

CHAPTER 6

Data Collection Techniques

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6.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on basic data collection techniques and on non-response conversion. The chapter is organized in the step by step process of organizing data collection. The chapter describes general procedures for data collection. The local agency may need to change some of these procedures for data collection on specific measures.

This chapter provides a broad discussion of successful survey administration that depend on advance planning, careful selection of administrators, an adequate training program, and careful documentation of all activities. It is crucial to establish standards and procedures that will be used by all survey administrators. The importance and benefits of setting standards and following prescribed survey administration procedures cannot be over-estimated.

Survey respondents must feel confident that every reasonable effort has been made to protect their privacy. Consider asking all survey administrators to sign a confidentiality agreement. This provides the message that the commitment to confidentiality is a serious one and reinforces the survey administrator's obligation to protect privacy.

The local agency, in conducting a survey, can either contract out the data collection to another organization, or they can administer the data collection themselves. This chapter provides useful guidance to a local agency conducting the data collection themselves and to a local agency managing and monitoring the data collection carried out by contracted organization.

6.2 Choose and Train the Survey Administrator

Survey administrators manage the survey and data collection and they should be chosen carefully. Assuming that the local agency is conducting the data collection, the survey administrator should be someone in the local agency or an outside person or consultant who is:

- Well organized
- Detail oriented
- Has previous data collection experience
- Does not have a conflict of interest with the data being collected e.g. collecting data on nutrition programs while managing the nutrition program.

The survey administrator will:

- Recruit and hire the data collectors
- Monitor the data collection progress and quality of data coming back to the agency
- Document the survey procedures, any problems in data collection, questions that are a problem for respondents
- Supervise and arrange for payment of the data collectors.

Training of the survey administrator is largely the responsibility of the local agency. Reading this manual and supporting documentation for each performance measure should clarify some of their responsibilities. The survey administrator will also be trained by role playing the instrument and implementing instructions for each specific performance measure questionnaire the local agency is using. The survey administrator should actually conduct several surveys him or herself, to fully understand how the questionnaire works in the field. If another person was the survey administrator in your local agency last year, he or she should be able to assist in training the new survey administrator.

6.3 Developing Administrative Procedures for the Survey

As mentioned above, it is very important to develop administrative procedures for the survey to insure that the questionnaire will be administered in a consistent manner. Survey administrative procedures include:

- How the sample is selected in the agency
- How interviewers are recruited and paid
- How the selected respondents are initially contacted
- The number of call backs for non-respondents
- Procedures for appointments for interviews
- Procedures used in conducting the interview
- How the data is cleaned, edited and compiled in the data entry system.

These survey procedures should be compiled in a notebook and maintained as a reference for all staff involved in conducting the survey. If you are contracting out the survey, these procedures should be incorporated as part of the contract with the survey contractor.

6.4 Recruiting, Paying and Training Interviewers

It is important to decide who will conduct the survey. The decision to use your own staff, outside interviewers or a survey contractor is based on the following considerations:

- Your survey budget
- Availability of staff
- Availability of AoA performance measurement experience
- Availability of qualified contractors
- Policies for using a contractor.

If you decide to use a contractor, be sure to allow enough time to establish the contract and begin your survey on schedule. The contracting process usually takes between 30 and 60 days to complete. You can locate contractors at local colleges and universities, private consulting companies, and independent agencies.

If you use a contractor it is very important to prepare a contract that includes:

- A timeline that includes all activities

- A list of documentation, reports, and data and documentation the contractor will deliver
- Any specialized software the contractor should use
- The names and backgrounds of the persons who will work on the contract
- The cost of the contract.

Do not ask the contractor to perform the tasks that Westat provides such as developing a data entry system, data cleaning, and simple analysis.

If the local agency conducts the interviews, they will have to recruit the interviewers. The agency can use staff or outside personnel. One source for outside personnel is to place an advertisement in the local newspaper and ask for experienced interviewers. Another source is a local community college or university. You can contact the colleges student placement office and place an ad in the college newspaper.

The local agency has two basic choices for paying the interviewers. They can pay an hourly rate or they can pay by completed interviews. The local agency can check on hourly rates for interviewers by checking with local survey companies or with the local employment agency that maintains wage rates for different types of jobs.

After the interviews have been recruited, they have to be trained. The training should take no more than half a day for a questionnaire. The training should include:

- Overview of the POMP program objectives and some detail about the service area being surveyed
- The importance of maintaining survey administration procedures
- Confidentiality
- Scheduling survey appointments
- Administering the questionnaire
 - Procedures for administering the questionnaire
 - Reviewing the questionnaire content in detail to be clear on the intent of each question
 - Role playing the administration of the questionnaire
- Turning in the completed questionnaire
- Payment to interviewer(s).

6.5 Determining the Schedule for the Survey

List all of the activities that must be completed in order to conduct the survey. Then make realistic estimates about the time required for each survey activity. List the elapsed time for each activity which will provide an overall time schedule for the survey. If you conducted a survey for POMP last year, start with that schedule and update the schedule to this years' realities. Review this schedule with key staff in the agency and the person responsible for conducting the survey last year, if possible, to both do a reality check on the time frames for activities and to key people in the agency aware of the survey schedule.

It is also important to inform key agency staff of the staff resources and time commitments required in conducting the survey, especially if it is being conducted with in-house staff.

In addition to the time schedule it is important to make additional lists for the survey:

- Who will be responsible for each survey activity?
- What coordination of activities will be required and which activities?
- What materials and resources will be needed to conduct the survey?
- When should the survey be conducted? (it is good to avoid major holiday periods, peak travel time South for seniors, or periods when a lot of people take vacations e.g. the last two weeks of August)
- How much time should be allowed to obtain an adequate response rate?

If you are preparing a survey for the first time, several activities should occur:

- Determine the survey administrator
- Train the survey administrator and use the previous survey administrator if possible
- Meet with staff and the previous survey group in the agency to discuss previous survey administration schedules and procedures
- Prepare survey administrative procedures
- Prepare survey schedule and determine the time frame for the survey
- Determine staffing and recruit staff and write contract for contractor to sign
- Select sampling procedure and sample for the survey
- Train the interviewing staff on the questionnaire and survey administration procedures
- Make copies of the questionnaire
- Establish tracking system for the survey
- Conduct survey interviews
- Monitor overall conduct of survey including the administration of interviews and quality of completed questionnaires
- Send complete data to Westat
- Review data entered for unusual or duplicate entries or data that does not seem to fit
- Generate reports of basic data.

6.6 Basic Data Collection Techniques

The three basic methods for administering a questionnaire are: an in-person interview, a telephone interview, and a mail survey. We assume that local agencies will be conducting the interviews by telephone. Some of the basic telephone interviewing techniques are:

- Call the respondent and ask if this is a good time to conduct an interview and explain that the interview will take a certain amount of time to administer
- If this is not a good time for the interview, try to make an appointment for an interview time
- Conduct the interview

- If the respondent has to break off the interview, ask for an appointment time to finish the interview
- Record all answers to all questions
- If the respondent has any difficulty in understanding the question, repeat the question and tell them to use their judgement on the answer
- Ensure that the questionnaire is complete before it is turned in to the administrator
- Avoid holidays for administering the interview.

6.7 Quality Control of Interviewers and Survey Results

It is important to monitor both the interviewers and the interview results while the survey is in progress. Typically, the survey administrator conducts this monitoring function. The survey administrator can monitor the telephone interviews either by sitting next to interviewer while the interview is taking place or by listening in on the interview if the telephone system allows. If the administrator listens in on the call, the respondent needs to be notified at the beginning of the call.

If interviewers are paid by the number of completed questionnaires, there may be an additional incentive for completing fake interviews. Therefore, it is important to have the threat of ongoing monitoring to keep the interviewers honest.

The interview results also need to be monitored. Each questionnaire should be carefully reviewed by the administrator as it is turned in by the interviewer. The questionnaire should be reviewed for completion and for answers that seem reasonable. Sometimes question responses are missing and the respondent needs to be called back to complete the questionnaire. There may be responses that are inconsistent with other responses or stray marks on the questionnaire.

After the data is entered into the data entry system for that particular POMP measurement area, it needs to be carefully reviewed to make sure there are not erroneous entries.

6.8 Tracking the Surveys

A simple tracking system can be established for the interviews in order to maintain confidentiality of the respondents. Simply give each respondent an identification number and use the number as the survey record identifier. It is important to update the survey tracking system on a weekly basis as surveys are completed. The tracking system should be used to monitor the response rate of the survey. The respondent's name should be included with their identification number to allow follow-up calls or record checks.

6.9 Converting Non-Responses

It is important to try to convert non-responses or refusals to interviews whenever possible. A high response rate to the survey provides better statistical results and is more efficient and cost effective to administer. An important administrative procedure to establish is the

number of callbacks to a respondent in order to get a completed interview. Techniques that can be used include:

- Set a number of attempted call backs to respondent such as 5 or 7
- Designate one interviewer who is particularly good at handling non-respondents
- Set appointments that are convenient for the respondent