

Challenges to Doing Evaluation in Rural Areas

Rural programs face unique constraints when it comes to conducting evaluation activities. Many strategies that are fairly straightforward to use in urban or suburban areas may not work that well in rural settings. To find out some of the specific evaluation challenges of tobacco programs in rural counties, we spoke with project directors from four rural local lead agencies: Nancy Mahannah of Mono County, Karen Kong of Inyo County, Bill Hall of Modoc County and Shane Marquardt of Alpine County.

One of the biggest challenges in doing evaluation in rural areas can be to capture a large enough sample size for data collection. With much smaller populations, people can be sparsely spread out time-consuming and difficult to size. "We only have 1300 sample size of 200 that TCP

collectors might have to wait order to catch enough people reach larger groups of people at one time are limited. Big community events might only happen once or twice a year, so projects need to find alternative ways to reach a wide spectrum of community members. One strategy some use to assess public sentiment is to conduct a series of focus groups rather than a survey. Another is to target attendees at key institutions like churches or schools while they are a "captive" audience. Bill Hall said, "We went to every church and asked if they would be willing to attach our brief questionnaire to their programs for the day."



over a wide distribution area, making it more get a representative sample of sufficient people in our town," said Karen Kong, "so the wants us to collect is hard to get."

Lower population density means that data outside a grocery store for several days in for a public intercept survey. Opportunities to



Karen paid a visit to the only fast food joint in her town in order to access a large sample of students. "Because the high school has no cafeteria, the kids go for fast food. By going there at lunch time, I was able to get one third of the school's population to take our survey," she noted.

Sometimes unexpected factors can hamper even the best planned data collection efforts. Nancy Mahannah's project was trying to conduct a telephone survey about household smoking behaviors during the height of the OJ Simpson trial. "At first we had a hard time finding any telephone surveyors," she said. "Then we found surveyors but nobody wanted to talk to us. One interviewer was even told, 'Call me back after the trial because that's what I'm gonna be watching every night.'" The interviewee didn't want to be pulled away from the TV until the trial was over.

As a result of the poor success rate of reaching people by phone, Nancy and her team tried a different approach by doing a random block survey (door-to-door) several months later. She said, "We sent interviewers out in January but people did not want to open their doors because of the heat escaping and they didn't want to invite strangers into their homes." On top of that, data collectors had to deal with dogs that were tied to people's porches and snow and ice on all of the steps. Nancy continued, "It just became physically impossible to do the survey during that time. So we ultimately ended up attaching questionnaires to school newsletters and gave the teachers an incentive for getting them back to us. We got a FANTASTIC return rate, like over 70%!" So sometimes it may take several tries to hit upon the right strategy. You just have to be flexible, get creative and remain persistent.



Location and weather play a decisive role in the evaluation efforts of places like Alpine County, the smallest county in the state. Because it borders Nevada, many of the county's residents attend school, shop or spend leisure time across the state line,



which complicates data collection processes. Some communities there are split into multiple jurisdictions and as many as three to four different telephone prefixes or area codes. In that case, a community phone survey doesn't make sense because half of the residents belong to Calaveras County and the other half to Alpine. So sampling can require special attention.

Additionally, the weather closes off key mountain passes from October or November until as late as May or June. "This extends a normally one hour drive to four hours or more (each way)," remarked Shane Marquardt. "For that reason we don't go to Bear Valley in the winter months unless we have to. Otherwise you have to spend the night there

because you can't drive there and back in one day. This means we schedule most of our evaluation activities during summer."

In addition to small populations, far distances and challenging weather conditions, rural counties also may face other factors that can hamper their evaluation activities. In Bill Hall's town there is no local media, so it's hard to use the media to assess his community's support of his project's tobacco control activities. Inyo County has no local colleges from which to draw eager public health or social science students to help with data collection. Consequently, Karen has a smaller pool of volunteers to work with - high school students she doesn't like to take away from evening homework time, or adults who prefer to help out only during business hours.

In counties with a mix of larger cities and rural areas, such as Modoc County which includes Chico and Redding, countywide data is skewed by larger urban centers and may not reflect the realities of small towns and unincorporated areas. For this reason, Bill tries to verify if the county-level data matches conditions in rural parts of his region. "For example, I'll look at the Healthy Kids survey and see if the trends for teen smoking prevalence mirror what I see at school -- I'll observe how many students go smoke at lunch." In this way, he can get a rough approximation to compare with ratios in countywide survey data.

Size does matter

Small rural counties are not without their advantages, however. Karen can "do all of the youth tobacco purchase survey in every tobacco retailer in the county in one day," even with driving two hours to some locations. "We start in the morning at one end of the county and cover all of the stores in between and finish by evening," she noted.

Bill knows practically everybody in his community so he has direct access to everyone. He describes, "Because I am on the City Planning Commission, the County Roads Commission, a member of the Rotary Club, attend church and coach school sports, I can ask key informants anything we need to know." He also is not above going to every business in town to ask them what they think.

So while rural counties face some unique challenges when it comes to collecting data to inform their programs, the very nature of their small size and close-knit communities can also work to the advantage of well-placed tobacco project personnel.

If you would like to share any strategies you've found effective in meeting the challenge of doing evaluation in rural counties, please contact TCEC at rakipke@ucdavis.edu. We also would love to get your photos of any evaluation activities you might be conducting.

Photos by McMorr, The Consumerist, la fattina, Kambiz Kamrani and M. Jeremy Goldman

