

SAMPLEThe Sampling Procedure

The Ministry agreed to use their family allowance records to obtain a sample of 150 families to whom they were paying four or more family allowances. Records for England and Wales are kept at Newcastle. They are in chronological order and are not arranged by area or region. It is reasonable to assume therefore, that the names are in random order. Names from the records were extracted until there was a total of 150 large families living within the London postal district. (To confine the sample to a smaller area within London would have made the sampling procedure considerably longer.) The sample was intended to give, as near as possible, the same number of families with 5, 6 and 7 children and rather fewer 8-child families.

For reasons of confidentiality the Ministry did not disclose the names of the families drawn from the records before contacting each family themselves. They therefore wrote to each family in the sample enclosing a letter from us explaining the purpose of the survey. The letter began:

"Dear Madam,

We are research workers from the University of London who are trying to study the financial problems of people who have large families, like yourselves. When we know the facts we hope to write a book because we feel that people do not know enough about the special problems of bringing up a large family and how you manage. Of course we shall not mention any names, and nothing you tell us will be passed on to any Ministry or to the tax authorities."

Then followed instructions as to how to reply. With this letter each family received a stamped postcard on which the Ministry had printed the name and address of the family, with a request that any family interested should post it back to us, after which I would call and explain the survey.

The Survey Response

Distribution by size of families in sample compared with distribution by size of families receiving family allowances at 31st December 1964
(excluding families with less than five children)

| | Number of children | | | | Total |
|---|--------------------|------|------|-----------|-------|
| | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 or more | |
| Families receiving allowances on 31.12.64 | | | | | |
| Number (thousands) | 134.4 | 55.8 | 22.7 | 14.6 | 227.5 |
| Per cent | 59 | 25 | 10 | 6 | 100 |
| Original sample | | | | | |
| Number | 41 | 45 | 46 | 18 | 150 |
| Per cent | 27 | 30 | 31 | 12 | 100 |
| Families interviewed | | | | | |
| Number | 18 | 23 | 30 | 15 | 86 |
| Per cent | 21 | 26 | 35 | 18 | 100 |
| Sampling fraction (response) per 1000 | 0.14 | 0.38 | 1.10 | 1.03 | |

Letters were sent in January 1965, to which we received 35 replies. In the Autumn of that year the Ministry agreed to send a reminder letter. Fifteen families had moved since the sample was drawn (nearly a year had elapsed) and so were not contacted. Thirty-eight families informed the Ministry that they did not wish to take part in this study at this stage and a further ten told me when I called on them that they did not wish to be interviewed - not always because they were not interested or resented 'snoopers', but because they were too busy. The remaining 52 families were successfully interviewed. Several said they were glad to have the opportunity of being included in the survey after all. They had intended to reply to the first letter but had not done so because the postcard had been forgotten, lost or destroyed by the children. Others explained that the first letter arrived in the middle of a family crisis and had been overlooked for that reason. The experience with this sample confirms the finding that postal sampling, however carefully the letters explain the purpose of the survey is likely to produce a poor response. A personal explanation together with assurances that questions that offend or worry them, need not be answered, is much more likely to dispel misunderstanding and misapprehension about the nature and purpose of the survey. This procedure almost invariably brought co-operation.

Differential response rate

The characteristics of the families who responded to the first letter were different in some respects from those included in the survey at the second stage. The 35 families interviewed in the Spring 1965 included all five families in Social Class I, five of the seven families in social class II and six of the 12 families in social class V. Among social classes III and IV only a minority of those who were eventually interviewed responded to the first letter: 15 of the 41 families from social class III and four of the 21 families from social class IV. The medium incomes of the two groups were very close although the first group included seven of the 12 families with a weekly income over £35. Most of the very large families were included at the second stage for only five of the 17 families with at least nine surviving children were interviewed in the Spring 1965 together with half of the families with eight or fewer surviving children. This would suggest that lack of time was one reason for not replying to the first letter.

The total response rate varied directly with size of family. Those with five dependent children having the lowest response rate (41 per cent) and those with eight or more dependent children the highest (80 per cent). Part of the explanation for this difference might be that those who have only five children are less likely to consider themselves to be a 'large family' and declined to take part for that reason. (A few of the five-child families who were interviewed remarked that they were surprised to be included in a study of 'large families').. The mean number of surviving children born in these families was seven, the mean number of dependent children in the families at the time of the survey was six. The bias towards the very large family, introduced at the sampling stage was therefore increased by these differential response rates.

