Pretest results of the intended new labour status questions in the German LFS according to the flowcharts being part of the annex of the draft LFS-regulation

Katharina Marder-Puch, Federal Statistical Office Germany[1]

Abstract

The Federal Statistical office of Germany conducted a cognitive pretest to get information on the methodological impact of implementing the new regulation on Integrated European Social Statistics (IESS) concerning the questions on the ILO-employment status.

Focus was laid on the first questions identifying whether a person is employed or not, on reference periods and specific terms. The overall result is that the tested questionnaire is comprehensive and easy to fill in for the respondents. The identification of the employment status of the respondents seems to work. The reference periods show some problems as not all respondents calculate the reference periods correctly, which should be kept in mind when interpreting the results.

Aspect for further testing were identified, especially regarding the quality of answers depending on the interview mode.

---

[1] Katharina.marder-puch@destatis.de

1. Background

In the context of the developments at the European level of a new regulation on Integrated European Social Statistics (IESS), Germany will have to change several methodological aspects of the current LFS, which is integrated in the German Microcensus. Additionally to the European requirements, a national reform of the Microsensus[2] will integrate three big household surveys (LFS, SILC and ICT) into one survey and pose new demands on German official statistics from 2020 onwards.

Although a lot of methodological changes of the "Microcensus 2020" are already quite comprehensive, there are additional changes of the LFS-methodology coming from the European level. They especially affect the respondents and maybe the response behaviour. As effects on the results are expected, Germany decided to run a cognitive pretest identifying some of the challenges.

This pretest was conducted between November 2018 and January 2019. The greatest methodological interest was in the new order of input harmonised questions on the ILO-Labour status and the comprehension of the reference week and changing reference periods.

The reason for putting an emphasis on these two aspects is the current LFS.
1) In 2005, the Microcensus was changed from a (yearly) survey with a reference week in spring into a continuous survey making it possible to deliver monthly results. For the reason of stable monthly results it was decided to implement a sliding reference week[3]. Changing to a fixed reference week in 2020 as required by the coming LFS regulation consequently will affect the results. The change will very presumably and most clearly be seen in the monthly results, but will also have an impact on the layout/design of the questionnaire in all used modes and on its perception by the respondents.
2) Since 2011, the Microcensus/LFS uses the "main status approach" to identify the ILO-Employment status of a person. This means that the first question of the ILO-block is the question on the main status of the respondent, followed by asking for having done (paid) work in the reference week.
   This approach has been implemented after conducting several analyses[4], tests and a register survey of marginally employed persons[5]. The background here was a divergence of employed persons in the results of the national accounts, which are mainly register based, and the results of the LFS. The "new" way using the main status question as entry to the ILO-questions to identify employment reduced this divergence.[6]
   Changing back to the question on paid work during the reference week as being the first

---

[2] See Marder-Puch, Katharina: "The new German Microcensus as an integrated survey for household statistics". Paper at the last Workshop on LFS Methodology - May 2018, Reykjavik.
[3] Kirsten Iversen: Das Mikrozensusgesetz 2005 und der Übergang zur Unterjährigkeit. In: Wirtschaft und Statistik, 01/2007.
[4] Thomas Körner, Katharina Puch, Thomas Frank, Holger Meinken: Geringfügige Beschäftigung in Mikrozensus und Beschäftigungsstatistik. Neue Erkenntnisse zu den Hintergründen der Ergebnisunterschiede. In: Wirtschaft und Statistik, 11/2011.
In English: Thomas Körner, Katharina Puch: Coherence of German Labour Market Statistics. In: Statistics and Science, Vol 19. 2011.
[5] Thomas Körner, Katharina Puch: Measuring marginal employment in registers and surveys. In: Statistics and Science, Vol 20. 2012.
[6] Körner, Thomas; Puch, Katharina: Der Mikrozensus im Vergleich mit anderen Arbeitsmarktstatistiken. Ergebnisunterschiede und Hintergründe seit 2011. In: Wirtschaft und Statistik, 04/2015.

question, will presumably lead to different results. On the one hand it is important to inform the users and to explain transparently the changes and the effect on the result. On the other hand it is much more important to get an impression on what the methodological impact on the respondents' side may be. Therefore, the pretest should give insight on how the respondents react to the questions meaning the wording and use of specific terms.

2. The conducted pretest

The pretest was commissioned to two external service providers[7] as the in-house pretest laboratory did not have free capacities. The test finally was conducted during November 2018 and January 2019.
The test aimed at identifing challenges and getting information about the labour status questions using qualitative methods via phone and face-to-face interviews.

The test questionnaire was developed using the flow charts and explanatory notes available at this time (October 2018). The main challenge was to exactly stick to the specifications made there. This was quite difficult in a few questions, especially due to translation. Therefore, two versions of the questionnaire were prepared to be able to identify comprehensive wording and phrasing for six questions.
The questionnaire used for testing was a (very short) PAPI-tool as this mode is considered to be the most difficult for respondents as they have no help from interviewers and they are not lead by automatic filters.

120 persons answered the two versions of the test-questionnaires. As all questions relevant for determining the ILO-Status (employed, unemployed or inactive persons) should be tested, it was decided to cover 60 employed persons and 60 non-employed persons. The probands were chosen through hidden recruitment. An unexpected challenge in the recruitment phase was to identify all sub-groups of employed and non-employed to test as many of the questions as possible in a full range. Concerning the non-employed, housewives and –men were difficult to find. As for the employed, the subgroups were differentiated by the reason for being absent in the reference week. No persons in slack work or strike were recruited, as well as in off-season. This means that unfortunately the dedicated question on seasonal work could not be tested.

The PAPI-questionnaire was send via mail to the test persons asking them to fill it in at home by oneself within a specified period of time. One or two days after receiving the letter, the interviewers called in by a given time to conduct the cognitive interview using retrospective probing. Some 30 interviews were conducted face-to-face in the same way. The partly standardized interview was meant to find out about the preferred wording/phrasing and the comprehension of the questions as well as specific terms. Additionally, their purpose was to discover problems that were not foreseen during the preparation. Further methods used during the interviews were General / Elaborative Probing, Comprehension Probing, Category Selection Probing, Specific Probing, Emergent Probing.

---

[7] ISPOS GmbH, Pretest Section, Hamburg and GESIS Leibnitz-Institut für Sozialwissenschaften, Mannheim

The test questionnaire as such consisted of only 19 questions only referring to the respondents but not the household as a whole. That made the task quite easy compared to a real LFS-questionnaire. Mostly due to this circumstance, a number of unpredictable problems occurred concerning mainly the routing, respectively filtering. Especially persons indicating an employment in the first question only had to answer one more question at the end of the questionnaire. This lead to uncertainty and the respondents partly went back to the front and answered all other fitting/suiting questions. Therefore, some of the results, especially those on filters, can be summed as "pretest-effect". This has to be taken into account when evaluating the results.

3. Objectives of the pretest

The planned changes in the Microcensus questionnaire gave reason for the following objectives. Generally, the test's purpose was to evaluate the overall comprehensibility of the questionnaire, its questions in terms of wording and phrasing. Special focus was laid on:

a) The first four questions identifying if somebody is employed during the reference week. The test was meant to find out how the respondents react to these four questions and in which question they indicated a possible employment. Furthermore, it should focus on the fact if all subgroups of employed are identified by these four questions?

b) Within the first four questions, the question on small or casual jobs was of special interest. As the analyses of the past showed, especially marginally employed persons who indicate as their main status being a housewife/-man, being retired or in education have difficulties to indicate an employment if they are not pointed at it.

c) The comprehension of the reference week and the other reference periods referring to it is crucial if the results should be according to what is asked. The pretest should therefore find out, if the respondents identify the reference week and if they answer correspondingly. If the reference week is not understood properly in the first step the answers referring to the other reference periods would also be not exact. Thus, it was an aim to find out about the period respondents are referring to when asking about job search and availability.

d) Finally, the comprehensibility of wording and of specific terms should be tested. To reduce it to only a few, a focus was laid on the translation and perception of the term "work", as well as on the terms "household" and "family" in the question on small/causal jobs.

4. Main findings

The findings of the pretest presented in this paper focus on questions on employment status. The results on the questions on job search and availability are not discussed in detail. It may be said that these questions ran very smoothly. The problems detected there are mostly covered by the prestest objective concerning the reference periods and the comprehension of wording and phrasing.

1) **Main findings on Question 1 –** *1 hour work in reference week*
   a) "During the reference week, did you work at least 1 hour for pay as employee or self-employed?"
   b) "During the reference week, did you work at least 1 hour for pay?"

The wording of the question seems to work well. There were no problems identified, all probands were able to understand the question, to highlight the important parts and to give an answer. Comparing the two versions it was found out that small job holders more likely react to version b), whereas self-employed did not indicate an employment in this version. As small job holders eventually are identified by question 4, version a) of the question is preferred, especially as self-employed are addressed directly.

As a result of the pretest of the first question it can be stated, that 79 % of the employed probands (n=60) already indicate their employment here.

2) **Main findings on Question 2 –** *unpaid family workers*
   "During the reference week, did you work at least 1 hour unpaid in a family business?"

As only 0.3 % of all Germans in employment are unpaid family workers and there was only 1 case in the pretest that was additionally identified as not being employed, no specific conclusions can be drawn for this question.
Nevertheless, all test persons were asked about the comprehension of the question and the terms used. All of them were able to give examples for this sub-group of employment. It can be assumed that the wording and the terms used are understood well.

3) **Main findings on Question 3 –** *absent from work*
   a) "Do you usually have a job or work, but did not do it during the reference week?"
   b) "Do you usually have a job or work that you did not do during the reference week?"

The question is understood well by the majority of the probands. Persons who were asked to answer the question could respond to it easily. 16 % of the employed indicate an absence from work, here.
During the probing it was observed that the term "usually" is not clear for everybody. It is partly understood as "regularly". This means that seasonal jobs would not be covered. As a result it is recommended to explain the term "usually" by using examples below the question itself.

4) **Main findings on Question 4 –** *small and casual jobs*
   a) "During the reference week, did you do a small or casual job for pay, as for example mentioned in the list?
      Not meant are activities that are carried out for one's own family."
   b) "During the reference week, did you do a small or casual job for pay outside the family as for example mentioned in the list?"

The list included the addition "outside family" where necessary

The question seems to works well. 5 % of the employed probands indicate an employment here. The pretest found out that persons not answering in question 1 are answering here.

Concerning which version is preferred, the difference between the two question versions is that the instruction ("It is about activities that are not performed for one's own family") is presented in one case separately below the question text (version a) and in the other integrated into the question text and additionally in the list (version b). Following the probing, version 1 is the preferred one.

The long list of examples is in general is conceived as being helpful by the test persons. Some of them asked for more examples that are even more self-explanatory and differentiated while others probands asked to shorten the list with the examples being too differentiated. A clear result was, that a different sorting of the list would be appreciated.

The results concerning the terms household and family are presented further down in this paper.

5) Summary on the findings concerning questions 1-4

Regarding the objective, whether all employed probands can be identified exhaustively by the first four questions and whether it is easy for them to indicate their employment, the pretest gives a positive conclusion. The long list of examples on small jobs seems to be very useful for persons who are indecisive.

Most employed probands (79%) indicated their employment in question 1, followed by 16% in question 3 and only 5% were left to indicate it in question 4. This is a very good distribution.

As the persons who took part in the pretest are a special population in a special interview situation, Destatis still has reservations due to the many experiences in the past showing that people in small jobs are difficult to be identified.

6) Reference week and reference periods

Understanding the concept of the reference week and the referring reference periods is crucial for the results of the LFS. The pretest should therefore find out, if the respondents correctly identify the reference week and if they answer correspondingly. A positive result is that about 70% of all probands reply corresponding to their reference week. For employed persons the share is even higher (83%). Those test persons who have problems referring correctly to the intended reference week are mainly using the interview week as reference. This problem seems to occur more often if the reference week has passed more than four weeks.

Based on the correct identification of the reference week, respondents may make mistakes also answering the questions on job search and availability. Looking at the four week reference period for job search, only 30% correctly refer to reference week and the 3 weeks before that.

Interestingly, the share of persons referring to the correct period is higher for the availability-questions. Here, about 40% interpret the availability-period correctly. There is one further important result regarding the question on availability: The probands were asked to assess two versions referring to the reference period: a) "in the reference week and the week following it" and b) "within two weeks". The result is, that it is much clearer to use version a) in order to receive precise answers.

To reduce mistakes referring to a misunderstanding, the reference week will be highlighted in the future survey in different, mode-adapted ways. The PAPI will have a fold-out notice whereas the CAPI will highlight it by pop-ups at the screen. In the interviewer modes, the interviewer will have to remember the respondent to give precise answers.

7) Comprehension of the term "work"

The term "WORK" that is used in English and therefore in all proposed phrases and questions throughout the LFS regulation, the flow-charts and the explanatory notes, is quite difficult. It can be translated into several German words that are perceived differently. The pretest was meant to identify the differences in the meaning of the term to get an idea where to use which German word.
There are three translated words used in the questionnaire, partly with an addition that explains it further.

"Arbeit" and " Job"	is mostly used throughout the questionnaire, especially in first four questions.
"Tätigkeit"	is mainly used in the questions on job search and seems not misleading there.

The test found out that most respondents differentiate the terms as follows:

Arbeit	is understood as having an official, main, paid job (being subject to social security contributions).
Job	is something done aside, i.e. to earn something on top (during education, retirement, being housewife, …) or as second job.
Tätigkeit	is wider and includes unpaid work (voluntarily or within family).

Whereas "Arbeit" and "Job" is clearly linked to an income in any kind, "Tätigkeit" is not. Concerning the use is the questionnaire it becomes clear that all terms may be used. To exclude unpaid work in "Tätigkeit", it is proposed to add "with a few hours" or "against pay".

8) Comprehension of the term "household" and "family"

A further term that was in focus of the pretest was the use and understanding of "household" and "family" in the question on casual work /small jobs. The proposed question in the flow charts and explanatory notes uses both terms: "…a work for payment outside your household" in the question itself and "not belonging to your family" behind several items in the list of possible jobs that is part of the question.

When preparing the questionnaire it was not clear to DESTATIS, which concept should be used to receive the information behind the question. Eurostat confirmed that the concept should rather be "outside the household AND outside the family" what gave reason to test the probands' understanding of both terms to be able to choose the correct wording for the final questionnaire.

The findings from pretest show that:

"Family" is   1) interpreted differently wide

                          2) but is a clear term

                          3) and includes persons living in the same household.

"Household" alone is an irritating concept for the test persons.

Persons living in a flat together, as for example students sharing a flat during university time, do not consider themselves as a family and mostly not even living in the same household.

As the purpose of the concept is not to include jobs done within a household AND not within the family, the family concept seems to serve both demands. Therefore it is proposed only to refer to "family" in this question for the final questionnaire.

5. Conclusion

The pretest provided numerous valuable results. In addition to the research questions there were some unexpected additional findings. All of them give interesting insight into the respondents' perception and answer behaviour and how future questions on the ILO-Employment status in the German Microcensus could look like.

Although the reservations concerning the identification of casual job holders are not fully resolved, the pretest showed that the probands did not have too much difficulty giving answers. The wording and phrasing did not negatively influence the response behaviour. The new order of questions seems to work quite well with 79% of employed persons indicating their employment already in the first question. How well the questions identify employment, how good the quality of the result is and in how far the results match with those of other sources may be analysed and assessed in the future.

The answers regarding reference periods will probably not be exact. It should be kept in mind when analysing this feature and may be reason for more analyses in the future. An important aspect for further testing may be the quality of answers depending on the interview mode.

All in all, the results are based on a cognitive pretest with a rather small number of probands and with limited research question. The pretest reflects neither a real interview situation nor does it take into account that the questions are asked as a part of the whole LFS questionnaire. But the findings are valuable for developing the final version of the questions on employment status.

Annex 1: Flow of questions in Pretest-Questionnaire

① During the ref-week, did you work at least 1 hour against payment as employee or self-employed ?

→ no

② During the ref-week, did you work at least 1 hour unpaid in a family business?

→ no

③ Do you usually have a job or work, but did not do it during the ref- week? — yes →

→ no

④ During the ref-week, do you have a small or casual job against payment, as for example mentioned in the list?
Not meant are activities that are carried out for one's own family.

yes → **employed** (①②④ yes)

no →

⑤ For what reason did you not work during the ref-week?

Illness/sick leave, holiday, flextime, maternal leave, part-time retirement, job related training

Parental leave or care leave → ⑥ Continuing pay — yes →

no ↓

strike, bad weather, slack work, general education or training, other reason → ⑧ Duration of absence:
< 3 months — yes →
> 3 months

> 3 months ↓

Off-Season → ⑦ Continuing tasks or duties? — yes →

no ↓

I have already found a job, but have not yet worked in the ref-week

no ↓

employed

9 Did you do anything in the reporting week or the 3 weeks before that to find work? This includes the search for a job with only a few hours or activities to start a company. — **yes** → **10** What did you do in the ref-week or in the 3 weeks before to find a new job?

↓ **no**

11 Have you already found a job during the reporting week?
yes, I found and started in ref-week → **employed**
yes, I found and not yet started in ref-week
no

↓ **no**

12 When do you start your new job ?

13 Even if you are not looking for a job, would you still like to work ?

↓ **no**   ↓ **yes**

15 For what reason would you not like to work?

14 For what reason did you not look for a job in the ref-week and the 3 weeks before ?

16 Suppose you had been offered a paid job during the ref-week, could you have started it during the ref-week or the following week? — **yes** → **unemployed**

↓ **no**

17 Why can't you start a new job within 2 weeks?

→ **inactive person**

10