

Appendix A: Design, methodology and limitations of the telephone survey

Design, methodology and analysis

A telephone survey questionnaire of eight to ten minutes duration was designed by HREOC in collaboration with the Gallup Organization. A copy is attached at Appendix B.

A random national population sample was conducted of 1,006 persons between the ages of 18 and 64 years across Australia. This was a representative sample of the Australian population covering all age groups, income brackets, and geographical locations. In conducting the household telephone survey, a five-call design was used, meaning that each telephone number was called up to five times on different days at different times. Those interviewees who stated that they had experienced sexual harassment in the workplace in the five years prior to the survey were asked more in-depth questions about the nature of the sexual harassment experienced.

After collecting the initial 182 pilot interviews, the questionnaire was amended slightly. The question seeking a rate of incidence of sexual harassment was varied, removing the limitation to those who experienced sexual harassment in the past five years in the workplace. The question was asked "have you ever personally experienced sexual harassment?" This was done in order to compare more directly the results of this study with other studies conducted in Australia and New Zealand.¹⁵⁸ However, the collection of the more detailed information about the sexual harassment was still limited to those interviewees who had experienced sexual harassment in the workplace in the past five years.

In addition, questions asking these interviewees to rate their feelings of being offended and intimidated by the sexual harassment were added. These questions were added to provide an indicator of the interviewee's perception of the seriousness of the sexual harassment.

One hundred and fourteen in-depth interviews were obtained from the general population sample of those who had been sexually harassed in the workplace in the past five years. Eighty-six additional in-depth interviews were conducted to boost the total sample size of these interviewees from the 114 obtained in the general population sample to 200 in total.

Interviews were conducted over the telephone. Female interviewers were used because of the sensitivity of the topic. General population interviews were collected in July 2003; and additional booster interviews were collected in early August 2003.

Interviewees to the telephone survey were advised that the study was being conducted on the prevalence and impact of sexual harassment. The following definition of sexual harassment based on the legislative definition in section 28A of the SDA¹⁵⁹ was provided to all interviewees:

Sexual harassment is an unwelcome sexual advance, unwelcome request for sexual favours or other unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature which makes a person feel offended, humiliated, or intimidated, and where that reaction is reasonable in the circumstances.

Where interviewees stated they had experienced sexual harassment in the workplace more than once, they were asked to base their responses to the questionnaire on the most recent experience.

As the findings from the telephone survey are based on differing sample and sub-sample sizes, the reliability of the data varies as follows:

- Total population sample of 1006 interviewees gives a margin of error of plus or minus three percentage points of the population parameter. For results based on this sample

¹⁵⁸ See 2.2.2 for comparison of the national telephone survey results with other research conducted in Australia and New Zealand.

¹⁵⁹ Section 28A provides (1) For the purposes of this Division, a person sexually harasses another person (the *person harassed*) if:

(a) the person makes an unwelcome sexual advance, or an unwelcome request for sexual favours, to the person harassed; or

(b) engages in other unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature in relation to the person harassed; in circumstances in which a reasonable person, having regard to all the circumstances, would have anticipated that the person harassed would be offended, humiliated or intimidated.

(2) In this section:

conduct of a sexual nature includes making a statement of a sexual nature to a person, or in the presence of a person, whether the statement is made orally or in writing.

¹⁶⁰ In other words, in theory, in 19 cases out of 20, the results from the larger sample sizes should differ by no more than three percentage points, in either direction, from what would have been obtained by interviewing all Australians aged between 18 and 64 years.

¹⁶¹ This reduced total population sample results from the revision of questions after the first 182 pilot interviews were conducted.

¹⁶² These will be noted in the footnotes for each population.

¹⁶³ See Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission *A Bad Business: Review of sexual harassment in employment complaints 2002* HREOC Sydney 2003, p11.

¹⁶⁴ See Appendix B.

size, we can say with 95 per cent confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects could be three percentage points in either direction.¹⁶⁰

- Total population sample of 824 interviewees¹⁶¹ also gives a margin of error of plus or minus three per cent.
- Total harassed in workplace in past five years sample of 200 interviewees give a margin of error of plus or minus seven per cent. For results based on this sample size, we can say with 95 per cent confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects could be seven percentage points in either direction.
- Percentages based on smaller sample sizes would have a larger margin of error.¹⁶²

Therefore we can be statistically confident of findings based on the total population samples. For statistics based on the sub-sample of 200 interviewees who experienced sexual harassment in the workplace in the past five years, we are still able to draw conclusions that are relatively statistically sound. Of course, the smaller the sub-sample size, the less reliable the data become.

Limitations of the research

While a telephone survey is a relatively efficient method of interviewing a large sample population, particularly where the topic of the survey may be a sensitive issue for many people, it does have some limitations. The following limitations are relevant to this research.

Reaching individuals with limited English language skills

A disadvantage of a telephone survey as a research tool is that it favours interviewees with good English language skills. Individuals with little or limited English speaking and comprehension skills are unlikely to participate in a telephone survey due to the difficulties of non face-to-face communication. This limitation is borne out by the fact that the proportion of individuals who speak a language other than English at home is significantly underrepresented in the telephone survey population when compared to the general population. See Chapter 3 for a comparison of the ethnicity of the target of sexual harassment in the telephone survey data and A Bad Business data.

Sample size

There is a relatively small proportion of the population which has experienced sexual harassment in the workplace in the last five years. That is, it is a low incidence population. This makes it difficult and expensive to find a systematic and representative sample of people who have the required experiences. While the sample size of 200 is still reasonably robust, sub-sampling of this group often means that we are analysing very small samples. This means that conclusions should be drawn from such sub-samples with caution. Where statistics based on small sample sizes are reported in this paper, the sample size and the margin of error are also provided.

Limitations with the comparison of A Bad Business and the telephone survey

Any comparison of the results of *A Bad Business* and the findings of the telephone survey is limited by the quality of the data. As detailed in *A Bad Business*,¹⁶³ the complaint files which formed the basis of the analysis in that paper varied in the amount of information that was collected, particularly in relation to the demographics of complainants and their alleged harassers, information about the employer and the effect of the sexual harassment.

A fundamental difference between the data from *A Bad Business* and the telephone survey is that the survey data are based on the interviewees' own perceptions of sexual harassment based on their own experiences and an oral statement of the legislative definition of sexual harassment read out to them at the beginning of the interview.¹⁶⁴ *A Bad Business* data are based on sexual harassment complaints formally assessed and

investigated by HREOC's specialist complaint officers as falling within the provisions of the SDA. So while the behaviour reported in the telephone survey is perceived as sexual harassment, it may well fall short of unlawful sexual harassment under the SDA.

Other limitations with comparing the data include the varying sample sizes. Due to the varying quality of the complaints data, the sample sizes in *A Bad Business* can vary significantly. Some of the sample sizes are very small, only permitting qualitative analysis. Thus, comparing the statistics from *A Bad Business* with those of the telephone survey is often difficult. The sample sizes are provided in the footnotes along with warnings as to the strength of any conclusions drawn from the comparison.

The timing of the collection of the two sets of data also presents limitations. The telephone survey results relate to sexual harassment experienced in the workplace in the five years prior to the conduct of the interview (July-August 2003). The findings of *A Bad Business* relate to complaints of sexual harassment finalised in 2002 by HREOC. The timing of the occurrence of the sexual harassment complained of may have occurred significantly earlier than 2002, depending on the duration of the sexual harassment complained of, and the time the complaint took to finalise.¹⁶⁵ It is evident that there may be significant timing discrepancies between the two sets of data.

Another limitation with the comparison is the differing demographic parameters of the respective population samples. For example, the age of interviewees to the telephone survey was limited to individuals between 18 and 64 years due to logistical issues in gaining parental consent for minors to participate in the survey and the fact that the majority of individuals have retired from the workforce by the age of 65 years.¹⁶⁶ Thus any comparison of the age of the targets of sexual harassment must be read with this limitation in mind.

A further limitation is that data from *A Bad Business* relates only to sexual harassment complaints made to HREOC, and does not include information about sexual harassment complaints made to the State and Territory anti-discrimination agencies. Thus, the comparison cannot purport to examine the differences between all reported and non-reported sexual harassment.

¹⁶⁵ See Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission *A Bad Business: Review of sexual harassment in employment complaints 2002* HREOC Sydney 2003, p32.

¹⁶⁶ The age of complainants in *A Bad Business* ranged from 15 to 58 years, while the age of alleged harassers ranged from 20 to 69 years. See Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission *A Bad Business: Review of sexual harassment in employment complaints 2002* HREOC Sydney 2003, p19.