

NCS Frequently Asked Questions

For answers to your questions about NCS, consult this frequently asked questions page.

What is The National Citizen Survey™?

The National Citizen Survey™ is a unique service to administer, analyze, and report results from a customizable citizen survey. National Research Center, Inc., and ICMA are able to provide this service at a relatively low cost through careful standardization and automation of the survey process. Each participating jurisdiction can make important customizations for its locale, and the report can compare the results from your jurisdiction with results from other jurisdictions across the United States.

Why should we survey our citizens?

Good reasons include: to measure service performance; to benchmark service quality ratings; to assess community needs; to make long-range, short-term, or strategic plans; to demonstrate the receptivity of your government; to evaluate potential policies or community characteristics; to continue a trendline from periodic surveying; or to respond to a council mandate. These days, residents expect their local government officials to be as well informed about customer perspectives as the best businesses.

Why should we use The National Citizen Survey™ instead of doing the survey on our own?

The National Citizen Survey™ offers many advantages over both in-house administration and the use of a consultant. These include reduced costs, comparisons to national norms, and the credibility of a widely reputable independent research firm.

What kinds of questions are included on the survey?

Questions are included about the quality of life in your community or county, local policies, demographics, quality of local government services and resident use of services.

Our jurisdiction provides a wide array of services. Will The National Citizen Survey™ let us survey opinions about all of these services?

The selection of service questions is extensive, so all of the major services that you provide are likely to be represented.

Can The National Citizen Survey™ be used by counties?

Yes. A special template, fully customizable, is available for counties.

We participate in ICMA's Center for Performance Measurement. Can we use The National Citizen Survey™ to collect data for CPM?

Yes. In fact, The NCS was designed to coordinate with CPM data collection. If you use the NCS survey instrument, you will not need to ask citizens the same questions again for CPM purposes.

To what extent is the survey customizable?

You may customize your survey by choosing from a set of questions that are commonly used in citizen surveys, that have been endorsed by a panel of experts, and that have been tested at several pilot sites. You also have the option of creating three policy questions that are entirely specific to your jurisdiction. Furthermore, you may choose among a selection of additional services to modify the administration by including an open-ended question, comparisons to your previous survey results, a larger sample size, phone data collection, a Spanish translation, customized norms, geographic crosstabs, and a breakdown of results by respondent characteristics.

What will the margin of error in the results be?

Typically, with a sample size of 1,200 surveys, there will be about 400 responses, which translates to a margin of error that is approximately 5 percentage points around any percent. One of the additional options is a larger sample size of 3,000 residents, which will reduce the margin of error to about 3 percentage points.

How long will jurisdiction staff spend on The National Citizen Survey™?

This will vary and will depend in part on the way your jurisdiction operates. A lead staff member for the project could expect to spend from 10 to 40 hours over the course of the 18-week administration. Publicity is encouraged, and will take additional staff time. The reward for your rather small investment of time will be a better survey and a higher response rate.

What is the cost of The National Citizen Survey™, and how does it compare to the cost of a survey from a private consultant?

You will find enclosed a list of options for The National Survey™ services, and you will find The NCS™ more affordable than a fully customized survey. The added value of normative data makes The NCS™ even more cost effective.

How long will it take to get results and the report once we sign up?

Once you sign up, you will receive a packet of materials requesting information about customizing the survey. The complete time frame is approximately 12 weeks from the time we receive your completed materials from this packet.

How will the survey be administered?

The survey will be administered by mail. A postcard is sent to randomly selected households announcing that a survey will follow. The first survey comes a week later and is followed by a "reminder" survey one week after that. Data collection by phone is also an option.

How many people in our jurisdiction will receive the mailing?

The basic service includes a sample size of 1,200 residents. However, we also offer the option of a sample size of 3,000 residents at an additional cost.

How many responses can we expect?

With a sample size of 1,200, we typically receive about 400 responses. For a sample size of 3,000, we expect approximately 1,000 responses. The actual number varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. The response rate will depend partly on the amount of publicity you provide ahead of time.

What about people who don't speak English?

We offer a Spanish-language version of the survey instrument as a service option. Let us know if you are interested in other languages.

What kind of report will we get?

You will get three separate reports. An executive summary briefs you on results. A comprehensive report includes survey background, survey methods, local results, and appendices. Local results are presented in tables and graphs. A third report, intended for internal use or for public information purposes, at the manager's discretion, compares local results to norms based on National Research Center's database of over 350 surveys conducted throughout the United States.

Can we compare the results of The National Citizen Survey™ to the results of surveys we did in the past?

Yes. As an option, we can convert most service evaluations to The NCS™ measurement scale for comparisons over the last three administrations to The NCS™ results.

With which communities will we be able to compare our results?

The normative comparisons are based on about 350 jurisdictions where citizen surveys have been conducted recently. These are communities from all across the United States ranging in size from just a few hundred to over two million. More than 200,000 residents of counties, villages, townships, and cities completed these surveys, and they are intended to represent over 30,000,000 Americans. Norms can be customized, too, so that your jurisdiction is compared to others in the database of similar size, location, or type (e.g., counties, cities, towns, etc.).

Do we have to compare our results to national norms?

No, the choice is yours.

What if we don't want our results publicized?

That is up to you. The final report is delivered to the client only, on your time schedule. Comparisons with the normative data are presented in a separate report. Results from our database remain confidential. Norms are created by grouping results so that individual jurisdictions remain anonymous unless they choose to be mentioned for purposes of positive recognition.

With which communities will we be able to compare our results?

The normative comparisons are based on about 300 jurisdictions where citizen surveys have been conducted recently. These are communities from all across the United States ranging in size from just a few hundred to over 2 million. More than 100,000 residents of counties, villages, townships and cities completed these surveys and they are intended to represent over 30,000,000 Americans. Norms can be customized, too, so that your jurisdiction is compared to others in the database of similar size, location or type (e.g., counties, cities, towns, etc.).

How is the validity of the survey authenticated?

In the final report, we provide an elaborate description of our meticulous survey methods. We also provide a certificate of participation, suitable for display, signed by the executive director of ICMA and the president of NRC, to all jurisdictions that successfully complete the survey project.

Can results be used for measuring government performance?

Yes, the opinion of residents is critical in understanding the quality of service delivery and has become a widely-used performance measurement tool. We remind our clients that administrative records and independent observations about actual service efficiencies and quality measures are important, too.

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