

Conducting Surveys Guide

Surveying Residents

NORC programs often survey senior residents with an eye towards collecting information from enough individuals to capture a picture of the community as a whole.

Before deciding to move forward with a survey, ask yourself whether it is the right tool for you. Surveys generally ask close-ended, narrow questions that yield “quantitative” information (“73% of respondents say that traffic is the top problem in their community”). While this is a helpful way to learn about peoples’ attitudes, measure client satisfaction, and gather opinions about various issues, it is not the only approach you can use. Focus groups, key informant interviews, informal discussions, and findings from other public and private studies (see Demographic Information Resources) can also help you meet your information needs.

If you decide to conduct a survey, keep your purpose in mind throughout the design process because it will influence what questions you ask, who will be surveyed, and how you will reach your target population. Talk with your advisers and partners about how your findings will be used (see Understanding the Community, Guiding Principle #5).

There are many resources available to help you construct, administer, and analyze your survey. An especially good one is *The Survey Kit* by Arlene Fink (Sage Publications, 2002).

Be sure to consider these questions:

- 1. What kind of a survey do we need?** Often, you will need only a simple, small-scale survey that you can tailor yourself from existing survey tools. More complicated and expensive surveys can provide more detailed and scientifically rigorous data, but they generally require a survey research company or a partner with research expertise. The nature of the information you need, and your budget, will influence your approach.
- 2. Whom do we want to survey?** Figure out who can best answer your questions and decide on your “sample size” (the number of people you will ask to complete the survey). The sample needs to be large enough to give you a feel for the entire population. For example, if there are 1,000 seniors in your NORC, you will want a sample of at least 100 people.
- 3. How will we conduct the survey?** Mailing a survey is generally easiest, but it is likely to generate a return rate of only two or three percent. A more personal approach generally produces more responses. If you conduct a telephone or in-person survey, decide who will administer it – you might use staff members, trained interviewers, or graduate students.

4. What questions should we ask? Try to use a survey with questions that have already been tested and validated by others. Resources that can help:

- ✓ Government-administered surveys, such as the National Health Interview Survey and the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (see: www.cdc.gov/nchs/express.htm)
- ✓ Surveys developed by university faculty, such as the Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey, which measures social connectivity and civic engagement. <http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/saguaro/communitysurvey>

If you need information about more specific community concerns, work with your advisers and partners to add appropriate questions. Some general guidelines when you are designing a survey:

- ✓ Keep it short (no longer than 15-20 minutes to administer)
- ✓ Don't be too personal.
- ✓ Avoid open-ended questions.
- ✓ Place easier questions first and sensitive ones last.
- ✓ Avoid words that provoke strong emotions.
- ✓ Group questions together by topic in a logical order.

5. How will we compile survey results? If your survey questions are simple, you can just add up the results (for example, if residents were asked about the most prevalent problems in the neighborhood, count how many people said "transportation," "noise," and "broken sidewalks"). A more complex survey may need to be analyzed by someone with more sophisticated statistical skills.

After tabulating the results, detail your findings in a one or two page report, and share it with your advisers and partners. Be sure to get their input on the meaning of your findings. (See Using Data to Inform Action for more details.)

Checklist of Survey Topics

These are some of the topics you may want to cover in your survey:

Demographics

- ✓ Age
- ✓ Gender
- ✓ Race
- ✓ Ethnicity
- ✓ Length of residency in community
- ✓ Living arrangements
- ✓ Number and proximity of children/other relatives
- ✓ Employment status
- ✓ Income

Housing

- ✓ Homeowner or renter
- ✓ Monthly housing expenses
- ✓ Housing affordability
- ✓ Housing repair or modification needs
- ✓ Condition of housing
- ✓ Type of housing
- ✓ Presence or absence of stairs inside/outside of house

Neighborhood

- ✓ Satisfaction with neighborhood as a place to live
- ✓ Neighborhood assets and problems
- ✓ Neighborhood safety
- ✓ Access to services in the neighborhood
- ✓ Access to recreational and socialization opportunities
- ✓ Sources of information for neighborhood news, events, and activities

Mobility and Transportation

- ✓ Mobility limitations
- ✓ Use of assistive devices
- ✓ Usual mode of transportation within and outside the neighborhood
- ✓ Access to public transportation
- ✓ Access to other types of transportation
- ✓ Transportation difficulties
- ✓ Condition of sidewalks and streets

Social Engagement

- ✓ Contact with family members, friends, and neighbors
- ✓ Participation in clubs and other recreational activities
- ✓ Volunteering/helping neighbors and other community residents
- ✓ Participation in NORC program activities

Civic Engagement

- ✓ Participation in civic activities, such as voting, contacting local officials, and donating to charities
- ✓ Membership in civic clubs

Health

- ✓ Health status
- ✓ Mental health status
- ✓ Access to and use of medical services
- ✓ Frequency of seeking care
- ✓ Management of chronic conditions
- ✓ Vaccinations and screenings, including mammograms and colonoscopies
- ✓ History of falls
- ✓ Emergency room visits
- ✓ Medications
- ✓ Exercise
- ✓ Limitations in activities of daily living
- ✓ Access to health care information
- ✓ Use of health services provided by the NORC program

Social Services

- ✓ Access to and use of community-based social services
- ✓ Use of social services provided by the NORC program
- ✓ Unmet needs

Surveying Organizations

In-person conversations with representatives of organizations in your community are the optimal way to learn about the resources in your area, but these can be time-consuming and labor-intensive.

An alternative is to mail out surveys, or send them out electronically. You can design your own survey using one of the many on-line tools available to help, such as Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com), Zoomerang (www.info.zoomerang.com), or Survey Gizmo (www.surveygizmo.com). It won't do as much to build lasting relationships but it will give you a broad overview of what's going on, and how leaders perceive the community.

To increase your response rate, be sure to include a cover note that briefly explains why you are soliciting the organization's opinions and how you plan to use the information. You should also indicate how long it will take to finish the questionnaire (preferably, not more than 10 minutes).

Ask closed-ended questions in order to generate concise and easy-to-use information. Simple, multiple-choice questions can tell you a lot about each organization, and its involvement in the NORC neighborhood:

- How long has your organization been serving this community?
a. 10 years or less b. Between 11-20 years c. More than 20 years
- Do you currently serve clients in the NORC?
a. Yes b. No c. Don't know
- If yes, approximately how many clients are you currently serving?
a. Fewer than 10 b. Between 11-25 c. More than 25

You can also solicit opinions from organizations with a slightly more complex format. For example:

- From the list below, select the top three issues you believe seniors in the NORC program face. You may select more than one:
 - a. Hunger
 - b. Isolation
 - c. Depression
 - d. Limited access to health care services
 - e. Recreational opportunities that are too few or too far away
 - f. Other _____