

Results Unsatisfactory:
A Critical Review of the 2010 VAC National Client Survey

By

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Prepared for:

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Section 1 - Preamble

While this report is by no means exhaustive, the analysis contained herein is nevertheless significant. We feel that our findings are of such importance that they warrant a timely release, as decisions are now being made on the basis of information provided in the NCS. While a more comprehensive study of the National Client Survey could be conducted, we have every confidence that our analysis is conclusive and able to bear scrutiny.

Section 2 - Background

In April/May 2010, Corporate Research Associates administered a survey of clients in order to assess their level of satisfaction with services they receive from Veterans Affairs Canada. The survey was designed by staff at Veterans Affairs. The results of this survey were presented to Treasury Board in fall 2010 as part of the 2009-2010 Departmental Performance Report for Veterans Affairs Canada.

In the months preceding this presentation to Treasury Board, media provided extensive coverage of veterans who were frustrated and dissatisfied with the benefits and services provided by Veterans Affairs. Major news items included the class-action lawsuit regarding SISIP pension claw backs; the dispute over ALS coverage; ongoing arguments regarding compensation for Rainbow Chemicals and depleted uranium exposure; revelations regarding Departmental privacy breaches; and the first-ever nation-wide protest by veterans.

The National Client Survey was conducted just prior to this surge in mass-media attention and was tabled shortly after the Veterans' National Day of Protest. The NCS claims that 80% of veterans are satisfied with the benefits and services of Veterans Affairs. Our Duty found it difficult to reconcile this finding with what we ourselves had heard from veterans.

On this basis, Our Duty Inc began an investigation in November 2011 to test the veracity of the conclusions of 2010 National Client Survey.

Section 3 - Summary

External empirical evidence¹ suggests that a great many VAC clients are dissatisfied with the department. This evidence questions the validity of the 80% Overall Satisfaction result of the NCS.

Respondents reported moderate health issues and minimal impediment to lifestyle. This suggests inadequate sampling of disability clients.

Negative scores from the majority Canadian Forces clients would have to be balanced by abnormally high scores in the other populations in order to achieve the high satisfaction rating

¹ See Appendix 2

The NCS did not comply with design standards outlined by the Panel on Telephone Public Opinion Survey Quality. Data collected was irrelevant to the survey goals. The survey was long and burdensome to respondents. The survey failed to account for non-response bias in its conclusions.

The majority of eligible contacts (52.8%) were non-responders who did not participate in the survey. The most likely causes for non-response relate to client dissatisfaction. Proper accounting of non-response data would have significantly decreased the client satisfaction scores. By failing to adhere to mandated standards, the National Client Survey did not achieve any accurate results.

Section 4 – Recommendations

We have grave concerns regarding the conduct and structure of the 2010 National Client Survey. Given its significant deviation from accepted standards, we suggest it would be unsafe to consider the study conclusive.

Regarding Contact Data:

We have found no issues directly relating to *NCS Section 1 - General Contact*. However, as the degree of non-response bias impacts all aspects of the survey, we also cannot be certain of the accuracy of these results. Therefore, we recommend that data from Section 1 should only be utilized when qualified with '*amongst survey respondents*'.

Regarding NCS Sections 2 through 5:

Despite government requirements, the NCS does not address its significantly high non-response rate. There are numerous indicators within the collected data that suggest clients who were significantly dissatisfied did not participate in the survey. This results in satisfaction scores being over-inflated.

We find that the survey significantly exceeds recommended length guidelines. One section of data collection falls outside the survey's demograph and there is replication of queries within and across sections. The NCS questionnaire is both long and burdensome, in violation of government standards. The collection of accurate

satisfaction data requires that the survey itself not cause dissatisfaction. The NCS fails in this regard, thus further skewing results towards a false positive.

Deviation from government standards, failure to address non-response bias, and bias created by the survey design have combined to skew data to such a degree as to render the results inconclusive. It is our conclusion that it is unsafe to regard Sections 2 through 5 (inclusive) as, in any way, accurate measures of satisfaction among clients of Veterans Affairs Canada.

Therefore, it is our recommendation that the 2010 National Client Survey be declared invalid, unreliable, and inconclusive.

Section 5 - Issues Arising from the NCS Key Findings

The NCS findings generated several discussion points.

From *Key Findings*:

VAC's programs and services are meeting client needs. The vast majority of clients are satisfied with the programs and services offered by the Department, and the needs of most clients are being met in this regard. Drivers of overall satisfaction with programs and services include: meeting basic needs, quality of service delivery, staff going the extra mile, accessibility of services, fair treatment, and the amount of time to get service. Veterans Affairs Canada clients are satisfied with their life and do not generally require assistance with their day-to-day tasks. That said, only moderate self-report ratings are offered concerning the overall health and well-being of clients, as also is the case concerning self-reported assessments of mental health. Further, a minority of clients experience challenges in undertaking activities as a result of physical or emotional problems have not had energy or have felt downhearted and depressed in the past four weeks. Clients have friends and family they can talk with, and generally feel they have someone they can count on to help them if they become sick.

Various Veterans Affairs Canada programs are highly regarded, with the majority of each specific client group earmarked with specific program survey queries

(i.e., VIP clients, Health Benefits clients, and Disability Benefits clients) offering high ratings of their respective programs.

In many instances, Canadian Forces Veterans offer lower ratings compared with other clients. In many instances the survey results for Canadian Forces Veterans differ somewhat from those for the other three client groups examined. This group is more likely to experience difficulty in contacting the Department, and is more likely to have contacted VAC in a number of different ways over the past year. Further, they offer lower ratings of Veterans Affairs Canada staff members, and tend to rate the various elements associated with contacting the Department as very important. Finally, this group is less likely to agree that the programs and services offered by the Department are meeting their basic needs.²

5.1 External Evidence of Dissatisfaction

External empirical evidence suggests that during 2010, many VAC clients were dissatisfied with the department. A review of media coverage for 2010 reveals extensive reporting on this. Of greater significance are comments made by veterans appended to online editions. While these in no way constitute scientific analysis, the high volume of negative comments suggest that there was a significant client population dissatisfied with the services and benefits provided by Veterans' Affairs. Accepted statistical population curves would indicate that each outspoken critic represents several

² NCS p.2

individuals. Therefore, while no hard data exists on the population size of dissatisfied Veterans Affairs clients, it is reasonable to assume that the population was greater than the 20% suggested by the NCS.

5.2 Questioning the Accessibility Results

The NCS indicates a high level of satisfaction as regards to service delivery and wait times. However, both then and now, the most frequently expressed frustrations by veterans' organizations relate to long processing times and difficulties with accessing programs. Just two months after the presentation of the NCS to Treasury Board, then Veterans' Affairs Minister Jean-Pierre Blackburn announced a series of measures specifically taken to reduce wait times and improve accessibility.³ This leads one to inquire why the Minister would action items which the NCS says are satisfactory.

5.3 Respondents Healthy and Unimpeded

The NCS key findings section contains a most significant indicator of bias: that respondents reported only moderate health issues, and that a minority reported physical or mental health issues impeding their activities.⁴ One should expect that clients of Veteran's Affairs, being in receipt of disability benefits, would report moderate to

³ *Veterans Affairs Minister Highlights Improvements for Canada's Veterans* (News Release)

⁴ NCS, p.2

significant health issues and impact. That the survey indicates otherwise suggests that the sample population is not representative of the client population.

In particular, this key finding should have raised questions with the designers and contractors regarding survey validity.

5.4 Least vs. Most Satisfied

Our final observation is regarding Canadian Forces clients, who represent a 39% majority of the total client population.

The key findings state that these clients are also the most dissatisfied group, and that their dissatisfaction impacts on all service areas⁵. Arithmetically, the lower ratings from Forces clients exert a negative impact the total scores. Hence, in order to achieve an 80% overall satisfaction score, ratings from other populations must be abnormally high - approaching 100%. This would seem counter-intuitive for any study of this type.

⁵ NCS, p.2

Section 6 - Issues Arising from Survey Design

In analyzing the National Client Survey, we found a number of areas where the NCS deviates from the Government of Canada's accepted standards for surveys.

6.1 Failure to Comply with Design Standards

The *2007 Final Report by the Advisory Panel on Telephone Public Opinion Survey Quality* notes the following standard for survey design:

Survey questionnaires must be designed:

- a) To collect only the information essential to the objectives of the study, and*
- b) To minimize the burden placed on respondents while maximizing data quality⁶*

We find that the NCS fails to meet both these standards in the following regards:

- a) Data collected on the NCS was not relevant to the objectives of the study
- b) the NCS is extremely long and burdensome to participants

6.2 Unnecessary Inclusion of Remembrance Programs

The NCS fails to meet the above restrictions by the inclusion of *Section 5: Satisfaction with Remembrance Programs and Activities*.

⁶ TPOSQ, p.19

The NCS population sample was specifically chosen from clients in direct receipt of benefits.⁷ However, Remembrance Programs are not restricted to VAC clients: one need not be in receipt of benefits to participate in Remembrance programs. For example, active duty members of both the RCMP and Canadian Forces regularly attend these activities. As well, large numbers of the civilian population avail of these programs. While the survey respondents undoubtedly appreciate Remembrance Programs, this population is not a representative sample.

Questions relating to Remembrance Services add approximately 7 minutes to an already lengthy survey, while not collecting any useful data. The latter portion of Section 5 should have been removed during the design phase. Data relating to Remembrance Programs should have been collected in a separate survey with a broader population sample.

6.3 Long and Burdensome

According to the NCS the average interview length was just under 27 minutes.⁸ This represents an excessive duration for a telephone survey. TPOSQ specifically notes 20

⁷ NCS p.5

⁸ NCS p.5

minutes to be a long telephone call, and that surveys exceeding this length experience issues with response rates - which shall be addressed further in the following section.

We have found duplication of data collection among the NCS survey questions, both within and across survey sections.⁹ This increases the burden on the respondent in that it further increase survey duration as well as creating frustration though repetitive querying.

We believe the NCS overall length should have been reduced either before or subsequent to pre-testing, once the average duration was determined. By reducing duplication of questions and eliminating those relating to Remembrance Programs, designers should have been able to reduce the overall length to between 15 and 20 minutes. While that duration would still be considered lengthy, it would have reduced the burden on the respondents greatly while bringing the survey into compliance with the federal guidelines.

⁹ There are numerous examples of this throughout the NCS. Rather than detail them all, the authors felt it was enough to note this fact. Finding other examples is neither difficult nor does it require specialized skills.

For Example: NCS Questions 2.7 and 2.8, though worded differently, collect essentially the same data. Compare 2.7 *The following questions are about activities you might do during a typical day. Does your health now limit you in these activities?* with 2.8 *During the past four weeks, how much of the time have you had any of the following problems with your work or other regular daily activities, as a result of your physical health?*

Section 7 - Issues Arising from Non-Responders

The *Advisory Panel on Telephone Public Opinion Survey Quality* states:

*Response rate is important as an indicator of potential risk to data quality in the form of nonresponse bias. If survey non-respondents differ systematically from respondents on key survey variables, then nonresponse bias exists. The magnitude of any nonresponse bias in the results will depend on both the size of the difference between nonrespondents and respondents on key survey variables, and on response rate.*¹⁰

As demonstrated in the appendix to this report, during 2010, veterans were publicly expressing a high level of discontent with the programs and services provided by Veterans Affairs. Yet the National Client Survey indicates a high level of satisfaction. Seeking to reconcile the empirical data with the conclusions presented in the NCS, we closely examined the survey population and response rates.

We have found that non-response bias has such a large impact on the NCS as to cause substantive failure throughout the survey.

¹⁰ TPSOQ p.40

7.1 Lower Response Rate Than 2007

From NCS *Completion Results*

Among all eligible respondents contacted, the response rate was 29 percent.

*This response rate is in line with the guideline recommended in the 2007 Final Report by the Government of Canada's Advisory Panel on Telephone Public Opinion Survey Quality (TPOSQ). The response rate is calculated as the number of cooperative contacts (1,417), divided by the total of eligible numbers attempted (4,862). The final disposition of all telephone numbers called below is based on the Marketing Research and Intelligence Association's Standard Record of Contact Format.*¹¹

In *Highlights of the NCS*, it states: *The response rate was 29%, down from 54% in 2007.*¹² This 25 point difference in response rates indicates that clients were only half as willing to participate in the 2010 survey. This should have caused survey administrators to review the design and correct issues. If that was not achievable, then the survey analysis should have provided proper accounting for non-response bias and its impact. This was not done.

¹¹ NCS p.5

¹² HNCS, *Background*

7.2 Failure to Address Non-Response Bias

In the 2007 Final Report by *The Advisory Panel on Telephone Public Opinion Survey Quality*, the panel noted that non-response bias poses a significant risk to data collection quality.¹³ The Panel offered the following standard:

*All survey reports must contain a discussion of the potential for non-response bias for the survey as a whole and for key survey variables. Where the potential of a non-response bias exists, efforts should be made to quantify the bias, if possible, within the existing project budget. If this is not possible, the likelihood and nature of any potential non-response bias must be discussed.*¹⁴

The 2010 National Client Survey failed to adhere to this standard.

Non-response bias is of serious concern in a satisfaction survey, as the potential drivers of non-response impact directly upon both sample pool and results. In this instance, those clients least satisfied with Veterans' Affairs are the least likely to participate in a survey regarding their satisfaction level. In disregarding this fact, the National Client Survey developed a strong bias towards positive results.

While the NCS presents numbers regarding non-responsive contacts, no effort was made to indicate any reasons given, or even manner or tone of the non-responders.

¹³ TPOSQ p.41

¹⁴ TPOSQ p.42

Again, the NCS fails to meet the TPOSQ standards: *Monitoring of call dispositions/reasons for non-response shall be carried out on an ongoing basis, throughout the entire field period.*¹⁵ The purpose of such monitoring is to measure and account for the impact of non-response bias. In failing to adhere to this protocol, the NCS has not collected any data by which the amount of non-response bias could be measured. As a result, there is no mechanism whereby the survey results can be adjusted. Had such monitoring taken place, that data would allow some measure of correction even at the current late date.

7.3 Non-Responders by the Numbers

Examining the table of Completions Results¹⁶, the NCS notes that contact was made with 3004 eligible respondents, of which 1587 are considered 'non-responsive'. The largest single portion of non-responders was 1134, which declined to participate. 108 Individuals terminated mid-survey. The remaining 345 hung-up, had their gatekeeper refuse to connect the surveyor with the client, or asked to be placed on the Never Call list.

This gives a total of 52.8% of eligible respondents who declined to participate: 37.7% refused outright, 11% terminated the call before or mid-survey. In other words, more

¹⁵ TPOSQ p.47

¹⁶ NCS p.6

than half of the clients contacted would not express their level of satisfaction with Veterans' Affairs.

The National Client Survey makes no attempt to explain why not.

7.4 Reasoning the Non-Response

Despite a lack of data tracking, the reasons for non-response are easily postulated.

They might include:

- Dissatisfaction with the half-hour duration of the survey
- Satisfaction with VAC services without specific comment
- Fear that participation may impact quality or level of service
- Gatekeeper protection of a dissatisfied client from aggravation
- High level of frustration with VAC services

Regarding Duration:

On survey length, TPOSQ suggests *1) The questionnaire is a reasonable length, e.g., surveys 20 minutes or longer can often result in lower cooperation rates.*¹⁷ The 2007 National Client Satisfaction Survey had an average duration of 20 minutes¹⁸. The 2010 National Client Survey averaged 27 minutes; almost half-again as long. In 2007, clients

¹⁷ TPOSQ p.20

¹⁸ NCSS 2007 s1.2

were twice as willing to participate (54% vs. 29%). This demonstrates how duration contributes to non-response bias.

Regarding Satisfaction:

Those who are content with the services may decline the survey as they have no specific comments. A participant may feel that rating every question 'satisfied' or the middle response would be a waste of their time and that of the surveyor. This is particularly true with lengthy surveys. As a result, the pooled data may be missing moderate responses as well as strong negatives. Moderate responses exert a mid-line pressure on numerical data. A reduction in moderate scores will falsely skew results towards the positive.

Regarding Fear:

Despite the required notifications regarding privacy, there exists among VAC clients a belief that criticizing Veterans' Affairs will negatively impact one's benefits. Such fears have been supported by revelations regarding privacy breaches at VAC and VRAB.

Though not yet publicized at the time of the survey, the Bruyey Affair was known in the veterans' community. It was commonly known that, after a veterans' advocate spoke publicly against the New Veterans' Charter, he had difficulty accessing his entitlements, and that attempts were made to have this person committed to a mental hospital.

These rumours were confirmed shortly after the NCS survey period. Since then, a number of veterans, including a member of the Veterans' Review and Appeal Board,

have come forward with similar stories of privacy violations and criticism affecting entitlements.

While these incidents were news to the rest of Canada, such stories have been widely circulating among the veteran population for some time. There are also many rumours that individuals who file complaints regarding their benefits find entitlements further reduced or processing delayed. It is commonly held that one must be cautious when criticizing Veterans' Affairs.

It is not the role of this report to test the veracity of these fears, only to note that they exist, that there is evidence to support these fears, and that these fears represent a real contributor to non-response bias.

Respecting Protection and Frustration:

The final two drivers of non-response bias in the National Client Survey result from the same source: extreme dissatisfaction. Gatekeepers experience first-hand the frustration a client endures regarding the department. Naturally, gatekeepers would wish to protect their loved ones – and themselves – from further aggravation.

Section 1.3 of the NCS notes that 86% of respondents preferred contacting the department by telephone.¹⁹ This would suggest that dissatisfied non-responders spend a lot of time on the telephone with Veterans' Affairs. It is a reasonable assumption,

¹⁹ NCS s1.3

therefore, that these individuals would be far less inclined to participate in a half-hour telephone survey than one who is satisfied. The survey question could very well provoke an intense emotional response, causing early termination of the call. Dissatisfied clients could quite possibly interpret the survey invitation itself as insulting, with similar results.

7.5 Dissatisfaction and Non-Response Bias

The TPOSQ notes that while *response rate is not a direct indicator of data quality, it is important as an indicator of potential risk to data quality in the form of nonresponse bias.*²⁰ Simply put, if the non-responders have similar opinions to participants, then there is no bias. When opinions differ greatly, then lack of data from the non-responders will have significant impact on the survey results. Therefore, the TPOSQ arrived at the following standard:

*All survey reports must contain a discussion of the potential for nonresponse bias for the survey as a whole and for key survey variables. Where the potential of a nonresponse bias exists, efforts should be made to quantify the bias, if possible, within the existing project budget. If this is not possible, the likelihood and nature of any potential nonresponse bias must be discussed.*²¹

²⁰ TPOSQ p.41

²¹ TPOSQ p.42

As we have discussed, the National Client Survey did not adhere to this standard. This poses a significant problem, as non-responders in the NCS are likely to have vastly different opinions from responders. This is true with any satisfaction survey.

The TPOSQ notes that there are several accepted methods for collecting non-response data²²:

- *refusal conversations*; where the surveyor would prompt the client to elaborate on their reasons for their non-participation
- *follow-up survey*; where the non-responders would be surveyed regarding their reasons for declining the survey
- *disposition tracking* of reasons for declining participation; where surveyors would select from a list based on the clients reaction. Choices might be: not interested, no time, satisfied with service, dissatisfied with service, anger reaction, no data attainable, etc.

In the case of satisfaction surveys, follow-up surveys can be seen as harassment by the non-responders, as can refusal conversations. However, disposition tracking, especially when coupled with a single-question query regarding refusal reasons, can collect enough data to quantify the satisfaction level of the non-responders and to measure non-response bias. Such empirical data as tone and use of language would have served as key indicators as to general attitude towards Veterans' Affairs.

²² TPOSQ Section 5, Standards and Guidelines for Response Rate

Dissatisfied VAC clients, especially those extremely frustrated with the service, would reasonably be disinclined to participate in any satisfaction survey. These non-responders are extremely significant, as their opinions have a strong negative impact on the survey scores. As the goal of any satisfaction survey is not to achieve high scores but rather to isolate areas for improvement, it is of critical importance that the unhappy clients are surveyed.

The National Client Survey made no attempts to collect data from non-responders. Nor did it offer any discussion of non-response bias, despite government standards.

7.6 Satisfaction Result Inconclusive

What should be clear in our analysis is this: those clients who were the most dissatisfied with VAC services would be least likely to respond to this survey. As the intent of the NCS was to locate areas where service might be improved, surveying dissatisfied clients would have been critical to achieving this result. Even without participating, client dissatisfaction could have been tracked and used to qualify data.

By not accounting for non-responder bias, the National Client Survey cannot reasonably arrive at the 80% Overall Satisfaction result which it claims. In fact, it can only prove that 80% of the 1417 respondents were satisfied - that is, 80% of the 47.2%.

This yields a *proven* satisfaction score of 37.8%.

However, this score itself is highly questionable, as it is an arithmetic result based on information which is highly suspect. Failure to account for any amount of non-response bias means that the true measure of satisfaction among Veterans' Affairs clients for the outlined timeframe cannot be known.

Section 8 - Conclusions

Detailed analysis of the 2010 National Client Survey commenced in November 2011.

Preliminary findings discussed with Our Duty board on an ongoing basis until January 2012.

Decision taken to release a brief on these findings: 13 January 2012.

Draft report submitted to Our Duty Board for review on: 19 January 2012.

Final report approved by Board on: 26 February 2012

Report released to public on: 6 March 2012

Section 9 - References

1. *Veterans Affairs Canada – 2010 National Client Survey (POR-125-09) (NCS)*; Corporate Research Associates; July 2010; Contract Number: 51019-098010/001/CY
2. *Highlights from the 2010 National Client Survey (HNCS)*; Veterans Affairs Canada website; <http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/department/reports/ncs10/highlights>
3. *The Advisory Panel on Telephone Public Opinion Survey Quality - Final Report (TPOSQ)*; Public Works and Government Services Canada; February, 2007; Catalogue Number: P103-3/2007E-PDF; ISBN: 978-0-662-45478-6
4. *2007 National Client Satisfaction Survey (NCSS) - Veterans Affairs Canada*; <http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/department/reports/ncss07/final-report-toc>
5. *Veterans Affairs Minister Highlights Improvements for Canada's Veterans (News Release) - Office of the Minister of Veterans Affairs, 11 January 2011*, <http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/department/press/viewrelease/1055>

Section 10 - Citation

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Appendix

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Appendix 1

Veterans Affairs Canada – 2010 National Client Survey (POR-125-09) (NCS); Corporate Research Associates; July 2010; Contract Number: 51019-098010/001/CY

Appendix 2

Selected media reports from 2010