

## **Guidelines for Designing, Administrrating and Analysing the Survey Method in Prisons**

### **What is the Survey Method?**

The survey method is a research technique that is used to gather certain information from a selected amount of people, through the methods of questionnaires and interviews. The survey method is very useful as it can be used to obtain factual information such as people's levels of knowledge, their beliefs, their attitudes and their preferences. It can also be used to ask people about difficult issues and personal subjects that could not be obtained through other research methods such as experiments or observations.

### **Why use the Survey Method in Prisons?**

The survey method is ideal to use in the prison environment as it won't take up that much time, resources or time training staff. You can use the survey method with offenders to get a better understanding of their lives in prison and their lives before being sentenced to prison. There are a number of topics that you could use as the aim of your survey method, for example you could ask the offenders;

- ✚ The types of offences they have committed in their lives including those that they were not caught for doing and those they received sentences for.
- ✚ Their overall opinions of the prison including their relationships with the other prisoners and prison guards, the cleanliness of the prison and the atmosphere of the prison.
- ✚ Their health habits and their wellbeing at the prison such as how easy is it for them to see a health professional and what type of service do they receive, their health habits and if they are taking part in any substance abuse.
- ✚ The rehabilitation programmes you provide, their views of the programmes they have attended, did they feel the programme worked.

Surveys are a useful thing to do in a prison as they can provide an insight as to what the prisoners actually think and feel about themselves and those around them. You can use this method to really get to know what types of offenders you have in the prison; you would be able to ask them certain questions that they may have never been asked before such as "how do they feel about the crimes they committed" or "do they feel they deserve the sentence they were given".

The results you obtain can help you improve the prison in a number of ways from the way you present your rehabilitation programmes to the cleanliness of the toilets. They can also be used as a part of a Home Office research programme, which can help them use your results together with other prisons around England and Wales to obtain statistics and generalisations.

## The Type of Data the Survey Method can Collect

There are two types of data that the survey method can collect and these are divided into quantitative and qualitative data .

Quantitative data produce large quantities of numerical and statistical data and are useful when using a large sample group . The advantages of quantitative data are that it can study trends, make comparisons, are easy to analyse and are reliable, representative and objective. However, the disadvantages are that they lack depth, have no meanings, do not focus on the individual, and therefore are not wholly representative.

Qualitative data involve emphasising meanings, experiences, descriptions , and opinions and are best used with smaller sample groups. The advantages of this data are that it is closer to reality, more personal, provide in -depth feelings and meanings, give detailed descriptions and are un -biased. The disadvantages of qualitative data are that it can be unreliable, subjective, cannot be measured, cannot generalise and can often be mis -interpreted by the researcher.

## Which Method?

Before you think about which topic you would like to gather research on, you need to decide if you are going to conduct the research , there are three main ways that you can administer your survey in the prison.

- ✚ **The self completed structured questionnaire** , which has the questions in a logical order and specify particular answers that, may be given. They mostly contain questions with pre -coded answers, and not many open questions. This makes them particularly useful when you have a large amount of questions as the results are easier to analyse and quantify, however they can not be the right method to use if you are hoping to get in-depth responses.
- ✚ **The self completed unstructured questionnaire** , this mainly contains open questions and allows the respondents to reply in anyway they wish to, and to give any length answer they require. This method is useful if you wish to gather much more in -depth answers but it will take longer to analyse and is more suitable for shorter surveys.
- ✚ **The interview** , where the questions you wish to be answered are asked to the respondent by face -to-face with an interviewer. This method can be done either structurally or un -structurally depending on how the interview takes place and if a rapport is built between the interviewer and interviewee.

## **Questionnaires**

A questionnaire usually consists of a number of pre-decided questions administered in the way of a form for completion, they are normally used for obtaining information from a large number of people or a widely distributed group as the forms can be simply handed out and are self-completed by those that you have given the forms to. The main advantage of a questionnaire is that they are very systematic and standardised; meaning that all the participants will be asked the same questions and respond through the same pre-coded replies. This will allow you to look at the data from a large amount of participants and easily compare it.

By using a questionnaire you take up less time than you would be getting staff or researchers to go and talk to the prisoners face to face. The best way to conduct a questionnaire is to make it anonymous, this will allow you to ask personal or embarrassing questions to the prisoners and they will be able to answer truthfully, as many people tend to do when questionnaires are confidential, as you will not know who answered what form.

Another benefit by making your questionnaires anonymously is the chance that your response rate will increase; this is the amount of people that complete your questionnaire out of all those you give it to. You could get a low response rate by giving the prisoners a questionnaire each and asking them to return it once it has been completed. This could affect your response rate by the prisoners either not being bothered to answer it, forgetting they have it or not having enough time to fill it out. By having a low response rate your questionnaire can be made useless, as the small number that does reply may not be representative of all those that you gave the questionnaire to, as they may have strong opinions on one subject while those that didn't answer may have different opinions.

A way of making your response rate higher could be arranging for all the prisoners to fill out the questionnaire in a room at a certain time of the day, as this would ensure you getting all your questionnaires answered and completed. Although this will make your response rate higher and your results more representative, it could produce other problems.

By making the prisoners complete the survey together may produce social desirability, where the prisoners will answer the questions to make them look more socially desirable to each other. This could be more of a problem in a prison as there may be certain prisoners that have a following of other prisoners and have a respectable reputation, so they may answer the questions in a way to keep this respect. This could make the results you obtain less valid.

The design of your questionnaire is an important factor to think about. The questionnaire should be laid out attractively, it shouldn't look cramped with tiny font instead the questions should be spread out across the pages using the space you have wisely. If the questionnaire looks intimidating then your respondents may be put off before they start answering the questions.

The order you put your questions in need to be in a logical order, leading from one question to the other and not jumping from topic to topic, and that all the questions covering one particular subject are placed together. The best way to present your questions is to start with general questions that can establish a general overview of the respondent's opinions or preferences, and then gradually work down to the specifics of the particular subjects. Easier questions should be presented at the beginning with the harder ones following, this is to help the respondents feel at ease early on and help you receive more in-depth replies to the trickier questions later on.

There are certain types of questions that you can include in your questionnaire, there are;

- ✚ **Behavioural Questions** which prompt the respondents to reveal what they have done in the past. You can use these types of questions to find out about any previous crimes that the prisoners committed but not convicted for, the type of people they had as they peers or how they behave inside the prison.
- ✚ **Attitudinal questions** which ask the respondents likes and dislikes, attitudes and opinions. You can use these types of questions to ask the prisoners about their feelings towards the prison, the rehabilitation programmes, the amount of time they have for visits, and even how they feel about the food.
- ✚ **Classification questions**, these try to classify the respondent in terms of age and sex. You can also use these questions to find out about the prisoners occupation, socio-economic class, home ownership and marital status before they were sentenced to prison. This is useful to use to make your sample a more representative one, and it may also be useful to see if there are certain patterns, such as who commits certain crimes, i.e. Males aged 16-20 commit petty theft more than other male age bands.

Badly worded or poorly constructive questions can mislead or confuse respondents and may influence them into giving them certain replies. The two main ways of asking questions are either open or closed questions.

An open question allows the respondents to offer their opinions, and allows them to express themselves freely. Closed questions, sometimes classed as multiple choice questions, only allow the respondents to choose from a number of given responses.

Closed questions are much easier for the respondent to answer and easier for you to analyse and the results can be easily quantified.

Open questions can lead to a wide range of replies, and due to this they could be difficult to interpret and analyse. They are simple to design and are less likely to lead the respondent into answering in a certain way.

If you need to judge the degree of the respondent's feelings on a subject, you may wish to include a rating or response scale. There are various types of scales that you can use:

Likert scales show how strongly the respondent agrees or disagrees with a the statement given, and can look like this;

*Put a tick in the box that shows how strongly **you agree or disagree** with each of the following statements*

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The education provided has been of some benefit to you		X			
The lecturers that provided the education where approachable			X		
You were given enough support for carrying out your studies from the prison guards.				X	

**Rank order scales** are questions that ask the respondent to put a number beside various items to put them in some sort of order of preference, such as;

*When thinking about the prison visits, please rate each statement in order with 1 being the most important to you and 5 being the least important.*

Time of visits	1
Amount of visitors	4
Supervision of visits	3
Notice of visits	5
Who gets to visit you	2

**Semantic differential scales** use two words describing the opposite ends of a scale, with a series of points highlighted between. The respondents are asked to indicate where on the scale their opinions lie, for example;

*The rehabilitation programme you received*

Effective.....X..... Not Effective  
 Well Presented.....X..... Poorly Presented  
 Active Method.....X..... Theory Method

Another problem with allowing the prisoners to complete the questionnaire alone is the possibility that they may either not understand what the questions are asking from them or they may not be able to read the questions, as many prisoners are illiterate, which is why using the face-to-face interview method may be better.

## **Interviews**

Interviews can be carried out very much like a questionnaire if done in a structured way, which is very formal. You can still pre-plan the types of questions you wish to ask the respondents and still include pre-coded answers, as the interviewer can simply read out the questions to the respondents, explain how they should be answered, for the scale questions, and the respondents can either write down their own answers or the interviewer can do it for them. The same questions are asked to each respondent, just like a questionnaire, and should be asked in the same way to each respondent

An interview can also be conducted in an unstructured way, informal, and this is best if you wish to ask the respondent how they really feel about certain subjects and issues as it is much more open and free-flowing like a normal conversation. The interviewer will be aware of the topics they wish to ask about and may even have them jotted down with some opening questions, but there are no pre-set questions, as it is normally the interviewee who controls the interview and leads the discussion. This type of interview is best used when wanting to ask the prisoners about personal issues that you may not be able to ask about on a piece of paper.

Interviews give you the ability to gain the understanding, from the respondent's perspective, about a certain issue as it allows the respondent to express their views and to get their point across, unlike in a questionnaire where they have to tick a pre-decided answer that may not truly reflect what they really feel.

Interviews are also a good source of information if there can be a rapport and some trust built between the interviewer and interviewee, as they are more likely to obtain a more honest opinion and more honest answers, which improves the validity of the interview, this way the interview can lead into much more personal issues that a questionnaire could and allows it to be more in-depth. A problem with building a rapport though could be the interviewer showing empathy for the respondent and by simply agreeing and showing an understanding of what the prisoners have been through could lead or influence their answers.







Although an interview can be very valid there are still some issues that can make it less valid due to certain types of bias. There is interview bias, which is where the interviewer influences the interviewee's answers either by phrasing the questions in a certain manner or just by simply being an interviewer as some people like to look interesting and want to please the interviewer and may then give the replies that they feel the interviewer is hoping for. Other

ways that the interviewer could influence the respondent could be the manner and tone of speech, their ethnic origin, their sex or their personal habits.

Lying is a problem for most research methods as the respondent may feel they have nothing to gain from telling the truth or may have simply forgotten and could be relying on broken memories or they could have simply not understood the question completely. This can be an issue if the subject you're asking about is a sensitive issue, but with face-to-face interviews the interviewer may be able to tell if the respondent is lying as the main indicator is through the respondent's facial features and body language. The interviewer could then clarify what they are asking or rephrase the question to try and obtain the truth.

Interviews are time-consuming and can be costly, as you are using someone to perform the interview individually to each of your sample. You may also need to provide a prison guard to supervise the interviews in case a sensitive issue is reached and the prisoner may react in a hostile or violent way. You also have to rely on your interviewers to be honest when recording the responses and that they are not giving you the answers they believe you are looking for.

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