

2020 Philadelphia Defendant Survey

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Table Of Contents

- Project Overview..... 2
- Sample Design..... 2
 - Target Population..... 2
 - Sampling Frame..... 2
- Questionnaire/Letter Design and Formatting 3
 - Questionnaire Design..... 3
 - Letter and Postcard Design..... 3
 - Survey Formatting 3
- Programming 3
- Data Collection..... 4
- Data Processing and Quality Control..... 5
- Weighting 5
 - Weighting Procedures..... 5
 - Margin of Sampling Error..... 8
- Response Rate..... 8
- Deliverables..... 9
- About SSRS..... 9

Project Overview

The Pew Charitable Trusts hired SSRS to conduct a study of Philadelphia residents who had civil legal cases adjudicated in Philadelphia Municipal Court in 2018, the latest year for which data was available. The survey's goal was to better understand Philadelphia residents' experience as defendants in Philadelphia's municipal court system. Defendants were the target population for this study.

The 2020 Philadelphia Defendant Survey used a mixed-mode online and mail survey design. Data collection occurred from Feb. 12 through April 27, 2020, and respondents had the option to complete the survey in English or Spanish. Statistical results were weighted to correct specific discrepancies based on the sampling frame provided. The design effect for this survey is 1.17, and the margin of sampling error for the complete set of weighted data is plus or minus 6 percentage points.

Details on the sampling, questionnaire design, data collection, processing, and weighting are discussed below.

Sample Design

Target Population

The target population for this study was Philadelphia residents who had civil legal cases adjudicated in Philadelphia Municipal Court in 2018. The survey targeted defendants in debt claim lawsuits.

Sampling Frame

The sampling frame for this study was defendants in debt claim lawsuits for cases adjudicated in 2018. Pew provided SSRS with the sample database. Pew compiled a list of names and addresses of defendants in debt claim lawsuits for the survey from the Philadelphia Municipal Court website.

Once SSRS received the sample from Pew, it reduced the file to include only cases from 2018, removed any cases that did not have addresses, and excluded cases that involved trusts or funds, as well as any case without a defendant. To maximize the contact and study participation rates, SSRS completed the following sample preparation steps:

1. All sample records were run through the NCOA (national change of address) directory. SSRS updated the sample database with the most recent respondent address based on this look-up.
2. Given that the respondents must have resided in Philadelphia County at the time they were surveyed, SSRS removed all sample records outside Philadelphia County from the sampling frame.
3. SSRS checked for duplicate sample records based on name and address and removed all duplicates.
4. To customize mailings to include a Spanish-language version, SSRS flagged all sample records that had a Hispanic surname.

Once those steps were complete, SSRS selected a random 7,600 defendants who were mailed the invitation letter, reminder postcard, and reminder survey packet.

Questionnaire/Letter Design and Formatting

Questionnaire Design

Pew developed the questionnaire for this study. SSRS reviewed the questionnaire primarily to identify problems in the instrument that might increase respondent burden, cause respondents to refuse or terminate the interview, create problems with respondent comprehension, or pose practical challenges for a hard-copy questionnaire, such as complex skip patterns. Once the questionnaire was finalized, SSRS then translated the instrument into Spanish.

Letter and Postcard Design

Pew researchers developed the text for the study invitation letter, reminder postcard, and nonresponder follow-up cover letter in consultation with SSRS. These mailing materials were based on similar Pew studies (i.e., the [Philadelphia Movers](#) and [Philadelphia Resident](#) surveys). SSRS translated these materials into Spanish and formatted the letters and postcards to prepare them for mailing. SSRS sent Pew the final letters for approval before printing and mailing the material to contacts.

Survey Formatting

SSRS was responsible for formatting the questionnaire into a self-administered paper instrument. It focused on clarity of format for any skip logic and for overall comprehension of the questionnaire. SSRS also made efforts in the design to (1) encourage cooperation by offering an easy-to-read, easy-to-manuever hard copy and (2) reduce the potential for confusion and thereby produce the most accurate data. SSRS formatted the survey in Word and then worked with its professional printing service. Paper surveys were printed in both English and Spanish and were sent to Pew for approval before materials were printed and mailed to contacts.

Programming

Prior to the field period, SSRS programmed the study into its Conformat platform for web administration in both English and Spanish. The program was optimized for administration via smartphone or other mobile handheld devices. SSRS checked the program extensively to ensure that skip patterns followed the design of the questionnaire. The web program was checked on multiple devices, including desktop computers and handheld mobile devices, and on different web browsers to ensure consistent and optimized visualization across devices and browsers. SSRS generated unique survey passwords that were assigned and provided via mail to potential respondents, who then accessed the web survey directly using those passwords. This also gave respondents the ability to return to their surveys later if they chose to suspend their interviews.

Data Collection

SSRS used a sequential web-mail mixed-mode methodology to conduct interviews for this study. Data collection was conducted in English and Spanish. Eighty-eight percent of the surveys were completed online, while 12% were completed via mail.

All selected sample records received a one-page, single-sided study invitation letter. This letter was printed on Pew stationery and was addressed to the respondent name on file. For records flagged with a Hispanic surname, the letter was printed double-sided, with one side in English and the other in Spanish. The text of this letter, developed in collaboration with Pew researchers, included a short web link for the survey and a PIN to access the online survey. The invitation letter included a \$2 cash pre-incentive and offered a \$10 payment upon completion of the survey via a virtual gift card code. The \$10 payment was disbursed soon after completion of the web survey.

Two days after the invitation letter was mailed, all contacts were sent a reminder postcard. The purpose of this mailing was to remind potential respondents to reply to the initial mailing. The postcard did not contain the survey web link or the target respondent's PIN.

Approximately two weeks after the study invitation letters were mailed, nonresponders were sent questionnaire packets via first-class mail. This mail option ensured that we were able to reach respondents who do not have internet access or were unable to complete the survey online. This mailing was sent in a 6-by-9 envelope and contained:

- A personalized reminder letter printed in color on Pew stationery, explaining the nature of the survey.
- An eight-page questionnaire booklet in English or, for records flagged with a Hispanic surname, two eight-page questionnaire booklets (one in English and one in Spanish).
- A postage-paid business reply envelope.

Respondents completing the survey via mail instead of online were given a \$10 postpaid honorarium as a check mailed after receipt and verification of completion of the mail questionnaire.

To detect any questionnaire, sampling, or response rate issues, SSRS conducted the mailing in two phases. Phase 1 involved mailing up to 1,000 study invitation letters, reminder postcards, and questionnaire packets. Within approximately two weeks of sending the Phase 1 study invitation letters, SSRS conducted a Phase 2 mailing for the remaining 6,600 cases. Phase 2 records received the same mailing structure as Phase 1 (an invitation letter, a reminder postcard, and a questionnaire packet). Table 1 shows the schedule for when each mailing was sent out.

When Phase 1 respondents initially began completing the survey, SSRS noticed a higher-than-expected termination rate at Q2 (*Before we begin, were you sued in Philadelphia Municipal Court in 2018?*). SSRS and Pew discussed this and decided to make an update to Q2. On March 2, the wording was updated to read: *Before we begin, did you have a court case in Philadelphia Municipal Court in 2018?* Furthermore, on March 16, we decided to update the wording again to remove the mention of 2018 (*Before we begin, did you have a court case in Philadelphia Municipal Court?*), with the hope of continuing to improve the screen-in rate.

Table 1

Contact Schedule

Date	Mailing
Feb. 12	Phase 1 invitation letters mailed
Feb. 14	Phase 1 reminder postcards mailed
Feb. 28	Phase 1 survey packets mailed
March 18	Phase 2 invitation letters mailed
March 20	Phase 2 reminder postcards mailed
April 2	Phase 2 survey packets mailed

Data Processing and Quality Control

Data from both web and paper modes were combined and thoroughly cleaned with a computer validation program written by one of SSRS's data processing programmers. This program established editing parameters in order to locate any errors, including data that did not follow skip patterns, out-of-range values, and errors in data field locations. Back-coding was done for Q25 to sort any "other/specify" responses into prelisted categories where appropriate. And Q27 was fully coded using categories developed from scratch.

After carrying out quality control procedures, SSRS provided Pew with a clean, processed, and fully labeled and weighted final SPSS dataset, along with two banners of cross tabulations.

Weighting

SSRS worked with Pew researchers to determine weighting variables for this study based on the available frame data, which included whether a defendant was represented by an attorney, case type, case outcome, Philadelphia neighborhood, and amount sought for the case.

Weighting Procedures

Data was weighted so that it was representative of the target population of adults age 18 or older living in Philadelphia who were recent debt claim defendants in Philadelphia Municipal Court. Weighting balances the demographic profile of the sample against target population parameters.

To handle missing data among demographic variables, SSRS employed a technique called hot decking. Hot deck imputation randomly replaces the missing values of a respondent with those of another, similar respondent without missing data. The replacement values are further determined by variables predictive of nonresponse that are present in the entire file. SSRS used an SPSS macro detailed in "Goodbye, Listwise Deletion: Presenting Hot Deck Imputation as an Easy and Effective Tool for Handling Missing Data" (Myers, 2011).

Weighting is accomplished using SPSSINC RAKE, an SPSS extension module that simultaneously balances the distributions of all variables using the GENLOG procedure.

The data was weighted to the following parameters: defendant representation (yes or no), case outcome (won or won by default, judgment by agreement, lost, lost by default, not known, settled, withdrawn), case type (auto/home remodeling repairs/bad check/commercial paper loans/faulty repairs/incomplete service/other/real estate, consumer purchase, landlord/tenant-based small claim, motor vehicle, return security), neighborhood (Center City, North Philadelphia, Northeast Philadelphia, Northwest Philadelphia, Riverwards, South Philadelphia, and West Philadelphia), and amount sought (\$1,205.79 or less, \$1,205.80-\$2,236.67, \$2,236.68-\$4,229.27, and \$4,229.28 or more).

Table 2
Raking Dimensions

Dimension	Value label
Defendant attorney representation	Yes
	No
Case outcome	Won and won by default
	Dismissed for no service
	Judgment by agreement
	Lost
	Lost by default
	Not known
	Settled
	Withdrawn
Case type	Consumer purchase
	Motor vehicle
	Return security
	All others
Amount sought (divided into quarters)	\$1,205.79 or less
	\$1,205.80-\$2,236.67
	\$2,236.68-\$4,229.27
	\$4,229.28 or more
Philadelphia neighborhood	Center City
	North Philadelphia
	Northeast Philadelphia
	Northwest Philadelphia
	Riverwards
	South Philadelphia
West Philadelphia	

Table 3

Population Parameters and Weighted and Unweighted Total Sample Distribution

Characteristic	Value label	Parameter	Unweighted	Weighted
Defendant attorney representation	Yes	7.0%	10.7%	7.4%
	No	93.0%	89.3%	92.6%
Case outcome	Won and won by default	2.0%	3.9%	2.2%
	Dismissed for no service	20.4%	12.3%	19.6%
	Judgment by agreement	7.1%	12.7%	7.2%
	Lost	1.7%	4.2%	2.2%
	Lost by default	37.5%	33.8%	37.2%
	Not known	19.1%	20.8%	19.3%
	Settled	4.1%	6.2%	4.1%
	Withdrawn	7.9%	6.2%	8.1%
Case type	Consumer purchase	83.4%	85.4%	84.9%
	Motor vehicle	5.5%	4.9%	5.5%
	Return security	0.9%	2.9%	1.3%
	All others	10.2%	6.8%	8.3%
Amount sought (divided into quarters)	\$1,205.79 or less	25.0%	24.4%	25.0%
	\$1,205.80-\$2,236.67	25.0%	26.6%	25.7%
	\$2,236.68-\$4,229.27	25.0%	22.1%	24.4%
	\$4,229.28 or more	25.0%	26.9%	24.9%
Philadelphia neighborhood	Center City	4.2%	5.2%	4.0%
	North Philadelphia	19.7%	22.1%	19.6%
	Northeast Philadelphia	24.2%	22.4%	24.6%
	Northwest Philadelphia	12.0%	12.3%	11.6%
	Riverwards	10.2%	10.4%	10.5%
	South Philadelphia	13.4%	10.4%	13.3%
	West Philadelphia	16.1%	17.2%	16.5%

Margin Of Sampling Error

Specialized sampling designs and post-data-collection statistical adjustments require analysis procedures that reflect departures from simple random sampling. SSRS calculates the effects of these design features so that an appropriate adjustment can be incorporated into tests of statistical significance when using this data. The so-called design effect, or *deff*, represents the loss in statistical efficiency that results from complex sample designs and systematic nonresponse. SSRS calculates the composite design effect for a sample of size n , with each case having a weight, w , as:

$$deff = \frac{n \sum w^2}{(\sum w)^2}$$

The design effect for this survey was 1.17 overall.

In a wide range of situations, the adjusted *standard error* of a statistic should be calculated by multiplying the usual formula by the square root of the design effect (\sqrt{deff}) and the square root of the finite population correction (\sqrt{fpc}). Thus, the formula for computing the 95% confidence interval around an estimate, \hat{p} , is:

$$\hat{p} \pm 1.96 \sqrt{\frac{deff \times fpc \times p \times (1 - p)}{n}}$$

The survey's margin of error is the largest 95% confidence interval for any estimated proportion based on the total sample—one around 50%. For example, the margin of error for the total sample is plus or minus 6 percentage points. This means that in 95 out of every 100 samples using the same methodology, estimated proportions based on the entire sample will be no more than 6 percentage points away from their true values in the population. It is important to remember that sampling fluctuations are only one possible source of error in a survey estimate. Other sources, such as measurement error, may contribute additional error of greater or lesser magnitude.

Response Rate

Table 4 reports the disposition of all sampled records that were contacted. The response rate estimates the share of all eligible people who were ultimately interviewed. Response rates are computed according to American Association for Public Opinion Research standards.⁵

The response rate for this study was 13.5%.

⁵ The American Association for Public Opinion Research, "Standard Definitions: Final Dispositions of Case Codes and Outcome Rates for Surveys," 9th edition (2016).

Table 4

Sample Disposition

Disposition	N
1. Complete (I)	308
2. Eligible, noninterview (R)	35
Refusal and break-off	35
3. Unknown eligibility, noninterview (UH)	6,458
Nothing ever returned	6,410
Refused, unknown if eligible	48
4. Not eligible, returned (IN)	799
Did not have a case in Philadelphia Municipal Court in 2018	238
Undeliverable	552
Ineligible respondent (deceased, duplicate respondent, etc.)	9
Total contacted	7,600
$e=(I+R)/(I+R+IN)$	30.0%
$RR3=I/[I+R+(e*UH)]$	13.5%

Deliverables

SSRS provided the following deliverables to Pew:

- Formatted, clean questionnaires (for both web and mail versions)
- A final, clean, fully labeled, weighted SPSS data file
- Two banners of cross tabulations run on final weighted data
- A final SPSS data file of those who agreed to be re-contacted
- Topline results
- Methodology report

About SSRS

SSRS is a full-service public opinion research firm managed by a core group of industry-leading professionals. SSRS service offerings include the Omnibus Survey, Probability Panel, and other online solutions as well as custom research programs—all driven by a central commitment to methodological rigor. The SSRS team is renowned for its multimodal approach, as well as its sophisticated and proprietary sample designs. Typical projects for the company include complex strategic, tactical, and

public opinion initiatives in the U.S. and in more than 40 countries worldwide. Please visit ssrs.com for further information.