Conducting Community Mail Surveys

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Policing agencies pursuing organizational change consistent with community policing should think carefully about coordinating community feedback into the strategic planning process. A relatively inexpensive way of collecting reliable information from the community is the mail survey. The Regional Community Policing Institute (RCPI) at Michigan State University has developed a mail survey that assesses citizen satisfaction with police services, identifies neighborhood problems, and gauges neighborhood readiness for community policing interventions.

Designing a Survey
Survey research entails presenting subjects with a series of standardized items. Since the information collected is only as good as the items in the survey, naturally, reliable and valid survey items are needed. The attached survey includes "closed-ended" items used by numerous criminal justice researchers and police departments from around the country. Although allowing subjects to respond in their "own words" is sometimes useful, close-ended items are frequently used because of the uniformity they offer. The open-ended strategy requires that a researcher read and code each response so that comparisons can be made and trends identified across subjects. While we assume that respondents will offer relevant information in an open-ended format, often they do not. Since these problems are fairly common, it is best to collect open-ended information sparingly.

The following should be considered in designing close-ended items.

- Response categories should be "exhaustive" (include all possible responses).
- Response categories should be "mutually exclusive" (no more than one response is required).
- Written survey items should be presented clearly.
- Items are kept short and to the point.
- Biased items and terms are avoided (Maxfield & Babbie, 1995, pp. 215-219).

Avoiding biased items and terms is particularly important to prevent encouraging respondents to answer in particular ways.

While there are various ways to present survey items, it is critical to remember the items should be presented in an uncluttered fashion. Avoid jamming as many items as possible on a single page. Cluttered surveys run the risk that respondents will skip questions or discard the survey. Presenting the most interesting items at the beginning of the mail survey increases the chance of capturing the respondent’s interest. Place items designed to collect demographic information at the end of the survey.

There are many benefits to using close-ended survey items that present response categories that are "exhaustive" and "mutually exclusive." An open-ended strategy may work best in exploring a particular item. However, because of various difficulties associated with this strategy, open-ended items should be kept at a minimum. When designing the survey, care should be taken to present an uncluttered, aesthetically pleasing document.

Drawing a Sample
With unlimited resources, there would be little need to draw a sample. We would simply ask everyone his or her views about the research topic. However, such resources are seldom available. To circumvent this obstacle,
social scientists draw samples. In our case, we want to select a group of individuals that accurately represent the larger community. When the characteristics of the sample closely resemble the make-up of the population, then the sample is considered "representative." Key to this concept is the notion of "random selection." When we randomly select citizens, each person has an equal chance of being selected independent of other factors. Random selection generally serves two purposes: 1) it minimizes researcher bias, and 2) the difference between our sample and the population at large can be estimated ("sampling error") (Maxfield & Babbie, 1995, p. 185).

However tempting, we run an increasing risk of going astray when we sample according to convenience. For example, suppose we are conducting research to determine area citizens' satisfaction with police services. We stand out in front of a community meeting and politely ask people who are leaving the meeting if they will participate. While this approach is certainly convenient, it raises several questions. For example, were the citizens interviewed (the sample) similar to the larger population of citizens living in the community? Do demographic characteristics such as race, age, and income reflect the characteristics of the larger population? If not, the sample is not "representative" of the population. Generalizations or conclusions cannot be formed about the community in general from the findings.

Researcher bias must also be considered. Consciously or unconsciously, researchers may approach certain types of citizens more often than others. We may avoid people we perceive to be "anti-cop," or think that "smart-looking" citizens will be more receptive to our research agenda and more likely to participate. This type of behavior (labeled "selection bias") will also affect how representative the sample is, thus limiting our ability to speak about the population of citizens in our community.

We judge the quality of a sample by the degree to which the characteristics of the sample are consistent with the larger population. We ask ourselves whether our sample is "representative." Random probability sampling provides an excellent (but not error-free) way of drawing a quality sample. In general, we increase sampling error when we rely on "convenience" sampling techniques. These procedures are generally considered crude, and should be used only in the event a "sampling frame" (list of names from which to draw a sample) is unavailable. Luckily, sampling frames of American communities are readily available from many sources including private vendors.

**Data Collection**

After designing the survey and drawing the sample, the questionnaire is ready for mailing to area residents. Prior to mailing the survey, postcards should be distributed to all potential research subjects. Doing so forewarns residents that they will be receiving an important survey and it "cleans" the sample by identifying bad addresses. By distributing postcards via first-class mail, bad addresses will come back marked "return to sender" and can then be removed from the sample list.

Using the U.S. Postal Service makes distribution relatively inexpensive, provides access to a widely dispersed sample, and gives respondents time to provide thoughtful responses (Fowler, 1993, p. 66). One disadvantage of using U.S. mail, however, is that despite our best efforts, it is likely that some people will not return the survey. In order to make accurate statements about the population in general, we want the highest response possible thus increasing our chances of maintaining a representative sample. If the response rate is low, then the representativeness of the sample becomes questionable.

**Response Rates.** Although there is no scientifically determined criterion for what constitutes an appropriate response rate, in general 50 percent is considered "adequate," 60 percent "good," and 70 percent "very good" (Babbie, 1992, p. 267). Strategies to increase response rates include providing a self-addressed, stamped envelope in which to return the survey. By minimizing the research subject’s investment, we increase the chance of each citizen responding. While most people will invest the fifteen minutes it takes to complete the survey, few will pay for the postage necessary to return it.
Another strategy involves follow-up contacts. Don Dillman (1978), a well-known expert in the field of survey research, recommends that respondents be mailed a reminder card ten days after the initial mailing. If no response is forthcoming, Dillman recommends sending another survey along with a letter of encouragement. As a final step, Dillman suggests telephoning all nonrespondents. After telephone contact has been made, another survey should be sent out to nonrespondents if necessary. Using this approach, Dillman and others have obtained response rates exceeding 70% with samples drawn from the general public. In practice, three mailings (the original and two follow-ups), seem appropriate. Well-formatted, uncluttered surveys not exceeding six pages in length which are followed-up by reminder cards and surveys to nonrespondents should yield an adequate-to-better response rate.

**Monitoring Returns.** Careful records must be kept for who has and has not returned a survey. Assigning each respondent an identification number which is placed on the survey makes this task easier. When the survey is returned, an individual can easily be removed from the mailing list. Some respondents may be wary of the identification number. A small note should be included next to the number explaining its purpose. If the respondent defaces the identification number to the extent that it is no longer legible, then the survey should be destroyed and not included in the analysis.

**A Note on Ethics**
Balancing the potential value of research findings against the potential harm to the research participant represents a basic ethical dilemma for social science research (Maxfield & Babbie, 1995, p. 153). While there is little risk of potential harm to participants in a community mail survey, the following ethical principles should be followed.

- Provide a broad description of the research intentions outlining the process while exercising care not to bias the results.
- Ensure confidentiality so that respondents will be assured that they will not be treated differently by the police as a result of their responses.
  - Reaffirm that the community survey is not a law enforcement tool per se, but rather a tool to improve, develop, and focus future policing strategies.
- Emphasize that participation is voluntary. Every potential research subject has the right to refuse to participate.

**Final Thoughts**
Key to the successful implementation of community policing is better insight into citizen appraisals of police service, and their perceptions of neighborhood problems. To that end, the Regional Community Policing Institute at Michigan State University has developed the "Police Department Crime and Criminal Justice Survey." Though far from perfect, community mail surveys can provide police departments with reliable, useful, and important information. We encourage departments to engage in efforts to systematically gather information from area residents and include such information in their strategic planning process.
Multi-Linear Process

The Beginnings of a Working Plan -- An Example

Categories and Activities

Political Involvement
- Meet with City Officials
- Develop written plan
- Incorporate in budget process...

Department Assessment
- Conduct survey
- Focus groups
- Communicate results

Community Preparation
- Develop Community Strategy
- Solicit Community Input
- Communicate CP principles to community
- Communicate results and implementation strategy

Performance Evaluations
- Identify current department performance system
- Establish performance measures for Community Policing
- Determine how measures will be collected and establish process
- Train Supervisors
- Implement

Implementation
- Determine criteria for choosing area(s)
- Identify areas
- Allocate Resources
- Involve community and media
- Implement Community Policing in all area(s)...

Community Organization
- Identify existing groups
- Identify areas to be organized
- Establish patrol subcommittees to work on organization plan
- Implement

Categories

Activities -- Activity cards are first organized horizontally by time sequence and then organized vertically in time sequence.
Steps for a Joint Labor/Management Approach to Community Policing — Considerations at each step

- Are management leaders interested in exploring a joint labor/management (JLMC) approach?
- Are union leaders interested in exploring a JLMC approach?
- What value does a JLMC approach bring to the organization?

- What is the criteria for the selection of participants?
- Who should be on the committee?
- How will they be chosen?
- Will the meetings be facilitated and by whom?

- What demonstrations of commitment does each party need from the other in order to go forward?
- Are both parties willing to commit to the process?

- What is it that we are committing to?
- What is our purpose?
- What are the boundaries of the committee's work?
- On what issues does the JLMC have the authority to make decisions?

- What are the ground rules for the meetings and the joint activities?
- How will we treat each other's ideas?
- How will members make decisions if all members do not agree?
- How will discussions be managed?

- How often will the committee meet?
- Who will facilitate the meetings?
- Should subcommittees be formed?
- How are members compensated for time spent on committee activities?
- How will meeting notes be distributed?

- What do we want to achieve?
- How does this fit with our current vision, mission, culture?

- What are the goals necessary to achieve the vision?
- What are the objectives which support goal achievement?

- Which categories represent critical activities?
- What are the deliverables associated with each category?

References


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