Handout 5: Data Collection

How is data collected?

Through existing information such as:

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS statistics)
- Local community profiles
- Relevant reports.

This is called secondary research.

Through collection of new information such as:

- Questionnaire completed when client uses the service
- Community meetings
- Survey of community groups.

This is called primary research.

Ethical and confidentiality issues when collecting data

Questions to consider:

- Should we tell people before collecting data on their circumstances?
- How do we show respect for cultural and individual differences?
- Should we keep the information we collect confidential?

When doing research always remember the rights of the people you are researching.

The rules of carrying out research

- Work with others rather than in isolation. Share and seek ideas and listen to others input
- Be clear about the questions you ask by being exact in what you are saying
- Be clear about why you are asking the question and if anybody else has a stake in your findings
- Don’t be happy with the first answer until you have sought more information and looked at the question in other ways. It might be that its not the best answer
- Be aware of the constraint on your agency in terms of time, money skilled people to help, access to others for research
- Don’t take on a piece of research that is too ambitious. It’s better to tackle something smaller and more achievable than something large that you can’t finish
- Think of clever ways to present your research to get your message across
- Continuously review your research and question the results
- Be flexible. Problems will arise and sometimes it is necessary to change the focus of your research.
Doing a simple survey

People often think that they don’t have the skills to do research that it’s too “academic” and complex for them. Now this is true for large research projects where many thousands of dollars have been set aside for the project but a simple local survey can be done with little previous experience as long as there is forethought and preplanning.

Step 1

Know precisely what it is you want to know. This sounds pretty simple but in fact it isn’t. It’s important to spend the time really examining what it is you want to know. For example as a community worker at Carmen Poldis Centre you want to know if the services in New Cedar are adequate.

Ask yourself if this is really what you want to know. Or rather do you want to know about the services Carmen Poldis might be able to offer? For example housing or transport needs are not something Carmen Poldis can address.

So the question will be narrowed down to identify if the services at Carmen Poldis are adequate. Can you measure “adequate?” What is adequate for one person is inadequate for another. Are we interested in those people who already use the Carmen Poldis centre or those who were unable to access the services or those who didn’t even know the services existed. Are we really only interested in those clients who have been attending the Family Work program in the last 12 months?

You can see from the above example that it’s very important to get your ideas about what you are researching very clear in the beginning.

Step 2 choosing the research method

Once you know exactly what it is you do want to research you have probably been thinking along the way about how you will collect the data you need to provide you with the answers.

It may be that in some instances Local Council or the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) or journals and reports may have the answers. (secondary research). On the other hand you may need to get the information from staff, clients and staff from other community organisations (primary research).

If you need to collect your data through primary research you may organise:

• A focus group of key people
• An interview
• A questionnaire.
**Step 3 what resources are needed**

Before you begin it’s important to work out what resources you need. For example:

- Will you need extra staff or can you use volunteers
- What training, if any, do people need to carry out the research
- What stationery is needed, photocopying, stamps and phone calls
- Will you need people who have interview and telephone skills
- Will there be a computer free to analyse and write up the results.

The resources you have will affect the type of research you can do. However if you have few resources it doesn’t mean you can’t do the research but rather limit it’s scope so it becomes manageable.

**Step 4**

**Designing the questions**

Remember when designing the questions you need to keep reminding yourself about what answers you are looking for i.e what is it you want to find out.

Don’t ask questions that are superfluous, or may be interesting to know. Remember that every question you ask has to be compiled, collated, analysed and written up.

The type of question is also important. Some questions require only a short one sentence, one word response. These are called “closed” questions. An example of a closed question is personal particulars, or answers that require only a “Yes” or “No” For example have you left school?

Closed questions are easy to collate but they don’t give much information about an issue you are researching.

Open questions allow the respondent to expand on the answer saying what they want either by writing in the space on the questionnaire or through an interview where the responses are recorded or written down.

Open questions are useful when you need a full answer. For example “What are the reasons why you stopped attending the Family Services program?

A disadvantage of open questions is the difficulty of analysing and collating the results as the answers are often very varied.

Most questionnaires and interviews have a combination of both open and closed questions.

Additionally, make sure your questions are not long and drawn out nor double barrelled meaning that they have 2 questions in one.
Questions you design can be used in either a questionnaire, or a structured or unstructured interview.

If you design a questionnaire then you can distribute it through the post, placed into letter boxes (self administered) or handed to people personally (face to face). Remember to tell the people who fill out the form (the respondents) how they can get the forms back to you and by what date.

**Step 5 testout the questions**

Now you are ready to see if your questions work. This is sometimes called trialing or piloting. Ask a few people to take part in order to test your questions for clarity, length of the whole questionnaire or interview, its relevance and overall impact. Make any alterations before you start the official survey.

**Step 6 sampling**

If your survey involves a small and discreet range of people then you will be able to survey all or most of them. For example staff at Carmen Poldis Community Centre, all the members of the New Cedar Youth Club. Often though it’s not possible to ask all the people if you have a large number of people, e.g all the people of New Cedar, so you then take a sample.

The problem is who do you ask? The survey has to represent a mix of all the different people living in New Cedar otherwise it isn’t representative of the group and so your survey is biased.

One method is a *random sample*. If you were surveying all the residents of New Cedar then you would get their names from the electoral list and randomly allocate a number to those who are to be surveyed. There are computer packages that will allow this to happen or for a smaller survey you can put all the names in a hat and a number is drawn against them from another hat. All equal numbers are interviewed for example.

Another method of sampling is called Systematic sampling which is easier than random sampling. You select the respondent at regular intervals. For example every third person who comes through the door, every 10th person on the electoral role.

Remember when choosing the site and you are sampling will it be representative of the population you wish to survey?. For example a shopping centre for late night shopping is unlikely to get a representative group of the older people. During the day it might not be representative of the area’s citizens who are in paid employment.

**Step 7 administering the survey**

Now you are ready to begin. Will you need to let people know that you will be asking them to complete a questionnaire or call on them to complete an interview?

If so then you might announce it at a meeting, ask the local paper to put it in as a press release, write to the school for permission to announce it through their newsletter or
letterbox drop. Announcing it in this way gives the research credibility and people are forewarned. When you do conduct the survey wear an identification card and show it when you introduce yourself.

Clearly explain the reasons you are conducting the survey and how long it will take and how their information will be used.

Other issues to consider when carrying out your survey:
Time of day – when are the shopping centres their busiest
Location – shopping centres, railway stations
Language – is there a dominant migrant population so do you need to have the survey translated.

**Step 8 analysing and interpreting the results**

Now you have all the data you have to get the results into a form that is useful. The first step is to categorise all the questions so they can be counted. For example all the closed questions and multiple choice questions are easy to count and then list the number as a percentage of the total population surveyed which is 100%.

For example: present as part of a questionnaire
Question 4: Which service at Carmen Poldis Community Centre do you use?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family Centre</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth programs</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education programs</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>150</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

150 was the total population surveyed.

Open and close questions are more difficult to collate as the responses can be so varied. Sometimes the responses are similar so they fall automatically into a category while at other times you may need to make up a category as an umbrella to include a number of somewhat similar responses. This is called coding. Coding is subjective as you are determining if one response is like another to fit under an umbrella category and it could be that another person may code it differently. It may be a good idea to get others to also determine a code separately, compare the results and come up with a compromise.

If you are concerned that some good points may be lost when the answer gets coded you can illustrate the answer with a quote as an example.

Once you have the open questions coded you can count them in the same way as you have the closed questions.
Step 9 writing up the results

Now you have all the data collated you need to decide the best format to distribute them. This will depend on your original reason for doing the survey. If you are using the results to lobby the management committee for a new service you will probably want to include a table to show the results of your research and put it in a report or briefing paper.