UNISON

Open College

BLOCK HIR.102
HOUSING-RELATED SURVEY

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1. Introduction

For the housing provider, surveys have become increasingly popular in use. Broadly they can be broken down into two areas:

Stock surveys; and

people surveys.

Stock surveys are concerned with the actual housing that people live in. They will often be carried out by the technical and housing conditions part of the organisation. These will often be surveys which will consider the condition of the stock and be used to determine future repairs and planned improvements programmes and costs. A good example of one of these types of surveys will be a stock condition survey.

People surveys are concerned with interviews with tenants. Most local authorities and housing associations carry out these surveys regularly. A good example of one of these types of survey will be a tenant satisfaction survey, which is designed to find out what tenants think about their homes and the housing service that they receive.

In both of these cases, the basic reason for carrying out the survey is the same. Surveys are carried out when data is not available but is needed to help to solve a problem or to answer a question. They are used to gather "primary" data, which means that they are collecting new information.

2. Survey Types

There are several types of survey that the housing provider can carry out. Which one is chosen depends on factors of:

- what you need to know;
- time; and
- cost.

Questionnaires can include two types of question.

The first is the closed question. This is when the respondent can give one or more answers from a list of possibilities. It is called closed because the possible responses have been established by the researcher. An example of a closed question would be "What type of house do you live in?".

The second is the open question. This is when the respondent can answer in any way they wish. An example of an open question would be "What do you see as the main issues affecting this estate?".

The first consideration in thinking about a survey is determining exactly what you need to know. In itself this will rule out certain types of survey approach. Consider a house condition survey, for example. The housing provider needs from this survey an accurate record of the condition of its housing stock. As we shall see, this need will automatically exclude a postal survey, however well designed, because this sort of survey requires a physical investigation of a house structure.

What types of survey can be carried out?

2.1 The Postal Survey

The postal survey is a questionnaire which is designed to be completed by the respondent on their own and sent back to the housing organisation or the research company carrying out the work.

These surveys use standardised questionnaires in which most questions are pre-coded with boxes for respondents to tick their answers. The questions must be phrased in straightforward and simple language because respondents are not able to get help with anything they do not understand.

The main advantage with self-completion questionnaires is that they are the cheapest form of survey to undertake and a relatively large population can be contacted. Respondents can also complete them at their own convenience. Most often, pre-paid envelopes are included for the respondent to send back their completed questionnaire.

The postal survey does have significant disadvantages, though. The number of people who complete the questionnaires tends to be low, and they are not the best way to explore subjects in real depth because, by their nature, they have to be relatively simple in their design.

2.2 Face-to-Face Interviews

The face-to-face survey involves interviewers visiting people at home and going through a questionnaire with them.

The questionnaires used in this form of survey can be more complex than those used in the postal survey. They can be designed much like those used in a postal survey, in a set order, or be much more

open, with the interviewer exploring issues in depth with the respondent, or they can be a mixture of the two. They may include closed and open-ended questions. Interviewers may record responses by pen, tape recorder or straight onto a portable hand held computer.

The face-to-face interview has both advantages and disadvantages. Interviews can be flexible and a skilled interviewer can get more information from a respondent than could be got from a postal survey.

The big disadvantage with face-to-face surveys are that they are expensive compared to other methods, largely due to interviewer costs. It is also possible for interviewer bias to take place, which can distort results.

2.3 Telephone Surveys

Telephone surveys have similar advantages to face-to-face interviews in that it is possible to do a detailed interview over the phone. They have an added benefit of being able to target a wider population more cheaply than face-to-face surveys.

The big problem with telephone surveys is that they can only be used with those who have a telephone! For housing providers, this would have to be a major consideration when thinking about carrying out this type of survey.

B. Question and Questionnaire Design

The design of a questionnaire is one of the most important parts of the survey process. In all questionnaires problems can arise unless great care is taken in the design of the questions.

These are the key factors which are involved in question design:

- Questions should be simply and clearly worded so that they can be easily understood.
- Questions must be clearly useful and relevant so that the desired information is gathered.
- Questions must be free from bias.
- Questions that may be considered intrusive, such as asking about household income, need to be placed carefully in the questionnaire. This would be a poor first question because it may make the respondent reluctant to continue the interview and/or give an honest answer. The issue of 'personal' questions needs to be carefully thought through, and should be avoided if possible.
- The order in which questions are asked needs to be logical. If several issues are being asked about, which is the case in most surveys, then they should be gone through one by one.
- Questions should be unambiguous and should not themselves contain vague words such as "broadly" or "generally".
- Leading questions should be avoided. For example "don't you think something needs to be done about……." will encourage a positive response.

While designing the questions is obviously important, the questionnaire form itself has to be carefully designed. There are important factors to consider when designing the questionnaire form –

- The form has to show clearly who should complete it.
- The form has to show clearly where the answers should be recorded.
- The form should contain enough space to complete the answers.
- The questions need to be set out in a way that makes it clear how they follow one another.
- The convenience of both the respondent and the survey team who will process the questionnaires needs to be considered.

The overall objective of producing a questionnaire is to collect information and therefore it is worth organising and designing it carefully. A standard practice once the questionnaire is ready is to run a "pilot". The pilot is a test run of the survey. By testing the questionnaire on a small sample of respondents, the researcher is able to judge how well the questionnaire is going to work in practice. Questions which may be difficult can be identified and changed and new ones added if the information coming back needs expanding.

C. Sampling

In research terms, the group we wish to study is called the population. It need not be a group of people. A stock condition survey will have as its population the housing stock of the provider carrying out the survey. If the research is only interested in looking at high rise housing, then its population will be multi-storey blocks.

The importance of clearly defining the population can be seen from our description of telephone surveys – if the housing provider saw its research population as all tenants, then this may be an inappropriate survey method. If, on the other hand, its research population was tenants with telephones, then it would be more valid a method.

The best information one could get would be, of course, to study the whole population. A stock condition survey which studied every home a provider has in their stock would give a complete set of information. Of course, often the sheer size of the population makes this unfeasible in terms of cost and time. Nor is it necessary. In such cases we select a **sample**. A sample is a subset of the population we wish to study.

Researchers use samples to tell them about the wider population at large. It is important then that the sample firstly has the same characteristics of our total population. When carrying out a survey of tenants, the researcher has to try to ensure that the characteristics of those interviewed by gender, race, household status, age, location, household type, house type, and so on is representative of the total number of tenants. In practice, this is very hard to achieve. The researcher must decide which characteristics of the sample must match the population and try to ensure that these are covered in the sample.

In most research, a form of random sample is used. This means that each unit of the population has as much chance of interview as another.

Firstly, a sample frame is developed. This is the list from which the sample is chosen. If a tenant satisfaction survey was being carried out, then the sample frame could be the rents accounts. A computer programme will randomly select those to be interviewed, ensuring that every tenant has as much chance as another to be interviewed.

1. Determining Sample Size

A number of factors determine the size of the sample required:

(1) *heterogeneity of the population* – if the population has a greater degree of variability with respect to the variable of interest, a larger sample is needed. If everyone in the population were the same, a sample of 1 would be sufficient, but if everyone were different, a sample of the entire population would be required.

(2) *desired precision* – when taking a sample of the population there will be some error in the sample estimate, due to the fact that different samples from the same population may give different levels of the population characteristic. It is possible to specify the amount of error that is acceptable and this, in turn, specifies the sample size. It is worth noting that it is the absolute size of the sample that matters and not the proportion of the population that is sampled. Also the size of the sample does not need to be huge to give very precise results (see table below). A general rule of thumb is to have at least 400 in the sample, or each arm of the sample.

Standard errors for a proportion of 50%* for different sample sizes.

Sample Size	Standard error (%)
100	5.0
400	2.5
2,500	1.0
10,000	0.5

*Standard errors are smaller for proportions greater or lesser than 50%

(3) *available resources* – each case in the survey will require a certain amount of money to be spent. If there is a limited budget for data collection, the budget divided by the cost per case will give the sample size. If this sample size is too low (see above), but typically less than 100, the results from the survey will be of limited use.

(4) *number of breakdowns in analysis* – Do the results of the survey need to be broken down and reported by tenure? If so, the number of cases in each tenure should be sufficient to enable the results to be reported with an acceptable degree of precision. If the survey is only interested in LA stock, only 400 surveys are required. If the survey needs to have

information comparing LA to private stock, 400 surveys in each tenure (i.e. 800 in total) are required. Consider the following example:

Sample	400
LA stock	280
LA stock containing >1 person	200
LA with children	150
LA with children <5 years	10

There will be strengths and weakness in the data sets above. The strong data sets will be those concerned with households containing more than one person and households with children. The fact that there are only 10 interviews with households containing children less than five years old will be a weakness, and data from those 10 interviews will not allow you to speak with confidence about that particular household type.

D. Survey Examples

We have looked at what different types of survey there are and how you go about doing them. In the examples below, we will look at two recent surveys that were carried out by the City of Edinburgh Council.

In both these cases, the numbers of households visited for interview was high. Data was collected and then analysed using computer statistical packages. These pieces of software allow you to work with large data sets and then to apply a number of statistical tests to the data. The packages are that available today will also allow you to prepare graphs and other visual representations of your results so that they are readily understood when presented.

The examples below show two very different types of survey. One is a "people" survey and one is a "property" survey. Both use similar methods to select their interview size and population. However, unlike a survey of tenants, a stock condition survey is looking at the house – this means that the person carrying out the individual survey needs to be technically skilled in a different way to the person carrying out a survey of tenants. While surveys of tenants are usually carried out by market or social research organisations, stock condition surveys are usually carried out by chartered surveyors.

Example 1: The Tenant Attitudinal Survey 2001

As we have seen, most housing providers carry out surveys amongst their tenants on a regular basis. The point of these surveys is usually to try and identify what areas of the housing service tenants think is good and what areas they think could be improved.

These surveys are usually called tenant satisfaction surveys. In 2001 Edinburgh took a different approach to their tenant survey. Instead of doing a survey that would only tell you what percentage of tenants are happy or unhappy with the service, the Council decided to do a deeper piece of work. The 2001 survey was designed to explore not just the tenants views of the housing service but what sort of things made people think the way they do about the service. This involved looking at what elements of the housing service were important to the tenant and what they expect from a housing service.

A cross section of tenants were interviewed before the questionnaire was designed so that the Housing Department could find out what tenants thought the most important parts of the housing service were. When this was done, the questions were prepared and they were based on the issues that tenants raised. Tenants identified four main areas of importance. These were –

Housing Allocation

Estate and area management

Repairs and capital improvements

Communication and customer care

A questionnaire was then drawn up and a sample of tenants throughout the city was interviewed. It was important to try and make sure that the sample was accurate so, although tenants were selected randomly for interview, selection was done so that all areas in the city and people living in all housing types in the city were interviewed.

When the survey work was finished, analysis was done through a method called multi-variate analysis. This is based on the view that the world is complex and "multivariate" – every effect has not one but several causes. By using this approach, the results of this survey were able to show not just the satisfaction levels with the housing service but also how the tenants felt about the performance of the Housing Department in relation to their own priorities. This survey went further than most tenant satisfaction surveys because it not only determined how satisfied tenants were with different aspects of the housing service but it also identified how important the different parts of the housing service are to tenants. By using this analysis, it was possible for the Housing Department to map out its strengths and weaknesses in relation to its service priorities.

Example 2: The Stock Condition Survey 2000

Local authorities throughout the United Kingdom face harder financial environments for long-term investment and planning within their housing stock. With increasing investment needs in an ageing housing stock, Councils have begun to look at new approaches which have often involved looking at the long-term investment and maintenance needs of the housing stock.

In Edinburgh, a housing stock condition survey was carried out in 2000. This survey had three main aims. These were –

- To measure housing conditions and attributes across the whole housing stock.
- To give the Council information which would assist it in making maintenance decisions over a longer term planning period.
- To provide a computerised base of housing information which could be maintained and updated over time.

To do this, the stock condition survey involved an overall sample of 3500 homes being visited. The results had to be representative of the total housing stock so this meant that homes were chosen according to the house type and the location of the City they were in.

The survey involved an internal and external inspection of dwellings. There were a number of broad types of information that were collected. These were –

1. Information on the construction of elements in the house, such as central heating.
2. Information on the age of key attributes in the house, such as electrical wiring.
3. Information on the life expectancy of elements in the house.
4. Information on housing standards compared against statutory standards.
5. Information on repairs costs involving both catch-up repairs and planned repairs.
6. Information on improvement costs.
7. Information on current investment needs.

When this survey was completed, analysis was done by house type and geographical area. The information in the stock condition survey has allowed the Council to see both what condition its housing is in now and also to project the likely investment needs for 30 years into the future.