

Easing the burden: Exploring a new design for response burden management within sampling coordination of business surveys

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Abstract

Response burden management is important for all National Statistical Agencies (NSI) in their work to reduce the cost inflicted on respondents. The Fifth Principle of the United Nation's Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics (2014) demands that statistical agencies consider "the burden on respondents" when collecting data. An important way in which many NSIs ensure minimal response burden in business surveys is through a probability sampling coordination system. This system draws representative samples of businesses for each survey, while at the same time minimizing the overall number of surveys each business participates in over a given period. However, the number of surveys is not the only way to measure response burden. The time spent on answering the survey, and the overall user experience, are also important measures of response burden.

This paper explores ways in which this information – time spent, and user experience – can be accounted for when designing a system for sampling coordination of business surveys.

Statistics Norway (SSB) uses the sampling coordination system called NORSAMU (Norwegian System for Coordinated Business Surveys). Also, SSB collects information on time spent and user experience through the business survey portal called Altinn. However, this information from Altinn is yet to be accounted for within NORSAMU. This paper analyses the total response burden for each business, when combining information both from NORSAMU and from Altinn. Importantly, this paper answers the question: How can data on time spent and user experience be implemented when designing a system for sampling coordination of business surveys, in order to improve response burden management?

This will provide new insights relevant for other NSIs in their response burden management within sampling coordination of business surveys. This analysis also provides an opportunity for exchanging ideas between countries with similar systems.

Keywords: business surveys, sampling coordination, response burden management

1. Introduction

Response burden management is important for all National Statistical Agencies (NSI). The Fifth Principle of the United Nation's Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics (2014) demands that statistical agencies consider "the burden on respondents" when collecting data. This is according to principle 5, stating that "Statistical agencies are to choose the source with regard to quality, timeliness, costs and the burden on respondents" (United Nations, 2014, p. 1). Statistics Norway (SSB)'s own guidelines have adopted these principles (Statistics Norway, 2021b, p. 7). In fact, the burden on respondents is one of the parameters reported annually to the Ministry of Finance (Statistics Norway, 2021a, p. 27-28). Eurostat also emphasizes the importance of response burden management. In the "European statistics code of practice", indicator 9.2 dictates that "the response burden is spread as widely as possible over survey populations and monitored by the statistical authority" (Eurostat, 2017, p. 14).

Response burden is of concern for NSI's not only because they are obliged to consider this when collecting data. Failing to consider the burden on respondents has both methodological consequences and political consequences (Jones *et al.*, 2005). It affects statistical quality (Jones *et al.*, 2005), and harms the relationship between the NSI and the business community.

Conceptualizing response burden

When measuring response burden, it is common to distinguish between *actual response burden*, and *perceived response burden* (Haraldsen et al., 2013, p. 219). The term *actual response burden* focuses on the monetary burden we inflict on businesses by having them fill out our surveys instead of doing their usual job, and the term *perceived response burden* focuses on the respondents' survey experience. Bottone et al. (2021, p. 812) define *perceived response burden* as "the respondents' assessment of how burdensome they find it to comply with the data request." While the term *actual response burden* in theory often focuses on the labor costs spent filling out our surveys, in practice, time is often used as an easier to measure indicator for *actual response burden*. As Haraldsen et al. (2013, p. 219) writes: "Time is money in businesses."

Clarification of terms

First some notes about the terms used in this paper: “Survey” is the overall term for collecting “data from a subset of the population of interest” (Jones et al. 2013, p. 4), and a “survey round” is a period specific round of a survey. For example, a quarterly survey has four survey rounds annually. The term “questionnaire” refers to the specific research instrument, consisting of a set of questions, that are used for gathering information of interest. One survey might consist of multiple questionnaires.

Spreading the response burden through sampling coordination

There are numerous ways in which NSIs work to reduce response burden. One way to reduce the total response burden for a given survey is to reduce the sample size (Haraldsen et al., 2013, p. 241). In the case of a repeated survey, which is mostly the case for surveys in NSIs, one can reduce the frequency of the survey being sent out. NSIs can also reduce response burden by making changes to the questionnaire, e.g., by reducing the number of questions or formulating the questions in a way that is easy to understand for the respondents (Haraldsen et al., 2013, p. 241).

Yet another way of reducing the response burden lies in the design of the survey sampling system, which is the focus of this paper. Survey sampling refers to the specific process of selecting units from a population. To achieve a representative sample, the population is divided into different subgroups, known as *strata*, and units are then sampled from each of these strata. The number of units sampled from each strata varies, and in some strata all the units are included in the sample. This is known as a stratum with *total count*. For business surveys, the sampling units are businesses, which is why, in this paper, *sampling unit* and *business* are used interchangeably.¹

Choosing a sampling method that takes into consideration response burden is a powerful tool for reducing and managing response burden (Jones et al., 2005). One such mechanism that can be included as a part of the design of the sampling system is *sampling coordination*. This means that when drawing a sample for one survey, each

¹ Within survey research, a participant in a survey is known as a *respondent*, which is also used in this paper.

unit's participation in other surveys is also taken into consideration (Haraldsen et al., 2013, p. 222). This implies that “[...] samples are not drawn independently of each other, but in a way that controls joint survey participation.” (Haraldsen et al., 2013, p. 222). A sampling coordination system controls the overlap of survey samples and enables a more even spread of response burden amongst businesses. The details of sampling coordination systems lie beyond the scope of this paper, but the important aspect is that usually, it is only the *objective number* of survey participation that are considered when spreading response burden, i.e., *response burden* is understood to only mean the *number of other surveys and/or survey rounds* a given unit participates in.

However, both actual and perceived response burden varies immensely across the different surveys. Some surveys use long questionnaires asking for information it might be time consuming for the business to retrieve, while questionnaires for other surveys might only contain one or two questions asking for information which is easily available. Importantly, the response burden for each survey also varies between the businesses. Typically, it is easier for a large business to respond to surveys compared to a smaller business, as they have more resources – time and personnel – available.

The aim of this paper is to explore ways in which this variation in response burden can be accounted for within a system of sampling coordination, by answering the question: *How can data on time spent and user experience be implemented when designing a system for sampling coordination of business surveys, in order to improve response burden management?* The next section presents how sampling coordination is done in SSB today, how SSB collects data on actual and perceived response burden, and finally test a technique for including data on time spent when drawing survey samples.

2. About the study

This study concerns sampling coordination in SSB Norway, which is done through a system for coordinated sampling, and data on actual and perceived response burden collected through the business survey portal called *Altinn*.

Sampling coordination in Statistics Norway

Most of the business surveys in SSB, including the largest surveys, are currently included in NORSAMU (*Norsk system for samordnet utvalgstrekkning*) which is a system for coordinated sampling of business surveys. It is based on SAMU, which is the system for coordinated sampling used by Statistics Sweden (SCB). One of the objectives of systems such as NORSAMU and SAMU is to spread the response burden among businesses (Lindblom and Teterukovsky 2007). In NORSAMU, response burden is understood to be (1) the overall number of different surveys a given unit participates in, and (2) the consecutive number of rounds of the same survey a given unit participates in.

Firstly, NORSAMU attempts *minimal overlap* with all the other surveys included in NORSAMU. Put simply, this means that the more surveys a given unit participates in, the less likely it is to be chosen for another survey. In practice, this means that within each stratum, units that have participated in few other surveys are drawn before units that have participated in more surveys.

Secondly, NORSAMU uses each unit's survey participation history to prioritize between units in the same strata. By selecting a unit that has participated in as few other survey rounds as possible, the total response burden is spread amongst the businesses, and the burden for each business – the number of survey rounds - is kept a minimum. This is also known as *negative coordination* (Guggemos and Sautory, no date).

The details of NORSAMU lies beyond the scope of this paper. However, the important aspect is that NORSAMU only spread the response burden by considering the *objective number of survey participation*, be it participation in other surveys (*minimal overlap*), or participation in consecutive survey rounds of the same survey (*negative coordination*).

Lastly, it is worth noticing that in practice, sampling coordination evens out the response burden primarily for small and medium sized companies. Large companies are often included in strata with full count and are sampled regardless of their participation in numerous other surveys (Haraldsen *et al.*, 2013, p. 222).

Data collection on response burden in Statistics Norway

As previously mentioned, there are two different aspects of response burden: *Actual response burden*, and *perceived response burden* (Haraldsen *et al.*, 2013, p. 219). In 2015, SSB started collecting data on *actual response burden* for business surveys, measured as time spent preparing for and filling out our questionnaires. In 2018, this effort to measure response burden was followed up by also collecting data on *perceived response burden*, measured as whether the respondents found the questionnaire easy or difficult to fill out. Information on both actual and perceived response burden is collected through the business survey portal *Altinn*, where each questionnaire includes a standard battery of questions on response burden. Thus, the data on both actual and perceived response burden is self-reported.

As of 2022, all SSB's surveys include questions on time spent preparing for and filling out our questionnaires. However, only five surveys include questions on perceived response burden.²

When it comes to actual response burden, we ask the respondents how much time they spent gathering necessary information before the questionnaire could be filled out, and how much time they spent filling out the questionnaire. Based on these questions we create three indicators on actual response burden: time spent on preparations, time spent filling out the questionnaire, and total time spent. And as

² These were chosen because they are some of our largest and most complex questionnaires. But we are working to include questions on respondents' survey experience in more questionnaires, so in time we will have more data in this area. But as of now the data is limited.

mentioned earlier, we use this data when we report the total business response burden to the Ministry of Finance.

For the questionnaires that include questions on perceived response burden, we ask the respondents if they considered it easy or difficult to fill out the questionnaire. And if they considered it difficult, we ask them to specify, from a list of options, what made it difficult to fill out the questionnaire. This list of options includes among other things “many questions”, “untidy layout”, “unclear concepts and explanations of concepts”, and “difficult or time-consuming calculations”. Based on the data on perceived response burden we can both see how many thought the questionnaire was difficult to complete, and what the reasons for this were.

3. Results

The data used in this analysis spans 2015 – 2021, with 153 363 sampling units, i.e., unique businesses. These are all businesses that have participated in a business survey between 2015 and 2021 *and* filled out the questions regarding time spent on filling out the questionnaire. This data material covers 99 different business surveys, 511 different survey rounds, and 116 different questionnaires. This is not the complete data for all business surveys in SSB. As answering the questions on “time spent” is not mandatory, this data covers units that received a questionnaire between 2015 – 2021 *and* answered the questions on time spent. It is the best data we have available, but the number of surveys will be incorrect as multiple units participated in surveys where they did not fill out the questions on time spent. It is also important to notice that the data on time spent and user experience are self-reported by the respondent, and we have no opportunity to verify them. Thus, it is natural to assume that some of these values are incorrect reports that does not necessarily represent the actual time spent.

Distribution of response burden

Table 1 shows summary statistics for the two main variables of interest; number of survey rounds for each unit, and the total time spent answering questionnaires for each unit. On average, in this data material, a business participates in 3 survey rounds, and has on average spent 286 minutes answering questionnaires for SSB. We also see that there are some extreme outliers for the variable *time spent*, reflecting that these numbers are self-reported and might be incorrect, which is why Table 1 includes the 90th percentile, and the standard deviation for time spent should be treated with caution.

Table 1 Summary statistics of number of survey rounds and time spent

	N	Min	Q25	Median	Mean	Q75	Q90	Max	Sd
Number of surveys	153 363	1	1	2	3.03	3	6	55	3.85
Time spent	153 363	0	20	60	286.26	180	490	359398	2441.30

Response burden for six different questionnaires

To further explore the variation in response burden across surveys, we look at the following six questionnaires:

- **RA-0678** asks about businesses number of vacancies
- **RA-0530** asks about prices of building materials for housing
- **RA-0419** asks about the use of IT in businesses
- **RA-0794** asks about turnover, costs and investments in businesses
- **RA-0425** asks about figures for macroeconomic statistics
- **RA-0649** asks about waste from service industries

These questionnaires have been selected to illustrate the fact that there is great variation when it comes to total time spent on the questionnaires we send out. Figure 1 shows a boxplot with total time used (in minutes) for these questionnaires. The blue box is the interquartile range and show the spread of the middle half of the distribution for each selected questionnaire, i.e., the range from the 25th to the 75th percentile. As we can see in Figure 1, on average, the respondents used way less time on RA-0678 compared to RA-0649. And the other four questionnaires fall somewhere in between. Again, the high number of outliers reflects that these numbers are self-reported and might be incorrect.

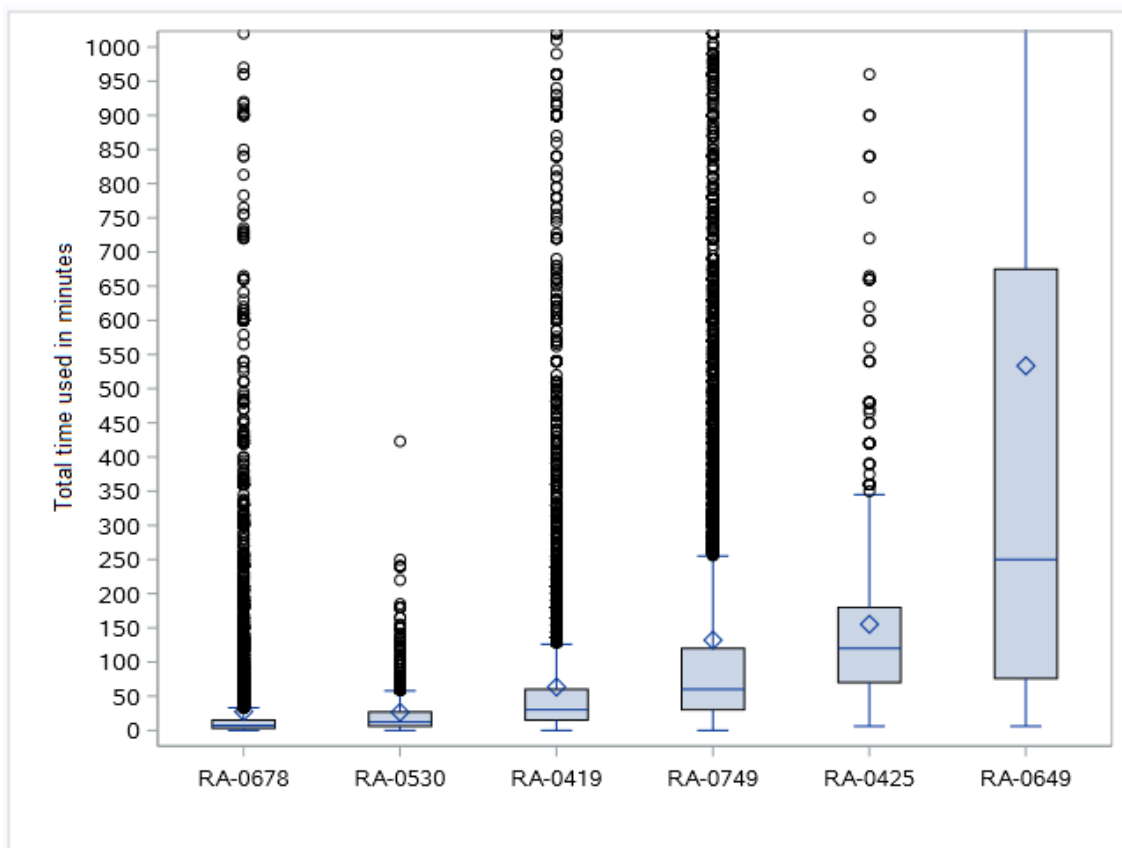


Figure 1 Boxplot showing total time used (in minutes) for six different questionnaires

While Figure 1 illustrates the large variation in total time spent between the six selected questionnaires, Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for the same six questionnaires.

Table 2 Summary statistics on total time used (in minutes) for six different questionnaires

	RA-0678	RA-0530	RA-0419	RA-0749	RA-0425	RA-0649
N	56 581	1 815	29 292	75 468	857	95
Mean	27,63	26,61	63,46	133,20	155,36	533,4
Median	7	12	30	60	120	250
Mode	2	10	15	30	120	30
Sd	615,70	102,06	256,87	990,91	145,26	760,02
Q25	3	6	15	30	70	76
Q75	15	27	60	120	180	675

As we can see in Table 2, the mean and median value for each selected questionnaire varies greatly, meaning that total time spent varies greatly between each questionnaire. When it comes to the relationship between the mean and the median value, we can see that the mean is greater for all the selected questionnaires. And the reason for this, as mentioned earlier, is extreme outliers that affects the mean. Therefore, we use the median value (which is less affected by extreme values) when we report the total business response burden to the Ministry of Finance.

Data on perceived response burden

Figure 2 shows the percentage distribution for the five questionnaire that include the question on perceived response burden, which are the following questionnaires:

- **RA-0479** asks about expenses related to research and development
- **RA-0657** focuses on businesses located on Svalbard
- **RA-0749** asks about turnover, costs and investments in businesses (also presented in Figure 1)
- **RA-0481** focuses on businesses in the maritime industry
- **RA-0708** asks about expenses related to innovation

Since this is a voluntary question that does not have to be answered to submit the questionnaires, there are some missing values, which are excluded from the figure.

As we can see in Figure 2 it varies between the surveys how large a proportion thought the survey was easy to complete, and how large a proportion though the survey was difficult to complete. For example, about 75 % thought that RA-0479 was easy to complete compared to about 32 % for RA-0708.

In sum, both Figure 1 and Figure 2 show that the surveys sent out by SSB varies both in terms of the actual and the perceived response burden we impose on the respondents. And this in turn is due to the varying size and complexity of the various surveys.

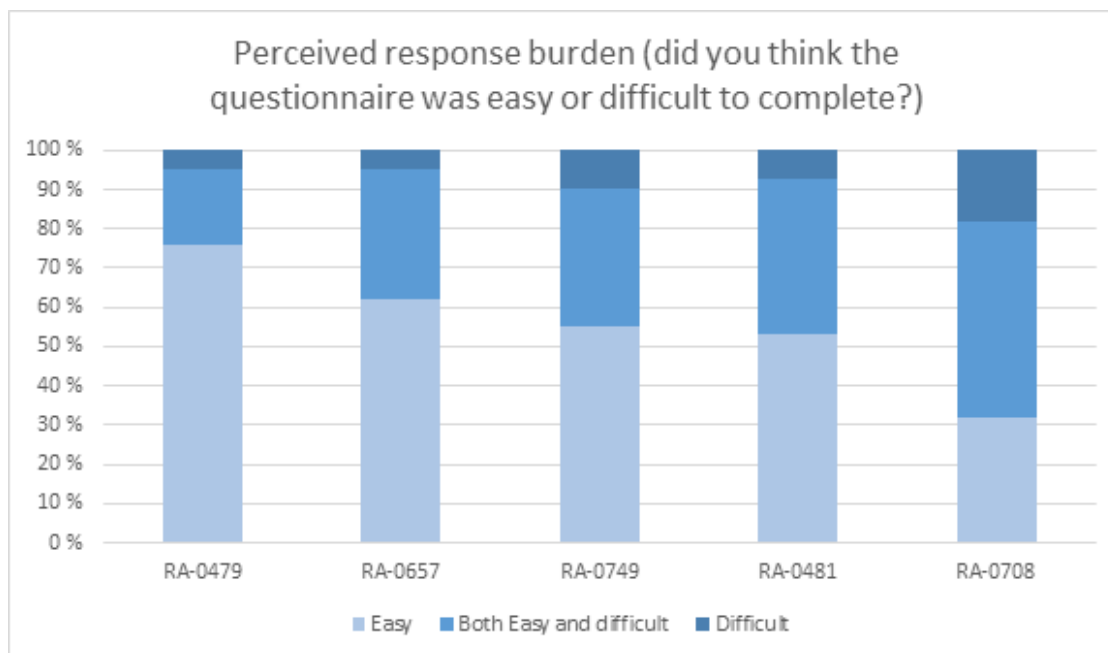


Figure 2 Perceived response burden for five different questionnaires

Testing the new design accounting for total time spent

The final step in the study is to test whether information on time spent can be accounted for when drawing survey samples. Due to the previously mentioned amount of missing data as well as the presence of extreme values, this should be viewed as a test of the new technique rather than a true result of the effect of a new design. We test this on one of the largest surveys in SSB with one of the most complex drawing procedures, which is the Structure Business Survey (RA-0749). Ideally, we would prefer using a less complex survey, but we choose this survey as it has one of the largest populations, thus maximizing the use of our limited data material. There are many full count strata, which are excluded from this analysis. Ultimately, we are looking to draw 2245 units from a population of 20 037 units. We test this on the newest drawing, from January 2021, by re-drawing samples using various drawing techniques and comparing the distribution of response burden for each technique. We used R (R Core Team, 2019), and the R-package 'prnsamplr' (Gylling, 2021), for the sampling.

We drew three different samples; Sample A, Sample B, and Sample C.

Sample A was drawn using Simple Random Probability sampling in each stratum. Next, for Sample B and Sample C, we followed Lorca et al. (2011): To draw Sample B, units are ranked according to the number of survey rounds, within each stratum, and units with the lowest number of previous survey rounds are sampled first, for each stratum respectively. Finally, to draw Sample C units are ranked, again within each stratum, first according to the number of survey rounds, and then according to total time spent. Units with the lowest number of previous survey rounds and time spent are sampled first.

Finally, each of these three techniques are evaluated based on the distribution of the number of survey rounds and the time spent amongst the units in the samples. We would expect that the response burden in terms of total number of survey rounds is more evenly spread in Sample B compared to Sample A, and that time spent is more evenly spread in Sample C compared to Sample A and Sample B.

Distribution of number of surveys

Table 3 shows descriptive statistics for the number of surveys for the different samples. The mean value of number of survey rounds is reduced from 3.88 for Sample A to 1.94 in Sample B. The maximum number of survey rounds amongst the units in the sample is also reduced, from 33 in Sample A to 22 in Sample B. Sample C accounts for number of surveys before time spent, which is why the numbers are similar for Sample B and Sample C.

Table 3 Summary statistics for number of surveys across sample designs

	N	Min	Q25	Median	Mean	Q75	Q90	Max	Sd
Sample A	2245	1	1	2	3.88	5	9	33	3.91
Sample B	2245	1	1	1	1.94	2	4	22	2.00
Sample C	2245	1	1	1	1.94	2	4	22	2.00

Figure 3 shows that the sampling design used for Sample B is successful in reducing the total number of survey rounds compared to the sampling design used for Sample C.

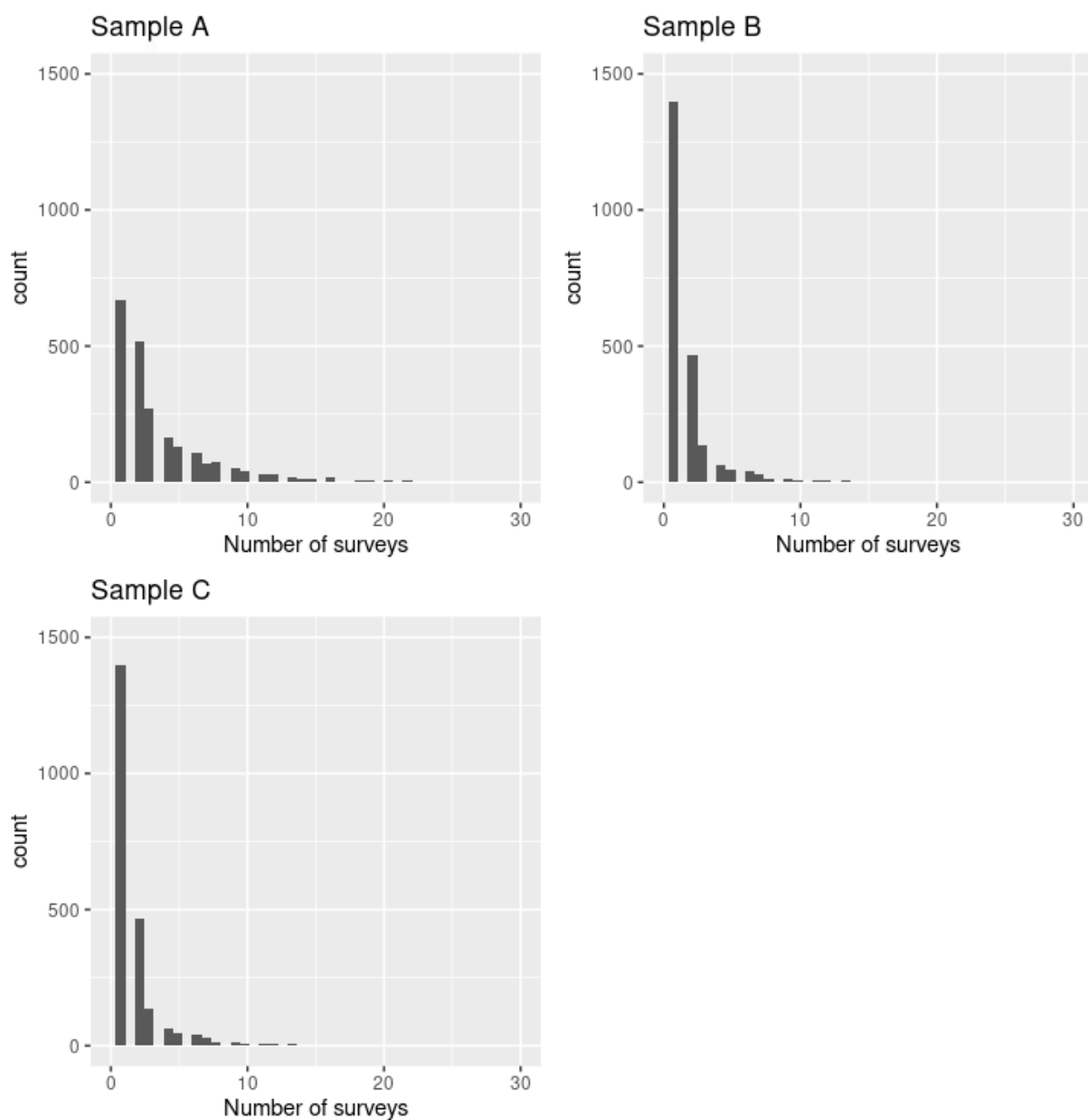


Figure 3 Distribution of number of surveys for different sample designs

Distribution of time spent

Table 4 shows that the mean value of time spent is reduced from 401.40 minutes in Sample A to 137.52 minutes in Sample B, reflecting the fact that only ranking units based on aggregated number of surveys also help reduce the time burden. Finally, in Sample C, where time burden specifically is accounted for, the mean value is reduced even further to 106.31 minutes.

Table 4 Summary statistics for time spent across sample designs

	N	Min	Q25	Median	Mean	Q75	Q90	Max	Sd
Sample A	2245	0	35	105	401.40	300	765.00	119939	2741.69
Sample B	2245	0	15	45	137.52	120	301.20	7138	361.49
Sample C	2245	0	7	25	106.31	90	265.00	6060	291.94

Similarly, Figure 4 shows that the sampling design used for Sample C is successful in reducing the total time spent compared to the sampling design used for Sample A and B. The distribution of time spent is difficult to present visually due to the presence of extreme outliers, but in Figure 4 values over 800 minutes (around Q90 in this sample) is removed.

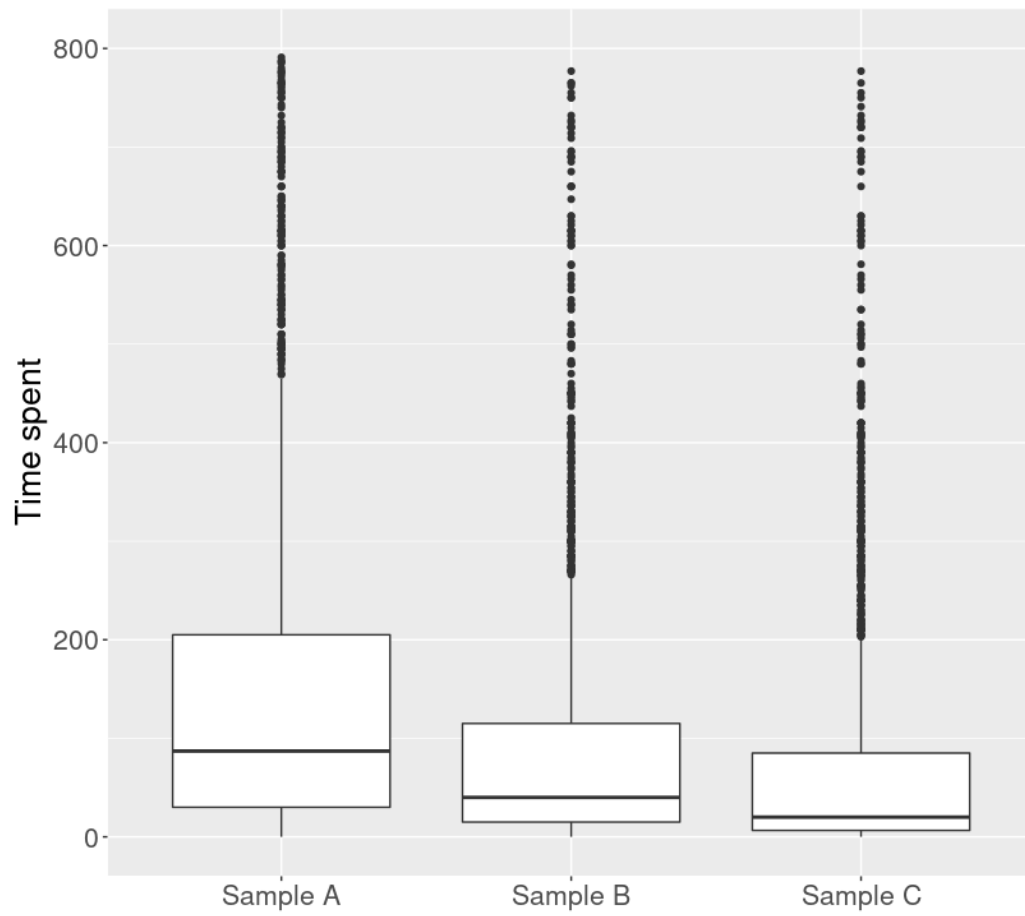


Figure 4 Distribution of time spent for different sample designs

Example of sampling for one stratum

Table 5 shows a more detailed view on the sampling procedure, comparing Sample A, B and C, for one particular stratum. The population in the sample consists of 13 units, i.e., 13 businesses are included in this stratum, of which 5 were sampled.

Table 5 Example of sampling from one stratum

	number of surveys	time spent	Sample A	Sample B	Sample C
Unit 1	1	10		Yes	Yes
Unit 2	1	20		Yes	Yes
Unit 3	1	30	Yes	Yes	Yes
Unit 4	1	30		Yes	Yes
Unit 5	1	60			Yes
Unit 6	1	70	Yes	Yes	
Unit 7	1	320			
Unit 8	2	45			
Unit 9	2	170	Yes		
Unit 10	3	80			
Unit 11	3	225	Yes		
Unit 12	4	240			
Unit 13	6	510	Yes		

We see from

Table 5 that units in Sample A were randomly selected. In Sample B, units were selected based on number of previous surveys. Lastly, in Sample C, units were selected first based on number of surveys, then on total time spent. The only difference between Sample B and C is that in the latter, Unit 5 was selected instead of Unit 6. They have both participated in only one previous survey, but Unit 5 spent less time

than Unit 6 on answering this survey. Thus, to spread time burden more evenly, Unit 5 was selected instead of Unit 6.

4. Discussion

The aim of this paper was to take a closer look at the sampling coordination system in SSB, which today only accounts for the number of surveys and survey rounds when spreading out the response burden among businesses. Knowing that SSB also collects data on actual response burden measured as time spent, and perceived response burden measured as whether the respondent found the questionnaire easy or difficult to fill out, we wanted to explore ways in which this data could be included in a sampling design, and we asked: *How can data on time spent and user experience be implemented when designing a system for sampling coordination of business surveys, in order to improve response burden management?*

We explored a technique where we ranked units according to time spent prior to sampling, which reduced the overall response burden in terms of time spent. However, accounting for *perceived response burden* within a sampling design is less straight forward, and problematic. Rather, the results from Figure 2 demonstrating a variation in *perceived response burden* across questionnaires further highlights that only looking at the number of survey participations when spreading response burden across businesses is problematic. Time spent is more objective, and easier to compare across businesses.

Related to this, several aspects should be noted:

Firstly, it is important to consider possible drawbacks with this technique: It is not always certain why some businesses spend longer than others on answering questionnaires. It might be a good reason for this, but it might also be that the business simply does not have full overview of internal information. Will it then be “just” to give this business a more lenient approach? Another aspect that this design does not account for is the fact that getting the same survey multiple times might be easier than getting a new one all the time. Lastly, while sampling coordination is an effective means for spreading the response burden, this is a strategy that is not so visible to the respondents.

Concluding remarks

Response burden management is important for methodological reasons and political reasons, making this a concern for all NSIs. This is reflected in the fact that multiple steering documents highlights response burden. SSB works continuously with this, but there is always room for improvement. As long as NSIs continue to depend on businesses and their reporting, continuing to explore ways to design the sampling system to further spread the response burden is an important part of the work to reduce response burden and maintain a good relationship between NSIs and businesses, which is crucial for the quality of the statistics.

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