

The Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center
Survey Development Best Practices*
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Please follow these guidelines and best practices during the planning and writing stages of survey development. **For the purposes of this guide, *survey* refers to traditional surveys, not applications or project snapshots, which may sometimes also be developed using a survey platform.**

The CSG Justice Center requires policy staff to determine whether the Research Division needs to be involved in survey development. This process of determination and review is as follows:

- Policy staff member drafts survey in Microsoft Word.
- Policy staff member determines if the survey must be vetted by Research Division staff by answering “yes” to any of the following questions:
 - Will you need Research Division staff to receive, analyze, or report on the data?
 - Will you be collecting any sensitive or personally identifiable information (PII) *other than name or email address for follow-up or an application* (note: applications should *not* include any other PII)? Examples of PII:
 - Example 1: In the last six months, did you make any appointments for counseling or mental health services?
 - Example 2: What is your DOC ID number?
 - Example 3: What is your date of birth?/How old are you?
 - Example 4: On what date were you released from supervision?
 - Example 5: What is your social security number?
 - Example 6: What is your home mailing address?
 - Example 7: What is your phone number?
 - Do you need assistance developing the survey or selecting the sample population, if applicable?

* Some content adapted from *Designing Quality Survey Questions* by Sheila B. Robinson and Kimberly Firth Leonard.

- How do you plan to report the data—will you need Research Division staff to assist or review?

If you need Research Division staff to vet the survey and do not have one assigned to your project, please contact jc-researchethics@csg.org.

- Communications editor reviews survey draft.
- Once the draft is finalized, Communications editor inputs the survey into survey platform.
- Communications editor sends policy staff member a test survey link for final run-through.
- Communications editor generates live survey link and data link, which will be password protected. Treat this password as you would any other and do not share it. If survey results contain PII, the data link may be restricted to prevent non-Research Division staff from accessing individual responses.
- Policy staff member and the Communications Division work together to distribute survey.
- Storing final data after survey closes, or once a month for ongoing surveys:
 - If data are sensitive or contain PII (other than name or email address), the Communications editor will work with Research Division staff to securely download and store the data.
 - If data are not sensitive and do not contain PII, the Communications editor will send the data to the policy staff member.

Survey Purpose, Audience, and Design

Survey purpose. The first step of developing a survey is to articulate—in writing—the survey’s purpose. This will help focus the rest of the writing process. When articulating what you’re hoping to accomplish, address the following questions:

- How will the survey data answer your big picture research questions?
- Who will you survey?
- Who will use the survey data?
- How will the survey data be used?
- What form will the data need to take to be most useful?

Survey audience. You’ll need to determine your target survey group.

- **Census (population) surveys** include everyone in a certain category (e.g., all parole board chairs in a state).
- **Sampling surveys** include a subgroup of people considered to be representative of the population in a certain category (e.g., a sample of mental health providers in select counties).

Consider what you want to say about and with your survey data.

- Census surveys typically describe what a target survey group thinks with little room for error *if the response rate is high*.
 - Example: You send a survey link to *all* parole officers in the state. You note how many people received the survey and how many people responded.
- Sampling surveys can still allow you to make generalizations about the target survey group if you
 - Use an appropriate sampling frame (i.e., a list of the full range of people who could potentially be included in your survey, such as all mental health providers in a county of interest).
 - Select potential participants through a random process based on that list (i.e., use a random number generator to select units for participation, such as counties, participants, etc.).
- Convenience samples (e.g., social media polls, participant recommendations, etc.) are less generalizable to a broad group of people.
 - Example: You send a survey link to service providers and allow them to share it with their networks. Because it is unclear how many people received the link and then responded, the response rate is unknown.

Survey design. Only collect data that can be analyzed and are relevant to the survey purpose.

- Make sure you have the analytical capacity to analyze the survey results.
 - Do you have Research Division staff budgeted and available to analyze the data?
- While it can be tempting to ask additional questions outside the purview of the survey simply because you have the opportunity to do so, don't.
 - Do not collect name or email address unless you will be following up with a personalized email.
 - Do not collect organization or agency name unless you plan on highlighting a particular one by name.
- Extra questions contribute to user fatigue, and it's unethical to capture data that are irrelevant to your survey purpose.

Survey length. Be cognizant of survey length.

- Rule of thumb: respondents answer 3–4 survey questions per minute.
- Respondents spend less time per question as survey length increases.
- If a longer survey is necessary for your purpose, send it to a larger group of people to ensure a sufficient sample size.
- Survey abandon rates increase for surveys that take more than 7–8 minutes to complete, with completion rates dropping anywhere from 5–20 percent.

Survey Instructions and Question Stems

Survey instructions. All surveys should begin with an introduction that provides the following information:

- Survey purpose
- Deadline for responding
- Any information respondents need to know to answer questions
- Point of contact
- Information about how this information will be reported, confidentiality
 - Examples:
 - This survey is completely voluntary. You are not required to answer any question you do not want to answer. You may stop taking this survey at any time.
 - CSG Justice Center staff will collect and assess responses from this survey. Responses will be kept confidential and specific responses will not be attributed to any one respondent or organization.
 - CSG Justice Center staff are conducting this survey on behalf of/in partnership with the Bureau of Justice Assistance or the Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention. Individual survey responses will be shared with them.
 - Responses will mostly be reported in aggregate but may be broken out to highlight a particular response/state.

Each section within the survey may also benefit from an introductory sentence or two to describe the purpose of that individual section.

Developing survey questions. There are several ways to go about developing survey questions:

- Brainstorming; ask yourself, “How might we . . .”
 - *How might we ask respondents...?*
 - *How might we find out...?*
 - *How might we understand...?*
- Conferring with potential respondents
- Using material that already exists
 - To the extent possible, use validated survey questions and scales from existing, edited surveys we’ve already disseminated. If you’d like to use survey questions from a survey we did not create in-house (e.g., reputable national surveys, academic publications, etc.), please consult your editor, as this can be complicated.

Ordering survey questions. When determining the order in which your questions should appear, keep the following in mind:

- Start with questions that are fairly easy to answer.
- Place some of the most interesting or pertinent questions toward the beginning to keep respondents engaged.
- Make sure any questions that are crucial for data collection appear earlier in the survey.
- Group related questions together.

- Leave sensitive questions (e.g., race, ethnicity, age of respondent, etc.) until the end unless they are critical for data collection.

Writing question stems. Question stems are the question part of a survey item, not the responses. The best survey question stems:

- Are easily understood and make sense.
- Ask for information the respondent is likely to know.
- Use terminology that respondents recognize and use themselves (e.g., if the survey is for community supervision officers in a particular state, use the specific names of programs and services in their state; don't generalize them for a larger audience), but avoid jargon that is too technical.
- Use correct grammar.
- Limit the amount of mental gymnastics respondents need to go through to answer.
- Use appropriate time frames, or reference periods.
 - Example: If someone is taking a survey in July, and the reference period is "in the last year," what does that mean? From last July to this July? The last calendar year? The last fiscal year? Be specific.
 - Long reference periods (months, years) should be used for infrequent occurrences (e.g., buying a car battery).
 - Short reference periods (a few days or weeks) should be used for common occurrences (e.g., trips to the grocery store).

Things to avoid in survey questions.

- Mental math (don't make respondents calculate answers)
- Low-frequency vocabulary (simplify language where possible—e.g., say "use" instead of "utilize")
- Vague quantifications (use exact numbers or ranges as much as possible instead of subjective words like *frequently*, *rarely*, *few*)
- Low recall (avoid asking respondents about things they did more than a month ago)
- End-loaded sentences (don't start sentences with piles of phrases, adjectives, etc. before getting to the important part of the question stem: **Bad:** *After working with stakeholders, state leaders, judicial officials, and legislators, the community activists finally started making headway.* **Good:** *The community activists finally started making headway after working with stakeholders, state leaders, judicial officials, and legislators.*)
- Unnecessary words (concise is better: *your primary office*, not *the office where you go every day*)
- Too many conjunctions (requires mental gymnastics to figure out what the question is asking)
- Nominalizations (verbs or adjectives that have been converted into nouns, e.g., *intention* vs. *intend*, *discussion* vs. *discuss*; often make sentences wordy and awkward)
- Passive voice

- Ambiguous wording (e.g., *How many years have you been employed in your current job?* Does “current job” mean current title and position, or at the company generally? Adding clarifying parameters can help.)
- Hypothetical questions (avoid “What if...” scenarios)
- Double-barreled questions (e.g., *Has the district responded with timely, informative, and accurate information?* is actually three questions in one)
- Leading/loaded questions (e.g., *Which of the following challenges have resulted from the legislation?* assumes the legislation caused challenges)

Open-ended questions. Consider what you expect to find by asking open-ended questions and how you will analyze responses before asking these kinds of questions in a survey.

- Limit user fatigue by
 - Limiting the number of open-ended questions (no more than 3–4, ideally)
 - Making open-ended questions optional to answer, where possible
- Use open-ended questions when
 - More detailed answers are desirable
 - Providing response options may be too leading
 - Specific numbers are needed
- Good open-ended questions
 - Are specific and easy to understand
 - Explain why the question is being asked
 - Indicate how detailed answers should be

Closed-ended questions. Closed-ended questions must be both exhaustive and mutually exclusive.

Bad: *How long have you worked in your current position?*

- *Less than 1 year*
- *1–3 years*
- *3–5 years*

This question is not exhaustive. How would someone indicate they have worked in their position for more than 5 years? The second and third categories are not mutually exclusive. How would someone indicate they have worked in their position for 3 years? Include “Other” with an open-ended box if you aren’t sure what the full range of options might be.

Closed-ended questions must also make it clear how to answer the question (e.g., “select all that apply,” “select the top three,” etc.).

Question Response Options

Midpoints. Midpoints are the middle response options in odd-numbered scaled responses:

- *Strongly disagree*

- *Disagree*
- ***Neither agree nor disagree***
- *Agree*
- *Strongly agree*

Research varies on the utility of including midpoints, but a general rule of thumb is to only use one if you're confident respondents could really have a neutral answer.

Balanced response options. For questions that include response scales, include balanced response options.

- Aim for 5–7 response options for scaled responses.
- If there are an odd number of responses, include a neutral option (if applicable), or add a negative or positive response to even out the choices.

Unbalanced

- *Poor* [negative]
 - *Fair* [negative]
 - *Very good* [positive]
 - *Excellent* [positive]
 - *Outstanding* [positive]

Balanced

- *Terrible* [negative]
 - *Poor* [negative]
 - *Fair* [negative]
 - *Very good* [positive]
 - *Excellent* [positive]
 - *Outstanding* [positive]

Matching response options to question stems. Bad survey questions frequently involve rating scales that have no bearing on the question stem.

Bad

How helpful was our staff?

- *Terrible*
 - *Poor*
 - *Fair*
 - *Good*
 - *Very good*
 - *Excellent*

Good

How helpful was our staff?

- *Not at all helpful*
 - *Somewhat helpful*
 - *Very helpful*

“Don’t know” response option. Providing a “don’t know” option can provide meaningful data. *But*, if you think a lot of respondents will select this option, this could indicate a problem with the question.

- It may be useful to ask a filter question to determine whether the respondent has enough knowledge to answer subsequent questions.
- Filter questions can eliminate the need for a “don’t know” option with every subsequent question. Filter questions can lengthen surveys quite a bit, though.
- Bottom line: if you're confident that most respondents will have enough knowledge to answer a question, a “don’t know” response option is unnecessary.

Labeling response options. For questions that include response scales, you must decide how to label the response options.

- Numeric scales can be difficult for respondents to interpret but provide equal intervals between choices, which is difficult to achieve with verbal labels (i.e., *1 and 2* vs. *poor and fair*).
- Labeling numeric end points (e.g., *1 = Poor, 10 = Excellent*) may seem easier, but may encourage some respondents to automatically choose an extreme response (one of the end points).
- Studies have shown that labeling all scale points yields the best results:
 - | | | | | |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|------------------|------------------|
| <i>Poor</i> | <i>Fair</i> | <i>Good</i> | <i>Very Good</i> | <i>Excellent</i> |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Ordering response options.

- Numeric scales should always read from least to greatest, either left to right or top to bottom depending on how the question is set up.
- Rating scales should move from the least desirable to most desirable to mitigate the primacy effect—people’s tendency to choose among the first few options, especially if they’re positive—as much as possible.
- Correct order:
 - *Strongly disagree*
 - *Disagree*
 - *Neither agree nor disagree*
 - *Agree*
 - *Strongly agree*

Data Analysis

Understanding the data. Survey data reveal different information depending on who was surveyed.

- In interpreting the responses, be sure to consider who responded.
 - Did you get responses from across your target survey group? (E.g., do your respondents represent mental health providers in 12 counties when you sent the survey to people in 12 counties, or do they only represent 2 counties?)
- If your responding sample excludes certain types of people from the target survey group, it is less representative of the target survey group. All survey results should be appropriately caveated.
 - For example, if a survey of the general public included few, if any, Hispanic respondents in the target survey group, a note in the methodology would need to explain that the responding sample underrepresented Hispanic people by XX points, when compared with the U.S. population.

- Survey data do not demonstrate causation. They reveal how a group of people feel about a topic at a moment in time.
- Ensure that all language describing survey results appropriately notes limitations of the data, including:
 - Question wording
 - Response categories
 - Whether the responding sample reflects the target survey group

Storing and sharing the data. Properly storing and sharing survey data is important to maintaining the confidentiality mentioned in the survey instructions.

- If your survey contains PII, it will need to be downloaded and stored in the Research Division SharePoint *by Research Division staff only*. Do not download these data to your personal machine or to your project SharePoint.
- Survey results that do not contain PII should be stored on SharePoint in project folders by policy staff.
- Excel workbooks containing the survey data should *only* be shared with project team (not funders or staff not on the project).
- SurveyMonkey hyperlinks with findings should not be shared externally.

Survey Checklist

Check your survey draft against this checklist. If you answer “no” to any of these items, reevaluate the survey to see how you can adjust it.

Checklist Item	Yes	No	N/A
Survey Purpose, Audience, and Design			
Survey purpose is clearly articulated in writing			
Questions relate to the survey purpose			
Questions will result in the type of data needed to answer research questions			
Researcher is prepared to analyze results from these types of questions			
Questions ask for information respondent is likely to know or be able to find out			
Survey is a manageable length			
Survey Instructions and Question Stems			
Survey introduction includes purpose, deadline, information respondents need to know to answer questions, point of contact, and information about confidentiality			
Crucial questions appear near the beginning; sensitive questions appear near the end			
Questions are as specific and narrowly focused as possible			
Questions ask about only one concept (are not double-barreled)			
Questions are concise, using as few words as possible to convey meaning			
Question phrasing is consistent with language used in other places in the survey			
Questions are written in semantically plain, straightforward language			
Questions are syntactically correct, employing correct grammar and usage			
Question wording reflects the language and culture of respondents			
Questions require as little inference or mental math as possible			
Questions use active voice			
Questions are phrased as neutrally as possible			
Open-ended questions are limited			
Closed-ended questions are exhaustive and mutually exclusive			
Question Response Options			
A midpoint is used when a neutral option is needed or when forcing respondents to “choose a side” may result in measurement error			
5–7 options are used for scaled responses (unless desired level of precision requires fewer or more options)			
Scaled response options are balanced with the same number of positive and negative options			
Response options are aligned with wording of question stem			
<i>Don't know, neutral, N/A</i> , or similar response options are used only as needed and have a clear purpose			
Response options are labeled (either numerically, verbally, or combination), where appropriate			
Numeric scales are ordered least to greatest			
Rating scales start with least desirable and move to most desirable			

