

The National Citizen Survey™ Information Guide



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The National Citizen Survey™ Features

If you are one of the many local governments that are already surveying their citizens, you may wonder what The NCS™ can offer you. Does your current survey service provide...

- An answer to the question: “How do the responses of our citizens compare to those of other cities?”
- A printed final report with charts and graphs, and comparisons that you can specify?
- Professional credibility that can support your results?
- A network of colleagues in other local governments who are surveying their citizens using the same service?
- Experienced survey professionals available by phone and e-mail?
- Low-cost options to customize your survey?
- Generation of reliable mailing lists based on your maps?
- The benefits and savings that come from constant refinement of the survey process over many local governments?

The National Citizen Survey™ does all this and more!

What you get with The National Citizen Survey™

- Choice of services to evaluate, choice of optional questions
- Pre-survey postcard mailing
- Customized cover letter
- Customized survey instrument (two mailings)
- Executive summary of local results, a comprehensive analysis of local results, and a separate report benchmarking local results against comparative norms
- Certificate of participation

The NCS™ Network

When you enroll to participate in The National Citizen Survey™, you join a network of jurisdictions that regularly survey their citizens.

- National Research Center, Inc. (NRC) has been building a database of citizen surveys for more than a decade. More than 400 local governments are represented.
- Comparing your results to norms from this database will allow you to put your own ratings in perspective, to identify programs that need attention, and to benchmark service improvements.
- During the course of the survey process, you will be part of a small group of jurisdictions that are on the same schedule and share the same timeline for surveying.
- A new survey group begins every month.
- By choosing to participate in The National Citizen Survey™, your jurisdiction benefits from economies of scale and from the collaborative process. Common interests and questions enhance the survey administration for each group.
- If a jurisdiction has any difficulty sticking with the original schedule, it can join a later group. NRC allows each jurisdiction to change plans or postpone its survey based on local needs.
- NRC welcomes multi-jurisdiction enrollments. When two or more jurisdictions enroll together, each enjoys the additional benefits of peer comparison.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is The National Citizen Survey™?

The National Citizen Survey™ is a unique service to administer, analyze, and report results from a customizable citizen survey. National Research Center, Inc., (NRC) and ICMA are able to provide this service at a relatively low cost through careful standardization and automation of the survey process. Each participating jurisdiction can make important customizations for its locale and the report can compare the results from your jurisdiction with results from other jurisdictions across the United States.

Why should we survey our citizens?

Good reasons include: to measure service performance; to benchmark service quality ratings; to assess community needs; to make long-range, short-term or strategic plans; to demonstrate the receptivity of your government; to evaluate potential policies or community characteristics; to continue a trendline from periodic surveying; or to respond to a council mandate. These days, residents expect their local government officials to be as well informed about customer perspectives as the best businesses.

Why should we use The National Citizen Survey™ instead of doing the survey on our own?

The National Citizen Survey™ offers many advantages over both in-house administration and the use of a consultant. These include reduced costs, comparisons to national norms and the credibility of a widely reputable independent research firm.

What kinds of questions are included on the survey?

Questions are included about the quality of life in your community or county, local policies, demographics, quality of local government services and resident use of services.

Our jurisdiction provides a wide array of services. Will The National Citizen Survey™ let us survey opinions about all of these services?

The selection of service questions is extensive, so all of the major services that you provide are likely to be represented.

Can The National Citizen Survey™ be used by counties?

Yes. A semi-customizable template is available for counties.

To what extent is the survey customizable?

You may customize your survey by choosing from a set of questions that are commonly used in citizen surveys, that have been endorsed by a panel of experts and that have been tested at several pilot sites. You also have the option of creating three policy questions that are entirely specific to your jurisdiction. Furthermore, you may choose among a selection of additional services to modify the administration by including an open-ended question, comparisons to your previous survey results, a larger sample size, phone data collection, a Spanish translation, customized norms, geographic crosstabs and a breakdown of results by respondent characteristics.

What will the margin of error in the results be?

Typically, with a sample size of 1,200 surveys, there will be about 400 responses, which translates to a margin of error that is approximately 5 percentage points around any percent. One of the additional options is a larger sample size of 3,000 residents, which will reduce the margin of error to about 3 percentage points.

How long will jurisdiction staff spend on The National Citizen Survey™?

This will vary and will depend in part on the way your jurisdiction operates. A lead staff member for the project could expect to spend from 10 to 40 hours over the course of the 18-week administration. Publicity is encouraged and will take additional staff time. The reward for your rather small investment of time will be a better survey and a higher response rate.

What is the cost of The National Citizen Survey™, and how does it compare to the cost of a survey from a private consultant?

You will find enclosed a list of options and prices for The National Citizen Survey™ services and you will find The NCS™ more affordable than a fully customized survey. The added value of normative data makes The NCS™ even more cost-effective and useful.

How long will it take to get results and the report once we sign up?

Once you sign up, you will receive a packet of materials requesting information about customizing the survey. The complete time frame is approximately 12 weeks from the time we receive your completed materials from that packet.

How will the survey be administered?

The survey will be administered by mail. A postcard is sent to randomly selected households announcing that a survey will follow. The first survey comes a week later and is followed by a “reminder” survey one week after that. Data collection by phone is also an option.

How many people in our jurisdiction will receive the mailing?

The basic service includes a sample size of 1,200 residents. However, we also offer the option of a sample size of 3,000 residents at an additional cost.

How many responses can we expect?

With a sample size of 1,200, we typically receive about 400 responses. For a sample size of 3,000, we expect approximately 1,000 responses. The actual number varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. The response rate will depend partly on the amount of publicity you provide ahead of time.

What about people who don't speak English?

We offer a Spanish-language version of the survey instrument as a service option. Let us know if you are interested in other languages.

What kind of report will we get?

You will get three separate reports. You can see samples of these final reports at icma.org/ncs. An executive summary briefs you on results. A comprehensive report includes survey background, survey methods, local results and appendices. Local results are presented in tables and graphs. A third report, intended for internal use or for public information purposes, at the manager's discretion, compares local results to norms based on NRC's database of over 350 surveys conducted throughout the United States.

Can we compare the results of The National Citizen Survey™ to the results of surveys we did in the past?

Yes. As an option, we can convert most service evaluations to The NCS™ measurement scale for comparisons over the last 3 administrations to The NCS™ results.

With which communities will we be able to compare our results?

The normative comparisons are based on about 350 jurisdictions where citizen surveys have been conducted recently. These are communities from all across the United States ranging in size from just a few hundred to over 2 million. More than 200,000 residents of counties, villages, townships, and cities completed these surveys and they are intended to represent over 30,000,000 Americans. Norms can be customized, too, so that your jurisdiction is compared to others in the database of similar size, location or type (e.g., counties, cities, towns, etc.).

Do we have to compare our results to national norms?

No, the choice is yours.

What if we don't want our results publicized?

That is up to you. The final report is delivered to the client only, on your time schedule. Comparisons with the normative data are presented in a separate report. Results from our database remain confidential. Norms are created by grouping results so that individual jurisdictions remain anonymous unless they choose to be mentioned for purposes of positive recognition.

How is the validity of the survey authenticated?

In the final report, we provide an elaborate description of our meticulous survey methods. We also provide a certificate of participation, suitable for display, signed by the executive director of ICMA and the president of NRC, to all jurisdictions that successfully complete the survey project.

Can results be used for measuring government performance?

Yes, the opinion of residents is critical in understanding the quality of service delivery and has become a widely-used performance measurement tool. We remind our clients that administrative records and independent observations about actual service efficiencies and quality measures are important, too.

We participate in ICMA's Center for Performance Measurement (CPM). Can we use The National Citizen Survey™ to collect data for CPM?

Yes. In fact, The NCS™ was designed to coordinate with CPM data collection. If you use The NCS™ survey instrument, you will not need to ask citizens the same questions again for CPM purposes.

Resources on the Web

Many other materials on the subject of citizen surveying and The National Citizen Survey™ are available free online at icma.org/ncs

icma.org/ncs

The NCS™ PowerPoint® Presentation: suitable for presentations to elected officials and other decision makers

The National Citizen Survey™ Survey Instrument

The National Citizen Survey™ Survey Instrument for Counties

NCS Enrollment Form

NCS Timelines

NCS Sample Report of Results

Articles:

Why Survey? Some Talking Points

After the Survey: Planning Next Steps

An Affordable Citizen Survey Now Available for Small Cities (Betsy Bean)–
The Mayor, Mar/April 2002

Perspectives, a newsletter about survey research for local government managers and elected officials

The screenshot shows a web browser window titled "ICMA Web Site" with the URL "http://icma.org/ncs". The page features the ICMA logo and tagline "Leaders at the Core of Better Communities". A navigation menu includes "JobCenter", "Retirement Corp", "PM Magazine", "Contact Us", and a search bar. Below the menu, there are tabs for "ICMA", "ICMA UNIVERSITY", "ICMA PRESS BOOKSTORE", "ICMA RESULTS NETWORKS", and "ICMA INTERNATIONAL". The main content area is titled "National Citizen Survey" and includes the slogan "The first and last measure of good government is citizen satisfaction." It also features a section titled "What is The National Citizen Survey™?" with a list of topics: Program Planning, Budgeting, Goal Setting, and Performance Measurement. A sidebar on the left contains a list of links such as "About ICMA", "Join ICMA", "Newsroom", "Conferences, Meetings, & Events", "Member Support", "ICMA Priorities", "Ethics", "Professional Management", "Awards", "Credentialing", "Who's Who", "Discussion Lists", "Corporate Relations", "Links", and "Passwords & Preferences". At the bottom left of the page, there is a "Resources/Topics" link.

The NCS™ Sponsors

National Research Center, Inc.

National Research Center, Inc. (NRC) has demonstrated leadership and innovation in citizen surveying since 1994. NRC conducts survey research for local and state governments and training in outcome and performance measurement for the public sector. NRC staff have presented their research on survey methods and analysis at national conferences and in peer-reviewed academic journals.

Thomas I Miller, NRC president, worked for local and state government for 16 years. For most of that time, he headed a division of the city government in Boulder, Colorado, charged with conducting policy analysis, survey research, and program evaluation. He founded NRC in 1994. Miller has a Ph.D. degree in research and evaluation methodology and is currently an adjunct associate professor at the University of Colorado. Tom is available by phone to debrief participants concerning the results of their survey. Tom and NRC vice president Michelle Miller Kobayashi are the authors of ICMA's popular book, *Citizen Surveys: How to Do Them, How to Use Them, What They Mean*, first published in 1991 and revised and republished in April 2000.

Heather Callahan Locke is The National Citizen Survey™ Manager. Heather works closely with participants and interested jurisdictions to answer questions and explore customization options. She oversees the survey process through questionnaire development, data collection and report writing, as well as post-report consultation on interpretation of results and next steps.

International City/County Management Association (ICMA)

ICMA is the premier local government leadership and management organization. Its mission is to create excellence in local governance by developing and advocating professional management of local government worldwide. ICMA (the International City/County Management Association) provides member support; publications, data, and information; peer and results-oriented assistance; and training and professional development to more than 8,200 city, town, and county experts and other individuals throughout the world.

The National Citizen Survey™ takes its place in a long series of initiatives created to further public trust and confidence in local government and improve the management of local government services. The survey instrument has been designed in coordination with ICMA's Center for Performance Measurement, which is the contact point for local governments interested in participating in The National Citizen Survey™.

The National Citizen Survey™—Options and Prices

The NCS™ Basic Service offered by ICMA and NRC includes:

- Customized survey form with jurisdiction name, logo, and local contact
- Choice of services to be surveyed
- Addition of three optional questions
- Customized cover letter on jurisdiction letterhead with mayor’s or manager’s signature
- Three mailings to 1,200 randomly selected households: pre-survey postcard and two mailings of the survey instrument (with the cover letter)
- A margin of error (95 percent confidence interval) about +/- 5 percentage points around any percent
- Data input and cleaning
- Statistical analysis of survey results
- Written report illustrated with tables and graphs summarizing the survey results
- Comparative norms for service evaluations
- Certificate of survey authenticity
- Technical assistance by phone and e-mail

The price for The NCS™ Basic Service is \$8,400. Additional options are available for the following additional fees:

Additional Option	Fee	Description
Comparison to prior NCS results	\$0	Service evaluation ratings are compared to previous NCS ratings at no extra charge.
Comparison to prior (non-NCS) results	\$1,750	Tables in the final report compare current service evaluation ratings to the jurisdiction’s ratings from as many as three previous years. Jurisdictions with more than three years of data can customize this option.

Additional Option	Fee	Description
Custom norms	\$1,100	Choosing from among several options, jurisdiction selects criteria for a set of custom norms. Custom norms will be provided alongside national norms in report tables. Graphs will include either custom or national norms but not both.
Demographic crosstabs	\$850	Crosstabs will be provided in a separate report for evaluative questions (1-15 on the survey template) by four demographic variables.
Expanded mailing	\$6,000	Survey is mailed to 3,000 residents instead of 1,200. Other custom-sized mailing options are also available.
Geographic crosstabs	\$1,100	Crosstabs will be provided in a separate report for evaluative questions (1-15 on the survey template) by each geographic area.
One open-ended question	\$1,350	One open-ended question chosen by the jurisdiction is added to the survey. Responses will be categorized and reported in a table under separate cover, accompanied by a complete list of verbatim responses.
On-site presentation of results	\$2,500	A PowerPoint® slide presentation will be developed using your results based on another template of The NCS™. An NRC representative will present survey results to your jurisdiction's elected officials. (Travel expenses will be added to the fee.)
Phone data collection	\$6,000	Survey is conducted by phone, instead of by mail, for 400 completed interviews.
Spanish	\$1,450	Cover letter includes paragraph in Spanish asking those who wish to complete the survey in Spanish to contact the jurisdiction and request a Spanish copy of the survey. Jurisdiction will be mailed envelopes—outbound and return—and surveys to mail out to those individuals.

Timeline for the National Citizen Survey™

- Legend: < Indicates when items from NRC are due to you
 > Indicates when items from you are due to NRC
 ◆ Indicates information items

Preparing for the survey

◆ The NCS survey process is initiated upon receipt of your enrollment form and first payment	week 1
< NRC mails you The NCS™ worksheet packet	week 2
> Due to NRC: Worksheets and additional payment for add-on options	week 4
◆ NRC uses the information you provided to generate the sample and customize the survey instrument for your jurisdiction	weeks 5-6
< NRC provides confirmation documents about options selected by your jurisdiction and a sample of the postcard and mailing envelope for your records	week 5
> Due to NRC: Confirmation of options selected.	week 6
< NRC provides samples of survey materials (cover letters and survey 1st 2nd instrument) for your records.	week 6
◆ NRC prints materials and prepares mailings.	weeks 5-6
< NRC mails evaluation questionnaire and timesheet about the data collection process to you	week 7

Conducting the survey

◆ Survey materials are mailed	
◆ Prenotification postcards delivered to post office	week 7
◆ 1st wave of surveys delivered to post office	week 8
◆ 2nd wave of surveys delivered to post office	week 9
◆ Data collection: surveys received for your jurisdiction	weeks 8-12
◆ Note 1: During this time, you will receive postcards that were undeliverable due to bad addresses or vacant housing units. This is normal. Please count all the postcards, as we will subtract the number of returned postcards from the total number mailed to estimate the number of “eligible” households in calculating the final response rate.	
◆ Note 2: You may receive phone calls from citizens during this time period who call to inform you they are outside of your jurisdiction’s boundaries, or that they do not wish to receive additional mailings, etc. Please reassure them that their household was randomly selected, and while they may receive a total of three mailings from you, they will not receive any additional mailings after that time.	

➤ Due to NRC: evaluation questionnaire and timesheet about the data collection process	week 12
➤ Due to NRC: Final count of returned postcards	week 12
◆ Survey processing and report writing	weeks 12-14
◆ During this time, NRC will process the surveys, perform the data analysis, and produce a two-part draft report for your jurisdiction. The report of results will contain a description of the methodology, information on understanding the results, and graphs and tables of your results. The second report will include a description of NRC's database of normative data from across the United States and actual comparisons to your results, where appropriate.	
◀ NRC e-mails draft report (in PDF format) to you	week 15
➤ Due to NRC: jurisdiction feedback on the draft report	week 16
◀ NRC mails final report and data file to you (unless otherwise specified)	week 17
◀ NRC mails final invoice to you	week 17
◀ NRC mails final evaluation questionnaire and timesheet to you	week 17
➤ Due to NRC: Final half of costs of The NCS™	week 18
➤ Due to NRC: completed final evaluation questionnaire and timesheet	week 18
◀ NRC mails certificate of participation upon receipt of final payment and evaluation sheets	week 18

Making the Most of Your Survey

Your local government will benefit most from participation in The National Citizen Survey™ if you take the following steps:

Create a committee or task force of staff, elected officials, and citizens. Charge it with defining the purpose and uses of the survey, reviewing the survey results, and making recommendations for action to the manager.

Publicize your survey by making full use of local media before the survey instrument is mailed. Newspaper stories, radio or tv spots, and flyers in utility bills are all good ways to alert citizens that you will be conducting an important evaluation of residents' opinions.

Share the results with staff who are responsible for improving service ratings. Some departments will be pleased to see the quality of their programs affirmed, others may be disappointed that citizens don't give their services top ratings. Line staff—firefighters, librarians, planners—should take part in the discussion about why residents rated their services so high—or so low. Program directors can be required to investigate ratings that are especially low and propose service improvements.

Set performance standards and use the survey results as a performance measure. The professional caliber and comparability of The National Citizen Survey™ help staff take the survey results seriously. As you build up a local trend line from year to year, you can test the effectiveness of new programs, examine trends in citizen use of services, congratulate staff on their progress, and catch problems with service quality before they escalate. And The National Citizen Survey™ gives you comparative norms that can serve as benchmarks for improvement starting in Year 1.

Use focus groups to help interpret your results. Small groups of interested citizens can provide detailed and specific input that will help explain the ratings your services receive.

Repeat the survey every year or two. Once you begin surveying your citizens, you'll want to continue on an annual or biannual basis so that you can monitor trends in citizen attitudes, measure and celebrate performance improvement, and identify problems before they become serious. Many local governments make citizen surveys a routine part of the planning and budgeting cycle.

Your Survey and the Media

The National Citizen Survey™ (The NCS™) is designed to be a useful tool for managers and staff but it is also a chance to communicate with residents. Involving the media from the beginning of your survey process will make it more likely that the results will be reported fairly and accurately and that residents will understand the purpose and significance of survey findings.

Enlist the media in publicizing the survey. Enthusiastic promotion can improve your response rate and the credibility of the survey results.

Educate the media about scientific survey methods and comparative norms. *Citizen Surveys: How to Do Them, How to Use Them, What They Mean*, published by ICMA and sent to you free when you enroll to participate in The NCS™, is a textbook on survey methods and norms that will help the reporters who cover your local government understand the survey results.

Release only your final survey results. National Research Center, Inc. (NRC) will send you a draft report. Plan to release the final report only after it has been approved by all involved. The final report can be held by NRC until you are ready to release it.

Use comparative norms judiciously. The National Citizen Survey™ gives you a final report with all local ratings illustrated with tables and charts. The separate report provides normative comparisons with the results from over 400 surveys in NRC's database. You may choose whether to report only your local results or your results compared to the norms.

Define the framework for comparison. Note that local governments that survey their citizens are still in the minority. You will be comparing your responses to those of a select group of cities and counties that also care enough to take the trouble to find out what citizens are thinking. To increase the comparability of the norms you use to benchmark your results, you may also request tailored comparisons with specific groups of jurisdictions chosen by size, geographic region, or type (cities or counties).

Manage your message. When you announce the results of your citizen survey, note the degree of citizen interest in their local government as represented by your survey response rate. Identify and highlight the services and indicators that receive the highest ratings. Point out comparisons that show that your local government is serving its citizens with special effectiveness. Identify services and indicators that receive lower ratings and discuss your plans for improvement. You will be able to make your plans for improvement part of the news story if you have already discussed future actions with staff and with a special committee or task force of staff, elected officials, and citizens. Two sample press releases are attached.

MODEL PRESS RELEASE FOR REPORTING THE RESULTS OF THE NATIONAL CITIZEN SURVEY™

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Date:

Contact:

Phone:

The results of The National Citizen Survey™ conducted in the City of Brookside earlier this spring are in. The City of Brookside received very high ratings for the overall appearance of the city, air quality, water quality, cleanliness of streets, and several indicators of civic involvement. Ratings for fire and police services were also above average ratings in comparable jurisdictions.

With an average rating of 83 out of a possible 100 points, the cleanliness of Brookside's streets compared favorably with residents' impressions of streets in other jurisdictions that survey their citizens, placing it in the top 18 of 65 jurisdictions. Even better, the overall appearance of the city received a rating of 88, placing the Brookside rating in the top 12 of 70 jurisdictions.

Brookside's libraries are among the most used in the comparison group. Over half of our citizens visit our libraries more than 26 times a year on average compared to 3 to 12 times a year in other jurisdictions that survey. Brookside citizens also attend public meetings and read the city newsletter almost twice as often as citizens in the comparison group.

The city has also identified two areas for improvement: a task force will be convened to study ways to improve emergency medical services, and city staff are exploring a solution to concerns expressed by citizens about storm drainage. Both services received ratings below national comparisons and lower than results in previous years.

The National Citizen Survey™ was conducted by National Research Center, Inc. (NRC), in partnership with the International City/County Management Association. The survey instrument was developed with the help of a blue-ribbon panel of national experts and tested in several pilot cities. The survey responses were analyzed by NRC. NRC's database of survey results from over 350 local governments across the United States provides a framework for understanding Brookside's ratings.

The City of Brookside plans to discuss the results of the survey with focus groups of survey participants. These discussions will help guide the city council in setting priorities for taking action on survey findings.

MODEL PRESS RELEASE FOR ANNOUNCING THE NATIONAL CITIZEN SURVEY™

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Date:

Contact:

Phone:

The City of Brookside is one of the first cities in the country to participate in The National Citizen Survey™. Within the next few weeks, questionnaires will be sent to a random sample of 1,200 Brookside citizens, asking for feedback on the quality and usefulness of city services. The results will be included in a final report that city officials can use in planning and budgeting for the future.

The National Citizen Survey™ is sponsored by the International City/County Management Association in cooperation with National Research Center, Inc. The questionnaire and survey procedure were designed based on the experience of hundreds of local governments of all sizes, from small to large.

Scientific sampling and weighting of the responses in each city ensure accurate and reliable results. Because each city's survey is developed using a standard template, and many cities can be surveyed at one time, The National Citizen Survey™ is a very efficient way to measure citizen opinion.

Cities and counties in twenty states have enrolled for The National Citizen Survey™. Brookside is the first city in [your state] to use the survey. Some of the cities in other states that have conducted The National Citizen Survey™ include Scottsdale, Arizona; Denver, Colorado; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Oceanside, California; and Rockhill, South Carolina.

Good Government Listens.

