Handout 11: Surveys

A survey involves selecting a group of people and asking them a set of questions. The questions are preplanned and you obtain the answers by asking people in an interview setting or by asking people to write the answers on the questionnaire. Surveys aim to be representative. They do this by asking the same questions of everyone in the community or by selecting participants in a way that allow them to generalise the results.

Surveys have a number of advantages including:

1. lots of information can easily be collected
2. the worker doesn’t have to be involved in collecting the information
3. they can obtain a broad range of opinions
4. results can easily be compared to other studies
5. they can be cheap.

Characteristics of a Survey

Surveys have a number of important characteristics such as:

1. Representativeness. This means the degree to which the results of the survey can be said to be true for the whole of the population. In a census of the entire population the results would be very representative. However it isn’t always possible to survey everyone. In ideal circumstances the survey should be constructed so that people who are typical of the community as a whole are surveyed. The more representative the survey the easier it is for the worker to generalise their results.

2. Standardisation. This is critical in a survey. Standardisation means asking people the same questions in the same order using the same words and in the same manner. It also means deciding upon a uniform way to interpret the questions.

3. Reliability. This means the degree to which the answer you receive from one person in your survey is the same as the answer another researcher might receive if they duplicated your methods, or if the same person was asked the same question but at a different time. Ensuring that your methods are standardised and the sample is representative increases reliability.

4. Validity. This refers to the extent the information found in your survey answers the original questions you sought to answer.
Steps in Developing a Survey

1. Become familiar with the issues you are researching. The RE in research implies that you are building upon work already done. The aim of the research is not to reinvent the wheel but to build upon work that has already been done. Therefore the first task is to undertake a comprehensive review of the research that has already been done.

2. Define the research problem i.e. what do you want to find out? Make sure you carefully consider and express the problem:
   - Limit the scope
   - Use concrete and simple language
   - Express the research question in measurable terms
   - Specify the context
   - Restrict the size of the study.

3. Write down the goals of the research. Remember to use the SMART rules for goals setting:
   - Smart
   - Measurable
   - Achievable
   - Realistic
   - Time-framed.

4. Read or speak to other people who have researched the issue.

5. Get to know the community you are conducting your research on. A community profile can help here.

6. Decide upon your methods. Choose a method that suits your question. Consider the population you are studying and the nature of the topic you are looking at. Refer to other people’s research. Which methods worked well for them? Consider your own skills and resources. Don’t be too ambitious. Consider sampling methods making sure you consider the sampling frame and issues of representativeness.

7. Draft your questionnaire ensuring there is a brief description at the beginning, outlining the purpose of the research.

8. Test your questionnaire on some community members and revise it to get rid of any problems.

9. When relying on the questionnaire being returned to you:
   - Include a phone number, fax number, email address or stamped addressed envelop for questionnaire return.
10. Conduct the survey.

11. Compile the results.

12. Write a report.