

Advice for a Needs Survey¹

Ask yourself: What are our reasons for choosing to do this survey?

Why are we getting involved in this? The answers may be immediately clear to you. They may also include many of the reasons previously listed. But perhaps your reasons are not entirely clear. Asking these questions gives you the chance to become clearer.

Ask yourself: What are our goals in doing this survey?

What do we want to get out of it? How will the results be used? Again, your goals (and uses) may be very apparent; they may also relate to your reasons above. But you ought to be able to state them before you begin.

Ask yourself: Are we ready to conduct this survey?

Are we prepared to do the work that needs to be done, with high-quality effort?

Decide how much time you have to do the survey, from start to finish.

How much time can you allow? Your answer will depend upon what is already known; upon the size of your target group; upon the importance involved; and upon the resources you have at your disposal. (How many people can help? How much money is available to spend?) If nothing is known, the community is large, resources are low, and importance is high, your survey may take considerable time, several months or even more. But if the reverse is true, you could complete a good survey in a month or less.

Decide how many people are going to be asked.

If you are surveying the needs of a small or even medium-sized group, you can (and should) include every single person. But if you have a neighborhood of 5,000 people, or a larger community, you probably will not be able to ask everyone directly.

When the group is larger, you can make your survey available to everyone who wants to answer it. But a more objective technique, which will usually give you more reliable information, is to construct a sample -- a pre-determined percentage of the total group -- and to ask each member of the sample for their input.

¹ Adapted in part from <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/assessing-community-needs-and-resources/conducting-needs-assessment-surveys/main>

Decide what questions will be asked.

These questions will depend upon the scope of the assessment. If you are asking about all possible needs in the community, then phrase your questions accordingly, and allow for a wide range of possible answers. On the other hand, if you are asking only about certain types of needs then your questions will naturally be geared to them. Either way, you have a choice between asking more quantitative, or closed-ended questions, and more qualitative, or open-ended questions. Closed-ended questions involve a choice among fixed alternatives -- you might state your degree of agreement with certain questions, or place your preferences in rank order. Open-ended questions allow more freedom; they give those answering the chance to say anything they want, even though the answers may be less precise. In many cases, your survey can include both types of questions.

Try out the survey on a test group.

The test group should ideally be composed of the same kinds of people who will be taking the full survey. A test group will let you know if your instructions are clear and if your questions make sense. Even if your survey is perfectly clear to you, it may not be clear to them. You need to find this out before the full survey gets dispersed. Don't bypass this step: your test group is like a trial run, or dress rehearsal, which will help you get rid of the rough spots before you hit the big time.