

Writing Survey Questions



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Law Enforcement Community Surveys Training Module 4

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“You get what you ask for”

Poorly designed survey questions will yield data that are of questionable worth to your agency.

- Use words and terms that most people understand.
- Simplify your sentence structure & reading level.
- Develop questions that are specific & concrete.
- Ask just one question at a time.
- Revise negatively (and double negatively) worded questions.
- Avoid leading questions.
- Do not make people feel bad about telling you the truth.
- Replace words/terms that could bias your results.
- Make your response options exhaustive.
- Make response options mutually exclusive.
- Provide balanced response options.
- Think carefully about “fence sitters” & “don’t knowers”.
- Provide a timeframe for your questions.
- Counterbalance response options.
- Consider the tradeoff between accuracy & information.
- Do not re-invent the wheel.



Use words and terms that most people understand

Avoid acronyms, technical language, jargon, and informal expressions.



DO THIS

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

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



NOT THAT

Which of the following four **UCR Violent Index Crimes** scares the most?

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

Simplify your sentence structure and reading level

Overly complex questions can lead to inaccurate and/or unreliable answers.



DO THIS

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

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



NOT THAT

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

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



Develop questions that are specific and concrete

The wording and specificity of your questions can make a big difference in the interpretation and use of your findings.



DO THIS

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

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



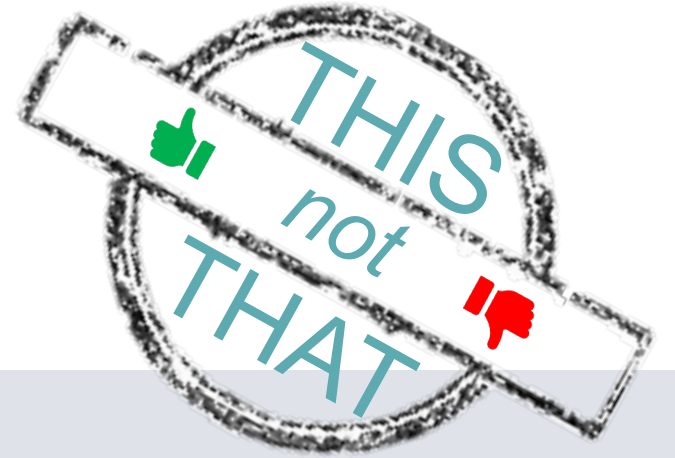
NOT THAT

Do you think red light cameras are a good idea?

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

Ask one question at a time

Double-barreled questions create problems for the survey respondents and the person analyzing the survey data.



DO THIS

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

☐ No

☐ Yes

Do you support increasing police patrols in this area?

☐ No

☐ Yes



NOT THAT

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

☐ No

☐ Yes



Revise negatively (and double negatively) worded questions

Negatively worded questions are often difficult to interpret.



DO THIS

Should the police give more citations for parking violations downtown?

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes



NOT THAT

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

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes

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

Most people have a natural inclination to please others, which may lead them to provide the answer they think you want.



DO THIS

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

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



NOT THAT

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

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



Do not make people feel bad about telling you the truth

People usually want others to see them in a positive light. This can lead survey participants to offer socially desirable answers rather than give their honest response.



DO THIS

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

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes



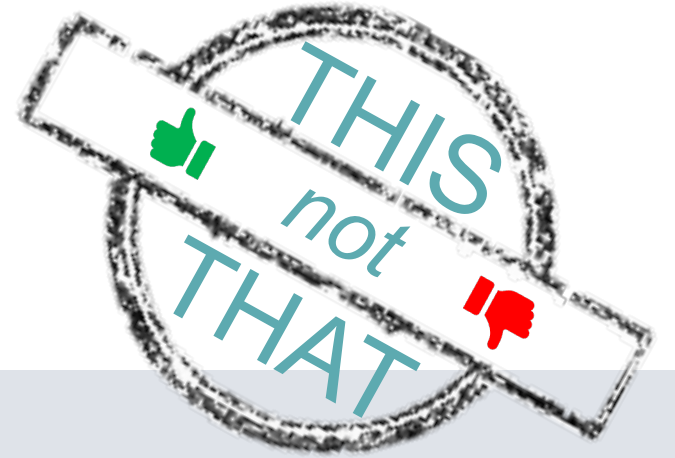
NOT THAT

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

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes

Replace words/terms that could bias your results

Some words, including a few associated with policing (e.g., racial profiling, police brutality), have become politically charged.



DO THIS

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

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



NOT THAT

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

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



Make your response options exhaustive

You need to consider all the possible answers that people might generate.



DO THIS

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

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



NOT THAT

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

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

Make response options mutually exclusive

At time you may want people to “check all that apply”, but more commonly you want them to choose just one answer.



DO THIS

How old are you?

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



NOT THAT

How old are you?

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



Provide balanced response options

The use of unbalanced options in a survey can also bias your findings.



DO THIS

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

- ☐ Very Dissatisfied
- ☐ Dissatisfied
- ☐ Neither Satisfied or Dissatisfied
- ☐ Satisfied
- ☐ Very Satisfied



NOT THAT

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

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

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

Help them decide by removing their escape routes by dropping the neutral responses and “don’t know” options.



DO THIS

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

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



NOT THAT

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

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



Provide a timeframe for your questions

Usually, we conduct surveys to learn about recent experiences.



DO THIS

During the past 12 months, have you been stopped by a police officer in our city while driving?

- ☐ No (Skip to next question)
- ☐ Yes

In the most recent stop, did the officer treat you fairly?

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes



NOT THAT

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

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes (Skip to next question)

Did the officer treat you fairly during this stop?

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes



Counterbalance response options

Have two versions of the responses and reverse the order of the response options to mitigate order bias.

Which of the following offenses should the police department prioritize over the next 12 months?

VERSION 1

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

VERSION 2

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



Consider the tradeoff between accuracy and information

Guesses contain some degree of truth but also some margin of error.

VERSION 1

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

- ☐ Never
- ☐ 1 to 10 times
- ☐ 11 to 20 times
- ☐ 21 or more times

VERSION 2

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

(Enter # of Times)

Do Not Re-invent the Wheel



- Some, even most, of the topics you want to include in your survey may have been covered in prior surveys.
- Look for other community surveys on the Internet, as many other agencies and cities have surveyed their communities about crime and policing.
- Search academic literature using an online tool like Google Scholar (Can come with a lofty fee if you're not within academia or with an academic partner).

Additional Resources

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

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