

A WORD ABOUT SURVEYS

So you have decided you need to collect local data for some reason. The reasons might include measuring the size or scope of underage alcohol use in your community, or the way teens get alcohol, or whether or not teens are afraid they will be caught and prosecuted for using alcohol, or to say to the media, “HEY LOOK AT THIS ISSUE!”

What you want to know will help you decide whether to use surveys, focus groups, or key informant interviews to collect your information. Surveys are usually the easiest of the three to do and can be done by a group whether they are just getting started or have been together for years.

Focus groups and key informant interviews require a little more organization and sometimes require professional assistance. For more information about focus groups and key informant interviews, contact Prevention Network.

WHY A SURVEY

Survey data can be used to accomplish many things. It is up to your group to decide what your goal will be when doing a survey.

Surveys can find out:

- How big of a problem a community feels underage drinking is
- Teens’ perception of how likely they are to be caught if using alcohol
- Whether or not teens and parents share the same perceptions regarding alcohol issues
- If a program or project you already sponsored got people’s attention
- Where teens who do drink get their alcohol (parents, store, friends, steal it, etc.)
- Where teens who do drink are most likely to use alcohol
- How often teens use alcohol
- If teens are aware of local resources like help lines, Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, or treatment programs

Survey data can be used to:

- Get media attention
- Get policy makers’ attention (from school boards to state and federal government)
- To find out if your assumptions or “gut feelings” about an issue are true
- To help plan future programming
- To get your group to discuss what they really want to do and what direction they want to go in.

The more people you have access to for your survey, the more useful your results will likely be. Listed here are a few places you can get access to large groups of people all in one place. When considering these places, ask yourself if the population you want for the purpose of your survey will be there.

- In the high school classrooms
- At the local mall
- At a county fair or other local festival
- At a high school or college sports competition or event
- At a community or high school dance
- At a large workplace in your community
- Places of worship
- Local recreational site or event

It is important to remember to get permission from the facility or event planners before you begin to distribute surveys.

It may also be possible to place your survey in a local newspaper or company or school newsletter and encourage people to fill it out and send it in to you. This will also get your group or initiative some media attention. Other ideas include having local businesses use your survey as a “check stuffer” when they place their employees’ pay checks in envelopes for mailing or distribution. Or have local grocery stores place a survey in every bag of groceries for a set period of time.

HOW TO SURVEY

It is easiest to create your own survey. This allows you to control the questions, and involves discussion among group members regarding what you really want to know and how to use the information gathered. The nature of the information that you need and the purpose you will put it to both determine the questions you want to ask.

Following are a few simple pointers about surveys. These tips are intended for simple surveys that will give you a good starting place.

- Keep it simple. You can likely gather the information you need to get started in ten questions or fewer.
- Keep it short. It is best if your survey takes up one piece of paper, preferably all on one side.
- Keep the questions straightforward. Once you have the question worded the way it is to go in the survey, read it aloud to determine whether a respondent will understand how to answer it correctly.
- Keep the respondents in mind when writing the questions. Don’t use slang that a teen would use if you are surveying professionals. Likewise, don’t use professional language and terms if you are surveying teens.
- When possible, allow respondents to answer in a scale, such as “strongly agree, agree, no opinion, disagree, strongly disagree.” This gives you more information than a “yes” or “no” answer and will provide additional information to work with.

WHO SAID THAT...

We recommend making your survey anonymous. This means that you DO NOT collect names or other information that identifies the individual filling out the survey. This allows people to answer honestly without worrying about everyone knowing about their personal issues. This also allows you to protect the identity of those filling out the survey. Depending on where you collect survey data, it may be necessary to verify that respondents are, indeed, from the geographic area that you intended to collect data for. For example, if you want information for Ingham County and pass out surveys at the Ingham County Fair, you may get people visiting from out of county, thus skewing your results. So it may be important to ask on the survey the county or city where the respondent lives. It is recommended that you DO NOT ask what school district a respondent is from, unless you are trying to survey only one district and would need to exclude any respondents from other districts.