

## Ann Landers Survey on Parenthood

Ann Landers (1918 – 2002) was a syndicated advice columnist whose daily column was published in over 1,200 newspapers in the United States and Canada. People wrote to her with many questions and problems and she answered – usually wittily and very often bluntly and directly. One of her columns from 1976 turned into survey on parenthood.

It sounded like a simple survey – easy to understand, easy to execute and relatively inexpensive with the survey costs limited to the recording of the responses. There were many responses, at least 10,000, so that the statistical efficiency was excellent. Provided that all the statistical assumptions were correct, the survey with that sample size was accurate to within 1 percentage point 19 times out of 20, or so we will find out later on in this course. This was the Ann Landers’ survey of 1975-76 that examined the issue of whether or not parents, if they had their lives to live over again, would have children. To her surprise, 70% of the respondents said “No.” On closer examination of this survey, there are several other problems with it that illustrate a wide range of the intricacies and problems, both statistical and non-statistical, surrounding survey research.



Ann Landers



“Hey, Pops, what was that letter you sent off to Ann Landers yesterday?”

Let’s start with Ann Landers’ “final report” on the survey that she wrote for the June issue of *Good Housekeeping* magazine in 1976. The report begins:

“It was a simple enough letter. A young couple about to be married wrote to ask for guidance. They were undecided. They just couldn’t make up their minds whether or not to have a family.

‘So many of our friends,’ the letter said, ‘seem to resent their children. They envy us our freedom to go and come as we please. Then there’s the matter of money. They say their kids keep them broke. One couple we know had their second child in January. Last week, she had her tubes tied and he had a vasectomy – just to make sure. All this makes me wonder, Ann Landers. Is parenthood worth the trouble? Jim and I are very much in love. Our relationship is beautiful. We don’t want anything to spoil it. All around us we see couples who were so much happier before they were tied down with a family. Will you please ask your readers the question: If you had it to do over again, would you have children?’”

Again, it was reported that 70% replied in the negative. In a sidebar that went with the report, the editors of *Good Housekeeping* wrote:

“All of us at Good Housekeeping know that no mother will be able to read Ann Landers’ report without passionately agreeing or disagreeing. We would like to know what your reaction is. Won’t you therefore, take a minute or two to let us know how you would answer the question: if you it had to do over again, would you have children?”

In their October issue, *Good Housekeeping* reported that 95% of the responses were “Yes.”

How does one account for these vastly different results? The same question was asked. The same method of sampling was used – readers of a magazine or newspaper were asked to respond to a question posed. Let’s consider a number of possibilities.

One possibility has to do with the way in which the same question was asked. The first survey appears to have a fairly negative setup. The young couple, in their letter to Ann Landers, recounted tales of woe among their friends, perhaps encouraging those with the more negative experiences of parenthood to write in. Now the June *Good Housekeeping* article, in which the sidebar appears, opens with the following words in large type:

“If you had it to do over again – would you have children? This is the question widely read columnist Ann Landers asked and 10,000 women answered. To her horror, seventy percent said that if they had known then what they know now, they would not have children.”

Based on that headline, the Good Housekeeping survey might be interpreted by many readers as a request to reaffirm parenthood. And so 95% of the writers tried to assuage Ann Landers’ horror by sending in their positive responses. Now part of goodness of survey results is directly related to the goodness of the measuring instrument, the questionnaire. It can be the case in surveys, and possibly that is the case here, that the same question, posed in two different contexts or preambles, elicits two different responses.

It turns out that different questions were used in the two surveys. We can dig a little deeper into this to see what appeared in the original Ann Landers' column. On November 3, 1975 the following letter appeared.<sup>1</sup>

“My husband and I have been married for a year and are undecided as to whether or not we should have children. Perhaps your readers can be of some help to those of us who are asking ourselves these questions.

Do people in their 50s, 60s and 70s regret not having had children when they were young? Are they lonesome? Or do they enjoy the freedom from the responsibilities that many parents and grandparents find burdensome?

I've heard some couples say they wish they had never had children – that their lives were beautiful until the kids came along and ruined everything.

Would you ask your readers to express their views and help us decide? We would especially like to hear from older people who do and do not have children. This is a case where we could learn from our elders.”

This is quite different from the scenario given in Ann Landers's “final report.” Her initial reply to this letter was:

“I can tell you right now you're going to get six of one and half a dozen of the other. It depends on whom you want to listen to.

Some parents will tell you their children have brought them nothing but grief. Others will say their children have been life's greatest blessing.”

She then went on to describe how her own daughter was a blessing. We are indeed talking about the same survey. The reader response to the couple's question appeared almost three months later on January 23, 1976. Ann Landers wrote:

“A few weeks ago, a young married couple wrote to say they were undecided as whether or not to have a family. They asked me to solicit opinions from parents of young children as well as older couples whose families were grown. ‘Was it worth it?’ they wanted to know. ‘Were the rewards enough to make up for the grief?’ The question, as I put it to my readers, was this: ‘If you had it to do over again, would you have children?’

Well, dear friends, the responses were staggering. Much to my surprise, 70 per cent of those who responded said ‘no.’”

Perhaps having the question worded differently is not the only reason for the difference in responses. The two surveys were actually targeted at different groups of people, or in the jargon of survey research, different target populations. The editors of *Good Housekeeping* requested responses from mothers. Ann Landers' question, based on the original letter appears to be targeted to both males and females in the approximate age range 50 to 80. Further, the *Good Housekeeping* survey was targeted at the readers of that magazine. Ann Landers was a syndicated columnist appearing in several different

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<sup>1</sup> As a syndicated columnist the letter appeared in many newspapers. The quotations are taken from *The Toronto Star*, November 3, 1975.

newspapers. Not everyone who read Ann Landers in the newspaper necessarily would read *Good Housekeeping*, and vice versa. Questions posed to different populations may elicit different responses.

Ann Landers herself came close to describing what is one of the major problems with her survey. At first, in one column<sup>2</sup> she listed potential psychological and cultural reasons for the negative response. Then in a later column<sup>3</sup> she wrote what is perhaps the real reason for her negative response.

“I believe the logical explanation for this phenomenon is (a) the hurt, angry and disenchanted tend to write more readily than the contented, and (b) people tell me things they wouldn’t dare tell anyone else.”

Her choice (a) is the real culprit. The responses to the survey were not a true cross section of society and reflected the opinions of only those who felt strongly enough to write in. This kind of self-selection bias could be eliminated using random sampling. Neither the *Good Housekeeping* survey nor the survey originally run by Ann Landers used any form of random selection. In both surveys the respondents selected themselves, based on a general appeal, to participate in the survey. For a randomized survey an individual would be selected randomly in some way from a population and asked directly (through the mail, face-to-face interview or telephone conversation) to respond to the question.

Two surveys asking the question, “If you had it to do over again, would you have children?” were actually run using random selection techniques. In one survey commissioned by the *Kansas City Star*, 409 people were chosen randomly from the Kansas City area. In that survey 94% answered affirmatively. Although we have probably eliminated the self-selection bias and can take some comfort in the validity of this estimate, we must be careful about what inference we are making. Since the target population was parents in the area of Kansas City and the sampling was with reference to this target population, then the inference is valid only for that target population. From this survey, it cannot be assumed that about 94% of parents in the United States would also answer positively to the question. To make that inference it is necessary to carry out a national survey. And that survey was commissioned by another newspaper, *Newsday*. In that survey 91% of 1373 respondents replied that they would have children if they had it to do over again.

The *Newsday* survey seems to validate the *Good Housekeeping* survey – both national surveys are in the 90 to 95% region on the positive side. Indeed, nonrandom selection can lead to accurate results in some cases. And nonrandom surveys can be much cheaper to run. The major expense in the *Good Housekeeping* survey was in tabulating the responses. In the *Newsday* survey there were additional costs incurred through the time it took to train interviewers, to select participants for the survey and to interview those who were selected. In view of the costs, one is very tempted to examine the *Good Housekeeping* survey closely in order to emulate the aspects of this survey that yielded what appear to be reasonable results. For example, if such items as age and gender are available from the responses, then we could check to see if our sample age-sex distribution conforms to the population distribution. The problem is that if these

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<sup>2</sup> *The Toronto Star*, March 29, 1976.

<sup>3</sup> *The Toronto Star*, June 16, 1976.

covariates – age and gender – are poorly correlated with our response variable – having a second chance on whether or not to have children – then the results can be badly biased. Neyman (1934) demonstrated this in a very different context when he examined the results of sampling from the census returns for the Italian census of 1921. In order to obtain the sample, certain sample statistics were matched to their population counterparts. Once again poor results were obtained when the matching variables were poorly correlated with the variables of interest. Consequently the advice to follow is that however strong the desire might be to follow Ann Landers' or *Good Housekeeping's* example, it is best not to yield to this particular temptation in reducing survey costs. The risk of self-selection bias is too great. Further, there is no way of quantifying this bias from the survey results alone.