

Retail trade: volume of sales

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Volume of sales - why the interest?

This Statistics in Focus presents the work done to develop a rapidly available retail trade index of the volume of sales for the EU. The volume of sales index is essentially a deflated index of retail trade turnover. In its own right it serves a similar (though not identical) role for retail trade as the production index in industrial sectors such as manufacturing, providing information on the cyclical position of an economy.

One of the main users of the European aggregates (particularly the euro-zone) compiled by Eurostat from the national short-term business statistics is the European Central Bank (ECB). In order to fulfil its primary objective of price stability, the ECB follows a strategy based on two pillars. The first pillar assigns a prominent role to money as signalled by the announcement of a reference value for monetary growth. The second pillar consists of a broadly based assessment of the outlook for price developments and the risks to price stability in the euro-zone based on a wide range of other economic and financial indicators. Analysis of developments in the retail trade sector is used as an indicator of activity and in particular household consumption. Monthly real economy indicators provide early information for quarterly national accounts results. Turnover in retail trade accounts for approximately 40 % of total household consumption and is important to explain its short-term movements. Besides important direct input to regular monetary policy analysis and decision making, retail trade information is also used for macroeconomic projections of GDP growth.

The economic weight of the retail trade sector in the economy can be seen in table 1.

	Retail trade (absolute value)	Share of business economy (%) (1)
Persons employed (thousands)	12 955	13.3
Turnover (EUR million)	1 683 671	10.3
Value added at factor costs (EUR million)	324 319	7.5

Table 1: Economic weight of retail trade, EU, 2001

(1) Business economy defined here as NACE Sections C to I and K.

Statistics in focus

INDUSTRY, TRADE AND SERVICES

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Objectives for retail trade volume of sales

According to Council Regulation (EC) No 1165/98 of 19 May 1998 concerning short-term statistics (hereafter referred to as the STS Regulation), a volume of sales index (or a deflator of sales) should be transmitted for the retail trade sector; in practice it is the volume of sales index that most Member States provide and that is disseminated by Eurostat. The STS Regulation requires that the index should be provided within 60 days of the end of the reference month; an extra month is granted for smaller Member States. The index is required for i) retail trade as a whole ii) for a split between food and non-food retail trade and iii) a more detailed breakdown into 8 NACE Groups or (aggregations of) NACE Classes.

Pressure for a more rapidly available volume of sales index has come from several parties, most notably the ECB. A benchmarking exercise was carried out to compare the availability of data within the EU (specifically in the euro-zone) with data in other countries, notably the United States of America. The provision of euro-zone/EU statistics as timely and reliable as those available for the USA could be achieved if each individual euro-zone/EU country produced statistics as timely and reliable as in the USA. However, the resources required would be much higher for the EU as a whole than they are for the

centralised system of the USA. In addition, the Treaty on European Union does not include provisions for a centralised production of euro-zone/EU economic statistics and the distribution of policy responsibilities under the EMU chapter of the Treaty requires national results for nearly all areas of statistics; furthermore the necessary infrastructure is not available, notably there is no appropriate business register.

In this context, at the initiative of the Task Force on Benchmarking in infra-annual economic statistics and with the support of the Statistical Programme Committee (SPC) meeting of May 2001, the Member States, the ECB and Eurostat created an expert group for the preparation of a feasibility study on a “country-stratified European sample for the retail trade index” in order to improve the trade-off between timeliness and resources. It held its first meeting in July 2001.

The original proposal studied by the expert group was presented by the ECB in a paper to the Task Force on Benchmarking. The paper explored three options for improving the timeliness of European indicators. The first was to improve the timeliness of national results without changing any compilation practice for European aggregates. The second was to introduce a centralised sample by Eurostat based on a European business

register. The third was country-stratified sampling. More details of the work done by the expert group, the results of its feasibility study, and the implementation work subsequently carried out by a Task Force are given in the next section of this publication.

The results of the feasibility study were presented at the SPC meeting of November 2001, where it was decided that the Member States should, within 2 years, be able to provide the volume of sales index within 30 days of the end of the reference period. Since then methodological work has continued in the Task Force. Furthermore, plans for changes to the STS Regulation are currently being discussed. Based on the progress achieved in Member States, in part from the work done in the Task Force, one of the proposed changes is to reduce the delay for the three main aggregates, namely total retail trade, food and non-food retail trade, to the 30 day target agreed at the November 2001 SPC meeting.

The feasibility study

When work started in the expert group in the second half of 2001, the situation concerning the timeliness of national data meant that it was possible to produce an EU aggregate about 65 days after the end of a reference month, at which time data for about 12 Member States was usually available. The first national data were provided to Eurostat by the United Kingdom after about 20 days, followed by Germany and the Netherlands after about 40 days. By comparison similar data in the USA were published after about 15 days. Table 2 shows the situation for each Member State.

The Task Force on Benchmarking in infra-annual economic statistics that

initiated the expert group also defined a set of operational objectives for the study. These objectives were accepted by the expert group. Two scenarios were investigated for the timeliness of an index based on the country-stratified European sample:

- 30 days after the reference month;
- 13 days after the reference month.

One of the objectives of the expert group was to stay within the other requirements of the STS Regulation, for example with respect to the level of activity detail required, the reference period and the observation unit. The feasibility study intended not to be constrained

by existing organisational conditions in the Member States or Eurostat.

The study started by identifying the practices in each of the Member States with respect to sources used, design of samples, data collection practices, index compilation methods and the dissemination of data. With respect to the two scenarios, compiling European aggregates after 13 or 30 days, considerable attention was paid to the evolution of response rates from the first day after the reference period, with the aim of assessing Europe-wide what proportion of enterprises had responded at any given moment.

	BE	DK	DE	EL	ES	FR	IE	IT	LU	NL	AT	PT	FI	SE	UK
Days after the end of June 2001	54	44	43	79	46	60	60	60	17	38	60	59	58	51	20

Table 2: Timeliness of data for the volume of sales, June 2001

Proposed sampling plan

The expert group looked at the possibility of introducing a country-stratified European sample, and looked at the sample sizes that would be necessary to meet a specified level of precision in the resulting European aggregates.

The approach of the country-stratified European sample proposes samples for each EU Member State that together produce accurate estimates for European aggregates. Focusing on this aggregated level the country-stratified European sample can be kept much smaller than the sum of

the individual national samples. The underlying idea is that such a reduction in size is a major prerequisite for a drastic improvement in timeliness. The concept of the country-stratified European sample assumes that the surveys are conducted by the national statistical authorities and the pre-aggregated data is communicated to Eurostat. It does not imply the transmission of micro-data to Eurostat. The European index is then calculated by Eurostat. It does not require a European-wide business register and attributes the key roles of the sample definition and the data collection and sub-aggregation to the NSIs. Thus, the proposal was

largely based on existing principles of co-operation in the European Statistical System. National retail trade indices would be calculated using a broader national sample through a suitable extension of the sample either subsequently or in parallel to the country-stratified European sample.

The fact that Member States which currently release volume of sales data quickly are not the Member States for which the highest revisions of data can be observed suggests that timeliness and accuracy can be combined.

The feasibility study (continued)

In summary, the benefits from the implementation of a country-stratified European sample would be:

- more timely results;
- efficient use of scarce resources in statistical production, because it avoids higher costs which would arise if more timely and representative results had to be produced by all current and future EU Member States;
- availability of supplementary information on the statistical quality of the indicator.

The sampling plan was derived by working with the pure sampling error. Non-sampling errors (e.g. population dynamics, errors in responses, non-response, etc.) were difficult to evaluate. Table 3 shows the results of the Neyman allocation if a precision of 1 % or 2 % (in terms of sampling error) is required for

total retail trade for the EU. For each Member State the turnover, the number of units in the population, the number of units in the sample in 2001 (when the feasibility study was carried out) and the number of units in the proposed country-stratified European sample are given. The numbers shown in the table are approximations of the sample sizes based on information available at that time.

From table 3 it can be seen that the reduction in sample size is quite large. For the EU Member States the reduction is around 80 % for the scenario with 1 % precision. The existing samples in the different Member States were usually designed to provide results on a far more detailed level of NACE and are therefore larger than they would be if they only had to provide the national aggregate for total retail trade. Therefore, the very high

reduction in sample sizes is not only due to the effect of country stratification but also the effect of limiting the level of activity detail.

A number of other scenarios were calculated as well. Four different levels of precision for the European aggregate were considered, as well as different breakdowns for retail trade. Even considering the most detailed breakdown and the highest level of precision studied, the reduction of sample sizes is remarkable. However, the resulting precision for individual Member States can possibly be too low to derive a national advanced indicator sufficiently reliable for publication. In order to make it reliable more units would need to be included in the sample and the feasibility study report also provided information on this aspect.

	Turnover, 2001 (EUR million)	Enterprise population, 2001	Existing sample size, 2001 (including non- response)	Neyman-optimum samples for precision of:			
				1%		2%	
				Sample size	Proportion of existing sample (%)	Sample size	Proportion of existing sample (%)
BE	52 323	98 511	3 023	493	16.3	253	8.4
DK	25 278	9 215	2 790	399	14.3	126	4.5
DE	317 736	360 774	25 761	2 504	9.7	811	3.1
EL (1)	24 307	53 840	1 847	143	7.7	51	2.8
ES	194 400	514 477	11 556	2 896	25.1	1 345	11.6
FR (2)	197 654	321 810	~	1 018	~	334	~
IE (1)	12 609	19 836	961	84	8.7	25	2.6
IT	180 783	570 379	7 262	2 052	28.3	649	8.9
LU (2)	1 722	3 630	~	16	~	5	~
NL	63 843	102 777	9 717	504	5.2	203	2.1
AT	36 935	49 823	3 605	210	5.8	78	2.2
PT	14 111	30 208	1 795	107	6.0	32	1.8
FI	21 614	22 045	333	464	139.3	146	43.8
SE	46 480	32 487	3 072	105	3.4	50	1.6
UK	294 454	224 653	4 697	2 996	63.8	1 057	22.5
Euro-zone (3)	1 118 037	2 148 110	65 860	10 491	15.9	3 932	6.0
EU (3)	1 484 249	2 414 465	76 419	13 991	18.3	5 165	6.8

Table 3: Neyman optimal allocation for total retail trade volume of sales

- (1) The population variance was estimated.
 (2) Administrative sources are used instead of sampling.
 (3) Excluding FR and LU from existing sample size.
 ~ not relevant.

Source: Feasibility Study Report, Country-stratified European Sample for the Retail Trade Index, Eurostat November 2001.

The feasibility study (continued)

Conclusions and recommendations

The study gave an overall assessment of the scenarios as well as conclusions concerning the impact on Member States. The design of a country-stratified European sample for retail trade was regarded as technically feasible. The information required for the sample design was generally available from the Member States. The different approaches currently used in the Member States, for example the use of surveys and/or administrative data, could be incorporated into the calculations. The country-stratified European

sample for retail trade would result in a significant reduction in the sample size.

The timeliness scenario of compiling an index 30 days after the end of the reference month was considered to be a realistic objective, although most Member States regarded it as necessary to create a separate processing chain for the calculation of the Member States' contribution to the European sample, and to intensify contacts with enterprises in order to achieve a high return rate within 21 days. A number of Member States preferred the possibility of advancing their existing procedures to meet the 30 day

objective without major changes to their surveys and index calculation. The 13 day scenario was considered by most Member States to be unfeasible without very significant changes to the current organisation of work. It would imply profound changes within the NSIs, co-operation with enterprises, regional offices, legal conditions, etc.

Implementation

The work presented in the report only evaluated the feasibility of the country-stratified sampling concept. It was not an implementation plan. The expert group recommended to start work on implementing the 30 day scenario with a two year plan. The conclusions and recommendations of the expert group were presented to the November 2001 meeting of the SPC where the target of 30 days rather than 13 days was adopted, and the two year work programme agreed. Since the November 2001 SPC meeting a Task Force has been working towards the implementation of the objective endorsed in that meeting and a number of implementation reports have been prepared that outline the progress made. The latest implementation report was presented in November 2003, providing information on the current status of implementation, the methods used, problems encountered, quality evaluations and whether national publication after 30 days was foreseen or not. The implementation has in general required extra resources in most Member States. For those Member States where implementation is still under way, new resources may be required at this stage, in particular to move from a pilot study to an

operational process. In some countries there is still work needed to speed up the responses, particularly of larger enterprises.

Several different methods have been used to try to respect the 30 day objective, notably shortening the delays in regular data collection, using the country-stratified European sample, econometric methods and regional sampling.

Rapidly available national data

Spain, the Netherlands, Portugal and Sweden have all aimed to reduce delays to below 30 days; the United Kingdom was already providing data within 30 days before the Task Force started its work. The other Member States who decided to keep the same sample mainly managed to reduce delays by shortening the deadline for responses and by intensifying the reminder system.

Country-stratified European sample

Belgium, Denmark, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg and Finland are using or will use a sub-sample to contribute towards the compilation of European aggregates. Since July

2003 Denmark provides monthly data within the 30 day target, whereas previously data was only provided every two months, with one of the two months' data being delivered after a long delay. Since January 2003 Ireland has provided an early estimate and aims to send final results within the 30 day objective by the end of 2005. Since May 2003 Finland has sent data within the 30 day target and it is expected to cut the delay to 27 days by January 2004.

Implementation (continued)

Both Belgium and Luxembourg are planning to use the country-stratified European sample but there is currently no such data collection. Luxembourg currently calculates the volume of sales from administrative sources. Feasibility studies will be carried out in both countries, beginning in November 2003 in Belgium and January 2004 in Luxembourg.

Greece has started to implement a sub-sample as part of the country-stratified European sample, but the figures are currently not available quicker than 38 days after the end of the reference period, and have not yet been made available to Eurostat.

In Italy, the implementation of the project is ongoing with January 2003 as first reference period for the early estimate. Many replies are available very close to the 30 day threshold. Since November 2003 these estimates have been made available to Eurostat.

Other methods

Germany has adopted an approach concentrating on rapid results from the 5 largest Länder which represent 75% of national turnover, combined with results from other Länder that are able to provide data within 30 days.

France provided Eurostat with a confidential early estimate for the first time for February 2003 with a delay of 38 days, and this delay has since fallen to around 30 days. The early estimate is based on econometric calculations and it is intended to publish it nationally by January 2004. Two methods have been tested to estimate the data. Firstly household consumption data has been used and the results suggest that the food retailing activity can not be estimated from this source and this may affect the quality of the overall retail trade

volume of sales index. The second method estimates the required data by econometric calculations using, for example, information from a monthly data collection from supermarkets and other outlets. The results of data confrontation suggest that at the detailed level the quality is insufficient, however, at an aggregated level (total retail trade, food and non-food), this approach may be of use.

In Austria, a pilot project during 2002 studied the feasibility of delivering the required data within 30 days. Austria attempted to speed up the response delay on a voluntary basis and around 40% of the respondents followed this proposal. At the present time the development of a faster volume of sales index is blocked.

Revisions and possible bias

In general terms, several of the projects implemented by countries have a risk of bias. To explore how this will affect the quality of the data, Member States have been evaluating the results of the changes that have been undertaken. Notably this involves analysing the revisions between the estimates made around 30 days after the reference month and those made after 60 days, the current date of publication.

In the case of speeding up the survey, and maintaining the sample size, quality problems may arise because of an increased rate of non-response. The use of a sub-sample may introduce other quality problems, such as bias due to the selection of only larger units.

An analysis has been done of the revisions between the indices compiled after 30 days and after 60 days. For the European aggregates there is currently no indication that the decrease in delays has caused stronger revisions although it is too early to draw final conclusions. A similar analysis has been done for each country and in a few countries strong revisions have been noted.

Current delivery of data

	BE	DK	DE	EL	ES	FR	IE	IT	LU	NL	AT	PT	FI	SE	UK
Jan	56	85	34	68	34		49	57	106	267	147	31	55	34	20
Feb	54	55	31	73	27	38	28	54	107	237	117	29	44	27	21
Mar	52	79	32	66	30	37	28	53	108	207	87	32	49	29	29
Apr	56	59	32	67	30	41	29	55	142	177	57	28	47	27	22
May	54	80	31	68	27	27	31	58	112	147	58	27	30	26	19
Jun	51	35	31	68	28	30	31	61	104	117	59	28	30	35	24
Jul	55	31	29	N/A	27	31	31	56	:	87	59	28	31	26	21
Aug	53	29	31	N/A	30	30	26	57	:	57	57	26	31	26	18
Sep	:	28	:	:	31	30	30	:	:	:	:	30	28	28	27
Average	54	53	31	68	29	33	31	56	113	162	80	29	38	29	22

Table 4: Timeliness of data for the volume of sales, 2003 (days after the end of the reference month)

: Data not delivered at the time of writing.

N/A Data delivered but precise delay not available.

In comparison with table 2, table 4 shows the current situation with regard to timeliness. As can be seen considerable progress has been made in several countries during the time of the Task Force. By August 2003 data had been transmitted within 31 days by 9 Member States, and as such the EU aggregate had a coverage of 77%. Finland started providing data based on the country-stratified European sample in May 2003 and has since then provided data within the 30 day target. Of the larger countries, and therefore the ones that influence most the EU index, Italy had the longest delays for data transmission during 2003, averaging 56 days after the end of the reference period.

Figure 1 shows how these delays impact on the timeliness of EU aggregates. The graph shows the cumulative weight of countries that have delivered data (in this case for

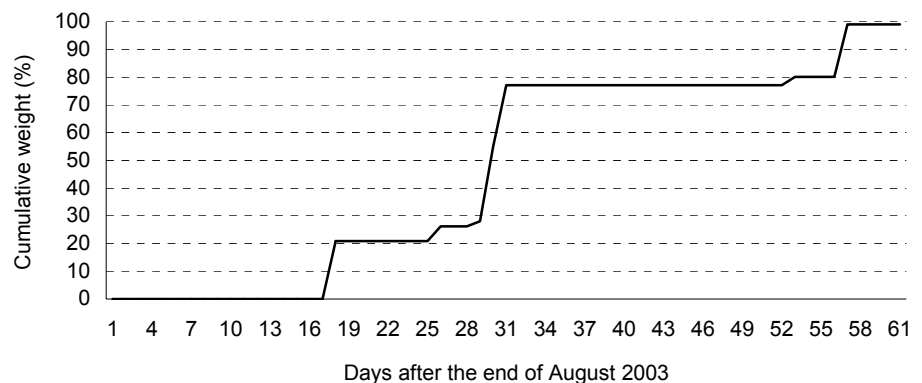


Figure 1: Cumulative weight of countries having delivered the volume of sales index for August 2003, in relation to the number of days after the reference period

August 2003). As can be clearly seen, the arrival of data after 30 or 31 days for three of the five largest Member States, Germany, Spain and France, as well as for Finland, leads to a surge in the proportion of the EU weight for which data is available, making it possible to estimate EU aggregates at this time.

Publication plans

It has been possible to compile the EU aggregate since the May 2003 reference period within 35-40 days, using data provided as part of the country-stratified European sample. Due to the experimental nature of the data for some countries this has not yet been published. The situation is expected to improve

further and it is intended to publish the European volume of sales index from reference period January 2004. In practice this means that the March 2004 Press Release will be the first to contain European aggregates incorporating the early estimates of several Member States.

Reference period	Planned release date
January 2004	5-Mar-04
February 2004	5-Apr-04
March 2004	5-May-04
April 2004	3-Jun-04
May 2004	5-Jul-04
June 2004	5-Aug-04

Table 5: Planning for Eurostat's volume of sales press releases in 2004

Further information:

➤ Reference publications

Title Quarterly panorama of European business statistics
 Subscription number VPA000 Price EUR 100

➤ Databases

NewCronos, Theme 4, Domain: ebt (European Business Trends)

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