

GETTING FOOD AND NUTRITION INFORMATION: The Survey

The public is often unclear about the content and source of food and nutrition-related information. They may ask: "How do they know this? How do they know this is true? When was this changed? How can I be sure that this is so? To be able to come to conclusions and make general statements about a health topic or problem, much rigorous study has first to be done. Studying a health problem or topic must follow a well-defined and described process in order to produce valid conclusions. This process is known as the research process.

Health research is the systematic process of generating knowledge on a specific, well-defined health problem. The researcher may want to prove or disprove an assumption, explore a new concept or collect new information on certain topics. There are different types of research but in this issue of Nyam News we will introduce a form that is commonly used - health survey research. The purpose of many surveys is to provide the investigator with clear, complete and accurate information on a specific topic or topics by asking individuals questions about a variety of factors that influence, measure or are affected by people's health. Answers to these questions generate statistics on the groups that those individuals represent. Surveys usually are the best way for researchers to learn systematically

about the thoughts, feelings and habits of a large group of people. Governments carry out a lot of this kind of research; other institutions often do this either on behalf of the government or because of their own interests.

How is survey research used in the area of food and nutrition? Much of the information available to the general public, including what you receive in this newsletter, and others drawn from the findings of studies, are the results of research efforts. Surveys directly related to food and nutrition that you often hear about include:

- Description of food consumption patterns in the population (information regarding quality and quantity of foods commonly consumed in a population).
- Amount of food available per person.
- The nutritional status of individuals of different age groups.
- The level of under-nutrition among children.
- The prevalence of obesity among adults.
- Risk factors for heart disease and cancers or other nutrition-related diseases.



Surveys can involve person(s) in the household, students attending school, patients attending clinics or consumers at food outlets. It may include persons within specific age groups or anyone available at the time.

The research process involves a number of phases and steps, which must be followed for us to be confident of the accuracy and reliability of the findings and especially if we want to publish the results. The first phase is the planning phase. Often this takes the longest period of time and can mean several months of meetings, discussions and writing. Researchers need to know exactly what they are looking for and exactly what they need to find out. The following are essential steps:

- Write down, or describe the problem or research question. A set of questions that the survey should answer is usually included. Who and what are the foci of the study, when and where it will be conducted – are some of the questions to be answered at this point.
- State clearly the purpose and objectives of the survey. Researchers spend a lot of time making sure that their purpose and objectives for carrying out a survey are quite clear. Study objectives help to clarify what the researcher needs to do to answer the research question.
- Next, the investigator decides which method will be used to obtain the information and how he is going to measure the concepts that he is investigating. During this step, the researcher estimates the time required to do all the work in the field (collecting the data).
- Decide on how the respondents (individuals from the general population) to be included in the study will be selected, how many are to be included and how they will be recruited into the study. A sufficient number of the appropriate individuals must be identified to answer the questions asked in the survey. It would not be sensible, for example, to ask persons in urban areas about farming the land and planting of crops. Mothers of young children would more accurately report weaning foods than single men. The researcher ensures that individuals selected have the experience and knowledge to answer questions.
- Decide on total cost in terms of staff, time, transport, equipment to be used in the survey. A survey always takes time and requires trained staff. Sometimes, the staff in the organization, for example, nurses in the Ministry of Health, will do the field work if it is a small survey. There is also the cost for paper, printing of the questionnaires and transportation costs associated with travelling to and from household to collect data. It is not always easy to find where a person lives (which could be in deep rural areas) and sometimes the person wanted is not at home and a return visit must be made.
- Prepare the questionnaire and other instruments that will be used. This will also involve testing it with a sample of the projected population to make sure it is comprehensible and that the information obtained is reliable and accurate.
- Prepare for the recruiting and selection of interviewers who will be collecting the data from the individuals selected. In selection of the interviewer the researcher will answer the question, "What kind of person will make the best interviewer for this survey?"

The next phase is organizing the survey. The investigator has to:

- Prepare the community for the survey. Persons in authority should know what is planned and their agreement and cooperation have to be obtained. The communities should also be informed of the upcoming survey. They should know that the study is being conducted, and how long it will take in the field, the main purpose of the study, that the information given will be completely confidential and how they will benefit from this survey. Most times the researcher provides this information via the media – newspaper or radio. The public is usually free to call and get clarification from the investigators.
- Test the questionnaires during this time. The researcher ensures that the questions are not vague. They should be clear and direct and should be worded appropriately for respondents.

- Train the interviewers to collect the information in a timely, accurate and ethical manner.

The next phase will involve collection of the data from the individuals selected. This stage is very important. It is the stage where specified members of the population are approached to participate. Surveys cannot happen without the cooperation and good will of members of the public, there will be no information and therefore no further understanding of the problem or situation. Interviewers collect information from selected persons during this phase.

A pre-determined procedure needs to be carefully followed to select the individuals necessary to take part in the survey. Selected individuals are usually referred to as respondents. The data can be collected in a number of ways including, via the telephone, during a face to face interview or obtaining the questionnaire through the mail.

Characteristics of these various methods are as follows:

1. **Telephone survey** – Most times telephone numbers are randomly or purposively selected from an up-to-date telephone directory. A number of surveys have obtained information in this way, for example, the adult behaviour and risk survey in the USA and other smaller studies.
2. **Mailed questionnaire** – Depending on the time and budget of the investigators, the questionnaires can be mailed to the selected respondents. There is usually a self-addressed envelope with paid postage ready for the respondent to return the completed questionnaire. A deadline date is set for the return of the questionnaire. One of the assumptions made in this method of collecting the data, is that persons can read. Persons are advised to complete the questionnaires on their own without interference or inputs from relatives or friends. It is distressing for the investigator when there is no response from the people. So reminders are usually sent to persons to encourage the completion and return of the questionnaire. Persons may not respond because they are not interested in the topic, they are too busy, or they cannot read.

3. **Face-to-face interview** – This is the most common way to obtain responses from people. Surveys such as the national censuses carried out in every country are often done this way. A specially trained interviewer personally visits and obtains the responses of the respondent. The interview can take place at various places, including the home, the office, on the street, in the clinic, in the school or at other public places depending on the nature of the questions to be answered and the type of persons needed. Where topics of a sensitive personal nature are being explored, the interview should be carried out in private. This would encourage persons to be more honest and open with their responses.

The Respondent – Special Considerations

Respondents are usually selected randomly from the population or from a special group. This means that each person in the group or population has the same chance of being included in the study. Researchers are aware of the difficulties that respondents face during surveys and take special care to address these and so as to alleviate any distress.

- Respondents are sometimes reluctant to discuss certain subjects with strangers or even to accept them in their homes. Also due to the prevalence of crime and violence in some areas, there is a general distrust of strangers. Interviewers are therefore trained in ways to allay this distrust and are provided with appropriate identification that will last for the period of the survey.
- Comfortable and trusting interviewees ensure better results. Researchers can ensure this by showing respect for their respondents and holding interviews in privacy, away from disturbances. This may be a quiet corner in the house or clinic.
- As far as possible interviews should not be too disruptive for respondents by consuming too much of their time. For especially long interviews respondents may be allowed to continue with some simple tasks while being interviewed, but these should not distract from the interview.

- As far as possible interviewers should encourage respondents to give careful, thoughtful and accurate answers to questions, and allow them the time they need to do so.
- Respondents are allowed a short break during an especially long interview.
- Respondents should be aware that some surveys are planned so that the field work lasts for a limited time – 1-3 months. Researchers may want to miss or catch special events or periods depending on the purpose of the survey. For example, an investigator would prefer not to conduct a food consumption survey during the Christmas period or a physical activity survey just before or during the carnival period. During these special events, behaviours of interest often change and do not represent what is normal.
- Of critical importance is the willingness of respondents to give the information asked when being interviewed. This willingness depends on

many factors: the stated benefits of the study, the assurances of confidentiality given by the interviewer, the convenience of the time and location of the interview and the approach of the interviewer, among others. Being able to convincingly explain the benefits of a study is a very useful asset in a study as it often makes the difference between a consenting respondent who shares information openly and one who either refuses or gives incomplete information. The latter could result in findings that are neither accurate nor reliable and in which not much confidence is placed.

A well-planned and carefully implemented survey can provide valuable insights into the food- and nutrition-related behaviour of key sections of the population. This information has a variety of uses - to assess status so as to plan programs, to evaluate the effectiveness of programs or to explore the dimensions of emerging problems. Over time it has proven to be a most useful tool to investigators and researchers, as well as to health planners and policy makers.

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