

The San Francisco Food Systems Guidebook

**San Francisco Food Systems Council:
bridging people to food**

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traditional methods for collecting data

After looking over the data sources that already exist for your topic and your community, consider what is missing. Perhaps the questions you would like answered were never asked. Maybe previous surveys neglected certain neighborhoods, non-English speaking residents, or unique periods of the month or year. Many times, questionnaires and tables cannot capture the whole story of a person's or a community's experience. Below is a list of traditional research methods that you can use to paint a more complete picture of your community's experience.

0 Document Review involves gathering and analyzing key documentary material such as laws, regulations, contracts, correspondence, memoranda and routine records on services and clients. These kinds of documents are a useful source of information on program activities and processes, and they can generate ideas for questions that can be pursued through observation and interviewing. *Strength:* documents can provide valuable information that may not be accessible by other means, as for covering events that took place before the assessment began, events that were part of private interchanges, or plans that have not been realized in actual program performance. *Weakness:* generalizations might be made based on the documents and data that were intentionally selected to survive and made available to public. In seeking out key documents, the researcher may have problems with confidentiality, privacy, and access.

0 Survey Methodology is helpful in its interdisciplinary orientation (many uses) and systematic collection of information. A good survey requires expertise and resources to conduct and the interviewer is not permitted to pursue issues of interest included in the guide. Surveys can vary considerably in size and type of sample. Many surveys study all persons living in a defined area, but others might focus on special population groups (e.g. children, physicians, community leaders, or the unemployed) or even inanimate objects (e.g. soils, housing). Surveys may be conducted with national, state, or local samples, collecting data through mail, telephone, Internet, or in-person interviews.

0 Mail surveys might be most effective when directed at particular groups, such as subscribers to a specialized magazine or members of a professional association. *Strength:* these surveys are relatively low in cost. *Weakness:* problems exist in their use when the level of response and cooperation is low.

0 Telephone surveys are an efficient method of collecting some types of data and are being increasingly used. They lend themselves particularly well to situations when timeliness is a factor and the length of the survey is limited. *Weakness:* phone surveys are conducted so much in San Francisco that it is very hard to get cooperation.

0 In-person surveys in a respondent's home or office are much more expensive than mail or telephone surveys. They may be necessary, however, especially when complex information is to be collected.

0 Photo novella is a means to convey messages or obtain information presented as a short dialogue with pictures like a comic strip. Photo novella is clear with engaging pictures that are arranged in logical sequence plot, characterization, visual style and pacing of message reflects home culture around a particular topic or issue. This technique is best when constructed by members of the audience. *Strength:* relatively inexpensive, appealing to groups with limited reading skills, and clarifies information and/or messages in a visual manner. *Weakness:* may be dismissed or discounted by policy-makers as not serious research.

- 0 **Photo documentation** uses photographs as a means of documenting the current state of a place or comparing "before" and "after." Strength: can be dramatic and persuasive, especially when it complements other forms of data collection. Weakness: may be dismissed or discounted by policy-makers as not serious research.

- 0 **Geographic Information Systems - GIS** uses computer software programs to map out specific resources or outlets in a community. Strength: can be useful for observing patterns in city design and resource availability and communicating issues in a visually attractive manner. Weakness: may not be feasible in many communities that have limited access to computers and to computer software.

- 0 **Direct observation** involves the systematic noting and recording of activities, behaviors and physical objects in the setting being studied as an unobtrusive observer. Strength: can often be a rapid and economical way of obtaining basic socio-economic information on households or communities. If participants are not aware that they are being observed, then they are less likely to change their behavior and compromise the validity of the assessment. Weakness: observations are subject to bias and may differ substantially from researcher to researcher.

- 0 **Key informant interviews** involve an individual, who as a result of their knowledge, previous experience or social status in a community has access to valuable information such as insights about the functioning of the community, problems and needs. Strength: can assist in understanding the context of a program or project, or clarifying particular issues or problems. Weakness: you have to be cautious in assuming that one, *selected* person's words are representative of an entire group's desires and beliefs.

- 0 **Participant observation** requires the researcher to become, in a sense, a member of the community or population being studied. The researcher participates in activities of the community, observes how people behave and interact with each other and with outside organizations, and tries to become accepted as a neighbor or participant rather than as an outsider. The purpose of such participation is not only to see what is happening but also to feel what it is like to be part of the group. Strength: the researcher is able to experience and presumably better understand the community values, needs and desires. Weakness: likely to alter the behavior that is being observed. In addition, ethical issues may arise if the participant observer misrepresents himself/herself in order to be accepted by the community being studied.

- 0 **Semi-structured interviews** involve the preparation of an interview guide that lists a pre-determined set of questions or issues that are to be explored during an interview. This guide serves as a checklist during the interview and ensures that basically the same information is obtained from a number of people. There is a great deal of flexibility in the order and workings of the questions. The interviewer is free to pursue certain questions in greater depth. Strength: it makes interviewing of a number of different persons more systematic and comprehensive by delimiting the issues to be taken up in the interview. Logical gaps in the data collected can be anticipated and closed, while the interviews remain fairly conversational and situational. Weakness: does not permit the interviewer to pursue topics or issues of interest that were not anticipated when the interview guide was elaborated. Also, interviewer flexibility in wording and sequencing questions may result in substantially different responses from different persons, thus reducing comparability.

- 0 Standardized open-ended interviews** involve a set of open-ended questions carefully worded and arranged in advance. The interviewer asks the same questions to each respondent with essentially the same words and in the same sequence. *Strength:* appropriate when several people are doing the interviews and the evaluator wants to minimize the variation in the questions they pose. It is also useful when it is desirable to have the same information from each interviewee at several points in time or when there are time constraints for data collection and analysis. Standardized open-ended interviews allow the assessor to collect detailed data systematically and facilitate comparability among all respondents. *Weakness:* does not permit the interviewer to pursue topics or issues that were not anticipated when the interview instrument was elaborated. Also, standardized open-ended interviews limit the use of alternative lines of questioning with different people depending on their particular experiences.
- 0 Informal conversational interviews** are appropriate when you want substantial flexibility. This method does not rely on a predetermined set of questions, but rather the spontaneous generation of questions in the natural flow of an interaction. Questions are formed in whatever direction appears to be appropriate, depending on the information that emerges from observing a particular setting, or from talking to one or more individuals in that setting. *Strength:* the interviewer is flexible and highly responsive to individual differences, situational changes and emerging new information. *Weakness:* may generate less systematic data that is difficult and time consuming to classify and analyze.
- 0 Focus group interviews** involve small groups of people who share similar backgrounds and experiences. Participants are asked to reflect on the questions asked by the interviewers, provide their own comments, and listen to what the rest of the group has to say and react to their observations. Focus groups differ from other interviews in that they collect people's opinions and perspectives in a social context. Typically, these interviews are conducted several times with different groups so that the evaluator can identify trends in the perceptions and opinions expressed. The interviewer acts as facilitator introducing the subject, guiding the discussion, cross-checking each other comments and encouraging all members to express their opinions. *Strength:* participant interaction helps weed out false or extreme views, thus providing a quality control mechanism. *Weakness:* requires a skillful facilitator to ensure an even participation from all members.
- U Community interviews** (hearings, meetings, and testimonies) are conducted as public meetings in which the whole community is consulted. Typically, these interviews involve a set of factually based fairly close-ended questions. Once the interviewers pose the question, the group will interact to get a consensus around an answer. *Strength:* by inviting the input of the whole community, you can gain valuable information on how well a project is working. *Weakness:* participation may be limited to a few high status members of the community or that community leaders may use the forum to seek consensus on their own views and preferences.

Community Action Model (CAM)

STEPS for Implementing Your Project

SEPT 1: NAME YOUR ISSUE/PROBLEM AND CHOOSE YOUR FOCUS

- Identify your Issue – What problem affects your community? (**REFER TO YOUR PICTURE AND SCENARIO FOR THIS PART**)
- Choose your area of Focus – Be more specific. What are some of the things causing the problem you have identified? What concerns you the most?
- Pick one concern that you will work on.

STEP 2: DEFINE, DESIGN & DO PERSONAL DIAGNOSIS

What Research Activities will you do to find out more about your area of focus. (the main problem):

- Do research on the Internet
- Do research at the library
- Collect and review health information about the problem you identified
- Do surveys to find out attitudes and opinions
- Do interviews with community leaders, residents, agencies, tenants, etc.
- Do petitions to gather support for your issue
- Research existing policies and laws affecting your issue (do these laws help you or make it harder to solve the problem affecting your community?)
- Count physical objects like number of rooms in each unit that have mold to prove there is a problem
- Do focus group with residents, agencies, community leaders, etc.
- Find out who makes decisions and who has the power to give you what you want.

STEP 3: ANALYZE YOUR DIAGNOSIS FINDINGS

- Analyze the information you have gathered
- Develop tables, charts, or other graphic representation of your findings
- Summarize your findings
- List possible actions and recommendations to solve the problem

STEP 4: SELECT ACTION THAT IS ACHIEVABLE AND ACTIVITIES & IMPLEMENT

- Develop action plan.
- Who are you going to approach,
- How are you going to approach them and what are you going to ask that entity to do (around your issue).
- Write a policy or an action you are going to want an entity to take.
- Do health fair to raise awareness and distribute information about tenant's rights
- Do community forums to raise awareness about the problems contributing to asthma
- Have a press event to raise awareness of a new policy or action

STEP 5: MAINTAIN /ENFORCE AN ACTION

- If there is current legislature pending around your issue, decide how you can support it.
 - write a letter to the sponsor/author of your issue (this would be a legislator/politician)
 - call or write enforcing body asking for updates (city agencies, council people, etc)