



# Gathering Feedback through Community Surveys

The police profession is a continually changing field and community concerns can change weekly. These changes, both small and large, cannot be done by police agencies alone. Changes must be a collaborative effort during which community members and elected officials play a crucial role in moving constructive efforts forward. Collectively, police and community members must be willing to listen and discuss the realities of policing, identify meaningful solutions, and understand that police officers are dedicated to protecting their communities. To ensure community buy-in and input in these areas effectively, police can use internal surveys and community safety surveys. These surveys can help an agency to respond to their staffs' and communities needs to improve satisfaction and support.

## Delivery Method for Survey

There are several different ways of delivering a survey to a target population. Each agency must determine the best method for its own needs and those of the community.

- **Online surveys** – internet-based survey tools are easily accessible at little or no cost. They are generally quick to implement and easy to gather and review responses. Online options offer anonymity and on-demand access. They can generally be made available to wide groups, but it is important to note that not all community members may have access to the internet and the results could be skewed.
- **Telephone surveys** – phone surveys can be randomized or conducted with targeted groups for which the law enforcement agency has contact information, for example, those who have been in contact with the agency. Phone surveys can be more resource intensive, but typically have a high response rate and can be arranged to have a degree of anonymity. However, the process can be resource intensive and not all community members have personal phones or may have numbers that change.
- **Hard copy surveys** – printed surveys may be mailed to wide group or distributed at targeted locations or events. This method is typically low cost to produce but can incur postage expenses and staff time to compile responses for analysis. Nonetheless, this method can increase accessibility for the widest representation of the community, especially those without phone or internet access.

## Who to survey?

Determine who the audience or sample population is for the survey. The target audience will generally give you different results and different concerns based on that specific population—the elderly, students, individuals who have used police services, underserved populations, or the community as a whole? Identifying the audience will affect how you compose your questionnaire.

Different audiences may yield different results. When trying to gauge an entire community, it is important to reach as many populations as possible. Do not limit yourself to a specific group as they will not be able to represent the opinions of those outside of that group. To ensure you are not excluding particular demographics, survey questions should be phrased in a way that all possible respondents can understand them. A survey can also be administered to two separate target audiences allowing for comparison analysis.

## Disseminating the Survey

When considering whole community data collection approaches, give special consideration to engaging those parts of the community that may traditionally have less open communication with the agency to ensure diverse perspectives. Keep in mind that not all community members may have the same access to standard survey dissemination methods given technology or language barriers or may be hesitant to share information.

There are ways of reaching out to these groups using proven survey methods that make it easier to get responses from groups that may be more challenging to reach. For example, the snowball sample survey



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method allows you to get more responses using word of mouth—if you can get one person from a diverse background to answer your survey, they will tell their friends and others in the same situation to take the survey. This approach is shown to work particularly well with hard-to-reach groups.<sup>1</sup>

Using strategic community partnerships with nonprofit organizations and faith-based groups to promote the survey can be an effective way to reach diverse stakeholders. For mailed surveys, partnering with utility companies or other partners who regularly send out community-wide mail can be a way to reach multiple households. Utilizing this and other community partnerships will allow police agencies to gather the most accurate and well-rounded data.

## Types of questions

There are many different ways of asking the same question and getting different answers so take your time when crafting the questions that will be used. Consider using a variety of question formats such as multiple choice, short answer, and scales, to keep individuals invested and lead to a more well-rounded answer pool.

## Potential Survey Question Categories

- Demographic information
- Experience with the agency
- Satisfaction with services
- Public safety priorities
- Other community concerns
- Open comments

## Analyzing Data

After receiving the survey results, evaluating the responses, and analyzing the gathered data will help inform actionable recommendations and changes. While this can be done internally, many agencies and organizations form strategic partnerships to maximize

efficiency and create a neutral approach to gathering information from citizens. Research partnerships with academic institutions can be a mutually beneficial relationship for this as they have the resources to use scientific inquiry to analyze the data, that can only be collected by the agency.

## Following Up

Following up with participants, both within the agency and within the community, regarding survey results and next steps is a critical component of surveying. Be transparent with the survey results. Over surveying with little follow up can lead to respondent fatigue as well as frustration and damaged relationships with participants.<sup>2</sup>

Agencies should provide their participants with upcoming action items based on the results of their participation in the survey. These action items can be provided to participants through public forums, round table discussions, and social media communication. Survey respondents will appreciate the agency's consideration, helping to establish better relationships with the community that the police agency is serving.

## IACP Resources

- A. IACP [Community-Police Engagement Page](#)
- B. IACP Model Policy: [Media Relations](#)
- C. IACP Model Policy: [Social Media](#)
- D. [IACP Policy Framework for Improved Community-Police Engagement](#)
- E. IACP [Law Enforcement Policy Resource Center](#)

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.healthknowledge.org.uk/public-health-textbook/research-methods/1a-epidemiology/methods-of-sampling-population>  
<sup>2</sup> [http://www.atusers.umd.edu/wip2/papers\\_i2007/Backor.pdf](http://www.atusers.umd.edu/wip2/papers_i2007/Backor.pdf)