

Objectivity in Data Collection

Organizations collect data on programs to understand their accomplishments, challenges, and whether they are achieving their objectives. To get an accurate picture of their program's performance, decision makers at organizations must carefully consider how to collect the data. Programs make decisions when collecting data that could inadvertently cause organizations to inaccurately estimate what they are trying to measure. A common way to collect data is through surveys. When conducting surveys, inaccurate estimation of the true value is known as survey error. If results do not accurately represent the truth, they may not reflect the experience of everyone who received the program. Ensuring objectivity in data collection can reduce the likelihood of survey error. The video introduced a few types of survey error that can happen in data collection and suggested strategies to ensure objectivity. These are described below and key terms are defined in Table 1.



Select a format that all respondents can access equally and easily. This decreases the possibility that one group of respondents will not complete the surveys and thus be underrepresented in the survey sample (known as nonresponse error).



Choose people who do not have a direct stake in the data collection to administer the surveys. This decreases the potential for unintentional influence in how respondents answer questions (known as the observer-expectancy effect).



Collect data in a way that makes respondents feel safe to answer the questions honestly. This can be done by stating in the instructions that respondents can refuse to participate or skip any questions they don't want to answer. This decreases the potential for respondents answering sensitive questions in the way they think they are supposed to (known as social desirability bias).



Train the data collectors to ensure they all collect data in the same way. Training should cover providing survey instructions to respondents, answering questions about the surveys, and handling and storing completed surveys.

Table 1. Key terms

Term	Definition
Nonresponse error	When data are not representative of all respondents because some respondents did not answer some or all survey questions
Observer-expectancy effect	When the observer subconsciously influences the respondent
Social desirability bias	When respondents answer in a way that they think is preferred

For more on survey error and its sources:

This book chapter describes two types of error in surveys: bias and variability: https://uk.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-assets/59319_book_item_59319.pdf

This paper provides a simple framework for understanding the possible types of survey error: https://rd.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007%2F978-94-007-0753-5_3034

These sites provide an overview of types of survey error: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/curiosity/total-survey-error-learn-this-term/> and <https://www.qualtrics.com/blog/5-common-errors-in-the-research-process/>

For more on biases and other types of errors:

This video provides an overview of types of survey response biases: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zaK4xfAqpY0>

This webpage explains the observer-expectancy effect: <https://thedecisionlab.com/biases/observer-expectancy-effect/>

This webpage discusses response bias, including social desirability bias: <https://thedecisionlab.com/biases/response-bias/>

For more on training survey data collectors:

This brief provides guidelines on preparing for and administering surveys to youth: https://www.prepeval.com/DataCollection/Survey_Admin_Guidelines.pdf

This webinar provides guidelines on survey administration that could be covered in a training: https://www.prepeval.com/DataCollection/Survey_Admin_Webinar.pdf

About this series

This video series, and the accompanying tip sheets on understanding and collecting high-quality data, were created as part of the [Sexual Risk Avoidance Education National Evaluation \(SRAENE\)](#). The series covers a range of data-related topics to help grantees understand the importance of high-quality data and provide guidance on how they can collect them in their program. Some of the resources are drawn from topic areas that are not related to SRAE, but the content on data is still relevant

FYSB does not recommend any particular survey platform or data system that may be referenced in tip sheets.

For more information or questions, contact the SRAENE team at SRAETA@mathematica-mpr.com.