# THE NCS™
## The National Citizen Survey™

# Guide to Understanding and Using Your Reports

2015

**NRC**
National Research Center Inc

**ICMA**
*Leaders at the Core of Better Communities*

# Contents

# Purpose of the User Guide

As a participant in The National Citizen Survey™ (The NCS™), you are among an elite group of communities that conduct resident surveys. Communities often use the results of The NCS to:

- **Envision** Make strategic plans and set goals
- **Engage** Partner with residents, other governments, private sector and community-based organizations
- **Earmark** Alter budgets, personnel or services
- **Educate** Communicate and reach out to residents to inform, educate and advocate
- **Enact** Create, alter and remove policies to promote community strengths
- **Evaluate** Track strengths and problems, dig more deeply and evaluate progress

The purpose of this User Guide is to provide you with an overview of the various products you have received related to your survey results, and to describe how to dive in and understand the data that are provided in these products.

Your community, including the elected officials and government staff, should dig into data relevant to their missions, discuss the findings and create action plans. Residents expect their leaders to act on the survey results they receive. By acting on survey results, community leaders build credibility with residents. This credibility leads to heightened public trust which, in turn, makes it more likely that residents will support expenditures and resource allocations recommended by their councils, commissions or staff. Proper expenditure of resources leads to better communities.
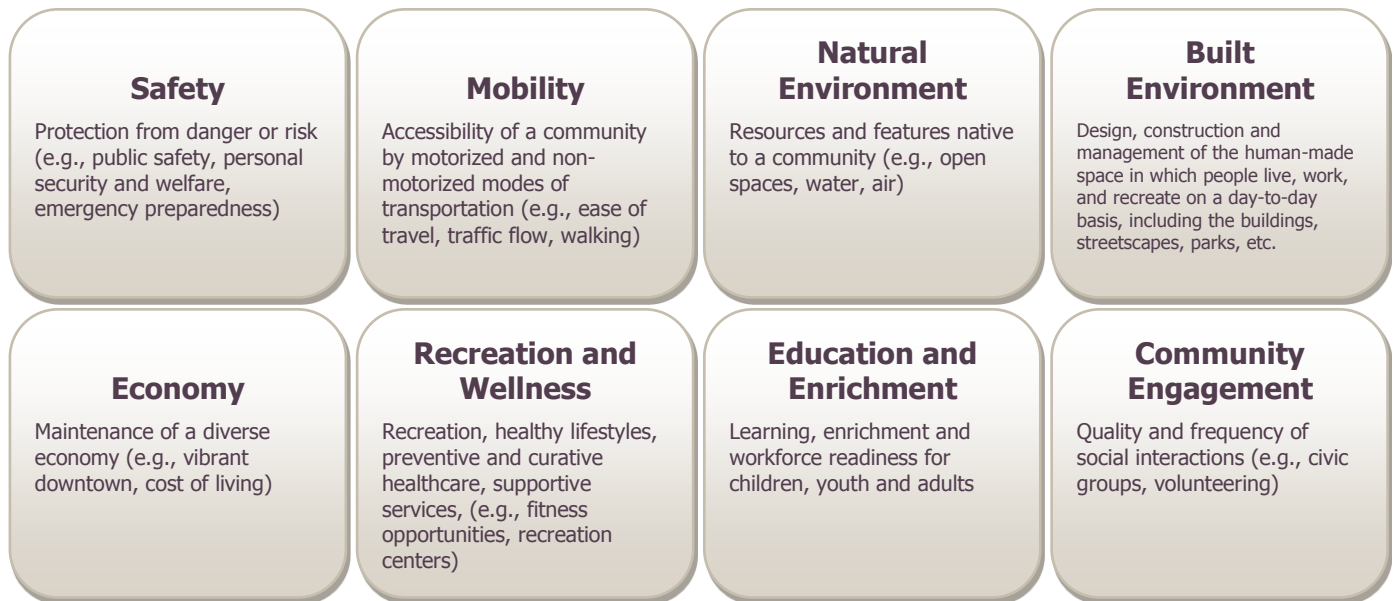
> **The NCS Background**
>
> National Research Center, Inc. (NRC) developed The NCS as a low-cost, comprehensive, statistically valid survey solution for local governments eager to find out what their residents think about their communities. The NCS is not just a survey; it is a service that encompasses the entire survey research process - scheduling, questionnaire development, sample selection, data collection, analysis and reporting. In partnership with the International City/County Management Association (ICMA), The NCS has been administered hundreds of times in numerous U.S. cities, counties, towns, villages and boroughs.
>
> The NCS assesses aspects of community life, local government service quality and resident participation in community activities. The results, based on resident perceptions, describe the areas where community members themselves believe things are going well and shed light on the areas that could benefit from improvement.

# What Does The NCS Measure?

Broadly, The NCS measures your community's "livability." A great many definitions have been made for community livability,[1] including one from the Partners for Livable Communities, calling it "the sum of the factors that add up to a community's quality of life."[2] Staff at NRC examined the extensive research that has been done about community livability and many of the models that have been developed to describe the components of livable communities.[3] Eight facets of community livability were distilled from our synthesis of this research: Safety, Mobility, the Natural Environment, the Built Environment, the Economy, Recreation and Wellness, Education and Enrichment and Community Engagement. The NCS questionnaire includes individual items that act as indicators of community quality within each of the eight facets – and, split in a different way, they form three "pillars" of community quality: Community Characteristics, Governance and Participation.

The Eight Facets of Livable Communities

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Safety** | **Mobility** | **Natural Environment** | **Built Environment** |
| Protection from danger or risk (e.g., public safety, personal security and welfare, emergency preparedness) | Accessibility of a community by motorized and non-motorized modes of transportation (e.g., ease of travel, traffic flow, walking) | Resources and features native to a community (e.g., open spaces, water, air) | Design, construction and management of the human-made space in which people live, work, and recreate on a day-to-day basis, including the buildings, streetscapes, parks, etc. |
| **Economy** | **Recreation and Wellness** | **Education and Enrichment** | **Community Engagement** |
| Maintenance of a diverse economy (e.g., vibrant downtown, cost of living) | Recreation, healthy lifestyles, preventive and curative healthcare, supportive services, (e.g., fitness opportunities, recreation centers) | Learning, enrichment and workforce readiness for children, youth and adults | Quality and frequency of social interactions (e.g., civic groups, volunteering) |

The Three Pillars of Livable Communities

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Community Characteristics** | **Governance** | **Participation** |
| Inherent and acquired amenities, the design and opportunities that contribute to the livability of a community | Services provided by local government; government function and levels of trust residents have in government leaders | Connection to neighbors, resident activities; use of community amenities and services; "social capital" |

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[1] Many examples are shown at http://www.camsys.com/kb_experts_livability.htm
[2] Source: Partners for Livable Communities, http://www.livable.org/about-us/what-is-livability
[3] See, for example: http://livable.nonprofitsoapbox.com/storage/documents/board_resources/BOT_Meetings/2010/4ExecCommNov5/ Grand_Alliance_doc_for_EC.pdf; http://www.sustainable.org/images/stories/pdf/Placemaking_v1.pdf; http://www.who.int/ageing/ publications/Global_age_friendly_cities_Guide_English.pdf

Other sectors that influence community quality include the businesses, non-profit agencies, fraternal or service organizations (e.g., Kiwanis, Rotary, Lions and more) and other community groups (such as homeowners or neighborhood associations, etc.) as well as other nearby local governments or other levels of government. They are important target audiences for receiving and acting on The NCS results.

Because much of what The NCS measures is quality – quality of community life, services and connection – it is common for community leaders to conclude that their locale must excel in every facet of livability. While leaders may feel compelled to strive to be equally strong in all areas of community life, such a strategy is rarely feasible or even desirable. Different communities have different strengths and identities. These strengths and definitions of the community should be noted by all those reviewing the results. Less desirable ratings for some indicators should not automatically be seen as negative for a community, but instead a reflection of the community's resources and priorities which wisely may be spent on areas that matter more. Not all indicators that show less achievement are a call to action, just as not all indicators that are strong should become a gateway to complacency. Those viewing The NCS results, and in particular those charged with creating plans based on the results, should consider their community's essence and priorities, and should choose to make improvements or maintain excellence in areas that support the identity they desire. Meeting your definition of success in the areas deemed most important is the ultimate goal – and one that The NCS helps measure – even if all levels of success are not equal.

# Using Your Reports

## Report Documents

Instead of a single, heavy document that can be difficult to navigate and share, The NCS results are reported in multiple formats and lengths, each with varying levels of detail to ensure that your different stakeholder groups get the right information to meet their needs. The Basic Service of The NCS includes each of the following documents:

- Community Livability Report
- Dashboard Summary of Findings
- Technical Appendices
- Trends over Time (if you have administered The NCS before)

Depending on the additional services you chose as part of your research project, you may also receive additional reports, such as:

- Demographic Subgroup Comparisons
- Geographic Subgroup Comparisons
- Report of Open-ended Questions
- Presentation slideshow (shown at in-person presentation of results and provided to you for your own uses)

This User Guide describes these reports, how to interpret the data and how to dig deeper to ensure everyone – you, government staff leadership, line staff, elected officials, residents, business owners and community organizations – get the most out of The NCS results.

## Report Types

When assembled together, these reports build on and reinforce each other, while separately, they provide the flexibility for targeted reporting to specific audiences.

**Community Livability Report** • This report is the most universal and summarizes all the results and key findings. The Community Livability Report is brief, attractive and accessible, making it a central public document.

**Dashboard Summary of Findings** • This report offers a simplified ("rolled up") quantitative view of the data, as well as comparison details for each question (the relationship to the benchmark and over time, if this is not the first iteration of the survey).

**Technical Appendices** • The appendices include the details about survey methods, individual response options selected for each question – with and without the "don't know" option – and detailed benchmark results. This document speaks to the credibility of data and the most granular detail of results.

**Trends over Time** • This report reveals how resident perspectives and behaviors have changed across two or more administrations of The NCS. The report offers a high level view of how rankings have changed as well as relative position to the benchmark including all administrations of The NCS.

**Guide to Understanding and Using Your Reports** • The Guide to Understanding and Using Your Reports (this document) is written simply so that the survey sponsors receive guidance about how to understand all aspects of the reports, and also so that sponsors can explain to others how the reports are organized and what they mean.

**Presentation** • An in-person presentation by NRC's independent researchers will offer an engaging overview of the findings – revealing important patterns without getting lost in the detail – at a Council meeting (either formal or work session). The PowerPoint slideshow can be reused for other audiences, including civic clubs, business and non-profit organizations and the press. Presentation by the unbiased survey research team offers the neutrality that is hard to garner when staff themselves present survey findings.

**Subgroup Comparisons** • Both demographic and geographic comparison options are available. Such information can be especially useful as programs are considered for different parts of a community or outreach is planned to educate different community groups.

**Open-ended Questions** • Residents' own words add flavor to the survey results and a quantitative grouping of similarly themed comments gives a sense of common ideas.

## Report Dissemination

Distributing the results and communicating the key findings engages audiences.

### Audiences and Stakeholders

**Residents** • Make the reports available to the public via your website. Share the results at a public meeting, being sure to advertise the event. A full presentation of the results (either by NRC or your own staff) with discussion of results among elected officials highlights the transparency of findings. If independence of the findings is particularly important in your community, working with NRC to make the presentation of results will be particularly effective.

**Department Managers and Line Staff** • Managers and staff will examine ratings most closely aligned to their work. Make a plan to disseminate results to line staff (e.g., through a series of small group meetings). Staff should be encouraged to identify specific areas where action is suggested – including further research as well as service enhancements or partnerships outside of the organization. These suggestions could be sent to the department heads who will meet to discuss action options with the chief administrative officer.

**Elected officials** • Elected officials benefit most from advance distribution of survey reports prior to public presentation and discussion. Ask elected officials to read the survey documents and funnel questions to staff who then can get assistance with answers from NRC professionals, when needed. Staff should develop an approach to action that can be presented to council. This way staff will be prepared when the inevitable council question is asked of the manager, "What do you plan to do with these results so that they don't just sit on a shelf?"

**Non-profits and Businesses** • While local governments sponsor The NCS, it is not just for staff and elected officials. It is a document to engage the entire community. Many of the findings of the survey will be relevant to the non-profit and business sectors and many community improvements will rest on the shoulders of these sectors as much as on government. Convene a meeting of business and non-profit leaders to release results and begin a discussion of actions to improve resident attitudes and behaviors. This could be a town hall-style meeting or a special invitation lunch with elected officials.

**Press/Media** • Getting in front of your results means controlling how and when results are shared with the press. Whether your relationship with the local news media is cooperative or contentious, you should declare your intentions for the results even before the survey is conducted – then reinforce those intentions once you have the results. Let the press know that there are no bad results and that your community conducts The NCS because it intends to learn and improve like the best businesses. Certainly social media outlets also permit you to express your intentions for results and to interpret the findings for any of your followers. (And do not forget to link subsequent decisions to what you learned from the survey.)

## Choosing a Report Audience

You can follow or adapt to your needs NRC's recommendations for sharing The NCS reports with different stakeholder groups in your community. There is no reason to withhold any report from any individual or stakeholder group, but if targeting the right information to the right audience is seen to be of value, we believe that these distinctions among audiences will make the first pass at distributing results most effective.

Sharing The NCS Reports with Different Sectors

| Report | Residents | Elected officials | Department managers and line staff | Non-profits and businesses | Press/ Media |
|---|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| Community Livability Report | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| Dashboard Summary of Findings | | | ● | | |
| Technical Appendices | | | ● | | |
| Trends over Time | ● | ● | ● | ○ | ● |
| Presentation of key findings | ● | ● | ● | | ● |
| Subgroup comparisons (demographic and/or geographic) | | ○ | ● | ○ | |
| Open-ended Question Responses | | ○ | ○ | ○ | |
| Guide to Understanding and Using Your Reports | | | ● | | |

●=Recommended
○=Optional

These stakeholder groups may wish to "drill down" into the results most meaningful or pertinent to their missions. Those wishing to drill down should review the questionnaire first and decide which survey items are relevant to their mission – choosing from not only specific municipality-provided services, but also those "community outcomes" that they wish to impact. The Dashboard Summary of Findings and Community Livability Report provide an overview, while the Technical Appendices provide the detailed survey responses and benchmark results. The Trends over Time can show how stakeholders' efforts have impacted the community over the years. Demographic and Geographic Subgroup Comparisons reports can help to point out on whom and where impacts have been felt to lesser and greater degrees.

# Community Livability Report

Using the model of the eight facets of community livability within the three pillars of community, The NCS Community Livability report is divided into seven sections:

- About
- Quality of Life
- Community Characteristics
- Governance
- Participation
- Special Topics
- Conclusions

**About** • This section provides background on The NCS and community livability with brief descriptions of the survey methods.

**Quality of Life** • This section of the report highlights areas of community strength and challenge, as well as identifying community characteristics most important to your residents' assessments of their quality of life. A summary of benchmark comparisons is presented by the eight community livability facets helping communities to focus on areas that may provide "bigger bang for your buck."

**Community Characteristics** • This section of the report describes residents' ratings of the characteristics that make a community livable, attractive and a place where people want to be.

**Governance** • This section of the report evaluates how well the local government delivers services and meets the needs and expectations of its residents.

**Participation** • This section of the report looks at how connected residents are to the community and each other.

**Special Topics** • This section includes the custom or special questions you may have included on your survey.
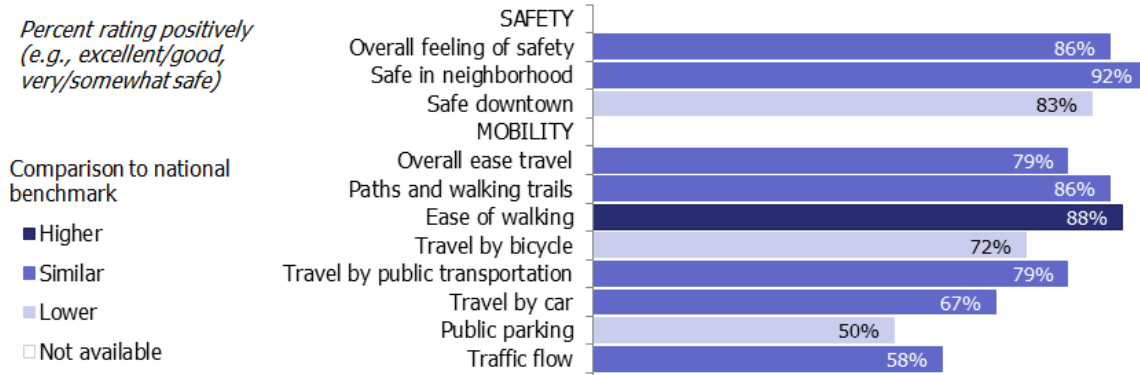
**Conclusions** • Your report ends with a summary of key findings.

For the most part, the "percent positive" is reported in the report's charts. The percent positive is the combination of the top two most positive response options (i.e., "excellent" and "good," "very safe" and "somewhat safe"). For question that ask about behavior (e.g., asked on a yes/no scale or frequency scale like "never," "rarely," "sometimes," "usually," or "always") we show a combination of responses that reflects at least some behavior (e.g., percent "yes" or "always" and "usually").

On many of the questions in the survey, respondents could answer "don't know," but these "don't know" responses have been excluded from the analyses shown in the report. In other words, the tables and charts display the responses from respondents who had an opinion about a specific item. Appendix A of the Technical Appendices provides the complete set of survey frequencies, with and without "don't know" responses. The User Guide section, *Understanding Survey Research* (starting on page 17) describes how and why we remove the "don't know" responses from our analyses.

Most of the charts in your Community Livability report have been color-coded to indicate how your results compare to national benchmarks, with individual survey items grouped within the eight facets of Community Livability. At a glance, you can see how your results compare to not only each other, but to

national benchmark communities, as well. Detailed benchmark results are provided in Appendix B of the Technical Appendices and include such additional information as your rank among the comparison communities. If you chose to have custom benchmark comparisons made, the results appear in this appendix as well.



*Percent rating positively (e.g., excellent/good, very/somewhat safe)*

Comparison to national benchmark
- Higher
- Similar
- Lower
- Not available

| SAFETY | |
| --- | --- |
| Overall feeling of safety | 86% |
| Safe in neighborhood | 92% |
| Safe downtown | 83% |
| MOBILITY | |
| Overall ease travel | 79% |
| Paths and walking trails | 86% |
| Ease of walking | 88% |
| Travel by bicycle | 72% |
| Travel by public transportation | 79% |
| Travel by car | 67% |
| Public parking | 50% |
| Traffic flow | 58% |

## Dashboard Summary of Findings

The Dashboard Summary of Findings summarizes resident ratings across the eight facets and three pillars of a livable community. The Dashboard Summary chart displays your overall performance in each facet based on each survey item's comparison to the benchmark. When most ratings were higher than the benchmark, the color is dark purple; when most ratings were lower than the benchmark, the color is the lightest purple. A mix of ratings (higher and lower than the benchmark) results in a color between the extremes.

| | Community Characteristics | | | Governance | | | Participation | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Higher | Similar | Lower | Higher | Similar | Lower | Higher | Similar | Lower |
| Overall | 20 | 25 | 7 | 28 | 12 | 6 | 5 | 14 | 14 |
| General | 2 | 5 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Safety | 0 | 1 | 2 | 6 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Mobility | 4 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Natural Environment | 3 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Built Environment | 0 | 4 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| Economy | 2 | 5 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 0 |
| Recreation and Wellness | 3 | 4 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 2 |
| Education and Enrichment | 3 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Community Engagement | 3 | 2 | 1 | 5 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 7 |

| Legend | |
|---|---|
| | Higher |
| | Similar |
| | Lower |

The Detailed Dashboard displays for each item on the survey, its comparison to the benchmark and the percent positive for the current year, and if applicable, how the current year's rating compares to the previous year's rating (higher, similar or lower). Examination of how areas are trending over time and how they compare to the benchmark can be helpful in identifying the areas that merit more attention.

| | Community Characteristics | Trend | Benchmark | Percent positive | Governance | Trend | Benchmark | Percent positive | Participation | Trend | Benchmark | Percent positive |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| General | Overall appearance | ↓ | ↑ | 74% | Customer service | ↔ | ↑ | 81% | Sense of community | ↔ | ↔ | 78% |
| | Overall quality of life | ↓ | ↔ | 82% | Services provided by ABC | ↔ | ↑ | 79% | Recommend ABC | ↓ | ↔ | 75% |
| | Place to retire | ↔ | ↔ | 65% | Services provided by the Federal Government | ↑ | ↔ | 45% | Remain in ABC | ↔ | ↑ | 83% |
| | Place to raise children | ↓ | ↔ | 77% | | | | | Contacted ABC employees | ↑ | ↓ | 51% |
| | Place to live | ↓ | ↔ | 84% | | | | | | | | |
| | Neighborhood | ↓ | ↔ | 78% | | | | | | | | |
| | Overall image | ↔ | ↑↑ | 87% | | | | | | | | |
| Safety | Overall feeling of safety | * | * | 89% | Police | ↔ | ↑↑ | 82% | Was NOT the victim of a crime | ↔ | ↑ | 89% |
| | Safe in neighborhood | ↓ | ↔ | 92% | Crime prevention | ↔ | ↑ | 70% | Did NOT report a crime to police | * | * | 82% |
| | Safe downtown/commercial area | ↔ | ↔ | 87% | Fire | ↔ | ↑↑ | 94% | Stocked supplies for an emergency | * | * | 42% |
| | | | | | Fire prevention | ↔ | ↑ | 80% | | | | |
| | | | | | Ambulance/EMS | ↔ | ↑ | 91% | | | | |
| | | | | | Emergency preparedness | ↑ | ↑↑ | 66% | | | | |
| | | | | | Animal control | ↓ | ↔ | 62% | | | | |
| Mobility | Overall ease of travel | ↔ | ↔ | 75% | Traffic enforcement | ↔ | ↔ | 66% | Walked or biked instead of driving | * | * | 35% |
| | Traffic flow | ↔ | ↔ | 49% | Street repair | ↓ | ↓↓ | 43% | Carpooled instead of driving alone | * | * | 42% |
| | Travel by car | ↔ | ↑↑ | 64% | Street cleaning | ↔ | ↑↑ | 66% | Used public transportation instead of driving | * | * | 19% |
| | Travel by bicycle | ↓ | ↑ | 55% | Street lighting | ↔ | ↔ | 60% | | | | |
| | Ease of walking | ↓ | ↑↑ | 66% | Snow removal | ↓ | ↓ | 60% | | | | |
| | Travel by public transportation | ↑ | ↓↓ | 45% | Sidewalk maintenance | ↔ | ↔ | 55% | | | | |
| | Paths and walking trails | ↓ | ↑↑ | 62% | Traffic signal timing | ↔ | ↔ | 52% | | | | |
| | | | | | Bus or transit services | ↔ | ↑↑ | 60% | | | | |

**Legend**

↑↑ Much higher    ↑ Higher    ↔ Similar    ↓ Lower    ↓↓ Much lower    * Not available

# Technical Appendices

## Appendix A: Complete Survey Responses

The first appendix in this document shows the responses to each question on the survey in two ways. Included first are the responses excluding any "don't know" responses and second are the responses including the "don't know" responses. We show both the percent of respondents giving a particular response followed by the number of respondents (denoted with "N="). Every table in the appendix is numbered, to ease its reference in additional documentation or reports you may develop. The complete question wording that was used on the survey is also displayed in every table. This permits readers to review the results in their entirety without having to cross-reference the survey instrument.

High "don't know" (typically 20% or greater) responses can suggest a need for additional communication or outreach in the community, especially if the high "don't know" responses are related to underused services.

### Responses excluding don't know

Table 1: Question 1

| Please rate each of the following aspects of quality of life in ABC: | Excellent | | Good | | Fair | | Poor | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ABC as a place to live | 47% | N=162 | 36% | N=125 | 12% | N=42 | 4% | N=15 | 100% | N=344 |
| Your neighborhood as a place to live | 45% | N=152 | 39% | N=132 | 12% | N=42 | 3% | N=11 | 100% | N=337 |
| ABC as a place to raise children | 54% | N=152 | 24% | N=69 | 18% | N=50 | 4% | N=12 | 100% | N=283 |
| ABC as a place to work | 34% | N=98 | 36% | N=102 | 22% | N=62 | 8% | N=23 | 100% | N=285 |
| ABC as a place to visit | 72% | N=214 | 22% | N=66 | 2% | N=5 | 4% | N=12 | 100% | N=297 |
| ABC as a place to retire | 40% | N=97 | 30% | N=72 | 18% | N=44 | 13% | N=31 | 100% | N=244 |
| The overall quality of life in ABC | 55% | N=187 | 35% | N=117 | 5% | N=18 | 4% | N=15 | 100% | N=337 |

### Responses including don't know

Table 30: Question 1

| Please rate each of the following aspects of quality of life in ABC: | Excellent | | Good | | Fair | | Poor | | Don't know | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ABC as a place to live | 47% | N=162 | 36% | N=125 | 12% | N=42 | 4% | N=15 | 1% | N=4 | 100% | N=348 |
| Your neighborhood as a place to live | 45% | N=152 | 39% | N=132 | 12% | N=42 | 3% | N=11 | 1% | N=3 | 100% | N=340 |
| ABC as a place to raise children | 46% | N=152 | 21% | N=69 | 15% | N=50 | 4% | N=12 | 13% | N=44 | 100% | N=327 |
| ABC as a place to work | 29% | N=98 | 30% | N=102 | 18% | N=62 | 7% | N=23 | 15% | N=52 | 100% | N=337 |
| ABC as a place to visit | 71% | N=214 | 22% | N=66 | 2% | N=5 | 4% | N=12 | 2% | N=5 | 100% | N=302 |
| ABC as a place to retire | 31% | N=97 | 23% | N=72 | 14% | N=44 | 10% | N=31 | 21% | N=64 | 100% | N=308 |
| The overall quality of life in ABC | 54% | N=187 | 34% | N=117 | 5% | N=18 | 4% | N=15 | 2% | N=7 | 100% | N=344 |

For some questions, respondents are permitted to select more than one response. When some respondents are counted in multiple categories, the total will likely exceed 100%. In these cases, those multiple response questions will have the appropriate notation below the table.

Table 55: Question D14

| What is your race? (Mark one or more races to indicate what race(s) you consider yourself to be.) | Percent | Number |
|---|---|---|
| American Indian or Alaskan Native | 4% | N=15 |
| Asian, Asian Indian or Pacific Islander | 6% | N=20 |
| Black or African American | 10% | N=35 |
| White | 86% | N=298 |
| Other | 15% | N=52 |

Total may exceed 100% as respondents could select more than one option.

## Appendix B: Benchmark Comparisons

### What Benchmarks Are

Benchmarks are comparison data that provide context for your ratings. In Appendix B, your detailed benchmark results are displayed in a table of five columns. The first column is the survey item for which the comparisons have been provided. The second column is your community's percent positive. The third column is the rank assigned to your rating among communities where a similar question was asked. The fourth column is the number of communities that asked a similar question. The fifth and final column shows how your rating compares to the other communities in the benchmarking database. In that final column, your results are noted as being "higher" than the benchmark, "lower" than the benchmark or "similar" to the benchmark, meaning that the average rating given by residents of your community is statistically similar to or different (greater or lesser) than the benchmark. More extreme differences are noted as "much higher" or "much lower."

### National Benchmark Comparisons

Table 1: Community Characteristics General

| | Percent positive | Rank | Number of communities in comparison | Comparison to benchmark |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| The overall quality of life in ABC | 83% | 98 | 286 | Similar |
| Overall image or reputation of ABC | 84% | 67 | 315 | Much higher |
| ABC as a place to live | 78% | 118 | 255 | Similar |
| Your neighborhood as a place to live | 89% | 80 | 374 | Higher |
| ABC as a place to raise children | 75% | 135 | 325 | Lower |
| ABC as a place to retire | 72% | 129 | 298 | Much lower |
| Overall appearance of ABC | 70% | 168 | 354 | Similar |

We also provide a list of the communities included in your comparison with their population according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The communities in the national database represent a wide geographic and population range; many communities find a custom comparison that targets specific geographies or populations to be useful.

### Communities included in national comparisons

The communities included in ABC's comparisons are listed on the following pages along with their population according to the 2010 Census.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Abilene city, KS | 6,844 | Cambridge city, MA | 105,162 |
| Adams County, CO | 441,603 | Cape Coral city, FL | 154,305 |
| Airway Heights city, WA | 6,114 | Cape Girardeau city, MO | 37,941 |
| Albany city, GA | 77,434 | Cartersville city, GA | 19,731 |
| Albany city, OR | 50,158 | Carver County, MN | 91,042 |
| Albemarle County, VA | 98,970 | Cary town, NC | 135,234 |
| Albert Lea city, MN | 18,016 | Casa Grande city, AZ | 48,571 |
| Altoona city, IA | 14,541 | Casper city, WY | 55,316 |
| Ambridge borough, PA | 7,050 | Castle Pines North city, CO | 10,360 |
| Ames city, IA | 58,965 | Castle Rock town, CO | 48,231 |
| Andover CDP, MA | 8,762 | Cedar Falls city, IA | 39,260 |
| Ankeny city, IA | 45,582 | Cedar Rapids city, IA | 126,326 |

### What Benchmarks Are Not

Benchmarks do not tell you what you need to fix. In this way, benchmarks are not like blood tests that carry a range, often narrow, within which you are considered to be healthy and outside of which you could be sick. A local score that is lower than scores typically seen in other places may indicate nothing more than community sentiment that resonates. For example, a suburb located near a large metropolitan center many not be seen to have as strong an economy as other places. This residential suburb's commercial areas are not seen to be as vibrant as other places, may have a higher cost of living, fewer jobs and may have ceded downtown activities to a nearby metro area that has much higher density and more entertainment opportunities. A lower benchmark rating for "economy" simply offers specifics to the community identity which residents and leaders may feel no need to ameliorate. Instead

this hypothetical community may want to focus its resources on sustaining or strengthening its image as a safe place with many recreation opportunities and ease of travel by car and light rail.

## How to Use Benchmarks
Many of the charts and tables in The NCS reports have been color-coded to indicate how your results compare to national benchmarks.

Benchmark comparisons often are used for performance measurement. Communities use the comparative information to help interpret their own citizen survey results, to create or revise community plans, to evaluate the success of policy or budget decisions and to measure local government performance. Taking the pulse of the community has little meaning without knowing what pulse rate is too high and what is too low. When surveys of service satisfaction turn up "good" citizen evaluations, jurisdictions need to know how others rate their services to understand if "good" is good enough. Furthermore, in the absence of national or peer community comparisons, a jurisdiction is left with comparing its fire protection rating to its street maintenance rating. That comparison is unfair. Streets always lose to fire. More important and harder questions need to be asked; for example, how do residents' ratings of fire service compare to opinions about fire service in other communities?

A police department that provides the fastest and most efficient service – one that closes most of its cases, solves most of its crimes and keeps the crime rate low – still has a problem to fix if the perception of residents in the community it intends to protect is not so strong. The benchmark data can help that police department – or any department – to understand how well citizens think it is doing. Without the comparative data, it would be like bowling in a tournament without knowing what the other teams are scoring. NRC recommends that citizen opinion be used in conjunction with other sources of data about budget, personnel and politics to help managers know how to respond to comparative results.

NRC's database of comparative resident opinion is comprised of resident perspectives gathered in surveys from over 500 communities whose residents evaluated the same kinds of topics on The NCS. The comparison evaluations are from the most recent survey completed in each community; most communities conduct surveys every year or in alternating years. NRC adds the latest results quickly upon survey completion, keeping the benchmark data fresh and relevant. The Basic Service includes national benchmark comparisons. If you chose a custom benchmarks comparison as an additional service to the basic NCS, these comparison will appear in this appendix, as well.

Jurisdictions in the benchmark database are distributed geographically across the country and range from small to large in population size. Data come from tens of thousands of individual evaluations of community quality, service delivery and engagement. Despite the differences in jurisdiction characteristics, all are in the business of facilitating a high quality of life for residents, typically by providing local government services to residents. Though individual jurisdiction circumstances, resources and practices vary, the objective virtually everywhere is to help create and sustain highly livable communities.

## Where Benchmarks Come From
NRC has been leading the strategic use of surveys for local governments since 1991, when the principals of the company wrote the first edition of what became the classic text on citizen surveying. In *Citizen Surveys: how to do them, how to use them, what they mean*, published by ICMA, not only were the principles for quality survey methods articulated, but both the idea of benchmark data for citizen opinion and the method for gathering benchmark data were pioneered. The argument for benchmarks was called "In Search of Standards." "What has been missing from a local government's analysis of its survey results is the context that school administrators can supply when they tell parents how an 80 percent score on the social studies test compares to test results from other school systems..."

Surveys in the benchmarks are conducted with typically no fewer than 400 residents in each jurisdiction, opinions are intended to represent over 30 million Americans. NRC innovated a method for quantitatively integrating the results of surveys that are conducted by NRC with those that others have conducted. The integration methods have been thoroughly described not only in the *Citizen Surveys* book, but also in *Public Administration Review* and the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*. Scholars who specialize in the analysis of citizen surveys regularly have relied on this work.[4] The method described in those publications is refined regularly and statistically tested on a growing number of citizen surveys in NRC's proprietary databases. NRC's work on calculating national benchmarks for resident opinions about service delivery and quality of life won the Samuel C. May award for research excellence from the Western Governmental Research Association.

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[4] See, for example: Kelly, J. & Swindell, D. (2002). Service quality variation across urban space: First steps towards a model of citizen satisfaction. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 24, 271-288 and Van Ryzin, G., Muzzio, D., Immerwahr, S., Gulick, L. & Martinez, E. (2004). Drivers and consequences of citizen satisfaction: An application of the American Customer Satisfaction Index Model to New York City, *Public Administration Review*, 64, 331- 341.

# Trends over Time Report

If you have conducted The NCS before, you will automatically receive the Trends over Time report. In this report we show your percent positive ratings by year, how your most current results compare to your previous year's results and how you have compared to the national benchmark for each survey year.

The Trends over Time Report provides insight on the aspects of your community that may be improving or perhaps starting to decline. While trends for your national benchmark comparisons are provided for reference, the benchmark is constantly changing as communities conduct newer surveys or new communities conduct surveys and resident perspectives change. Overall, your trends represent, perhaps, the most powerful benchmark you have – a comparison of you to yourself in prior years. These trends can be a window into the impact of new policies, capital projects or programs in your community.

### Table 1: Community Quality Overall

| | Percent rating positively (e.g., excellent/good) | | | 2013 compared to | Comparison to benchmark | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 2009 | 2011 | 2013 | 2011 | 2009 | 2011 | 2013 |
| Overall quality of life | 68% | 74% | 79% | Similar | Much lower | Similar | Similar |
| Overall image | 76% | 80% | 78% | Similar | Similar | Higher | Similar |
| Place to live | 72% | 71% | 82% | Higher | Similar | Similar | Much higher |
| Neighborhood | 79% | 84% | 91% | Similar | Higher | Higher | Higher |
| Place to raise children | 65% | 69% | 78% | Similar | Lower | Much higher | Higher |
| Place to retire | NA | NA | 60% | NA | NA | NA | Much lower |
| Overall appearance | 88% | 87% | 90% | Similar | Similar | Similar | Similar |

# Demographic and Geographic Subgroup Comparison Reports

An additional service many participants in The NCS choose is comparison of results by respondent characteristics. In the Demographic Subgroup Comparison Report, each survey question is cross-classified by responses from different demographic groups in your community. We typically show five demographic groupings (housing unit type, housing tenure, age, gender and race/ethnicity) so that you can see if results differ depending on the demographic category of respondent. The Geographic Subgroup Comparison Report is another optional service that compares survey responses by subgroups, in this case, based on respondents' location (e.g., district, neighborhood, ward, etc.). In order to create a report of geographic comparisons, the geographic subareas will need to be determined well before the survey mailing.

In these subgroup comparison reports, we show the percent positive rating and shade "statistically significant" differences grey. The shading is based on analysis of variance and chi-square tests of statistical significance where a "p-value" of 0.05 or less indicates that there is less than a 5% probability that differences observed among subgroups are due to chance; or in other words, a greater than 95% probability that there are differences that exist in the subgroups being compared.

Table 1: Community Characteristics General

| Percent rating positively (e.g., excellent/good) | Housing unit type | | Housing tenure | | Age | | | Gender | | Race/Ethnicity | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | Detached | Attached | Rent | Own | 18-34 | 35-54 | 55+ | Female | Male | White alone, not Hispanic | Hispanic and/or other race | Overall |
| The overall quality of life in ABC | 58% | 55% | 53% | 58% | 55% | 56% | 59% | 60% | 54% | 43% | 56% | 57% |
| Overall image or reputation of ABC | 62% | 55% | 56% | 59% | 59% | 56% | 60% | 56% | 61% | 58% | 55% | 58% |
| ABC as a place to live | 68% | 67% | 64% | 69% | 64% | 69% | 69% | 68% | 68% | 68% | 67% | 68% |
| Your neighborhood as a place to live | 50% | 49% | 46% | 51% | 53% | 49% | 47% | 50% | 49% | 49% | 47% | 50% |
| ABC as a place to raise children | 63% | 62% | 62% | 63% | 62% | 62% | 65% | 64% | 62% | 62% | 55% | 63% |
| ABC as a place to retire | 60% | 59% | 57% | 60% | 60% | 58% | 61% | 60% | 58% | 60% | 60% | 60% |
| Overall appearance of ABC | 55% | 50% | 43% | 56% | 50% | 52% | 57% | 52% | 53% | 52% | 57% | 53% |

Table 1: Community Characteristics General

| Percent rating positively (e.g., excellent/good) | District 1 | District 2 | District 3 | District 4 | Overall |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| The overall quality of life in ABC | 53% | 59% | 58% | 59% | 57% |
| Overall image or reputation of ABC | 50% | 61% | 60% | 60% | 58% |
| ABC as a place to live | 60% | 72% | 72% | 74% | 68% |
| Your neighborhood as a place to live | 45% | 58% | 50% | 48% | 50% |
| ABC as a place to raise children | 57% | 66% | 65% | 67% | 63% |
| ABC as a place to retire | 55% | 65% | 60% | 65% | 60% |
| Overall appearance of ABC | 50% | 52% | 53% | 59% | 53% |

Demographic subgroup comparisons can help with creating targeted communication and service campaigns to address the concerns of each group.

Geographic subgroup comparisons can help demonstrate the sense of equity felt across the community since residents in some parts of every community tend to feel better than do those in other areas about the services they receive or the livability of their neighborhood. Results from geographic subgroup comparisons will permit targeting of services, capital improvements and programs so that residents in all areas can feel that they are receiving their fair share of resources.

## Open-ended Question Responses

The NCS standard questions are close-ended. A closed-ended question is one where a set of response options is listed as fixed choices on the survey and those taking the survey respond to each option listed. Open-ended questions have no answer choices from which respondents select their response. Instead, respondents must "create" their own answers and state them in their own words. The inclusion of an open-ended question is available as an additional service for The NCS that results in a separate Report of Open-ended Questions.

On the survey, respondents write, in their own words, their answer to the posed open-ended questions. In this report, the verbatim responses are categorized by topic area using qualitative coding techniques. Often, an "other" category is used for responses falling outside these coded categories. In general, a code is assigned when the number of related responses reaches a critical mass.

We will provide a table showing the frequency of each code to give a general overview of the responses.

Table 1: Question 13

| What one thing do you like most about living in ABC? | 2013 |
|---|---|
| Location | 38% |
| My neighborhood | 16% |
| Quality of life in general | 10% |
| Parks and open space | 14% |
| Rural character | 8% |
| Small town feel | 7% |
| Other | 7% |
| Total | 100% |

We also provide every verbatim response with its assigned code. This type of report gives you and others a chance to "hear" the voice of respondents in their own words.

## Verbatim Responses

The following pages contain the respondents' verbatim responses as written on the survey and have not been edited for spelling or grammar. Responses have been organized by coded topic areas.

### What one thing do you like most about living in ABC?

**Location**
- Access to everything
- Actual location
- Close to city
- Close to metro
- Close to my office
- Close to town
- Close to work
- Close to work and everything is handy
- Convenience
- Convenience
- Convenience
- Everything is handy and close
- I like living south of the river
- It's convenient to everything meaning shopping and the airport
- Location
- Location
- Proximity to downtown

**My neighborhood**
- Appearance of the neighborhoods
- Friendly people next door
- Good neighborhood
- Great neighborhood
- I love my neighborhood!
- Just happy with the neighborhood I live in
- Lots of kids in the neighborhood
- Neighbors
- My neighborhood

# Understanding Survey Research

## Survey Sampling

We systematically select households from a geocoded United States Postal Service (USPS) address list to ensure that only households located within the boundaries of a community are surveyed. Systematic sampling is a procedure whereby a complete list of all eligible addresses is culled, selecting every $N^{th}$ one (a number that changes depending on the size of the population and the sample size to be selected) until the appropriate number of addresses is sampled. Not only does NRC scientifically and randomly sample households to participate in The NCS, but we also select, without bias, the household member to participate. This methodology helps ensure that the attitudes expressed by our respondent sample closely approximate the attitudes of all adult residents living in the community. Without controlling who in the household participates, it is likely that results would be biased towards those who are more sedentary and those without jobs (who may have different opinions about some services).

The Basic Service of The NCS includes mailing to randomly selected households. Though response rates across the US have dipped in recent years, the response rate for most administrations of The NCS ranges between 20% and 40%, which yields between 300 and 480 completed surveys.

## Margin of Error and Confidence Intervals

It is customary to describe the precision of estimates made from surveys by a "level of confidence" and accompanying "confidence interval" (or margin of error). A traditional level of confidence, and the one used for The NCS, is 95%. The 95% confidence interval can be any size and quantifies the sampling error or imprecision of the survey results because *some* residents' opinions are used to estimate *all* residents' opinions.

| Number of completed surveys | Margin of error |
|---|---|
| 100 | ±9.8% |
| 300 | ±5.7% |
| 400 | ±4.9% |
| 500 | ±4.4% |
| 750 | ±3.6% |

The relationship between sample size and precision of estimates or margin of error (at the 95% confidence level) is shown in the adjacent table. With a typical sample size for The NCS, this means an estimated margin of error at the 95% confidence level of plus or minus four to six percentage points.

A 95% confidence interval indicates that for every 100 random samples of the same number of residents, 95 of the confidence intervals created will include the "true" population response. This theory is applied in practice to mean that the "true" perspective of the target population lies within the confidence interval created for a single survey. For example, if 75% of residents rate a service as "excellent" or "good," then the 4% margin of error (for the 95% confidence interval) indicates that the range of likely responses for the entire community is between 71% and 79%. This source of uncertainty is called sampling error. In addition to sampling error, other sources of error may affect any survey, including the non-response of residents with opinions different from survey responders. Though standardized on The NCS, on other surveys, differences in question wording, order, translation and data entry, as examples, can lead to somewhat varying results.

For subgroups of responses, the margin of error increases because the sample size for the subgroup is smaller. For subgroups of approximately 100 respondents, the margin of error is plus or minus 10 percentage points.

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## Non-response Bias

Knowing that residents in single family dwellings are more likely to respond to a mail survey, NRC oversamples residents of multi-family dwellings to ensure their proper representation in the sample data. Rather than giving all residents an equal chance of receiving the survey, this is systematic, stratified sampling, which gives each resident of the community a known chance of receiving the survey (and apartment dwellers, for example, a greater chance than single family home dwellers).

## Weighting

The first step in preparing the data for analysis is to weight the data to reflect the demographic profile of the residents of the community being surveyed. Weighting is the approach used by quality survey consultancies to ensure that the demographic characteristics of the sample mirror the overall population. It is an important method to adjust for potential non-response bias. NRC uses a special software program of mathematical algorithms to calculate the appropriate weights. Several different weighting "schemes" may be tested to ensure the best fit for the data.

## "Don't know" Responses

Generally, a small portion of respondents select "don't know" for most survey items and inevitably some items have a larger "don't know" percentage. Comparing responses to a set of items on the same scale can be misleading when the "don't know" responses have been included. If two items have disparate "don't know" percentages (2% versus 17%, for example), any apparent similarities or differences across the remaining response options may disappear once the "don't know" responses are removed. Such an example is shown below.

When comparing the community as a place to live to the community as a place to work, it would appear that 76% of respondents rated the community as a place to live as "excellent" or "good" compared to just 63% for the community as a place to work. However, the community as a place to work has a much higher proportion of respondents answering "don't know" (17% compared to 2%).

|  | Place to live | | Place to work | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | Number | Percent | Number | Percent |
| Excellent | 48 | 25% | 38 | 20% |
| Good | 97 | 51% | 81 | 43% |
| Fair | 23 | 12% | 22 | 12% |
| Poor | 19 | 10% | 17 | 9% |
| Don't know | 3 | 2% | 32 | 17% |
| Total | 190 | 100% | 190 | 100% |

If we remove the three "don't know" responses from the community as a place to live and the 32 "don't know" responses from the community as a place to work, the two items are actually much more similar in their evaluations: 78% "excellent" or "good" place to live compared to 75% "excellent" or "good" place to work.

|  | Place to live | | Place to work | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | Number | Percent | Number | Percent |
| Excellent | 48 | 26% | 38 | 24% |
| Good | 97 | 52% | 81 | 51% |
| Fair | 23 | 12% | 22 | 14% |
| Poor | 19 | 10% | 17 | 11% |
| Total | 187 | 100% | 158 | 100% |

## Response Scale

The scale on which respondents are asked to record their opinions about service and community quality is "excellent," "good," "fair" or "poor" (EGFP). This scale has important advantages over other scale possibilities (very good to very bad; very satisfied to very dissatisfied; strongly agree to strongly disagree, as examples). EGFP is used by the plurality of communities conducting citizen surveys across the U.S. The advantage of familiarity was one that NRC did not want to dismiss when crafting The NCS questionnaire, because elected officials, staff and residents already are acquainted with opinion surveys measured this way. EGFP also has the advantage of offering three positive options, rather than only two, over which a resident can offer an opinion. While symmetrical scales often are the right choice in other measurement tasks, NRC has found that ratings of almost every local government service in almost every community tend, on average, to be positive (that is, above the scale midpoint). Therefore, to permit finer distinctions among positively rated services, EGFP offers three options across which to spread those ratings. With questions worded for EGFP, responses are more neutral because they require no positive statement of service quality to judge (as agree-disagree scales require) and, finally, EGFP intends to measure absolute quality of service delivery or community quality (unlike satisfaction scales which ignore residents' perceptions of quality in favor of their report on the acceptability of the level of service offered).