

Handbook Highlight from the Montana Municipal Officials Handbook

7.106 Community Surveys

Why Community Surveys

There are many methods of understanding community opinions and attitudes about a specific policy decision, whether past or pending. The method of surveying depends on financial resources, the time line to complete the work, the size of the population to be studied, available personnel, and expertise in survey work. While there are many costs associated with community surveys, there is also great benefit including measuring community satisfaction on a particular topic, confirming what may be already known anecdotally, or as a means of educating both local government officials and the citizenry themselves.

Community surveys often sample only a fraction of a total population. A sample is a representative part of a larger group (be it a neighborhood, ward, or entire municipality) whose opinions or attitudes are studied to gain information about the whole. A survey of the entire population (called a census) is often impractical and unnecessary since, if done correctly, statistical inference can generalize the results of a small sample to a larger population.

To begin a community survey, a survey instrument must first be developed. Use of citizens in the development of this survey can be integral to both the validity of the questions asked as well as a sense of ownership that citizens may feel over the survey process. Survey instruments can take many forms and depend on the sampling technique to be used but include door-to-door canvassing using a written questionnaire, on-line survey for those with an internet connection, mail back questionnaires, or telephone sampling. Each of these techniques has costs and benefits depending on the objective of the survey, sample size, and available resources.

With proper training, citizens can also assist with sampling, further legitimating the survey process. Officials should be familiar with sampling techniques or

contract the survey work to experts before authorizing citizens to conduct survey work. Critical to a successful survey is minimizing the margin of error, defined as the amount of random sampling error in the survey results. The larger the margin of error, the less faith one should have that the reported results closely represent the entire population.

In addition to community surveys, city officials may use a number of other techniques to engage citizens in open and informed conversations about policy issues. This current era marks a more deliberative democratic turn taking place in local governments across the United States. Various deliberative forums are structured in many ways including citizen juries, electronic town hall meetings, national issues forums, and neighborhood conversations all involving two key elements of deliberative democracy; objective background information and a structured environment for discussing an issue (Cavalier 2009).