HARC's Guide On

ENGAGING WITH THE COMMUNITY AND COLLECTING DATA DESPITE COVID-19

TAKE SURVEY

Importance of Data Collection

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered the way we live, work, and play in our community. There has been a disruption imposed on our daily operations on a grand scale. Adults and children have adapted to the "new normal" by wearing face masks, practicing social distancing, staying home, learning remotely, working remotely, etc.

But it's still critically important for local service organizations to reach out to their clients/members/target audience during this time! We need to gather feedback from them to better understand their changing needs during this time, and how the services we provide them are helping. In short, we need to engage our community members and collect data from them.

The words "collecting data" are often scary or unwelcome to service organizations, even in the best of times, much less during a pandemic. But HARC is here to provide you with tips to make it more accessible and flexible during these times. Reliable and accurate data is more crucial than ever, especially because COVID-19 is disproportionately affecting people of color, undocumented communities, and historically marginalized communities.[1]

Preparation

To figure out which questions you should be asking, work backwards: what information do you need to do your best work? Do you want to understand more about what your community needs? Do you want to understand more about how they're coping? How satisfied are they with the programs and services you're offering? What could be done better? All questions should be driven by what you need to know.

In any data collection effort, try to capture some demographics as well: age, gender, race, ethnicity are good places to start. This may seem like it's not of interest in the beginning, but will allow you to look at issues of equity and disparities later.

Tips on Writing Questions

- Try to write your questions in an unbiased way. For example, instead of "How great are our programs on a scale from 'great' to 'excellent'?", write "How satisfied are you with these programs on a scale from 'very dissatisfied' to 'very satisfied'?". Asking questions in an objective tone will not influence your respondents' answer choices. A balanced set of answer choices will allow respondents to give honest feedback.

- Avoid double-barreled questions, that is, those that try to ask multiple things in a single question. For example, avoid asking, "how interesting and useful was this presentation?". This is asking two things: how interesting was this presentation? and, how useful was this presentation?. This can be confusing for someone who found the presentation interesting but not very useful. Instead, separate the topics into two different questions.

- Train your staff who are responsible for collecting data to treat it like the highly confidential information it is. Ask them to imagine that this is their own credit card information and to treat it accordingly—they do not talk about it with others, they do not leave completed surveys in public unattended, etc.
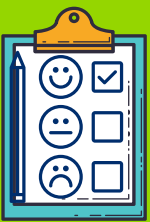
Community Outreach and Data Collection

Despite the shelter-in-place orders, you and your team can still collect feedback from your constituents to find out what they need during these uncertain times. The way you do that has just shifted a little bit.

First, think about who the participants and respondents will be. Ask yourself the following questions: Do they have access to technology (e.g. internet, phone, computer, tablets, etc.)? Will they need help navigating a website or application such as Zoom, Facetime, or Skype? Can they read? If you're making phone calls, what time would be best to call them? Put yourself in their shoes to figure out what's the best way to reach them.

Phone Calls

Because of the shelter-in-place orders, more people are spending time at home. Studies have shown this may be the best time to conduct random digit-dial telephone surveys because people do not have much to do, so they would be willing to take a survey by default.[2] Additionally, many people may feel isolated during this time, so they would be willing to take a survey in order to speak with another person. Lastly, not everyone has access to internet at home so this is an excellent way to access people with limited internet access and be more inclusive. When doing phone calls, be sure to have a general script to guide the call, and some way to track the data (a checklist that the caller fills out as they go through the conversation, or audio-record the call—with the participant's consent—and transcribe it later to make sure you don't miss anything). Now more than ever, be prepared to have longer calls with people, and for them to go off topic to express their fears and concerns.[2] It's important that your callers are empathetic and good listeners.

Staff Example

Our research assistants, Jerry and Amairani, are currently working with UC Riverside's Center for Health Disparities Research on a COVID-19 health disparities research project, where they will be collecting data via phone calls. Jerry and Amairani will have a script that they'll follow for the phone interviews, and they'll be audio-recording them for later transcription. They will be asking open-ended questions from the script, but will need to think quickly to spontaneously respond and probe for more details.

Video Calls

If your participants have access to internet and know how to use video conference applications such as Zoom, then consider using video calls as a way to collect data via interviews or focus groups. Be sure to provide them with a guide of instructions with tips on how to best prepare for a video call. For instance, if you are collecting data from a group discussion, advise them to use the mute button to silence background noise when someone else is speaking.
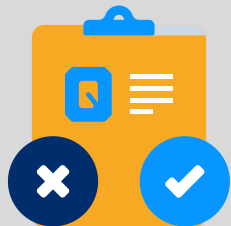
Staff Example

For a project with San Bernardino County, our director of research, Casey, and our research assistant, Jerry, planned to conduct in-person focus groups. However, these plans were interrupted by COVID-19. In order to continue collecting data, Casey and Jerry opted for conducting these focus groups via Zoom. To prepare, Casey and Jerry ensured the participants were digitally literate and aware of Zoom etiquette (e.g. using the mute button). Luckily, the participants had used Zoom before but this may not always be the case, so prepare instructions on how to use Zoom or similar applications if necessary. Also, be mindful that participants may live with others such as children, so they may be interrupted during the focus group. All in all, the focus group went well and our researchers collected rich qualitative data.

Online Surveys

Conducting a web survey may be an effective way to collect data if your target participants have access to the internet and are digitally literate. Keep in mind that this method may underrepresent low-income communities and elderly populations who are less likely to have the ability or willingness to take online surveys.[3] With that being said, there are advantages to online surveys because participants may take it at their own time in a setting of their choice. In addition, these surveys may include multimedia elements such as audio clips and videos, which are not feasible with most survey modes.

Staff Example

Our research associate, Chris, is designing a COVID-19 needs assessment for the Coachella Valley, which will launch in a few weeks. He's making sure to make this survey mobile-friendly, because many people access the internet on their smartphones.[4] For example, in Indio, 89.7% of the population uses smartphones. For many low-income people, having a smartphone is cheaper and more useful than a computer at home, and so their internet is limited to smartphones.

Paper Surveys

Traditional paper surveys are still an effective way to collect data, and they don't require people to have internet access, so they are more inclusive. There are some drawbacks to consider, though. For example, printing surveys can be costly if you are trying to reach thousands of people, and you can no longer rely on being able to distribute them at gathering places since many people are avoiding public places. However, this may be countered by mailing surveys to people's homes and offering an incentive (e.g., "every person who takes this survey gets $5!" or "take this survey and you'll be entered to win $100!"). If you're mailing out surveys, you can increase response rates by including a pre-stamped, pre-addressed return envelope, handwriting the address, mailing out follow-ups with a second copy of the surveys, and avoiding sensitive questions.[3] Paper surveys by their nature exclude people who can't read, so try to make the language of your survey as simple as possible—strive for a 3rd grade reading level. In addition, paper surveys serve as a great collection tool since it is unlikely to spread COVID-19 via mail.[5]

Staff Example

For a project with Desert Health Care District/Foundation (DHCD/F), HARC initially intended to do door-to-door outreach to engage the community, but that's not possible now. Instead, DHCD/F suggested a Facebook Live event, which is a great idea, but this leaves out people who do not have a Facebook account or access to the internet. Therefore, our CEO, Jenna, suggested that we supplement the Facebook Live event with mailed paper surveys to make sure we engage the community that does not have Internet access.

Data Analysis

Now that you've collected this valuable information, how do you bring it all together to learn from it? That's the process of data analysis.

For some of these methods, like online surveys, there are tools that will automatically generate findings for the overall group. For others, like paper surveys, you'll need to enter the data into an online spreadsheet. We recommend using a spreadsheet like Excel or Google Sheets because you can easily build in some formulas to sum up the findings automatically.

You can get some great information by simply tallying up responses and looking at the percentage of the total. If you have someone on your team who's naturally inclined towards numbers and data analyses, they can break it down for you further—are programs working well for some of your clients but not others? Are needs different for different groups of people? This is where the demographic come into play and help you measure potential disparities.

And if you want a more in-depth analysis that takes it a step beyond that, contact HARC and we can help you out!

Sources:
1. https://buildingmovement.org/blog/we-need-to-collect-more-data-during-covid-19-and-believe-it/
2. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/17/us/politics/polling-coronavirus.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage
3. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3964639/
4. 2018: ACS 5-year estimates data profiles, Table ID: S2801
5. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html

For more resources, please visit:

HARCdata.org/covid-19

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