This article explains the main features of the European labour force survey (EU-LFS) and gives an overview on the legal basis of the EU-LFS. Recently, a new legal framework covering the EU-LFS entered into force; this one is called the “Integrated European Social Statistics Framework Regulation” (IESS FR) and is applicable to the EU-LFS data collection since 1 January 2021. While this article gives references to this new legal framework, it also refers to previous frameworks (up to 2020).

This article is part of a set of online articles on the EU-LFS.

Main features of the EU-LFS

Type of survey and scope of the data

The EU-LFS is the largest European household sample survey providing quarterly and annual results on labour participation of people aged 15 and over as well as on persons outside the labour force. It covers residents in private households.

The EU-LFS currently covers thirty-four countries (participating countries) providing Eurostat with data from national labour force surveys: the Member States of the European Union, three EFTA countries (Iceland, Norway and Switzerland), and four candidate countries (Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey). The EU-LFS is conducted by the National Statistical Institutes (NSIs) in accordance with Regulation (EU) 2019/1700 and the data are centrally processed by Eurostat. The NSIs are responsible for designing national questionnaires, drawing the sample, conducting interviews and sending results to the Commission (Eurostat) in accordance with a common coding scheme established by Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2019/2240. Eurostat is in charge of monitoring the implementation of the regulation, providing assistance to NSIs, promoting harmonised concepts and methods, and disseminating comparable national and European labour market statistics.

Due to the diversity of information and the large sample size, the EU-LFS is also an important source for other European statistics, like education statistics or regional statistics.

Statistical objectives and data typology

The main statistical objective of the EU-LFS is to divide the resident population of working age (15 years and above) into three mutually exclusive and exhaustive groups - persons employed, unemployed and outside the labour force according to the classification of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) - and to provide descriptive and explanatory data on each of these three groups. Respondents of the EU-LFS are assigned to one of these groups on the basis of the information obtained through the survey questionnaire, which principally relates to their actual activity within a particular reference week.

Please note that the EU-LFS defines the resident population as all persons usually residing in private households.

Topics and age coverage
The core of the EU-LFS data collection covers the following topics: person and household characteristics, labour market participation, educational attainment and background, job tenure, work biography and previous work experience, working conditions including working hours and working time arrangements, participation in education and training, health status and disability, income, consumption and elements of wealth.

Moreover, the EU-LFS includes modules on specific topics, among which some are collected with a regular periodicity (of eight years). For more details about modules, please consult the article on EU-LFS modules.

While demographic data is gathered for population of all ages, questions relating to the labour market status are restricted to persons aged 15 to 89 years.

From the EU-LFS 2021 data collection, information is collected for:

- (a) every person aged 15 to 74 on the ‘participation in education and training’ topic;
- (b) every person aged 15 to 89 for quarterly, annual and biennial variables on all other topics;
- (c) every person aged 15 to 74 for the eight-yearly variables of the detailed topics on ‘labour market situation of migrants and their immediate descendants’ and ‘accidents at work and other work-related health problems’;
- (d) every person aged 50 to 74 for the eight-yearly variables of the detailed topic on ‘pensions and labour market participation’;
- (e) every person aged 15 to 34 for the eight-yearly variables of the detailed topics on ‘young people on the labour market’ and ‘educational attainment — details, including education interrupted or abandoned’;
- (f) every person aged 18 to 74 for the eight-yearly variables of the detailed topic on ‘reconciliation of work and family life’;
- (g) every employed person aged 15 to 74 for the eight-yearly variables of the detailed topic on ‘work organisation and working time arrangements’.

For more information on the concepts and definitions applicable from the 2021 data collection, please consult the article EU-LFS methodology from 2021 onwards, while those valid until the 2020 data collection are available at EU-LFS methodology until 2020. In addition, information on the classifications used in the EU-LFS, the explanatory notes and user guide describing the variables, as well as the national questionnaires used to collect the data, can be accessed through the article EU-LFS documentation.

Legal basis

The EU-LFS is based on European legislation since 1973. The principal legal acts, currently in force, are the Regulation (EU) 2019/1700 establishing a common framework for European social statistics, the Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2020/256 establishing a multiannual rolling planning, the Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2019/2181 regarding items common to several datasets, and the Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2019/2240 which specifies the implementation rules, technical items and contents of the EU-LFS.

Regulations relevant for the EU-LFS are listed below, where those in force from the 2021 EU-LFS data collection onwards are presented first, followed by those in force for the previous data collections.

Users are advised to always work with the latest consolidated version of the regulations. The consolidated version and information on amendments are always listed with each regulation.

Regulations in force since the 2021 data collection

Framework regulation

Delegated acts


Implementing acts


Regulation concerning general classification of the EU-LFS


- Regulation (EC) No 1059/2003 of 26 May 2003, on the establishment of a common classification of territorial units for statistics (NUTS). This regulation provides the codification of NUTS regions. The changes in codification can be found in the respective amendments.

Regulations on statistical confidentiality

Regulations applicable to the data collections between 1998 and 2020

General regulations

  This is the main regulation with provisions on design, survey characteristics and decision making processes.

  This regulation specifies the financing provision and the sample conditions for ad hoc modules.

  This regulation specifies the organisation of the ad hoc module within the LFS.

  This regulation changes the status of the survey characteristic 'income' from optional to mandatory.

  This regulation introduces 6 new variables and allows the wave approach for structural variables.

  This regulation puts a time limit on the adoption of the continuous LFS.

This is a documentation is the latest consolidated version with all amendments for the main regulations ((EC) No 577/98) on the organisation of a labour force survey in the Community.

Implementation regulations of the core survey

  The regulation implements the codification to be used for data transmission from 2009 onwards including the compulsory survey characteristic 'income', the use of a sub-sample for the collection of data on structural variables and the definition of the reference quarters.

  The regulation implements the codification to be used for data transmission from 2006 onwards and the use of a sub-sample for the collection of data on structural variables.

  This regulation implements the operational definition of unemployment and contains the 12 principles for constructing the questionnaire.


  The Annex I of the regulation defines the reference quarters for the first two years of the continuous survey and Annex IV defines the codification in force for 1998 to 2000.

Regulations on ad hoc modules and their topics


• Regulation (EU) No 318/2013 of 8 April 2013 adopting the programme of ad-hoc modules (2016 to 2018).


Regulations and ESS agreements on ad hoc modules - ad hoc modules description

• Regulation (EU) 2018/1709 of 13 November 2018 specifying the technical characteristics of the 2020 ad hoc module on accidents at work and other work-related health problems.

• Regulation (EU) 2017/2384 of 19 December 2017 specifying the technical characteristics of the 2019 ad hoc module on work organisation and working time arrangements.

• Regulation (EU) 2016/2236 of 12 December 2016 specifying the technical characteristics of the 2018 ad hoc module on reconciliation between work and family life.

• Regulation (EU) 2016/8 of 5 January 2016 specifying the technical characteristics of the 2017 ad hoc module on self-employment.

• Regulation (EU) 2015/459 of 19 March 2015 specifying the technical characteristics of the 2016 ad hoc module on young people on the labour market.

• ESS agreement specifying the detailed information to be collected in the 2014 ad-hoc module on the labour market situation of migrants and their immediate descendants.

• ESS agreement specifying the detailed information to be collected in the 2013 ad-hoc module on accidents at work and other work-related health problems.

• Regulation (EU) No 249/2011 of 14 March 2011 adopting the specifications of the 2012 ad hoc module on transition from work to retirement.


• Regulation (EC) No 20/2009 of 13 January 2009 adopting the specifications of the 2010 ad hoc module on reconciliation between work and family life.


• Regulation (EC) No 207/2008 of 5 March 2008 adopting the specifications of the 2009 ad hoc module on the entry of young people into the labour market.


• Regulation (EC) No 29/2004 of 8 January 2004 adopting the specifications of the 2005 ad hoc module on reconciliation between work and family life.

• Regulation (EC) No 247/2003 of 10 February 2003 adopting the specification of the 2004 ad hoc module on work organisation and working time arrangements.


Regulations applicable before 1998


• Other regulations providing a legal basis for the European labour force sample survey, dating back to 1973 are not available in electronic form.

See also

• European Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS)

Dedicated section

• Labour market (including Labour Force Survey)