

# Using Ad-Hoc Surveys to Teach Demography

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## Short Abstract:

This contribution describes the experience of administering an online survey to university students, using the collected data for teaching demographic concepts. The knowledge gained with this experiment contributes to the development of an effective tool for showing students the challenges of a questionnaire construction and for exploring the core questions of interest to demographers, all while maintaining a manageable survey length.

One significant advantage of this approach is the immediacy with which the collected data is presented to all respondents at the end of the survey, enabling instructors to discuss and analyze the results in real time. More interestingly, the resource offers the opportunity to construct an ideal or expected population based on student responses, revealing the implications of their answers for the demographic structure of a population.

This resource can benefit teaching in a range of lectures, including (but not limited to) those on fertility, aging, and mortality. Additionally, it introduces some creative indicators that effectively engage students in the understanding of demographic principles.

Moreover, this teaching resource is designed to evolve collaboratively, allowing demographers to refine and enhance it over time. Furthermore, its utility extends beyond the classroom, serving as a means to communicate pressing demographic challenges to a broader audience, making it an invaluable tool for both education and public engagement.

In sum, this original approach to teaching demography hopefully offers a dynamic and engaging experience for students, while also adding a tool to the communication strategies of demographic concepts outside the traditional context of university lectures.

### **Long abstract – some details**

This contribution describes the experience of administering an online survey to university students, using the collected data for teaching demographic concepts. An online was prepared using the platform Limesurvey. The questionnaire was originally developed in the occasion of the seminar “Demography Matters “ offered to the students of the Austrian Study Foundation by the Vienna Institute of Demography. It was distributed before the seminar and the data collected were used as a starting point for providing real data examples and introducing the methods and concepts of demography, mortality and health aspects, fertility and proximate determinants of fertility, migration aspects, the close bond between human capital and demography, projections.

After the success of this experience, the survey was adapted to be flexibly used in other countries. During the first semester of the academic year 2023/24 it was administered in different classes of the University of Roma Tre.

The survey is accessible by means of a link or the visualization of a QR code. The respondents could choose between the English or the Italian language. The survey comprises 35 questions of demographic interest, organized into five sections:

- General information: age, gender, expected level of education, place of residence (actual, past, expected),
- Work: (expected) age at starting work, retirement (expected and preferred age),
- Fertility and unions: intended number of children, preferred and ideal age at the birth of the first child, ideal age and reason for leaving parental home, partners.

- Health and mortality: European Minimum Health Module on self-rated health, perceptions regarding aging and own survival, knowledge regarding current life expectancy levels, memory, and perceived age.
- Wellbeing, use of social media, and opinion regarding demography.

The data gathered by the online questionnaire were stored on the WIC's LimeSurvey server as well as on the secure fileserver of the OEAW / Vienna Institute of Demography and can be accessed only by authorized persons. None of the questions could allow in any way the identification of the respondent, and respondents gave their implicit consent to use the data, showing the results in an aggregated way, by completing the survey. No question is mandatory.

All together, a total of 382 questionnaires were filled, from students of the bachelor and master level, enrolled either in a demography course, a statistical course, or a political science course from the University of Roma Tre.

The knowledge gained with this experiment contributes to the development of an effective tool for showing students the challenges of a questionnaire construction and for exploring the core questions of interest to demographers, all while maintaining a manageable survey length.

The administration of the survey itself and the inspection of results can both be used as useful tools for teaching demographic topics. In fact, by answering a demographic survey the students become aware of the process and the challenges of collecting micro-level data. One more significant advantage of this survey tool is the immediacy with which the collected data is presented to all respondents automatically at the end of the survey, in an aggregated way, enabling instructors to discuss and analyze the results, presented in (bar or histogram) graphs in real-time. Therefore, inspecting the results provides the first glance at the distribution of the demographic data in a population, albeit being the sample clearly not representative.

This resource can benefit teaching in a range of lectures, including (but not limited to) those on fertility, aging, and mortality. Additionally, it introduces some creative indicators that effectively engage students in the understanding of demographic principles.

More interestingly, the resource offers the opportunity to construct an ideal or expected population based on student responses, revealing the implications of their answers for the demographic structure of a population and providing an example of how demographic projections work. During lectures, the instructors should also be able to change the input values of the demographic indicators to show the impact of having different scenarios. This part of the project is currently under development.

Moreover, this teaching resource is designed to evolve collaboratively, allowing demographers to refine and enhance it over time. Furthermore, its utility extends beyond the classroom, serving as a means to communicate pressing demographic challenges to a broader audience, making it an invaluable tool for both education and public engagement.

In sum, this original approach to teaching demography hopefully offers a dynamic and engaging experience for students, while also adding a tool to the communication strategies of demographic issues to the interested public.