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Community-Engaged Surveys: From Research Design to Analysis and Dissemination

Community Voice and Power Sharing Guidebook

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About This Toolkit

In this toolkit, you will learn how to implement community-engaged methods in survey research, with examples of projects from across the Urban Institute. The document begins with an overarching section on how to gather and document community input and then dives into the phases for engaging the community in

In this toolkit, you will learn

- Methods for gathering and documenting community input

- The four phases for engaging the community in survey work

- Best practices for all phases of engaging the community in survey work

Methods for Gathering and Documenting Community Input

Methods for engaging with the community vary by the size of the group of community members you are working with. The methods can be informal or formal and depend on such factors as the scale of a project and the level of engagement desired. They should be considered for use in the development and revision phases of community-engaged survey design described below.

- **Small work groups** are effective for working shoulder to shoulder with community members and create an intimate and open atmosphere. Small settings enable community members to gain confidence, trust, and comfort over time, allowing for more frequent and honest contributions to various phases of survey development and implementation.

- **Individual work sessions** allow community members to help develop a survey without the influence of researcher bias. Community members' working on their own leads to the purest expressions of community autonomy and self-determination. With this method, researchers must be careful to support communication and use community members' input. If community members offer contributions but feel ignored, they may withdraw from the project.

- **Large group discussions** are a great way to gather community input. Although collaboration can be difficult in a large setting, the diversity of opinions can be valuable. This option can be well suited for researchers in the survey development phase who want to listen to the community's opinions but do not need to work alongside community members when writing their surveys.

Four Phases for Engaging the Community in Survey Work

Surveys are a research tool well suited for community engagement. Community-engaged survey methods can foster a less extractive relationship with the community, ensure researchers are asking the right questions to the right people, and lead to better responses, both in participation rates and truthfulness. Ultimately, survey skills remain with community members, and the data and findings can be used more broadly and sustainably.

Community-Engaged Surveys

The following are questions to keep in mind before you launch your survey work. If the survey comes out of a larger community-engaged planning process, the coordinating committee may discuss these questions together.

- What are the goals of the survey?

- Who are you trying to reach with this survey?

- How many people will you aim to reach?

- What is the scale of the survey? Will it be administered locally or nationally?

- How do you define this particular community of interest? How does the community define itself?

- How will you respond to and incorporate community feedback?

- Are there parameters, requirements, or other components of your work that you must balance against community input? How will you communicate those must-have items up front?

- Which community members can be most helpful?
  - Are there subcommunities that should be included as well?
  - How will you ensure that community members feel their voices are valued in the development process?

Engaging the community in survey work has four main phases or options:

01 Contextualizing research questions

02 Developing survey questions and tools

03 Implementing the survey

04 Collaborating on data analysis, report drafting, and product dissemination

Contextualizing Research Questions

In any research project, reviewing the literature on your topic of interest is essential for understanding the issues, framing your work, and informing your research questions. The same effort should be applied to understanding how to engage your communities of interest. This contextualization work should precede the survey design phase. Engaging the community in informal conversations can help researchers understand the cultural norms and priorities within the community. These informal conversations are not only pertinent to establishing context but also essential to building trust and making community members more comfortable and more likely to share valuable insights. Through structured, yet open, community forums, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners can identify and sharpen the central questions you aims to better understand through your survey. Employing community-engaged methods at the beginning of the survey process will ensure you are guided by the right questions.

INITIAL GUIDING QUESTIONS

Community-Engaged Surveys

o Which method or methods will you use to gather and document community input (e.g., small work groups, individual work sessions, or large group discussions)? Why have you chosen a particular method?

o How will you ensure that community members are adequately compensated for their knowledge, expertise, and participation?

o What work agreement will you put in place for compensating community members?

EXAMPLE

Climate Resilience and Mitigation in New Orleans

When staff at Urban began a project to study climate resilience and mitigation in the New Orleans area, they decided that a homeowner survey would be a big piece of the project. Given the trauma of Hurricane Katrina and the proliferation of local research in its aftermath, the team knew that potential respondents would have research fatigue. To understand the best way to approach and survey homeowners, Urban staff conducted a series of focus groups in the community. Staff first worked with local community partners to identify participants and questions for the focus group. Although Urban staff entered the focus groups with some survey questions in mind, they viewed the sessions as a starting point for understanding homeowners' knowledge of their rights and available supports around housing, and potential sensitivities around planned questions. The focus groups provided Urban staff with rich information, and that information helped them not only better understand the survey method but also ensure that the survey language was appropriate and that questions were sensitive to the importance of minimizing recall of trauma.

BEST PRACTICES

- **Read through the literature on the community.** If literature is available, reading it can lead to a deeper understanding of the community, including historical factors that members may not be forthcoming with in conversation. Furthermore, reviewing previous research conducted within the community can reveal previous researcher-community dynamics, particularly power imbalances, that will need to be avoided or mitigated.

- **Study surveys that involve the community, similar communities, or similar topics.** Although a survey design process that incorporates community engagement may differ from previous design processes you have used, an understanding of past surveys will help when designing and writing a new survey. If past surveys from the community of interest exist, they can offer actionable information, particularly when digested alongside community members, and will help you avoid putting people through duplicative research.

- **Spend time with the community.** The best way to understand a community is to spend time getting to know the people and groups who make it up. Being present in the community when you do not "have to" builds familiarity, trust, and understanding. Although formal meetings have their place, much can be gleaned from the community through informal, casual interactions. Informal engagement includes attending community events that are unrelated to your research project, talking with community members, and checking in with community leaders. Spending time with a community is an opportunity to build partnerships. Think through what you can offer the community (data, resources, connections, etc.) during your interactions. If you need to engage across many locations, make sure you are not prioritizing one area over the others, and if you cannot be with the community in person, find ways to build bonds via phone calls, emails, and text messages, or whatever method the community prefers.

- **Engage broadly with the community in structured settings, like focus groups and interviews.** A tenet of community-engaged surveys is that the more relevant an issue is to the community, the stronger the results of the survey will be. Although you may go into the survey with preconceived ideas about the topic and questions, be aware that engaging the community in structured discussion can uncover important nuances that might otherwise be overlooked in survey design. These discussions should not be steered in a specific direction but conducted in an open forum so

Contextualizing Research Questions

Review the literature to understand the community of interest, frame your work, and inform your research questions. Engage the community in informal conversations to understand the research topic and the main questions your survey aims to answer. The following are questions to keep in mind as you focus on community engagement that informs and contextualizes your research questions.

- What literature exists on the research topic, demographics, and lived experiences of the community of interest? Which community members can you speak with to determine whether your topic and research questions align with the community's concerns and priorities? Are preliminary adjustments needed?

  o If you are administering a national survey, how do contexts and community priorities differ across locations/ geographic areas? What adjustments are needed to address differences in contexts and priorities?

- What is the community's familiarity with the topic of your survey?

- Are there community members/leaders or organizations who are familiar with this topic and can give context to the survey?

- Has the community participated in past surveys or other research efforts?

  o What can you learn from those experiences?

- Are there opportunities outside the project to spend time informally with the

community members can speak freely to inform the project with their perspectives and expertise.

- **Think through nuances or differences if the survey will be administered on a larger scale.** If you are administering the survey nationally or in different locations, think carefully about how to incorporate different demographic and situational contexts— language/translation needs, research fatigue in an overresearched community, or even the effects of weather, depending on the season. You will likely need to engage community members who represent different areas and assess contextual distinctions that could affect study design.

Developing Survey Questions and Tools

The process of informing and shaping survey questions and selecting tools provides researchers with an opportunity to engage the community as partners in survey design, testing, and revision. However, despite its effectiveness, this approach can yield notable differences between the project team's perspective and the community's perspective on shaping survey questions. Teams that use this approach must determine in advance how the final set of questions may be refined or selected. Striking the right balance in survey wording is often more art than science.

Testing the survey with the community involves piloting it with a small, diverse, and representative group of community members. In this phase, collecting actionable feedback on the survey is the priority. Feedback can be the informal comments respondents make while taking the survey and responses to questions and comments posed

after they complete the survey. This phase can also provide a valuable opportunity to test methods of survey administration. If the project team plans to work with community members on survey administration, a pilot can help iron out small issues or identify larger problems with the intended methods.

The revision process empowers the community to offer changes to questions initially drafted by the project team. The project team should edit survey questions using community feedback as guidance, paying close attention to the community's language, culture, and history.

The design, testing, and revising of the survey should be guided by key considerations, including the selection of community members you will work with, the adoption of specific processes for engaging those members, and the strategy for creating an equitable environment for those engagements.

The level of engagement between a project and a community may differ based on timelines and budgets. It is important to strive, however, toward working with a representative group of community members to determine what the engagement process will look like if the survey is administered on a larger or national scale. Identifying and working with visible community leaders may be easy, but researchers must not neglect the perspectives of subcommunities and other members. If the team is not comfortable partnering with the community, meeting with members for feedback can be an effective method of engagement.

> ### EXAMPLE
> **Adolescent Sexual Health and Safety**
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> Two examples that demonstrate the importance of engaging with communities in survey development come from the Promoting Adolescent Sexual Health and Safety (PASS) project, a collaboration between Urban and the Benning Terrace public housing community in Washington, DC, to design and evaluate a program for teenagers that takes place away from school.
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> The first example is from when the project team, including community leaders, designed a survey to test the sexual health knowledge, behaviors, and attitudes of program participants. Community members provided input that some questions were too invasive and that the survey was too long, but the public health research experts insisted that the questions remain in the survey. However, when the survey was implemented, many respondents experienced survey fatigue, dropping questions toward the end and at times answering randomly or skipping questions.

Another example of the importance of community engagement in survey development is from a later phase of the PASS project, when the program was rolled out to new communities in DC. Urban researchers asked community partners running youth programming and family services whether they would like to contribute questions to the survey. Urban researchers thought this would give the partners an opportunity to use the collaboration with Urban to collect their own data. However, researchers underestimated the technical assistance and orientation to research and surveys partners would need to engage meaningfully in adding questions, as they were all new to this form of survey work. Ultimately, no partner questions were added. Urban did, however, commit to sharing all data with the partners and providing technical assistance to help the partners use data to improve their programming, demonstrate participant outcomes from their work to their stakeholders, or show the need in the community for PASS programming.

BEST PRACTICES

- **Establish a level of responsiveness to community feedback.** Before engaging with the community during the survey development and revision process, the project team should be transparent about its position on significantly altering the survey and directly communicate it to the community. Be sure to come to a joint decision on a framework for how input and feedback will be reviewed and how the community's suggestions will or will not be incorporated into the survey.

- **Identify collaborating leaders within the community, but do not neglect other members.** Depending on the other community-engagement elements of your project, you may already be working with a group of community leaders. However, you should ensure that you identify community members who are best suited for supporting survey design, which requires a specific skill set. Identifying the right set of community leaders for survey work is crucial for identifying and recruiting other members to participate in the survey design process.

- **Scan the community to create a representative group of community members.** The team must identify community members of all types and perspectives who can contribute to the development, testing, and revising of the survey. The community members in the room during this phase can have a large influence on the survey, so they must represent various groups within the community. No important subcommunity should be neglected. During a survey pilot, the pilot group should be small, but neglecting a particular demographic is inherently inequitable. The selection of community members for the pilot phase should be intentional, fair minded, and in line

Developing Survey Questions and Tools

Work with a representative and diverse group of community members to develop and test the survey questions. Edit the survey questions with community feedback, centering the language, culture, and history of the community. The following are questions to keep in mind as you focus on community engagement that informs and shapes your survey questions and tools.

- What survey details (phrasing, vocabulary, length, order of items, response options, etc.) will you ask community members to weigh in on?

- Can you include questions that are of interest to community residents or the community base partner organization, even if they are not directly relevant to your project?

- Can you provide a primer on surveys so community members can better understand how surveys work and help your team understand the topic or topics at hand?

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with current literature on survey design. Community organizations and leaders can be essential when selecting community members to take part in the survey pilot.

- **Create an equitable and empowering atmosphere that facilitates contributions from all community members.** Good community engagement does not occur when researchers and community members simply enter a room and discuss the survey. The team must be intentional in creating an environment that promotes open and honest input during all phases of survey development and revision. Keep in mind the history of research in many communities. Although community members may not feel comfortable at first, the survey team is obligated to do all it can to promote community trust and comfort. The more comfortable community members feel, the more they can offer to the survey development process. The project team should avoid responding negatively to the community's suggested changes even if they may be difficult to hear. Also, consider using alternative communication methods, like written suggestions, for community members who are less talkative or more hesitant to speak out.

- **Establish a method for collecting feedback.** Audio recording and note-taking are great ways to collect feedback on surveys. Other promising methods are conducting a short reaction survey after participants finish taking the survey or answering questions from participants about each section as they take the survey. If community members are tasked with receiving feedback on the survey, the team should ensure institutional review board practices are implemented when feedback is recorded. Training for the facilitators should include how to administer proper consent procedures.

- **Record all questions and comments from community members taking the survey.** How respondents behave while taking the survey can offer insights into survey improvement. If they seem confused or compelled to ask a question about the survey, that's a strong signal that a question may need rewording. A respondent's negative reaction to a question may be triggered by wording that offends or betrays norms within the community. Documentation of these questions and reactions should be reviewed later, paired with the research team's debrief notes, and appropriately addressed.

- **If feasible, pilot multiple methods of survey dissemination.** Before going forward with the survey, you must understand the best way of administering and distributing it. Although working with community members or partners is important, the testing

phase of the design process should be done regardless of community engagement and can help researchers identify the most effective ways to get survey responses. Testing phone, door-to-door, online, and other dissemination methods can ensure the optimal one is selected.

Implementing the Survey

Engaging community members in survey administration can strengthen the results because survey administrators from the community are likely to be more effective at reaching people and obtaining honest responses. Community engagement in survey implementation also allows for researchers to compensate community members and train community members in new skills that can be used beyond the life of the project.

EXAMPLE

DC Promise Neighborhoods Evaluation

Promise Neighborhoods is a US Department of Education place-based initiative that strives to turn neighborhoods of concentrated poverty into neighborhoods of opportunity. When Urban researchers surveyed neighborhoods within Washington, DC, to evaluate the program, they worked with their nonprofit partner to fully engage community members in the survey administration process. They hired and trained community members to be on paired teams that went into the community to conduct surveys. Community members served as community experts, introducing the survey and monetary and nonmonetary incentives to respondents. This strategy produced a response rate of 80 percent. Researchers believed the response rate was so high because respondents were familiar with the community members on the survey teams. Furthermore, Urban could give back to the community by compensating people and providing training and experience that could position them for other job opportunities. For more information, see the Promise Neighborhoods project page on Urban's website: https://www.urban.org/policy-centers/metropolitan-housing-and-communities-policy-center/projects/promise-neighborhoods.

BEST PRACTICES

- **Make a plan for disseminating the survey**. Will the survey be administered in person, online, by phone, or through another method? Each option has pros and cons, and many project elements will affect which is selected.

- **Pay community members to administer the survey or conduct outreach.** As previously discussed, potential survey respondents may be more comfortable talking to a fellow community member than to a researcher, especially in communities that have traumatic histories with researchers. Even if the survey is online, community members can help build trust and market the survey to increase participation. This strategy presents an opportunity to compensate community members. Make sure to create an explicit work agreement to delineate tasks and properly pay community members.

- **Train community members to administer the survey.** Depending on the size of the survey or the level of engagement in previous phases, you may need to bring in additional community members for the implementation phase. Regardless, researchers must make sure community members are well trained not only in asking survey questions and recording responses, but also in safety procedures and ethical considerations. Creating a plan for training community members is essential to properly implementing a survey.

- **Create a sampling/recruitment strategy to ensure the survey reaches a representative group within the community.** This is another aspect of implementation for which community members can facilitate strategic outreach. Work with leaders in the community to identify specific tactics for reaching different groups. A survey is only as good as the respondents it reaches,

so a representative, large, and diverse group of respondents is essential. Social mapping, a visual method of depicting the social and demographic landscape, can be helpful for networking and ensuring all populations of interest are reached.

Collaborating on Data Analysis, Report Drafting, and Product Dissemination

An essential piece of making surveys less extractive is giving the data back to the community, a step that should be taken regardless of which level of engagement you employ during the design and administration phases. Sharing results acknowledges the ethical principle of respect for persons, prevents treating research participants as a means to an end, and may have direct positive benefits for the participants. The process of sharing the data is carried out by working with the community to analyze both quantitative and qualitative data, draft and edit the report, create recommendations, and disseminate and present the final products.

EXAMPLE
Rocky Mountain Tribal Leaders Council Epidemiology Center Health Priorities Survey

The Rocky Mountain Tribal Leaders Council Epidemiology Center worked with a Tribal community to develop, pilot, and revise a health priorities survey. In the pilot phase, Tribal college interns piloted the survey with five Tribal members who had diverse life experiences and public health views. The members represented various groups in the community, including elders, traditional society, young adults, youth and family workers, and mothers. The interns recorded all questions Tribal members asked throughout the administration of the survey, along with feedback on the survey questions. This process provided valuable information to the survey team. Recommendations included adding kidney dialysis to the list of major health priorities and allowing multiple response selections for health priorities. More information is available in the 2019 article "Survey Development: Community Involvement in the Design and Implementation Process" from the *Journal of Public Health Management and Practice.*

GUIDING QUESTIONS
Implementing the Survey

Include community members and community input in survey administration. The following are questions to keep in mind as you focus on engaging the community in this aspect of your survey work.

- How will the survey be disseminated—in person, online, on paper, via tablet?

- Will you provide training for community members to field the survey?

  o If the survey asks personal questions, how will you ensure respondents feel comfortable taking a survey with fellow community members?

- Will community members work alongside the research team or on their own?

- What sampling/recruitment strategies will ensure the survey reaches a representative group within the community?

  o Are there plans to conduct outreach to sections of the community that are less visible or less likely to turn out or respond to a survey?

BEST PRACTICES

- **Present and analyze the data with the community.** This can take various forms, from Data Walks to community presentations. The project team should have a plan to attract the community and ensure that all interested people can participate in the process. Some community members may feel more comfortable providing input in settings with fewer people, so the team can also work with the community in smaller groups to analyze and interpret survey results.

- **Draft the final materials with the community.** Work with community members to draft the presentation or other final materials such as a report using both project team materials and those provided by community members. Given the wide range of skill sets in community groups, different approaches can be used to facilitate collaborative drafting and editing, including outline development, story-boarding, and informal discussion of sections with a community leader or team staffer who takes notes.

- **Honor the authorship of community members.** An important part of power sharing is honoring the community's authorship of its data, stories, and analyses. One way to do this is to formally acknowledge community members' authorship of reports and other materials produced. Implicit in this acknowledgment is the recognition that even if community members did not directly work on all aspects of a final product, their experiences, perspectives, expertise, and contributions were central to the project and its findings. You can take several approaches to properly attributing community contributions to a report: list an entire community as an author to honor community-level investment, credit community-based organizations or community advisory boards, name a community leader or community advisory board leader along with other authors, or embed the community name in the project title, report title, or subtitle.

- **Circulate the final report among survey participants and the larger community.** Communities that participate in surveys seldom see the results of their work or have access to the data derived from their ideas, experiences, and priorities. Providing a simple binder or printout for community members is more than a "thank you" card; it is documentation of their important contribution to the vision, sustainability, and transformative possibilities of the research project. In addition to sharing data (raw, tables, or charts), researchers should ensure that the final

Collaborating on Data Analysis, Report Drafting, and Product Dissemination

Present and analyze data with the community, draft reports and conclusions with the community, acknowledge community authorship, and disseminate the final report to research participants and the larger community. This step should be independent of the level of engagement used during the design and administration phases. The following are questions to keep in mind as you focus on engaging the community in analysis, product development, and product dissemination.

- What exactly is the community's role in data analysis and interpretation?

- How do you plan to attract the community? How will you ensure every community member who wants to review or discuss the data has the opportunity to do so?

- How will the community be involved in drafting reports and materials?

  o Will community members work on specific sections? Will they provide guidance on the overall document?

- How do you plan to return the data to the community (Data Walk, presentations, small group discussions, newsletter, etc.)?

- How will you leave a full dataset or reported findings with the community? How will you provide a data summary with key findings, infographics, data tables, and so on?

report is widely disseminated in the community and that they are available to field questions, especially at community-based question-and-answer sessions.

▪ **Create alternative products with communities.** Conventional reports laden with technical research jargon, frameworks, charts, and tables may not always be the most effective or useful products for community members. From the outset of engagement, work with the community to determine what products might help translate data and highlight actionable findings. Options to consider include alternative reports, fact sheets, flyers, flow charts, videos, slide shows, podcasts, and public venues for community discourse.

Acknowledgments

About the Urban Institute

The nonprofit Urban Institute is a leading research organization dedicated to developing evidence-based insights that improve people's lives and strengthen communities. For 50 years, Urban has been the trusted source for rigorous analysis of complex social and economic issues; strategic advice to policymakers, philanthropists, and practitioners; and new, promising ideas that expand opportunities for all. Our work inspires effective decisions that advance fairness and enhance the well-being of people and places.

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