

Why Are Surveys Conducted?

The major purpose of surveys is to describe the characteristics of a population. In essence, what researchers want to find out is how the members of a population distribute themselves on one or more variables (for example, age, ethnicity, religious preference, attitudes toward school). As in other types of research, of course, the population as a whole is rarely studied. Instead, a carefully selected sample of respondents is surveyed and a description of the population is inferred from what is found out about the sample.

For example, a researcher might be interested in describing how certain characteristics (age, gender, ethnicity, political involvement, and so on) of teachers in inner-city high schools are distributed within the group. The researcher would select a sample of teachers from inner-city high schools to survey. Generally, in a descriptive survey such as this, researchers are not so much concerned with why the observed distribution exists as with what the distribution *is*.

Types of Surveys

There are two major types of surveys—a cross-sectional survey and a longitudinal survey.

CROSS-SECTIONAL SURVEYS

A cross-sectional survey collects information from a sample that has been drawn from a predetermined population. Furthermore, the information is collected at just one point in time, although the time it takes to collect all of the data may take anywhere from a day to a few weeks or more. Thus, a professor of mathematics might collect data from a sample of all the high school mathematics teachers in a particular state about their interests in earning a master's degree in mathematics from his university, or another researcher might take a survey of the kinds of personal problems experienced by students at 10, 13, and 16 years of age. All these groups could be surveyed at approximately the same point in time.

When an entire population is surveyed, it is called a census. The prime example is the census conducted by the U.S. Bureau of the Census every 10 years, which attempts to collect data about everyone in the United States.

LONGITUDINAL SURVEYS

In a longitudinal survey, on the other hand, information is collected at different points in time in order to study changes over time. Three longitudinal designs are commonly employed in survey research: trend studies, cohort studies, and panel studies.

In a trend study, different samples from a population whose members may change are surveyed at different points in time. For example, a researcher might be interested in the attitudes of high school principals toward the use of flexible scheduling. He would select a sample each year from a current listing of high school principals throughout the state. Although the population would change somewhat and the same individuals would not be sampled each year, if random selection were used to obtain the samples, the responses obtained each year could be considered representative of the population of high school principals. The researcher would then examine and compare responses from year to year to see whether any trends were apparent.

Whereas a trend study samples a population whose members may change over time, a cohort study samples a particular population whose members do not change over the course of the survey. Thus, a researcher might want to study growth in teaching effectiveness of all the first-year teachers who had graduated the past year from San Francisco State University. The names of all of these teachers would be listed, and then a different sample would be selected from this listing at different times.

In a panel study, on the other hand, the researcher surveys the *same* sample of individuals at different times during the course of the survey. Because the researcher is studying the same individuals, she can note changes in their characteristics or behavior and explore the reasons for these changes. Thus, the researcher in our previous example might select a sample of last year's graduates from San Francisco State University who are first-year teachers and survey the same individuals several times during the teaching year. Loss of individuals is a frequent problem in panel studies, however, particularly if the study extends over a fairly long period of time.

Following are the titles of some published reports of surveys that have been conducted by educational researchers.

- "The status of state history instruction."¹
- "Dimensions of effective school leadership: The teacher's perspective."²