

Tips for Writing Survey Questions

The old saying, “you get what you ask for,” is certainly true when it comes to community surveys. Poorly designed survey questions will yield data that are of questionable worth to your agency. That equates to lost time, money, and opportunity. Perhaps even worse, confusing or badly written survey questions can frustrate the very people you are trying to engage with, the residents, business, and organizations in your community. It is well worth your time to learn more about writing survey questions. The following tips are a good place to start.

1. Use words and terms that most people understand; avoid acronyms, technical language, jargon, and informal expressions.

NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

Which of the four UCR/violent Index Crimes scares the most?

- ☐ Murder & Non-Negligent Manslaughter
- ☐ Rape
- ☐ Robbery
- ☐ Aggravated Assault

People may get upset with you, and your survey, if there are questions they do not understand. If they throw your survey away as a result, that is a problem. If they go ahead and answer the questions without fully understanding them, that is also a problem. The solution is to be very careful in your assumptions about what people know. It is usually best to assume people are unfamiliar with policing topics like the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) system and the definition of “non-negligent manslaughter”.

BETTER

Which of the following violent crimes causes you the most concern?

- ☐ Murder
- ☐ Rape
- ☐ Robbery (taking something by using or threatening force)
- ☐ Assault

2. Simplify your sentence structure and reading level.

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NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

Thinking about your most recent trip downtown and the things you may have observed there, how worried were you for your own safety and the welfare of any family members accompanying you on the excursion?

- ☐ Not at all worried
- ☐ A little worried
- ☐ Moderately worried
- ☐ Very worried

Overly complex questions can lead to inaccurate and/or unreliable answers. Try to write your questions at a 6th to 8th grade reading level. You can test the reading level of your survey questions using free online calculators or [MS Word](#). For example, the reading level of the question above is college (Flesch-Kincaid scoring). The revised question below reads at the 7th grade level.

BETTER

How worried were you about your safety during your most recent trip downtown?

- ☐ Not at all worried
- ☐ A little worried
- ☐ Moderately worried
- ☐ Very worried

3. Develop questions that are specific and concrete.

NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

Do you think red light cameras are a good idea?

- ☐ Very Bad Idea
- ☐ Bad Idea
- ☐ Good Idea
- ☐ Very Good Idea

The wording and specificity of your questions can make a big difference in the interpretation and use of your findings. If you want a general sense of people's support for red light cameras, the question above could work. If you are trying to gauge support specifically for red light cameras at high-risk intersections in your city, adjust your wording accordingly.

BETTER

Do you support/oppose the police department adding red light cameras at high-risk intersections in your city?

- ☐ Strongly Oppose
- ☐ Oppose
- ☐ Neither Support nor Oppose
- ☐ Support
- ☐ Strongly Support

4. Ask just one question at a time.

NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

Do you want the police department to prioritize crime downtown next year and do you support increasing police patrols in this area?

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes

Double-barreled questions, where you ask about more than one thing, create problems for the survey respondents and the person who eventually analyzes the survey data. How would a respondent answer the question above if they wanted the police to focus on crime downtown, but did NOT want additional patrols? Perhaps they prefer other crime control strategies (e.g., CPTED). Likewise, if someone answers “yes” to this question what does this mean for the data analyst? Does analyst just assume the person supports both things, prioritizing downtown and increasing patrols? Revise double-barreled questions by breaking them up into two distinct items.

BETTER

Do you want the police department to prioritize crime downtown next year?

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes

Do you support the police department adding additional patrols downtown?

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes

5. Revise negatively (and double negatively) worded questions.

NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

Should the police not give more citations for not parking properly downtown?

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes

Negatively worded questions are often difficult to interpret. If you select “yes” for the question above, does that mean you support more ticketing or less? If you had to read the question more than once to figure this out, then the wording is probably going to confuse your respondents. Confused participants produce confused survey results. You can improve your survey questions by removing negative and double negative wording.

BETTER

Should the police give more citations for parking violations downtown?

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes

6. Avoid leading questions that push respondents to answer in a certain way.

NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

The police department is working hard to improve safety and we have achieved many successes in the past six months. We want to know how safe do you feel when walking alone in your neighborhood?

- ☐ Very Unsafe
- ☐ Unsafe
- ☐ Neither Safe nor Unsafe
- ☐ Safe
- ☐ Very Safe

Most people have a natural inclination to please others. This can be a problem in surveys, because respondents may give you the answer they think you want, rather than provide their true opinion. The way you word, or frame, a question influences the extent to which happens. The first sentence in the question above makes it clear that the police department would like you to answer “very safe”. Wording the question this way might make your department look good in a report, but it would probably not accurately reflect how safe people actually feel in your community. The solution is to be as neutral as possible in the wording of your survey questions.

BETTER

How safe/unsafe do you feel when walking alone in your neighborhood?

- ☐ Very Unsafe
- ☐ Unsafe
- ☐ Neither Safe nor Unsafe
- ☐ Safe
- ☐ Very Safe

7. Do not make people feel bad about telling you the truth.

NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

If you saw a crime happening on your street, would you care enough about your neighborhood to call the police to report it?

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes

People usually want others to see them in a positive light. This can lead survey participants to offer socially desirable answers rather than give their honest response. Answering “no” for the question above suggests that you do not care much about your neighborhood. Even if this was how you truly felt, you might not want to acknowledge it to strangers conducting a survey. If the goal of your survey is to assess what people really think and how they behave, then you need to word your questions carefully. Try to remove language that is judgmental, critical, or self-incriminating. Another strategy for minimizing socially desirable responding involves “normalizing” the different responses a person might have. Adding a preface to the question below, “*People have different opinions about contacting the police*”, suggests that neither answer is abnormal.

BETTER

People have different opinions about contacting the police. If you saw a crime happening in your neighborhood, would you call the police to report it?

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes

8. Replace words/terms that could bias your results.

NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

Do you think we are spending too much money, too little, or just about the right amount on WELFARE?

- ☐ Too much
- ☐ About right
- ☐ Too little

Some words, including a few associated with policing (e.g., racial profiling, police brutality), have become politically charged. These words may unfairly influence your findings when they are used in a community survey. The above example is a good illustration: The question was used in the 1998 General Social Survey and 45% of the respondents answered “Too much”, suggesting a high degree of dissatisfaction with this government program. Interestingly, a slightly revised version of the question (see below) was included in the same survey and it generated a very different result: only 12% of the respondents thought that “Too much” money was being spent on assistance to the poor. The difference between 12% and 45% is substantial, and goes to show just how much your findings can hinge on a single word. Use words carefully when designing your survey questions and think about replacing emotionally charged words with neutral alternatives.

BETTER

Do you think we are spending too much money, too little, or just about the right amount on ASSISTANCE TO THE POOR?

- ☐ Too much
- ☐ About right
- ☐ Too little

9. Make your response options exhaustive.

NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

In the past 12 months, how many times did you visit a city park?

- ☐ Every day
- ☐ Weekly
- ☐ Monthly
- ☐ Once or twice for the year

The response options you provide should be exhaustive. This means you need to consider all of the possible answers that people might generate. For the example above, how would someone answer if they never went to a city park? Leaving this option out is likely to frustrate some participants and/or lead them to choose a response that does not accurately reflect their use of city parks. Inaccurate responding leads to inaccurate findings.

The question below does a better job covering the full range of experiences that people might have with their city parks. In some cases, you may need to consider adding an option for “other”. If you are asking about race, for example, you could list the five most common options and then add as a sixth choice, “*Some other race*” to ensure that people from more infrequent groups still have a box to check.

BETTER

In the past 12 months, how many times did you visit a city park?

- ☐ Never (0 times)
- ☐ Rarely (1 to 4 times)
- ☐ Occasionally (5 to 10 times)
- ☐ Often (11 to 20 times)
- ☐ Very Often (21 or more times)

You might also consider using an open-ended item during a pilot-test of your survey if you are unsure about the range of answers participants might give on a question. For example, we guessed at the upper limit (i.e., 21 or more times) when setting the answers for the prior question about city parks. A more informed approach to calibrating the response intervals would involve asking people an open-ended question during the pilot-test:

In the past 12 months, how many times did you visit a city park?...._____

You could use the answers to set the response options for your final fixed-choice question. Try to set the ranges to differentiate the respondents. In other words, try to avoid having everyone end up in the same bin (e.g., “1 to 999 times”, “1,000 to 2,000 times”, etc.).

10. Make response options mutually exclusive.

NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

How old are you?

- ☐ 18 to 25
- ☐ 25 to 35
- ☐ 35 to 45
- ☐ 45 to 55
- ☐ 55 to 65
- ☐ 65 or older

While there are occasionally situations where you want people to “check all that apply”, it is much more common that you want survey respondents to choose just one answer. You can control this by setting up your response options to prevent people from selecting more than one answer. In the question above, someone who is 25 could be in both the “18 to 25” group and the “25 to 35” group because age 25 is overlapping. You can easily correct this by making sure the response options are mutually exclusive (“18 to 24”; “25 to 34”).

BETTER

How old are you?

- ☐ 18 to 24
- ☐ 25 to 34
- ☐ 35 to 44
- ☐ 45 to 54
- ☐ 55 to 64
- ☐ 65 or older

11. Provide balanced response options.

NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

How satisfied are you with the police department's efforts to improve traffic safety over the past year?

- ☐ Dissatisfied
- ☐ Slightly Satisfied
- ☐ Moderately Satisfied
- ☐ Very Satisfied
- ☐ Extremely Satisfied

The use of unbalanced response options in a survey can also bias your findings. In the example above, there is only one choice for “dissatisfied” while “satisfied” comes in four flavors. This might suggest to the respondent that you prefer or expect them to be satisfied. A more neutral approach is to provide symmetrical response options.

BETTER

How satisfied are you with the police department’s efforts to improve traffic safety over the past year?

- ☐ Very Dissatisfied
- ☐ Dissatisfied
- ☐ Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied
- ☐ Satisfied
- ☐ Very Satisfied

12. Think carefully about “fence sitters” and “don’t knowers”.

NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

To what extent do you agree/disagree with the following statement: I have confidence in the local police.

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Don’t Know

Some people have difficulty making up their mind on survey questions and rely extensively on the neutral or middle response (i.e., “fence sitters”). Others opt out of answering questions by selecting “*Don’t know*” whenever it is available. If people are choosing these answers to save time or reduce their cognitive load, it may bias your findings. Remember, we want to know the truth: how people really feel about an issue. If you think a little extra time will help them make a decision, you can remove their escape routes by dropping the neutral response and “don’t know” options.

At the same time, people may indeed be neutral on a given topic or they may not feel they have enough information to decide one way or the other. Unfortunately, there is no ultimate answer to the question of whether you should provide a neutral response. It

depends on the nature of the question and how you want to analyze the data (e.g., agree vs. disagree; agree vs. neutral vs. disagree). Experienced survey researchers have stronger opinions about “don’t knowers” – they suggest that you avoid them when possible by not including it as a response option.

BETTER (under some circumstances)

To what extent do you agree/disagree with the following statement: I have confidence in the local police.

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

13. Provide a timeframe for your questions.

NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

Have you been stopped by a police officer in our city while driving?

- ☐ No -----> Skip next question
- ☐ Yes

Did the officer treat you fairly during this stop?

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes

Usually when we conduct a survey to learn about people’s experiences, we are interested in learning about their recent experiences. This means that our survey questions should identify our target timeframe. Otherwise, like the question above, we have no idea whether a respondent is referring to a recent event or one in the distant past. Under ideal circumstances, you should standardize the timeframe used throughout your survey (e.g., “past 12 months”, “past month”). This depends, however, on the potential frequency and emotional significance (i.e., salience) of the given experience you are asking people to recall. “How many times in the past month....” may be better for events that are highly frequent and/or of lower salience. Things like the number of times you went downtown, the number of times you drove a car, etc. Events that happen less often and/or are highly memorable might be better suited for a longer timeframe like a year.

If you are asking about experiences people may have had, you should also consider the possibility that they have had multiple incidents during the given timeframe. How would a

respondent answer the question above if they had two contacts with police officers, one that went poorly and one that went much better? Chances are that they are going to report on the more salient of the two – the one that left them feeling mistreated. This might bias your results in a negative direction. Explicitly identifying the incident they should report on is a good option, as demonstrated in the example below (i.e., “*In the most recent stop.....*”).

BETTER
During the past 12 months, have you been stopped by a police officer in our city while driving?
☐ No -----> Skip next question
☐ Yes
In the most recent stop, did the officer treat you fairly?
☐ No
☐ Yes

14. Counterbalance response options.

NEEDS IMPROVEMENT
Which of the following offenses should the police department prioritize over the next 12 months?
☐ Violent offenses (e.g., assault, robbery)
☐ Property offenses (e.g., auto theft, shoplifting, burglary)
☐ Drug/alcohol offenses (e.g., driving under the influence, illegal possession)
☐ White collar offenses (e.g., fraud, forgery, identity theft)
☐ Vandalism (e.g., graffiti, destruction of property)

Survey researchers have found that the ordering of your response options can lead to bias in your findings. In the example above, “*Violent offenses*” is the first option listed. Putting this first could suggest that this crime is more important than the other crimes listed. Some respondents also just read questions until they find the first answer that seems reasonable. This biases the responses toward the items at the top of a list.

One way to address this with paper surveys and interviews is to have two versions of the form and reverse the order of the response options. We refer to as “counterbalancing”. Online survey tools provide an even better option – you can completely randomize the presentation of the answers. Just be careful to leave things ordered when the order actually

matters. You would not want to randomize the order for a scale like: “strongly agree”, “agree”, “neutral”, “disagree” and “strongly disagree”.

BETTER

(version 1) Which of the following offenses should the police department prioritize over the next 12 months?

- ☐ Violent offenses (e.g., assault, robbery)
- ☐ Property offenses (e.g., auto theft, shoplifting, burglary)
- ☐ Drug/alcohol offenses (e.g., driving under the influence, illegal possession)
- ☐ White collar offenses (e.g., fraud, forgery, identity theft)
- ☐ Vandalism (e.g., graffiti, destruction of property)

(version 2) Which of the following offenses should the police department prioritize over the next 12 months?

- ☐ Vandalism (e.g., graffiti, destruction of property)
- ☐ White collar offenses (e.g., fraud, forgery, identity theft)
- ☐ Drug/alcohol offenses (e.g., driving under the influence, illegal possession)
- ☐ Property offenses (e.g., auto theft, shoplifting, burglary)

15. Consider the tradeoff between accuracy and information.

NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

How many times in the past 12 months have you seen a police officer inside the city limits?

_____ (enter # times)

We often want our survey respondents to quantify some experience they had. As in the case of the question above, this might involve documenting how many times they saw a police officer over the past 12 months. The challenge here is that most people will likely have difficulty accurately recalling something like this. By accuracy, we mean the truth or the correct number of times they saw an officer. With the exception of people living in rural areas, those in towns with no police department, and people who are housebound, chances are that most people see police officers in their community on a regular basis. Accurately quantifying how many times you saw an officer over a 12-month period might be impossible. Therefore, when people respond to a question like this, they usually write down their best guess - maybe “59 times”. Guesses contains some degree of truth, but also some margin of error. Error is something we try to minimize in survey questions or measurements.

One way to reduce measurement error is to revise the response options. Rather than ask people to write down a number, you could just ask, “Have you ever seen a police officer inside the city limits in the past 12 months?” The answers people give to this question are more likely to be accurate and consistent. The problem is that we have traded off accuracy for potentially important information. We have lost the distinction between someone who saw a police officer once versus someone who saw an officer 300 times.

Ultimately, there is no right answer to how you should ask this question. Your job when designing survey questions is to strive for a reasonable balance between accuracy and useful information. The example below might be a reasonable compromise.

BETTER
How many times in the past 12 months have you seen a police officer inside the city limits?
☐ Never
☐ 1 to 10 times
☐ 11 to 20 times
☐ 21 or more times

16. Do not re-invent the wheel.

There is a very good chance that some, even most, of the topics you want to include in your survey have been covered in prior surveys. This includes questions addressing perceived safety, fear of crime, and victimization, along with multi-item scales measuring constructs like social and physical disorder, police legitimacy, and collective efficacy.

A good starting place for your survey, therefore, are the resources listed below (most are free!). Next would be a search of the academic literature using an online tool like [Google Scholar](#). For a demonstration, try searching with this tool for “police legitimacy scale”. As you will see from the abstracts, a number of interesting possibilities come up for questions you could use on a survey.

Unfortunately, many of the articles you find in Google Scholar are inaccessible to people outside of academia or the publishers charge a lofty fee. One way to get around this is to collaborate on your survey with a local university or college. An alternative approach is to look for other community surveys on the Internet, as many other agencies and cities have surveyed their communities about crime and policing. Lastly, we provide several sample surveys in the current toolkit and hope to add more in the coming years.

Additional Resources

- Krosnick, J. A. & Presser, S. (2010). [Question and questionnaire design](#). In *The Palgrave handbook of survey research* (pp. 439–455). Springer.
- Weisel, D. L. (1999). [Conducting community surveys: A practical guide for law enforcement agencies](#). Bureau of Justice Assistance, US Department of Justice, Washington, DC.
- Bureau of Justice Assistance (1993). [A police guide to surveying citizens and their environment](#) (Monograph NCJ 143709). US Department of Justice, Washington, DC.
- Bradburn, N. M., Sudman, S., & Wansink, B. (2004). *Asking questions: the definitive guide to questionnaire design—for market research, political polls, and social and health questionnaires*. John Wiley & Sons.