Tips on Developing Surveys of Child Care Providers

Heather Sandstrom and Julia B. Isaacs

August 2020

As states and territories make decisions about child care policies, they may find it useful to collect data from child care providers. Existing administrative records, such as child care licensing data or workforce registries, offer answers to many questions but may be limited. New data—in the form of surveys, interviews, or focus groups—are useful to answer questions about providers' motivations, experiences, and perceived benefits and challenges of programs and policies.

Surveys can collect important information from providers but can be difficult to create. For example, poorly worded questions can lead to inaccurate and unusable survey responses. This brief describes best practices for developing and testing a **survey** of child care providers (see appendix A for glossary of bolded terms).

What to Consider before Developing a Survey

Before you start writing survey questions, you should do several things to prepare. First, identify the goals of your study and decide if a survey is the best way to get the information you need. At the same time, find out if you can answer your research questions with data that are already available, such as program administrative records or previous survey or interview data. Next, identify the target **population**—the group you want to collect data on—and the best **survey modes** (e.g., phone, mail, web-based) given the target population's characteristics, your desired **response rate** (i.e., the percentage of providers who respond), and available resources. This section discusses each of these steps. The remaining two sections discuss writing and testing survey questions.

What Is the Goal of Your Data Collection? Is a Survey the Most Appropriate Method?

You should identify your goals and research questions at the start of a new study so you can decide whether to use a survey. What are you hoping to learn from your study? Are you trying to gather information on a specific set of issues from a **sample** of local providers? Is the goal to hear personal stories of providers' experiences with a new initiative or their perspectives on a potential policy change?

There are many ways to collect data from providers. Surveys generally use **closed-ended questions**, which have a set of predetermined responses (e.g., yes/no; agree, neutral, disagree). However, you can ask a few **open-ended questions**, which have respondents answer in their own words. If you want to go deeper into issues and use many open-ended questions, then you want to use in-depth interviews or focus groups instead of a survey. A combination of a survey and in-depth interviews or focus groups may also address some research questions. Available funding, timelines, and other considerations may limit the methods you can use.

What Data Are Already Available to Help You Develop the Survey?

Reviewing what data already exist—from program records and earlier surveys—is a useful first step when you start to develop a survey. You can use data that are already available for many purposes:

- to help sample and recruit providers for your survey (e.g., identifying all licensed child care centers from licensing lists and using their contact information to recruit them for the sample);

- to learn about provider characteristics that may influence sample sizes and other features of your study design (e.g., the share of providers participating in the state quality rating and improvement system—QRIS); and

- to reduce the number of questions needed (e.g., if individual QRIS ratings are available and can be connected to new survey data, then you may not need to ask about QRIS participation and quality ratings in your survey).

Knowing what information is not available in existing data is important and can help you decide if you need to collect new survey data. For example, data from previous surveys may be available, but the data may be too old to reflect current trends. Or the data may not include the information you need to fully answer your research questions. For instance, administrative or program records often have missing data because of optional fields that people do not fill out.[1] Reviewing the quality and relevance of your existing data can help you decide what other data to collect.

Who Do You Want to Collect Data On?

Which of the many different types of child care providers do you want to collect data on? Child care providers are a broad and diverse group. They differ by *care setting* (center, group family child care home, other home-based provider, school based); *licensing* (licensed, license-exempt group-based care,

license-exempt individuals, unlicensed care); *payment* (paid or unpaid); *funding sources* (subsidy, Head Start or Early Head Start, public prekindergarten, private tuition and fees, other grants and private donors); and *relationship with children in their care* (related, unrelated but knew family before care began, or no prior relationship). Providers also vary in the ages of children they serve and the days and times they provide care. Some are accredited or participate in a QRIS and others do not.

When developing surveys of child care providers, you should clearly define the target population. You also want to consider the specific people who will respond to the survey. Depending on your study goals, survey **respondents** could include the following people:

- center directors, assistant directors, teachers, assistant teachers, and other nonteaching program staff;

- licensed and registered family child care providers and support staff working in group family child care homes; and

- license-exempt home-based providers in the subsidy system (e.g., grandparents) and outside the subsidy system (e.g., nannies; family, friend, and neighbor care).

If you understand the characteristics of your target population, you can write questions that are appropriate and easy for respondents to answer. For example, you may not want the same questions for a teacher in a classroom of 4-year-old children and a family child care provider serving children of different ages. In general, a single **questionnaire**—the full set of questions you are asking on your survey—may not work well unless the questions are broad and inclusive.[2] You can have several questionnaires designed for different types of providers[3] or a single questionnaire with different sections for various providers. Knowing respondents' characteristics can also help you think about how to collect the survey data.

How Should You Collect Your Survey Data?

One of the things you must decide is how people will take the survey (i.e., the survey mode). Common mode options include the following:

- **Telephone survey.** An interviewer asks the questions and records responses, usually in an electronic survey software program. The term computer-assisted telephone interview, or CATI, is commonly used to describe this mode. Telephone is the best option when covering a range of topics that require **skip patterns** (i.e., written instructions directing people from one section to another based on a response to an earlier question) and explanations, or when the survey is long and requires an interviewer to keep the respondent engaged.

- **Web survey.** Web surveys allow respondents to answer questions from their computer. Most survey software programs have the option to make surveys mobile friendly. This way respondents can complete the survey on a range of internet-enabled devices including smart phones and tablets.

▫ **Paper survey.** A hard-copy survey can be mailed via US Postal Service or another mail delivery service or distributed by hand. If using mail, include a stamped and addressed envelope for easy return. You can also have people fill out surveys in-person, such as at a provider training or conference, to quickly gather information from a convenient sample.

Each way of collecting survey data has pros and cons, as shown in table 1. As you weigh the trade-offs, consider such factors as available funding, the target population and desired response rate, the time it takes to complete the survey, and the range and complexity of survey topics.

TABLE 1
Advantages and Disadvantages of Common Survey Modes

Mode	Advantages	Disadvantages
Telephone survey	▪ Good for reaching people with low literacy or limited access to computers who may not be able to complete the survey on their own ▪ Good for long or complex surveys (i.e., those with skip patterns) ▪ Interviewer can keep respondent engaged and type in responses to open-ended questions	▪ Hard to schedule, particularly with busy child care providers ▪ Costs of training and paying the interviewers ▪ Costs of developing a computer-assisted telephone interview (CATI)
Web survey	▪ People like being able to complete them at their convenience ▪ People may respond more honestly to sensitive questions than when speaking to an interviewer ▪ You avoid the costs of paying for interviewers ▪ Very accessible if adapted to smart phone and tablet	▪ People with limited computer access or skills may not take the survey ▪ People may lose interest and rush through the end of survey, answering questions without much thought ▪ People may skip open-ended questions ▪ Costs of properly adapting the survey to be mobile friendly so it shows on small screens
Paper survey (mailed or handed out)	▪ Good for short surveys ▪ Good for reaching people who have limited access to computers ▪ Paper surveys handed out to a group gathered at a meeting can be done quickly and at low cost	▪ Does not work well for long or complex surveys ▪ Mail surveys take time to send out and collect; new mailings add cost ▪ Mailed letters can be misdelivered (especially in a large agency) or thrown away ▪ Response rates for mail surveys are often lower than for other modes ▪ Data from surveys handed out only represent people at the given location

Surveys that use more than one mode are becoming more common. However, it is best to avoid mixing interviewer-led and self-administered methods. One option is to use both web and mail—both self-administered but the respondent can choose which way to take the survey.

As you design your survey and choose the survey mode, you want to think carefully about how to recruit people and encourage them to respond. This is important because low response rates limit the **validity** and **generalizability** of the study findings. For example, providers who participate in a telephone survey may be different from those who do not.

An incentive such as a $20 e-gift card may help increase your response rate. Longer surveys may require a larger incentive. Another way to improve response rates is to keep the survey short and limit the number of questions about sensitive topics to reduce burden on respondents.

Tips for Designing Surveys

After you identify who you want to collect data on and how you will collect the data, you should create a list of **research constructs**—the concepts you are trying to measure, such as job satisfaction and family engagement. Then write questions that address those constructs. This section includes tips to keep in mind during this process. See appendix B for a useful one-page list of these and other tips mentioned in the brief.

Borrow from and Rework Existing Questions

Before you start to write new questions from scratch, find surveys from past studies. You can use or adapt existing questions to save you time. The Child Care and Early Education Research Connections website[5] is one place to search for surveys used in past child care studies.

A search of published literature (e.g., journal articles, online reports, books) on more specific topics (e.g., family engagement in early care and education) will also point to available **measures** that you can include in your survey. For example, the Measure of Family and Provider/Teacher Relationship Quality collects data on family engagement.[6] Some measures might be free of charge and others might be copyrighted. You may need to pay to use copyrighted material or contact the author for permission to use it. Always check available psychometric properties (i.e., **validity** and **reliability**) to determine the quality of the measure before adding it to your survey.

It may be useful to put the questions from existing surveys in a table, organized by research topic or research construct. You may decide that some constructs cannot be measured well with existing questions, and for those constructs you will need to develop and test new questions.

Keep Surveys Short, Simple, and to the Point

To reduce time and effort for respondents and increase response rates, a good rule of thumb is to use short surveys, short sections, and short questions when possible.

- Short questions help reduce confusion and the need to reread.

- Each section should also be short, and changes from one topic to another should be clear. Let respondents know up front the topics you will cover, and include sentences between sections to guide them (e.g., "Those are all my questions about your sources of funding. Next, I'd like to ask you a few questions about the children enrolled in your program.")

- You will want to keep the survey as short as possible. If the target population is motivated to participate, a longer survey might work well. For example, child care providers might be more willing to share their experiences with recent changes to child care subsidy payment rates, because they directly affect their business.

Consider the Provider's English Language Proficiency

Once you know the target population, you should ask: will all providers be English proficient? If not, do you have resources to translate and give the survey in languages other than English? If you cannot translate the survey, how will not including those with limited English proficiency affect study results? When collecting data in many languages, make sure you have enough time and resources for proper translation or else the text may not have the same meaning across languages.[7]

Be Careful with Word Choice

When writing questions, avoid jargon or terms that some respondents may not understand. Also consider the education level of the target population.

Questions should have the same meaning to all respondents. You may need to define a term at the beginning of a question to avoid confusion. For example, you may want to ask about a new workforce registry in the state, but when testing the questions before you start data collection you learn that providers do not call it a *workforce registry*. Instead, they use its proper name. In this situation, you may want to use the proper name for the registry in the survey. You could also explain in the beginning of the question what you are referring to when you say *workforce registry*.

Also, be aware of local differences in terms. For example, some state systems use the term *facility* to refer to the center or home that is licensed and the term *provider* to refer to the facility owner or director. A provider could operate more than one facility. In another example, family child care providers, home-based care providers, in-home providers, and child development homes are terms that may mean the same thing to some people but could have different licensing requirements and local meaning. While you develop your questions, speak with local stakeholders, such as child care resource and referral agency staff, and review available written resources to learn local terms.

When using examples in a question, avoid those that might draw out a particular response or bias. For example, you might want to know how many providers own a smart phone. Do not ask them if they own an iPhone. Instead, you might ask: "Do you own a smart phone (i.e., iPhone, Android, etc.)?"

Also, avoid questions that might show licensing violations unless you make it clear how the information will be used. For example, you may want to ask home-based providers how often they care for children beyond their licensed hours to get an estimate of the need for care during evenings and weekends. However, in admitting they are caring for children during unlicensed care hours, providers might be putting themselves at legal risk. You should word and interpret such sensitive questions carefully.

Consider the Order of Questions

If you expect some people will drop out of the survey before they finish, begin with the most important sections to make sure you get information on questions that matter most.

However, avoid personal or sensitive questions at the beginning of the survey (e.g., household income). The sensitivity of questions should increase throughout the survey, because sensitive questions can lead people to back off and become less open in their answers on other questions. For example, the National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) Center-Based Workforce Questionnaire ends by asking: "Do you currently receive financial or in-kind assistance from any government programs for needy families, such as cash assistance for disabilities, housing assistance, free/reduced lunch for your children or food stamps? Yes or no." This question is personal and sensitive and not related to the respondent's job, so putting this question earlier in the survey could turn people away. Often demographic questions (e.g., age, race, ethnicity, country of origin) are at the end of a survey, because some people may find these questions sensitive.

Consider how the order of questions may affect the answers. For example, you may want to ask child care staff about their compensation and benefits, workplace environment, and overall job satisfaction. If you first ask about their job earnings and whether they feel supported in their work environment, they may give a more negative response on job satisfaction than if you ask about job satisfaction first. You therefore want to think carefully how to order questions.

Another tip is to put more general questions after more specific ones. For example, first ask child care workers to say how satisfied they are with specific aspects of work (e.g., relationships with coworkers) and then ask a general question about overall job satisfaction. The specific questions help the respondent think about their experiences and opinions; then they can step back and give a more-informed overall opinion.

In some surveys, questions are presented in a random order, which is easy to do if you use a web survey. If you use a mail survey, you can print different versions of the survey where the questions are in a different order. Placing the questions in a random order is helpful if you think people may respond differently to the questions depending on the order they read them.

Use Specific Time Frames

Questions should say the period of time the respondent needs to think about when they respond (e.g., the past 12 months; the past 7 days). Not giving people a time frame can lead to inconsistent responses, because people will choose their own time frames, which could be different from what other people are using. If you change the time frame from question to question, include a sentence between questions to clarify the time periods.

Tip for child care surveys: be clear if you want respondents to include summer months when thinking about the past year, because enrollment and activities often differ in the summer.

Keep in mind that memories are short-lived. What time frame is reasonable depends on the topic. A year might be reasonable for some topics but a shorter time period is better for other topics. For example, a center director might reliably remember how many teaching staff have left the program in the past year (i.e., annual turnover) but might not remember how many subsidized children were served in the past year. Monthly child enrollment data would be easier to report because enrollment changes less in a month than in a year. In general, people tend to think in terms of a full week, month, or year, so asking about the past 3 weeks or 4 months may lead to less accurate responses.

Avoid "and" and "or" Questions

A question that has two parts connected with "and" can be confusing because it asks two questions in one. For example, consider the question: "Do you have any contact with other child care providers, and do you get any support from them?" This is hard to answer because someone may have different answers for the first and second parts. She may have contact with other providers ("yes") but not receive support ("no"). Another example is "How satisfied are you with your pay and benefits?" You should split this into two questions because someone might be satisfied with one but not the other.

Two-part questions containing "or" also can cause a person to reply to one idea when there are two in one question (e.g., "How often do you hold staff meetings or one-on-one meetings with your teaching staff?"). It is best to ask these as two separate questions.

Avoid Using Parentheses in Questions

Long questions that include parentheses with more information can lead to inconsistent responses. Some people might consider the extra information and others may not. If a definition or explanation is needed, make sure to bold and list it separately before or after the question so all respondents will read it and have the same information to form a response.

Use Meaningful, Balanced, and Mutually Exclusive Response Options

It's important to create the right response options. You must have enough meaningful options or all respondents may give the same answer or have a hard time answering. For scales with a list of responses, there should be the same number of positive and negative choices. You also want to reduce possible errors by being consistent in the number order on rating scales (e.g., if a 5 on a scale of 1–5 is positive on one set of questions, it should not be negative on the next).

You can change the format of different questions to help keep respondents' attention; otherwise they might select the same response over and over without thinking about their answers. For example, some questions ask about level of agreement (e.g., "On a scale of 1–5, how much do you agree with this statement?"). Other questions ask about how frequently an event occurs (e.g., "How often do you feel this way? Most of the time, some of the time, or never."). Mixing questions that have agreement scales and frequency scales can help keep respondents focused.

Also, make sure that no response options overlap. For example, response options about frequency, such as "sometimes" and "occasionally," can be tricky to tell apart. Reviewing questions that have been tested in the field and used in national studies can provide some examples of common response options. As described later in the brief, testing your survey before you begin data collection can uncover confusing response options you should fix.

Neutral Response Options Are Okay

Do not be afraid to include a neutral response option such as "neither agree nor disagree." A common fear is that too many people will select a neutral option, but survey research suggests otherwise. People will have an opinion on most topics, if you design the survey well for the target population. Although you do not always need a neutral response, it provides a central reference point for respondents on agreement scales where they may not have a strong opinion. See example 1 for agreement scales with and without a neutral option. You can test your survey to help decide if a neutral response option is needed.

EXAMPLE 1

Examples of Agreement Scales with and without Neutral Option

People work in care and education settings for many reasons. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements: [MARK ONE BOX IN EACH ROW.]

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I teach and care for children because I enjoy it.	☐	☐	☐	☐
I see this job as just a paycheck.	☐	☐	☐	☐
I teach and care for children because I like being around children.	☐	☐	☐	☐
If I could find something else to do to make a living I would.	☐	☐	☐	☐

Source: "Family and Provider/Teacher Relationship Quality (FPTRQ) Provider/Teacher Measure," US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, May 19, 2015, https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/resource/family-and-provider-teacher-relationship-quality-fptrq-provider-teacher-measure.

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about working in this program?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
My coworkers and I are treated with respect on a day-to-day basis.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Teamwork is encouraged.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I have help dealing with difficult children or parents.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Source: "National Survey of Early Care and Education Workforce [Classroom Staff] Questionnaire," US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, last revised November 28, 2011, https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/workforce.pdf.

Include a Response Option for "Other, Specify"

In many cases, response options are limited and people cannot find a response that best fits them. Having an option for "other" and an open field where people can write in a response allows for more complete and correct data. See example 2 used in the 2012 NSECE Workforce Survey for Classroom Staff about the respondent's education major.

Including an "Other, Specify" Response Option

What was your major for the highest degree you have or have studied for?

1 ☐ Elementary education

2 ☐ Special education

3 ☐ Child development or psychology

4 ☐ Early childhood education or early or school-age care

5 ☐ Other _____

Source: "National Survey of Early Care and Education Workforce [Classroom Staff] Questionnaire," US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, last revised November 28, 2011, https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/workforce.pdf.

Avoid a "Don't Know" or "No Opinion" Response Option

"Don't know" or "no opinion" responses lead to missing data. Too much missing data makes it hard to analyze your data.

However, in some cases a respondent may not know the answer to a factual question and a "don't know" response option is necessary. For example, in a large child care center, the director might not handle child care subsidy payments and may not know how many children enrolled receive a subsidy. (You also could plan for that question to be answered by a program financial manager or assistant director that handles payments.)

In most cases, if the survey includes relevant topics, most respondents should have an opinion on the issues covered and should have a valid response.

Avoid "Check All That Apply" and "All of the Above" as Response Options

These response options can add errors and make it hard to clean your data. Instead, provide a list of yes/no questions and keep the list short by including an "other, specify" option. See example 3 for a list of professional development activities included in the 2012 NSECE Workforce Survey. Instead of one question with a list of response options that respondents can check off, or a single "all of the above" option, the question is broken down into multiple yes/no questions.

Collecting Information on Types of Professional Development Activities as a List of "Yes/No" Items

In the past 12 months, have you done any of the following activities to improve or gain new skills in working with children?

a. Participated in any workshops—for example, those offered by professional associations, resource and referral networks, etc.? ☐ YES ☐ NO

b. Participated in coaching, mentoring, or ongoing consultation with a specialist? ☐ YES ☐ NO

c. Made visits to classrooms in other programs? ☐ YES ☐ NO

d. Attended a meeting of a professional organization (such as Zero-to-Three, Association for Education of Young Children, Association for Family Child Care, National After School Association, or another group)? ☐ YES ☐ NO

e. Enrolled in a course at a community college or four-year college or university relevant to your work with children under age 13? ☐ YES ☐ NO

Source: "National Survey of Early Care and Education Workforce [Classroom Staff] Questionnaire," US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, last revised November 28, 2011, https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/workforce.pdf.

Why You Should Test Your Survey

Once you have a full draft of your survey, you may want to start collecting data right away. Before doing so, you should test the questions. Testing identifies problems before launching the survey and can be done at many stages of survey development. Several methods are discussed here:

☐ **Expert panel reviews.** Early in the design phase, experts can review draft questions and provide feedback and recommendations. For example, an expert may suggest a different way of asking a question that will get better data. You may want to bring together experts for a day-long meeting to review and discuss questions as a group. You also may ask experts to review drafts on their own and share written comments. Reviewers should be subject matter experts with deep knowledge of the topic and existing research, as well as survey methodologists who can advise on the survey mode and question format.

☐ **Cognitive testing.** You can test your draft survey in the field with people from (or similar to) the target population. Cognitive testing provides an opportunity to get respondents' feedback on each survey question. You can do "think alouds," which involve respondents sharing their thoughts on each item and why they are responding the way they are. You can also do survey debriefings, where respondents take the survey on their own and then walk the interviewer through their responses, highlighting parts that confuse or concern them. Interviewers should ask about survey length, section and item order, clarity of wording, and preferred terminology. Ideally, cognitive testing is done in person, but if this is not possible, then you can do a telephone interview or web-based video conference.

- **Pretesting.** Once you have a complete version of the survey and instructions, you should pretest the full survey as it would be given to flag any issues, such as problems with skip patterns. Pretesting can be done with several people from the target population or, depending on the study design, could be done by others, including members of the research team. For a study that involves a survey of all licensed providers, you may want to avoid pretesting with licensed providers who will later be recruited for the survey. If pretesting uncovers multiple problems, you should do additional pretests. If your survey will be in multiple languages, pretests should include respondents fluent in each language.

Experts recommend that you combine testing methods because each tends to find different types of problems. However, cost and time can lead you to skip at least one method of testing. It is important to weigh the pros and cons of each method. Expert panel reviews can raise issues that would be missed during a traditional pretest. The detailed feedback from cognitive testing can be used to make improvements and can help identify problems, such as when respondents misinterpret a question. Yet cognitive testing can be expensive and time-consuming, and often there are no clear solutions to the problems you find. Pretesting is important for field testing the full survey (including informed consent and instructions) but is probably the least effective method of testing specific questions because respondents have less opportunity for giving detailed feedback.

Depending on timing and budget, a larger pilot study is a better way to test questions for larger or high-stakes surveys. A pilot study gives you data you can analyze to see how different types of people respond to your questions and which questions may not work well for some groups.

Conclusion

Child care providers are diverse in many ways. When designing surveys to collect data from providers, you should have a firm understanding of the study goals, the types of providers and program staff you are targeting, and the availability and quality of existing data you can use for sampling, recruitment, and linking to new data. Keeping in mind research burden and best practices in creating and testing surveys will strengthen your data collection process and data quality.

Appendix A. Glossary

Closed-ended questions: questions that have a list of response options (e.g., yes/no; strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree). Surveys generally have a large number of closed-ended questions.

Generalizability: how accurately results from a study's respondents represent a broader group of people or situations that were not part of the study.

Measure: a set of questions designed to collect information on a specific topic.

Open-ended questions: questions that invite respondents to answer in their own words, that is, to write their own response. Surveys generally have only a limited number of open-ended questions.

Population: the group of people being studied, such as home-based child care providers in a state or people participating in a child care provider certification program.

Questionnaire: a series of questions for people to answer so you can gather information from them. A questionnaire is sometimes referred to as a survey instrument.

Reliability: a highly reliable measure provides the same information if given many times to the same person within a short time frame (also called test-retest reliability) or if given by a different interviewer (also called inter-rater reliability).

Research constructs: broad concepts or topics for a study (e.g., job satisfaction). They can be abstract and not directly observable.

Respondent: a person who fills out a survey.

Response rate: The number of people who answered the survey divided by the number of people in the sample. A response rate is usually expressed as a percentage.

Sample: a set of participants selected from the full study population. A representative sample is a group that closely matches the characteristics of the full group from which it is drawn. A representative sample of child care providers may have the same ratio of center-based providers to home-based providers so the data can accurately reflect the perspectives of both groups.

Scale: In surveys, a scale is an ordered series of response options such as "agree strongly, agree, neutral, disagree, and disagree strongly."

Skip pattern: instructions directing people from one section to another based on a response to an earlier question.

Survey: a study that involves collecting data by asking a sample of people to respond to a set of questions.

Survey mode: the method used to carry out the survey, such as paper, telephone, or web. The mode can also refer to whether the survey is self-administered or administered by an interviewer.

Validity: how well a questionnaire or other means of data collection measures what it claims to measure—also called construct validity.

Appendix B. Tips for Designing Surveys

- **Know the audience.** What are their demographic characteristics (e.g., language, education level)? How much do they know about the topics of interest?

- **Borrow from and rework existing survey questions.** Find questions that have been used in past studies. Check available psychometrics (i.e., validity, reliability).

- **Use short surveys, short sections, and short questions to reduce burden.**

- **Be careful with word choice.** Avoid jargon. Survey questions must have the same meaning to all respondents. Be aware of terms that have changed meaning over time. Keep language barriers in mind. Avoid using examples that might draw out a particular response.

- **Use specific time frames.** People select their own time frames when you don't ask them to consider a specific one. If you change the time frame during the survey, put in a different survey section or include a transition between the time periods.

- **Use appropriate time frames.** Memories are short-lived; time frames need to be reasonable (e.g., in the past seven days).

- **Avoid "and" and "or."** "And" could imply two questions in one. "Or" could cause a respondent to reply to one idea when more than one are in a question.

- **Avoid using parentheses in questions.** Some people might use the information; others may not.

- **Use meaningful, balanced, and mutually exclusive response options.** Use realistic response options, not too many or too few, and the same number of positive and negative choices. Make sure that no options could overlap (e.g., "sometimes" versus "occasionally").

- **Neutral options are okay.** Do not be afraid to include a neutral response option such as "neither agree nor disagree."

- **Try to avoid "check all that apply."** Instead, make each response option a yes/no question.

- **Include an "other, specify" option.** This allows people to write in a response that fits them.

- **Try to avoid a "don't know" or "no opinion" response.** Ask about topics respondents know about.

- **Use consistent wording and categories.** Avoid switching number order on rating scales (e.g., a 5 on a scale of 1 to 5 being positive in one set of items but negative in the next). However, you should change the scale format (i.e., agreement scale, frequency scale) periodically to keep respondents' attention.

- **Consider the order of questions.** More sensitive questions should come nearer the end. Include broader questions after more specific ones. If you think some people will drop out of the survey before they finish, start the survey with the most important sections. Randomize question order when there is potential bias based on order.

- **When collecting data in multiple languages, make sure you have enough time and resources to translate** (Triplett n.d.).

Notes

[1] For more resources on using administrative records, see the section on "Working with Administrative Data" (24–34) in Rohacek et al. (2019).

[2] People often use the word "survey" to describe the set of questions they are asking, and we do so in this brief. However, survey researchers use the more specific word "questionnaire." Technically, the survey is the method of gathering information and the questionnaire is the set of questions. Some surveys have multiple questionnaires.

[3] The 2012 National Survey of Early Care and Education included a set of three provider survey questionnaires: a Home-Based Provider Survey, a Center-Based Provider Survey, and a Workforce Survey that randomly selected a teaching staff member from surveyed centers. The NSECE Project Team relied on administrative lists to construct a sampling frame of "listed" providers (i.e., centers and child care homes) and surveyed households to identify "unlisted" home-based providers (NSECE Project Team 2013). Even lists of licensed and registered providers can become outdated quickly with turnover in the field, so you may need to rely on multiple data sources to identify your target population. For more information, see "National Survey of Early Care and Education, 2010–2015," US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, accessed December 1, 2019, https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/national-survey-of-early-care-and-education-nsece-2010-2014.

[4] See Qualtrics survey support web page, "Avoid Being Marked as Spam," accessed November 25, 2019, https://www.qualtrics.com/support/survey-platform/distributions-module/email-distribution/avoid-being-marked-as-spam/.

[5] See Child Care and Early Education Research Connections search and browse tool to search for questionnaires, https://www.researchconnections.org/childcare/collection.jsp.

[6] The FPTRQ is a set of measures designed to assess the quality of the relationship between families and providers and teachers of early care and education for children from birth to age 5. For more information, see "Development of a Measure of Family and Provider/Teacher Relationship Quality (FPTRQ), 2010–2015," HHS, ACF, OPRE, last updated April 2015, https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/development-of-a-measure-of-family-and-provider-teacher-relationship-quality-fptrq.

[7] See Census Bureau guidelines for best practices on translating data collection questionnaires (Pan and de la Puente 2005).

References

Isaacs, Julia, and Amelia Coffey. 2019. *Evaluating Training and Professional Development for Home-Based Providers: A Brief for CCDF Agencies and Researchers.* Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

NSECE Project Team (National Survey of Early Care and Education Project Team). 2013. *National Survey of Early Care and Education: Summary Data Collection and Sampling Methodology. OPRE Report #2013-46.* Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, US Department of Health and Human Services.

Pan, Yuling, and Manuel de la Puente. 2005. *Census Bureau Guideline for the Translation of Data Collection Instruments and Supporting Materials: Documentation on How the Guideline Was Developed.* Washington, DC: Statistical Research Division, US Census Bureau.

Rohacek, Monica H., Amelia Coffey, Julia B. Isaacs, and Kathryn Stevens. 2019. *Research and Evaluation Capacity Building: A Resource Guide for Child Care and Development Fund Lead Agencies (Revised 2019).* Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

Sandstrom, Heather, Erica Greenberg, Teresa Derrick-Mills, Cary Lou, Shirley Adelstein, Charmaine Runes, Ashley Hong…and John Marotta. 2019. *Nontraditional-Hour Child Care in the District of Columbia.* Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

Triplett, Timothy. n.d. "Editing and Crafting Good Survey Questions and Questionnaires." Unpublished paper. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

About the Authors

Heather Sandstrom is a principal research associate in the Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population. Her research focuses on early childhood development and public programs that support the well-being of low-income children and families, including Head Start, subsidized child care, public prekindergarten, and early childhood home visiting.

Julia B. Isaacs, a senior fellow in the Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population, is an expert in child and family policy with wide-ranging knowledge of government programs and budgets. She directs research on early childhood education and is coprincipal investigator for Urban's *Kids' Share* analyses of public spending on children.

Acknowledgments

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR SUPPORTING RESEARCH ON CCDBG IMPLEMENTATION

This brief is a product of the Center for Supporting Research on Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) Implementation (Contract Number: HHSP233201500064I; Project Director: Julia Isaacs). The Center supports the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in learning from research on policies implemented in response to the goals of the CCDBG Act of 2014. Through a contract awarded to the Urban Institute, ACF is helping Child Care and Development Fund Lead Agencies and their partners build capacity to conduct high-quality, rigorous research; informing the development of evidence on CCDBG programs; and facilitating learning from state-, territory-, and tribal-level research on the CCDBG.

URBAN INSTITUTE

500 L'Enfant Plaza SW
Washington, DC 20024

www.urban.org

✉ Sign-up for the OPRE Newsletter

🐦 Follow OPRE on Twitter
@OPRE_ACF

📷 Follow OPRE on Instagram @opre_acf

f Like OPRE on Facebook
facebook.com/OPRE.ACF

in Connect on LinkedIn
company/opreacf