households, data analysis and creation of a report of results, report of normative comparisons, and summary report.
Spanish	\$1,450	Includes Spanish paragraph on cover letters asking those who wish to complete the survey in Spanish to contact the jurisdiction and request a Spanish copy of the survey. Jurisdiction will be mailed envelopes-outbound and return-and surveys to mail out to those individuals
3,000 out	\$6,600	Mailing is of 3,000 instead of 1,200.
Custom norms	\$1,100	Through worksheet options, jurisdiction selects criteria for set of custom norms. Custom norms will be provided alongside national norms in report tables. Graphs will include either custom or national norms but not both.
One open end	\$1,500	Includes one open-ended question added to survey. Responses will be categorized and reported in a table under separate cover, accompanied by a complete list of verbatim responses.
Compare prior (non-NCS) results	\$1,750	Tables include comparisons to previous years' service evaluation ratings in jurisdiction-up to three previous years.
Compare to prior NCS results	\$0	Comparisons included in report of results.
Demographic crosstabs	\$900	Crosstabs of questions 1-16 by 4 demographic variables on survey to be provided under separate cover from report.
Geographic crosstabs	\$1,100	Crosstabs of questions 1-16 by geographic variable to be provided under separate cover from report.
Phone data collection	\$6,000	400 completed interviews
On-site Presentation	\$2,650	Presentation of results to council or department heads. Cost includes travel expenses.



Leaders at the Core of Better Communities

