

Making the Right Connections: Adapting a Public Opinion Survey for a Low SES Population



The commuters waited patiently for their next bus or train. Some read, some listened to music through headphones, and a few smoked, exposing others to harmful secondhand fumes. Gena Knutson and her staff at the Vista Community Clinic wanted that scenario to change.

The Vista tobacco control project was interested in promoting a policy to ban smoking at bus and train stops in the North County Transit District of San Diego County. Buses and trains had long been smoke-free, but there was no policy on smoking at transit stops. Knowing the smoking rates and attitudes of bus and train riders about secondhand smoke would help the Vista program make a case for the need for a smoke-free transit stop policy to the board members of the transit district.

Gena began by contacting the Tobacco Control Evaluation Center (TCEC) to see if there were any transit stop surveys that she could look at for some ideas about questions to ask. Robin Kipke, an evaluation associate at TCEC, researched the repository of more than 400 surveys and observational instruments collected from state-funded tobacco control projects over the years. There were no existing surveys aimed at bus or train riders, so Robin adapted an instrument on smoking in outdoor public places and outlined some ways Gena could adapt it for use at bus stops.

The short, one-page survey asked how mass transit users felt about a variety of smoke-free policy options for train platforms or bus stops and their opinions on smoking in general. The remaining eight questions asked demographic questions such as age, race, city of residence and whether the respondent suffered from any respiratory problems (which could be aggravated by secondhand smoke). The survey was designed to be self-administered to a sample of 350 transit riders as they waited for their bus or train to arrive.



With surveys in hand, Vista Community Clinic staff visited transit stops in the



North County area to begin their work. The field test of the train survey with 25 commuters worked without a hitch. The test of the bus survey did not go as smoothly, however. Data collectors approached people waiting for the bus, and asked if they were willing to complete a short survey. Many people agreed to do so, but some had trouble understanding the questions. One woman asked a staff member to read her the questions. Apparently, among this rider population the questions were too long and complicated. It was clear that the population of bus riders differed from that of the train riders.

When crafting the surveys, Gena and her staff had assumed that mass transit users constituted one population-commuters. However, it soon became apparent that bus riders differed from train riders in at least one respect—they appeared to be less educated and had greater difficulty with the survey wording. This raised several possible hypotheses: Either bus riders were of lower socioeconomic status than train riders (with less education and lower literacy) OR perhaps they were not native English speakers (or readers) and this accounted for their trouble understanding the survey language. To test that hypothesis and explore the characteristics of the different types of riders, several more demographic questions about income levels and primary language could have been added to the survey.

Based on what they encountered during the pilot test, the Vista Community Clinic staff made the bus survey easier to read and complete. The survey was shortened by deleting several opinion questions as well as demographic questions. Words like "designated areas," "secondhand smoke" and "health hazards" were changed to more everyday language. With fewer questions, a larger font was used for the text and the amount of white space was increased.

After reviewing the survey results, Gena concluded, "What was very useful to us was the information on the types of people who were using the buses compared to those who were using trains." The survey showed that 35% of bus riders smoked daily, but only 14% of train riders did. The survey results clearly demonstrated a need for a smoke-free policy. Four waves of the intercept surveys will continue to collect

the opinions of bus and train riders which can then be used as evidence of the need for smoke free transit stop policies when meeting with policy makers.

For useful ideas about conducting evaluation activities with low SES populations, look at the [Culture in Evaluation Low SES Populations](#) on the TC Evaluation Center's website. Another resource is a handout from the TECC library, [Developing Materials for Low SES Populations](#) which has some good advice for developing educational materials that are just as applicable to developing new surveys.

Photos by Stringberd, LA Wad and Robin Kipke