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Adapting to change: Online first collection initiatives to improve the Labour Force Survey response rate

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Adapting to change: Online first collection initiatives to improve the Labour Force Survey response rate

Since its inception in 1945, the Labour Force Survey (LFS) has been the source of Canada's official unemployment rate and the cornerstone of Canada's labour market information ecosystem. The LFS is one of the timeliest surveys at Statistics Canada: key labour market indicators are published 20 days after the reference period, providing immediate insight on the Canadian labour market and supporting policy makers working on a wide variety of topics that impact Canadians.

Since 2010, a range of social and technological changes have made it more challenging to engage survey participants in Canada and other comparable countries, including the United States and United Kingdom¹. The decline in the Canadian LFS response rate accelerated in 2020, exacerbated by public health measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in the suspension of face-to-face interviewing between April 2020 and fall 2022. The response rate – or the proportion of selected households who complete an LFS interview – averaged 72.6% in 2024, compared with an average of 87.0% in 2019.

While LFS estimates continue to demonstrate high quality, even in the context of lowered response rates, Statistics Canada is committed to improving LFS response rates to ensure the survey remains representative of the labour market experiences of all Canadians. New initiatives based on lessons learned during the Census have been implemented, as outlined in the February 2024 technical paper [Ensuring that the Labour Force Survey Remains the Cornerstone of Canada's Labour Market Information Ecosystem](#). This paper provides an update on those initiatives.

Online first collection strategy

To confront these modern collection challenges and improve the response rate, LFS introduced collection initiatives which follow the “online first” strategy used by the Census. In the online first strategy, households receive a Secure Access Code and are invited to complete their Census questionnaire online. Only those who do not respond within a pre-determined timeframe are contacted by telephone or face-to-face. Adopting an online first strategy has three main benefits for LFS:

- it provides Canadians with the opportunity to complete their LFS whenever and wherever they choose;
- it enables interviewers to focus on respondents who are unable to complete their questionnaire online; and
- it is more resilient to unexpected events which can impact data collection, such as public health measures which limit face-to-face interviewing, postal interruptions which impact the delivery of invitation letters, or natural disasters (wildfires, flooding, extreme weather) which impact postal delivery and face-to-face interviewing.

In the fall of 2024, the LFS implemented two collection initiatives using the online first strategy. The first initiative collected contact information from selected households one month before they completed the LFS questionnaire. The second expanded the availability of the online questionnaire to offer Canadians a convenient, secure and user-friendly method of completing the survey.

¹ See, for example, [Current Population Survey Modernization Efforts Set to Launch \(census.gov\)](#) or [Labour Force Survey: planned improvements and its reintroduction - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)

Contact confirmation initiative

Data collection for the LFS is carried out each month over the ten-day period following the LFS reference week (generally the week containing the 15th day of the month). The LFS follows a rotating panel sample design, in which selected households in the provinces² remain in the sample for six consecutive months (herein referred to as month 1 to month 6). Each month about one-sixth of the LFS sampled households are in month 1 of the survey, one-sixth are in month 2 of the survey and so on.

In September 2024, Statistics Canada introduced the contact confirmation (CC) initiative to establish contact with the households entering the LFS sample before they complete their month 1 questionnaire. In the CC initiative, selected households are mailed a letter containing a Secure Access Code and asked to provide their contact information – contact name, telephone number, and email address – using an online questionnaire.

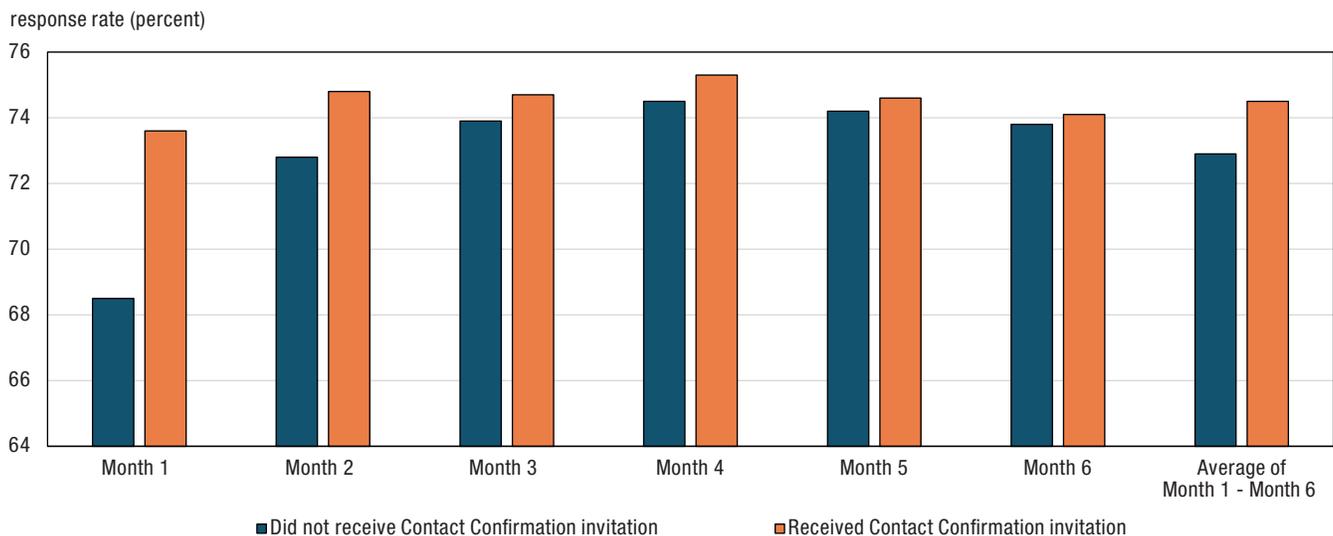
Engaging Canadians before they complete their first LFS questionnaire ensures that reliable contact information is available for most households in the first month of the survey. Furthermore, the CC initiative allows for more efficient allocation of interviewer resources by identifying addresses which are out-of-scope for the LFS, such as businesses or vacant and seasonal dwellings, before the first month of LFS collection begins.

Statistics Canada implemented the CC initiative as a pilot project in fall 2024. For three months, half of the mailable addresses entering the LFS sample (approximately 5,500 addresses each month) received a CC invitation letter.

Chart 1 presents the results of the pilot project: the orange bars represent the households that received the CC invitation letter during the pilot, while the blue bars represent households that did not. Results for Month 1 represent the average response rate for households completing their first month in the LFS; Month 2 represents the average response rate for households completing their second month in the LFS, etc.

As shown in Chart 1, among households that received the CC invitation letter during the pilot, the response rate was 73.6% in month 1, 5.1 percentage points higher than among those that did not receive the CC invitation (68.5%). The average response rate over all six months in sample was 1.6 percentage points higher among households that received the CC invitation (74.5%) compared with households that did not (72.9%).

Chart 1
Contact confirmation pilot results: Labour Force Survey response rates by survey month



Source: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey.

Following the success observed in the pilot, the CC initiative was expanded to all selected provincial addresses in the LFS sample in 2025. All mailable addresses receive the CC invitation and non-mailable addresses (approximately 1,800 each month) are visited in-person by an interviewer to provide their contact information.

² Selected households in the territories are surveyed every three months over a two-year period. Due to operational constraints, the data collection initiatives described in this paper were implemented only in the provinces and will be expanded to the territories in the future.

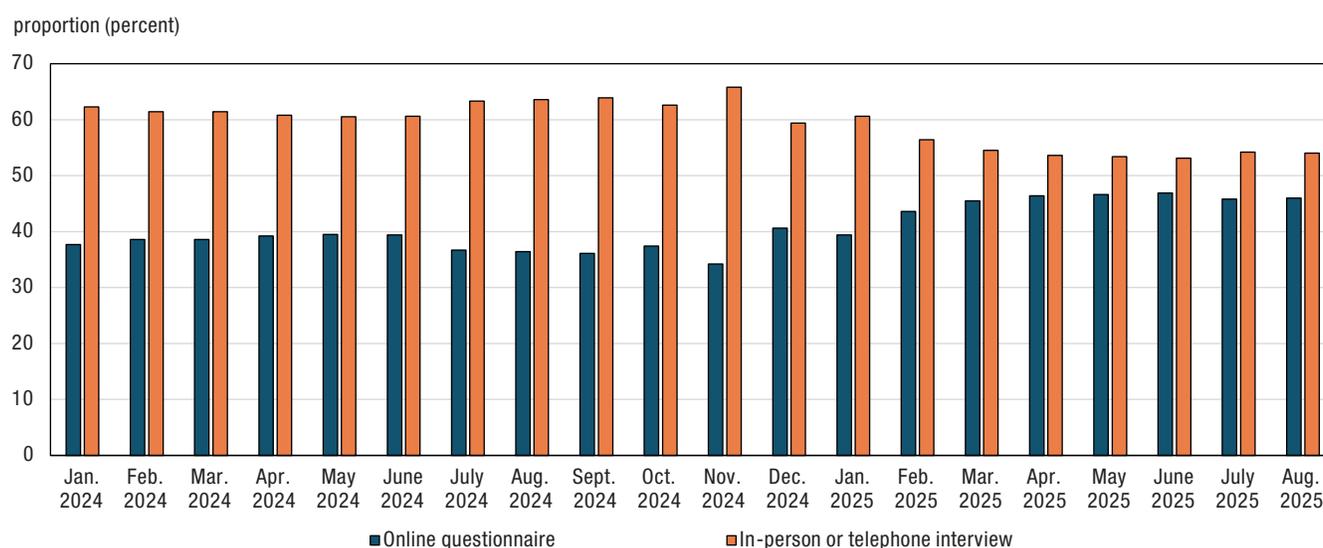
Expansion of online response

Historically, all households entering the LFS sample were interviewed either face-to-face or by telephone and the online response option was available to eligible households starting from month 2. By collecting an email address as part of the CC initiative, households can now complete their month 1 LFS questionnaire online and interviewers can focus on contacting hard-to-reach households which may not otherwise respond to the LFS and households which may prefer to complete their survey in person or by telephone.

Prior to the expanded online response initiative, just under 40% of LFS responses were completed online without the assistance of an interviewer. As shown in Chart 2, the proportion of responses completed online has increased since the implementation of the CC initiative, reaching 46.0% in August 2025.

Chart 2

Proportion of LFS responses completed online versus with an interviewer, January 2024 to August 2025



Source: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey.

Next steps in LFS collections initiatives

The contact confirmation initiative, which engages selected households before they complete month 1 of the LFS, marks Statistics Canada's first step towards improving the LFS response rate.

While overall LFS response rate remains a challenge, with the August response rate remaining stable year-over-year (72.3% in 2024 and 73.0% in 2025), the response rate for month 1 has improved notably, increasing from 69.1% in August 2024 to 74.1% in August 2025.

To build on this success, Statistics Canada will continue conducting research and evaluating methods to enhance the LFS experience for Canadians and sustain their engagement with the LFS from month 1 through to month 6.

In 2025, Statistics Canada launched the LFS Innovation Panel to improve response rates using behavioural science. The Innovation Panel aims to test new strategies through research and randomized trials, helping strengthen data quality and guide future survey operations. Through consultation with partners, research will draw on experiences from Statistics Canada's Census and survey programs as well as international studies to build the foundation for improving future survey operations, data quality, and the long-term resilience of the LFS.

This research will focus on improving engagement and retention by identifying the factors that motivate or hinder participation through analysis of operational data, public opinion research, and qualitative interviews with former LFS respondents. It will also seek to evaluate new strategies for collections operations and communication to improve the overall survey experience. These new strategies will be integrated in LFS survey operations in a controlled way to fully assess their impact.

Statistics Canada will continue to provide updates on initiatives to improve the LFS response rate. For questions related to these initiatives, please contact statcan.labour-travail.statcan@statcan.gc.ca.