

# The Voice of the Public: Why Citizen Surveys Work

**Thomas I. Miller and Michelle Kobayashi**

**J**ust how in touch with the citizens of your jurisdiction do you or your elected officials have to be? After all, there are the town meetings, the budget hearings, and the neighborhood talk-back sessions, as well as conversations with the chamber, school board, planning board, liquor board, board of zoning adjustment, Rotarians, Shriners, Odd Fellows, Grange, Elks, Lions, and like clubs representing all manner of fauna and flora. Open-mike time at council meetings can get to look like bug-house square at a carnival.

## **The Usual Suspects**

The truth is—and most staff suspect this—that the varied community activists who show up for every input opportunity are members of a single cadre of irate, enthusiastic, agitated curmudgeons who care deeply about the community in general, or their blocks in particular. When the dust settles and the budgets and policies have been written, the suspicion lingers that the typical resident still has not been heard from. Decision making by “wheel decibel” (a squeaky wheel gets the oil), after all, could simply be dismissed as the American way, by which those people with enough interest, energy, or money get to call the tunes. Although this genre of cynicism has been raised almost to a religion for the politically savvy, giving in to it won’t work when you come to the apolitical questions that managers need answered if they intend to run their communities well and to run them for all.

## The Citizen Survey Defined

The way to capture that much-vaunted voice of the typical resident is by a citizen survey, a scientifically conducted survey whose purpose is to gather the opinions of a sample of adults who represent the entire adult population of a jurisdiction. A citizen survey finds and gives voice to all types of citizens, the poorer as well as the better-off residents, those whose health may keep them from attending meetings and those in better health, shy people and outgoing people, newcomers and old-timers, and those who have a dispassionate point of view as well as those who are emotionally involved. The representative sample tapped in a citizen survey provides the point of view that can be found only in the community at large. We have found that about 15 percent of respondents to citizen surveys have attended any public meeting in the past 12 months. This means that 85 percent of the voices heard in a citizen survey are new.

This article, then, addresses citizen surveys that include an evaluation of local government services, that provide a kind of consumer scorecard. Common practice in local government service evaluation is to count citizen complaints. Typically, these "evaluations" of services come when there is a crisis—for example, right after a snowstorm, when streets are impassable and motorists are irate. But snowstorms of criticism are no way to judge the quality of services. Because evaluative surveys collect so much information so much more efficiently than any other kind of citizen participation, they are among the local government administrator's most useful management tools.

## What's the Point of Surveying?

It's not that surveying is the only way or the most accurate way to know what citizens in a community think or do. Citizen surveying is a compromise made in

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the face of a scarcity of resources. If time was boundless and money ran like water from a spigot, no one would bother with surveys. In the world of wishes, everyone in a community would be asked and everyone would respond to the questions of interest. There would be no guessing about what the people wanted or what they liked or what they did.

In the real world—where time flies and money talks—surveys are the quickest, cheapest, and most accurate way to reckon the state of public opinion. Survey researchers are stuck with the unenviable job of figuring out what *everyone* would say after hearing from only a few. In the typical Gallup poll, pretty good guesses are made about the likely behavior of 100 million Americans based on reports from only about 2,000 of them—a sample of only about 0.002 percent.

The trick to survey research, if there is one, is not in getting  $x$  many people to be surveyed but in ensuring that the people surveyed represent well the population about whom you're trying to make estimates (inferences). Imagine a citizen survey undertaken in New York City that sampled more than a million people. Wouldn't this survey give highly accurate estimates for this city of seven million? Probably not, if all those surveyed were from the Bronx. Or if they were all women. Or if they all worked on Wall Street.

With a lot of experience under their belt, survey researchers have proved to offer an accurate and affordable way to determine the predilections, fears, and activities of large numbers of people.

Many kinds of errors can occur when public administrators or elected officials use surveys to inform themselves about their communities. But survey errors are largely controllable. In contrast, the extent of misjudgment associated with other methods of taking a community pulse is hopelessly beyond estimate. There is no way to judge whether the information that public officials get from complaint counts, liability suits, newspaper straw polls, public meetings, conversations with friends, or letters to the editor really represents of all community residents. At least, survey strengths and limitations are well understood and can be used to make reasoned estimates of what constituents want.

## Rules of Thumb for Good Citizen Surveys

Maximize the representativeness of the sample.

Give all residents a chance to participate.

- Select households at random.
- Offer translations to other languages.
- Select participants within households in an unbiased way.
- Make multiple attempts to include selected households.

Compare your results with results from similar communities.

Enlist a team to review the results and to recommend the next steps.

Cooperate with similar communities to compare survey results.

## Telephone's Unspeakable Problem

In the National Research Center's analysis of surveys from around the country conducted from 1981 to 1991, the median response rate for telephone interviews was 65 percent. It was 35 percent by mail. In its update, conducted in 1998, the median response rate was 38 percent by phone and 35 percent by mail, among the few jurisdictions whose survey contractors still reported telephone response rates.

In fact, response rates by telephone have declined so rapidly and so far that it has become uncommon for telephone survey research firms to report their response rates. The American Association for Public Opinion Research has quite specific rules for response rate calculations that, when followed, produce response rates that go from bad (when the most liberal rules are applied) to worse (when stricter requirements for assumptions are applied).

It is not difficult to understand what has happened to the telephone survey research industry. In 1990, only 37 percent of American households had answering machines. By 1999, more than 80 percent had some kind of answering device or caller ID or call blocking.

The practice of pretending to administer a telephone survey as a ruse for marketing is so prevalent that it has its own name—"sugging"—an acronym taken from the first letters of "selling under the guise" of a survey. A journalist concluded in 1996 that "...an increasing reluctance among Americans to participate in surveys is distorting all polling data. At a time when abuse of the telephone by sleazy sales reps masquerading as pollsters is widespread, refusal rates are soaring."<sup>1</sup> In fact, a study done in the early 1990s showed that most Americans thought that telephone surveys and telemarketing were the same thing, or didn't know if they were different.

One telephone market researcher admitted that "the market research industry has pretty much abandoned the response rate as a primary indicator of survey quality. Despite response rates in the range of 10 percent to 15 percent, telephone surveying continues because the market research industry is heavily invested in the infrastructure used for telephone interviewing."<sup>2</sup>

Although there are noticeable differences in response rates for properly conducted phone, mail, and in-person surveys, the differences tend to be small, and the response rates for all methods are low enough to require some investigation of—or adjustment for—non response bias. It is generally accepted that a well-conducted mailed survey can net between a 35 percent and a 50 percent response. For phone surveys, good response rates now tend to fall between 25 percent and 40 percent, while in-person interviews, which once netted around an 85 percent response, are so expensive and liability-prone that almost no one does them for citizen surveys.

The response rates for intercept surveys vary by the environment and by the task asked of potential respondents. For example, two questions asked of riders sitting on a bus will get more than an 80 percent response but a two-minute survey asked of busy shoppers at an outdoor mall in the winter will get under a 30 percent response. The differences in response rates between the methods, excluding in-person surveys, is not large enough to recommend one method over another.

<sup>1</sup>John Liscio for *Barron's* (November 25, 1996).

<sup>2</sup>Reg Baker, *Marketing Research*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Spring 1996), pp. 22–24.

## Judging Service Quality

Evaluative surveys are conducted in many communities across the country, but their proper interpretation remains elusive. For example, what does it mean to discover that citizens are more satisfied with services from the parks department than with the services of street maintenance workers? Because most citizens prefer parks to potholes, it is better not to base the interpretation of results on absolute percentages but rather to attend to changes in residents' evaluations of one service from one survey to the next, and to compare your jurisdiction's results with those garnered across the nation or in similar locales.

Many jurisdictions do use the results of citizen surveys to assess the performance of local government services. Indeed, while it is right to acknowledge that citizen opinion is only one measure of service quality, citizen opinion also may be the most important measure. If you collect trash three times a day, and your residents still rate trash hauling as poor, you have a problem.

When you conduct a citizen survey, however, it is important not to presume that you can determine the best services by comparing ratings of one service with those of another. In this "competition," fire services will always win, and street repair will always lose. Fairer is a comparison of your fire services with those of other communities and of your street repairs with those of others.

## Who Is Doing Citizen Surveys?

In 1991, the National Research Center estimated that citizen surveys were conducted each year by 30 to 60 jurisdictions of over 25,000 population. By 1998, the center's estimate, derived from a survey of more than 1,000 larger jurisdictions, had risen six-fold, to more than 250 such surveys per year. Evidence from an e-mail survey conducted earlier this year suggests that the use of surveys is continuing to grow.

In 1998, many citizen surveys in-

## Look to ICMA

ICMA's special report on citizen surveys, *Citizen Surveys: How to Do Them, How to Use Them, What They Mean* (second edition) describes the best practices of jurisdictions with successful track records of surveying on everything from local trash pickup to long-term land-use planning. Written by Thomas I. Miller and Michelle Miller Kobayashi of the National Research Center, Inc., Boulder, Colorado, the book incorporates step-by-step guidance for conducting surveys. It answers questions like

- What makes a survey reliable?
- How can we be sure results really reflect the sentiments of citizens?
- How can we interpret the results we get?
- How can we be sure our results are comparable from one year to the next?
- How much does it cost to conduct a citizen survey?

The book summarizes ten principles for using surveys effectively and explains how to integrate citizen survey results into decision making and service improvement. Six case studies illustrate how local governments have used citizen surveys to promote excellence in service delivery and program planning.

*Citizen Surveys: How to Do Them, How to Use Them, What They Mean*, second edition. 2000. 176 pages. Special Report (42551), \$45.00. To order, visit ICMA's Online Bookstore at [bookstore.icma.org](http://bookstore.icma.org), or call 800/745-8780.

cluded questions about service quality and quality of community life. Slightly less popular are questions about the importance of various services, resident demography, and policy issues. Some surveys ask about residents' willingness to pay for proposed improvements, their use of facilities, and trust in government.

Among the communities conducting citizen surveys, almost half intended to measure resident satisfaction with city services, and about a third were gauging community support for policies and funding options. Close to a third intended to use the citizen survey over time as a device to monitor change. About a quarter of communities conducting citizen surveys used them as part of a planning process, and about 20 percent used the surveys for general information or public relations outreach.

More than two-thirds of communities in 1998 characterized the surveys as "very useful," and another third said that their citizen surveys had been "somewhat useful." But when it came to identifying actions taken based on the results of a citizen survey, findings were less positive. About a third of the communities reported using citizen survey results to assist in policy making, and about a quarter used the re-

sults for budget decisions or communication with community residents. About a fifth used the results in making decisions about land use or other plans.

## Using Survey Results

So as more and more local governments begin to conduct citizen surveys, the most important question may be: How can we use our citizen survey results once we get them? Here are a few suggestions on how to use survey results. In general, seek help by appointing a joint committee charged with taking survey results and, from them, recommending action (or watchful waiting). Decisions can affect community policy, personnel policy, and budget:

- Refer to results whenever citizens tell you they know what the community thinks.
- Bring results into discussions with elected officials about strategic planning.
- Monitor results to track the quality of service delivery. Allocate resources where they seem most needed.
- Compare results with those of similar communities to identify opportunities to benchmark service performance.

- Consider holding department directors to agreed-upon targets for consumer satisfaction.
- Decide whether to press for a community policy that you've tested in a citizen survey.
- "Jawbone" the results in your citizen newsletter and at press conferences.



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