

The NCS: Ready-to-Go

Frequently Asked Questions

About Polco

What are Polco's credentials?

Polco is a leading U.S.-based government technology firm specializing in community engagement, survey research, data collection, analysis, reporting, and performance management. With a commitment to innovation, our extensive experience and holistic approach make us the preferred choice for more than 400+ government agencies. Polco is the only strategic partner of the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) to offer survey research products and services to local governments.

National Research Center (NRC) is Polco's in-house research firm, boasting a 30+ year legacy of conducting trusted community surveys. Our leadership on surveying extends to educational efforts such as authoring books (*Citizen Surveys for Local Government*) and conducting workshops on survey methodology. Polco's data and survey scientists consistently drive innovation in survey methodologies across multiple industries.

About The National Community Survey™

What is The NCS™?

The NCS is an expertly-written, standardized, comprehensive survey that allows municipalities and counties to assess resident opinion about their community and local government. It is a trusted benchmarking tool used to evaluate services, measure quality of life, build public trust, inform budgeting decisions, assist in strategic planning, and monitor performance trends over time. Developed by NRC's founders in partnership with ICMA in 2001, it is the gold standard in community surveying and has been used by more than 500 communities across 46 states. The NCS focuses on ten main facets of community livability, which have been identified by survey researchers as most vital to creating a high-quality community that people want to live in.

What is The NCS: Ready-to-Go?

The NCS: Ready-to-Go utilizes the same question set as the traditional NCS, but with an open participation methodology. The NCS: Ready-to-Go opens the survey up to all residents immediately upon launch with a flexible, digital-only format.

What are the benefits of using The NCS rather than another survey option?

The NCS was developed, written and vetted by survey research experts, ensuring unbiased questions, high-quality data, and trustworthy results. Polco's 30 years of verified resident feedback powers the most comprehensive benchmark comparisons available, alongside an interactive digital dashboard that displays The NCS results with publicly available data for the most comprehensive insights on your community as possible. The final report of results is delivered in an easy-to-use, interactive online format in Tableau and includes benchmark comparisons, subgroup comparisons, and trends over time (where applicable).

Survey Methodology

What's an open participation survey and what are the benefits?

An open participation survey—like The NCS: Ready-to-Go—is offered to all adult residents in a community. This approach to gathering resident feedback is available to anyone who has access to an internet-connected device, and often provides a higher number of completed responses both overall and across specific population sub-groups. It can also be less resource intensive than a probability-based survey and requires less time from initial administration to receiving actionable data.

Polco's open participation surveys are administered digitally and require the promotional support of as many trusted communications channels as possible. Open participation surveys benefit from “snowball” sampling, whereby survey respondents recruit their friends and acquaintances by forwarding them the survey link. Encouraging residents to invite participation from others can increase overall response numbers as well as bolster responses from traditionally underrepresented communities.

Does open participation mean that people can take the survey multiple times?

While “ballot-stuffing” is a common concern for local governments, Polco's 30 years of research and testing on this topic consistently finds instances of duplicate responses to be quite rare. Even so, Polco automatically checks for and removes any duplicate responses from the dataset during analysis.

How should I respond to participants who are concerned about anonymity and/or sharing their email address?

Participant email addresses are not displayed anywhere within the administrative portal, providing a critical layer of anonymity between the survey giver (city, state, organization) and the respondent. Results are never reported so that an individual's identity can be known through their responses. Additionally, Polco does not share, sell or give away participant email addresses. Please view our [privacy policy](#) for more information.

Should I require participants to register on Polco and provide their email address and zip code?

Registration has mutual benefits: helping organizations build panels of trusted respondents, and helping subscribers stay notified and connected with ongoing opportunities to provide important feedback about their communities.

How can we increase participation rates?

1. Communication and Outreach – use Polco’s Outreach Guide to publicize The NCS anywhere and everywhere!
2. Share the Why – explain how the results will be used, i.e. for strategic planning or budgeting decisions. People are more likely to respond if they understand how potential outcomes will affect them personally.
3. Establish a Timeline – Let your community know when The NCS opens and when it closes, as early and often as you can. Send reminders and follow-ups to help create a sense of urgency and limit disappointment from those who didn’t get to take it.
4. Continue to Engage - Create a regular cadence of engaging with residents over time, so they see their input turned into action and are more motivated to participate next time.

Data Analysis and Validity**What does a ‘range of uncertainty’ mean? How does this differ from a traditional margin of error?**

Because The NCS: Ready-to-Go is available to all residents and not administered through a random sample, a traditional margin of error cannot be calculated; if it were, that margin would underrepresent the actual error due to other biases involved. As a result, with an open participation survey approach, we provide an estimated “range of uncertainty” around the final results. This gives you a guideline for understanding the accuracy and precision of your survey data even when a traditional margin of error is not available.

What is weighting?

Survey results are weighted, which is a survey industry best practice that adjusts the demographic profile of respondents to more closely match the demographic profile of the community. Demographic variables such as age, race, and gender are compared to census data to correct discrepancies that may arise from underrepresented groups. With survey weighting, results are more reflective of the community as a whole.

What does it mean for Polco to “clean” the data?

Cleaning data refers to the process of reviewing and verifying the collected responses to ensure they are complete, accurate, and consistent with the survey questionnaire. This involves identifying and addressing issues such as missing or inconsistent responses, duplicate responses, outliers, and invalid data which can distort the analysis and interpretation of the results. The goal of cleaning survey data is to produce a dataset that is valid and reliable, and that can support meaningful insights and conclusions.

Understanding Results

How seriously should benchmarks be taken?

Benchmark comparisons provide important context for interpreting your survey results. Benchmarking allows communities to compare their performance and services with those of other communities and identify areas for improvement. By measuring performance against recognized benchmarks and best practices, organizations can identify gaps, prioritize efforts, and demonstrate value to their constituents. Benchmarking is a critical tool in any effort to increase transparency, accountability, and service delivery.

What are crosstabulations and how do they work?

Crosstabulations, also called subgroup comparisons, are a common way to analyze the relationship between two or more questions, making data more actionable by identifying patterns, trends, and correlations within survey results.

Crosstabs also break down results into more manageable pieces, allowing for increased focus on specific topics and demographics. Understanding how different groups of respondents answered certain questions can foster deeper awareness about community needs and power data-driven decisions.

How are results from The NCS typically shared?

Most organizations post the URL to their interactive Tableau report of results from The NCS on their websites, and then share that URL across their communication channels. Many will distribute a press release summarizing the results, create quick videos, and include high level takeaways on blogs or social media. It is a best practice, if possible, to share next steps alongside results, demonstrating to the community that their time taking The NCS was valuable, and that their feedback will be used to make important decisions.

How have other communities used their survey results?

Most organizations use The NCS to make policy decisions, assist with strategic planning and budgeting, and measure performance over time. Results are also used to understand resident sentiment, identify issues and opportunities early, and highlight gaps in perception and/or education. The first year of results establish a baseline for performance and service delivery, and subsequent years produce trendlines that help gauge the success of new initiatives and determine areas of focus.