



SURVEY FUTURES

SURVEY DATA COLLECTION
METHODS COLLABORATION

The old and the new: Comparing the relative performance of face-to-face and self-completion surveys in contemporary (UK) conditions

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Rory Fitzgerald and Nhlanhla Ndebele

City St George's, University of London (UK)



University of Essex



University of
Southampton



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Outline

- Background
- Studies:
 - How do self-completion and face-to-face compare when run in parallel?
 - GB parallel run experiment using ESS questionnaire (2021/2)
 - Emerging findings from ESS parallel run across Europe (2025/6)
 - Comparing Web- or CAPI first work when recruiting to a panel survey (USoc) (2022-4)
- Conclusions and implications for survey design

Background

- Face-to-face survey data collection has long been considered the ‘gold standard’:
 - Due to the direct in-person interaction between the respondent and interviewer.
- However, the context in which surveys operate has changed dramatically:
 - Response rates have been declining.
 - Costs have increased.
 - Interviewer capacity has become more constrained.
 - In the post-COVID environment, online participation has become normal for much of the population.
- How do face-to-face and self-completion approaches compare under UK contemporary conditions?

ESS GB Parallel Run

- Fitzgerald et al. (2025):
 - Compared the ESS face-to-face and self-completion (web and paper questionnaires offered sequentially) surveys for a Great Britain sample.
 - The design of the two surveys was kept as similar as possible.
 - Differences mainly reflected inherent difference between the data collection modes.
- The study aimed to evaluate how self-completion and face-to-face surveys compare in terms of key quality measures in contemporary Great Britain.

ESS GB Parallel Run

- **Headline findings:**
 - **Self-completion survey achieved a higher response rate than the face-to-face survey.**
 - Results on representativeness were mixed, neither mode consistently outperformed the other.
 - The performance of self-completion survey was slightly inferior in terms of data quality measures.
 - Costs were considerably lower for the self-completion survey and within a shorter fieldwork period.
- **An important caveat:**
 - The ESS self-completion design used web and paper questionnaires (sequentially).
 - Paper questionnaires likely contributed to coverage and participation.
- **A carefully designed self-completion strategy combining web and paper can be a highly effective alternative to face-to-face.**

ESS GB Parallel Run



Response rates for GB ESS Round 10 face-to-face and self-completion surveys

	Face-to-face	Self-completion
Gross sample	5720	8000
Complete and usable partial completes	1137 ^a	2908 ^b
Known ineligible cases	381	8
Non-response		
Unknown eligibility	763	5084
Noncontacts and unusable partial completes	3439	0
AAPOR RR4 (eligibility rate $e = 0.93$)	21.51%	38.08%

Notes:

a: There was no fixed rule on inclusion of usable cases but only two cases in the data set answered less than 75% of 'ask all' questions. Includes units where those aged 15-17 were the target respondent (N=12).

b: Usable partial completes include at least 75% of 'ask all' questions.



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ESS GB Parallel Run

	FtoF	SC	Pop
Sex			
Male	45	46	48
Female	55	54	52
Age			
18–24	7*	7*	10
25–34	10*	13*	17
35–49	21	22	24
50–64	29	30*	25
65+	33*	28*	24

ESS GB Parallel Run

FtoF SC Pop

Education^a

ISCED 1: Less than lower secondary	15	16	18
ISCED 2: Lower secondary	10	12*	10
ISCED 3: Upper secondary (lower tier)	7	8	8
ISCED 3: Upper secondary (upper tier)	16*	14*	12
ISCED 4 / 5: Advanced vocational, sub-degree	15	17	17
ISCED 5 / 6: Bachelor's degree or equivalent, master, or doctoral degree	36	33	35

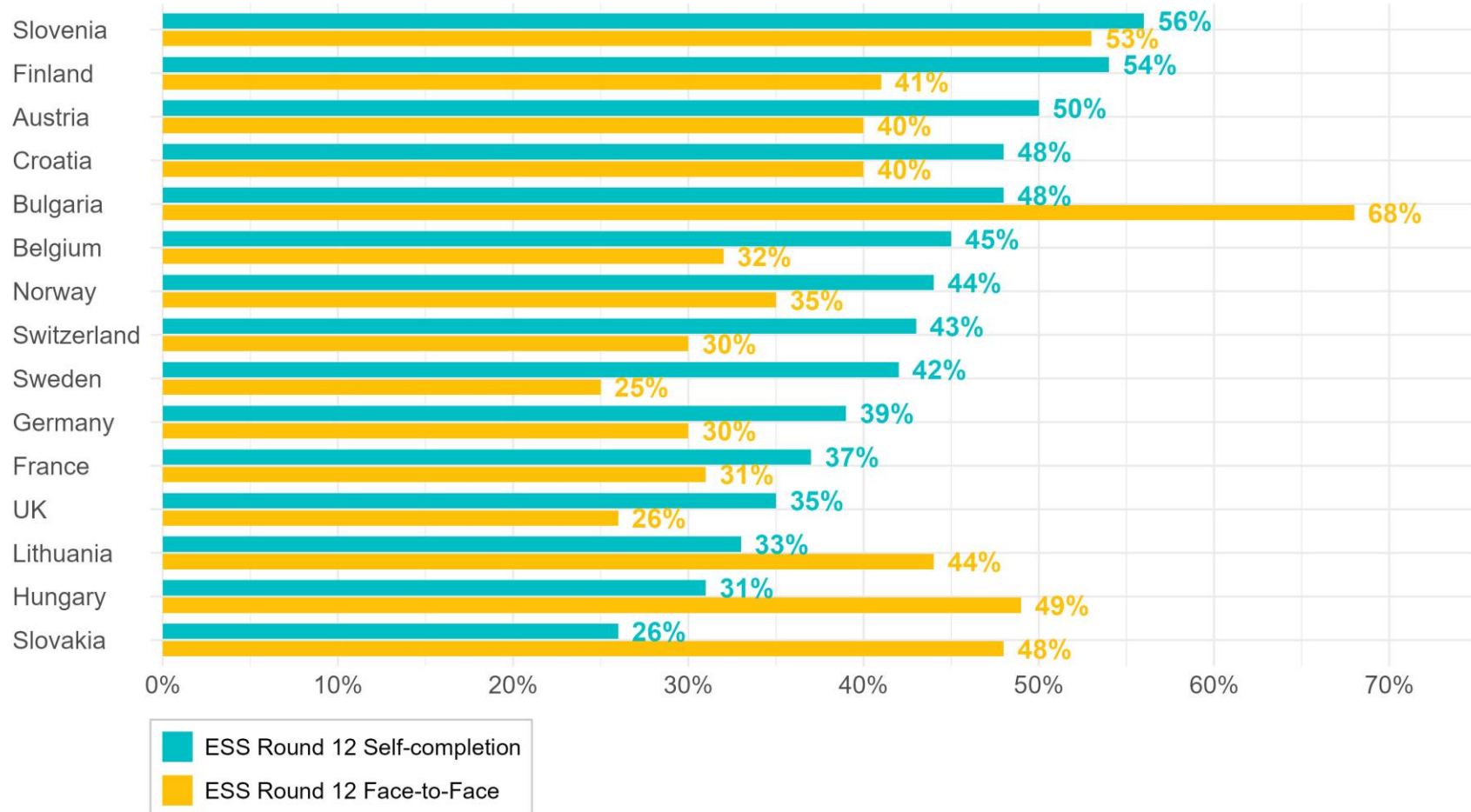
ESS GB Parallel Run

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ESS Parallel Run Round 12 (provisional emerging RR)

Progress in ESS Round 12: Self-completion and Face-to-Face

Observed response rates across both modes for countries that have concluded data collection



* Self-completion response rates are not adjusted for ineligibility

Web-first or CAPI-first?

- Lynn (2026):
 - Based on a large-scale randomised experiment as part of recruitment of a general population sample in the United Kingdom to be added to Understanding Society.
 - Compared two mode protocols, web-first versus CAPI-first.
- Due to extensive routing, the Understanding Society questionnaire is substantially more complex (than e.g. the ESS):
 - Paper questionnaire impractical.
- The study aimed to investigate how best to combine in-home CAPI with online self-completion for social surveys where paper questionnaires are impractical.

Web-first or CAPI-first?

- **Headline findings:**
 - Household response rates were substantially higher under web-first than under CAPI-first.
 - The web-first protocol provided representation that was either better than or similar to that of the CAPI-first protocol.
 - Costs were lower for the web-first protocol.
- **Improvements in the performance of the web-first protocol occurred simultaneously:**
 - The web-first design achieved both better survey outcomes and lower fieldwork costs.
 - For shorter surveys, it is possible that the advantages of web-first would be greater still.
- **Web-first protocols can be recommended for general population surveys in conditions similar to those faced by this study in the UK.**

Conclusions and implications for survey design

- When surveys can be administered using both web and paper questionnaires:
 - Self-completion methods can provide a credible alternative to face-to-face interviewing.
- For social surveys where paper questionnaires are not feasible and interviewer administration remains necessary:
 - A web-first approach can be more effective, with face-to-face interviewing used as a follow-up for non-respondents.
- The role of face-to-face interviewing is evolving:
 - Evidence points towards greater use of self-completion, with face-to-face interviewing used strategically to support participation and data quality where needed and / or use of knock to nudge fieldworkers rather than being the default primary method for most surveys.

References

Fitzgerald, Rory, Nhlanhla Ndebele, Olga Maslovskaya, Cristian Domarchi, Peter Lynn, Tim Hanson, and Ruxandra Comanaru. 2025. *Still the Gold Standard in Survey Research? Comparing Face-to-Face and Self-Completion Data Collection in a Repeat Cross-Sectional General Social Survey in Great Britain*. *Survey Futures Working Paper*. Working Paper 6. Colchester, UK: University of Essex.

Lynn, Peter. 2026. *Web-First or CAPI-First? How Best to Combine Modes to Recruit a Probability-Based General Population Survey Sample*. *Understanding Society Working Paper Series*. Working Paper No. 2026 – 06. Colchester, UK: University of Essex.

ESS mode transition information

<https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/methodology/methodology/data-collection-sc>

Thank you!



Questions and comments.

R.Fitzgerald@citystgeorges.ac.uk

www.surveyfutures.net

