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The Police Engaging the Business Community: Using Survey Research to Examine Needs

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The Police Engaging the Business Community: Using Survey Research to Examine Needs

This case study describes a survey research project in an experiential, classroom/ field setting. It provides an example of the collaboration between a practitioner agency (police department) and researcher (the University). The research project provided students hands-on experience 'doing' survey research and they actively participated in the process from start to finish. The project gave students the opportunity to engage with the community, understand the issues that are important to local businesses as they relate to public safety, and perhaps most importantly, increased students' understanding of the research process which they will be able to use once they are practitioners themselves.

Learning Outcomes

After completing this case study, you should

- Have a better understanding of the research process
- Distinguish that the research question drives the selection of the data collection plan
- Understand the trade-offs between different survey research methodologies
- Be able to describe important elements of informed consent
- Appreciate that even the best research plan may experience hiccups along the way

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Project Overview: Survey Research

In the criminal justice discipline, there is a continued emphasis to establish research-practitioner collaborations especially with regard to decision making. This emphasis has only grown stronger as public sector resources have continued to wither. To cite a dated cliché, agencies must 'do more with less'. One potential solution is for local police agencies (or other criminal justice agencies) to partner with university researchers to provide resources and expertise the organization may have lost during budgetary contractions. In this instance, a local law enforcement agency (practitioner) utilized the resources of a local university (researcher) to address questions regarding satisfaction and allocation of patrol resources.

This project was modeled to include survey research from the formulation of the question to the presentation of findings and recommendations to the collaborating agency. The Capstone in Criminal Justice is a required course and is taken by students in their senior year. The course and the collaboration with the local police department provided students an active role in addressing an issue or problem, design of an instrument, collection and analysis of data, and presentation of results to a local government body. The following narrative describes the research process in detail.

Research Question—What Do We Want to Know?

Prior to the beginning of the spring semester 2014, the Captain from the local police department and the professor of the Capstone in Criminal Justice course discussed ideas for potential research collaborations that might serve for a project for the criminal justice program's Capstone course. What resulted was a hands-on research endeavor whereby students developed a method to answer questions posed by the police department. This entailed the creation of a data collection instrument, creation of a list of elements, and a host of other issues that were brought to life through the research experience narrated herein.

Questions to Be Answered

In past efforts to address the needs of merchants and service providers along the central business corridor in the city, the police department funded a position for a neighborhood officer to patrol the corridor on foot. Due to budget cuts, the position was eliminated and the department sought other means to ensure that the needs of the businesses were tended to, albeit in a less systematic manner. In the spring of 2014, the department was ready to launch a new patrol initiative that allocated a dedicated officer to the corridor area for specific shifts. There were three overarching questions to be addressed:

- what are the issues and concerns that impact the businesses (on their block)?
- what times do businesses perceive to be most important for patrol presence?
  • what are the general perceptions that businesses have of the police?

However, due to the lack of resources for the police department to carry out their own research, the answers to the questions were yet to be determined. Enter: the Capstone class.

At the onset, in addition to the questions being asked, the department requested that a listing of businesses and contact information for those who participated in the survey effort be compiled.

What was the best approach to answer the specific questions posed by the police department? After considering different research methodologies, the preferred method was determined to be a survey because the questions to be answered involved gathering information on people's opinions and perceptions. Other methodologies such as secondary data analysis, systematic social observations, and an experimental approach were not amenable to the current effort. There was a great deal of discussion about the different types of surveys that could be employed for this project.

Survey Instrument—What Are We Going to Ask?

Due to a number of considerations, the research group was leaning toward a self-administered survey—pencil and paper, not online because we did not have access to email addresses of the businesses located in this corridor (in the subsequent years, this information may be available). At the beginning of the semester, students consulted the extant literature to address specific topics of the survey: the types of surveys of businesses that were typically conducted by police departments, specific questions asked and how were they coded, and finally, what would be considered a solid response rate?

Map and Survey Teams

The police department had identified the area where they were proposing to increase patrol presence with the additional officer (see Figure 1). It included the main commercial corridor (approximate 1.5 miles) of the city and the streets one block to the north and one block to the south. In addition, it included an area adjacent to the core business district known as German Village. Students were assigned to either the 'map' or 'survey' team. The map team was responsible for putting together the list of elements. The survey team was responsible for developing the survey instrument. Non-residential land uses (retail, manufacturing, churches, offices, social service agencies, non-profit organizations, etc.) were the target audience for the survey. Respondents for the survey were the business owners or managers.

Figure 1. Map 1 High/main street corridor.

Main/High Street Corridor
Businesses
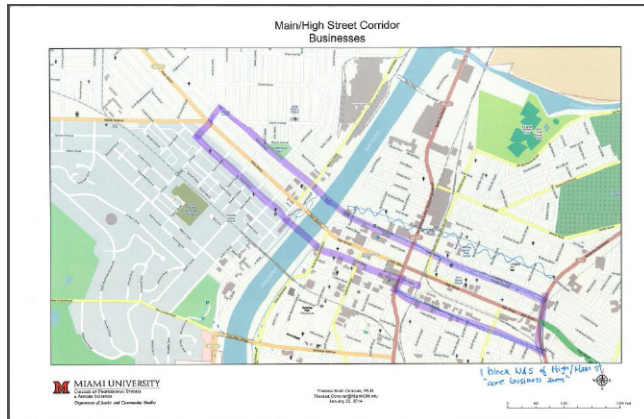
Map Team

The police department delineated the area in which they were interested. There was no list of businesses for this area. Students would need to devise a method for constructing the equivalent. Sources considered included the county auditor's real estate search page, Google Earth, and other resources. In the end, it was decided that addresses would be field checked—meaning that students would walk and/or drive through the area and write down the business names and addresses. It was decided that for multi-story buildings, only the first-floor occupants would be surveyed. All non-residential establishments would be included in the survey effort. Based on the canvassing effort, there were 196 businesses. This number appeared logistically and financially feasible for our group to manage. This small-scale project would not require a sample survey —we would attempt to collect information on all 196 businesses in the area. As such, probability sampling was not employed, so the results may not be generalizable to other populations (Maxfield & Babbie, 2012). However, the project will provide the police department with the information they need in order to best allocate patrol resources and to better understand the issues of the businesses they serve along the central business corridor. This information may be transferable (Andres, 2012) to other communities looking to address similar questions.

Survey Team

Prior to the survey team drafting the survey instrument, every student in class was responsible for obtaining three articles relating to police-community surveys (with an emphasis on businesses–non-residential entities) and/or three examples of surveys they found in their search. Each student uploaded their findings to the course learning management system. This enabled all students to view the literature and examples in order to guide them in the creation of the class survey.

Students on the survey team were responsible for creating a prototype which would be shared with the class and critiqued. The class met two times each week; students used the second meeting of the week to complete the project work during class time. Through this effort, the draft survey was created.

The draft survey was distributed in class, and we painstakingly went over each and every question: the format, the wording and possible responses. A large part of the time was spent on addressing the exhaustiveness and mutual exclusivity of responses categories. I could tell many students were growing weary (read: glazing over) due to the level of detail and the length of time it took to cover all 16 questions in the initial draft. This group exercise hammered home the importance of question wording, for example, one question was, 'How long has your business been in operation at this location?' How would people answer to this as an open-ended question? Would they respond in months or years? The strengths and weaknesses of question working and response patterns were discussed.

In a reflective writing assignment, students lamented about the labored nature of the task of going over the survey, but the majority commented about how it crystalized their understanding of the importance of wording for survey question validity, which was something they had not considered before.

The final survey included 10 closed-ended and 1 open-ended question. Although the informed consent form was included with the survey, critical information (i.e. confidentiality and voluntariness) was reiterated on the survey itself. The survey contained four pages in all, which were printed on an 11 × 17-inch sheet and folded in

half. The majority of the questions were closed-ended and presented as Likert scale items addressing the following: perceptions of safety, specific disorder and crime incidents identified as a concern to business owners, any police contact respondents may have had within the past 12 months and the level of satisfaction with that specific contact, perceptions of police presence in the area, satisfaction with the police department, methods that would increase engagement with the business community, times when police presence is most needed, familiarity with officers, and a check-off to describe the category of business the respondent most closely fits. The open-ended question asked how the police department could serve the respondent's business better.

Contact information for both the professor and the police captain were provided at the end of the survey in case respondents had questions. The consent form let respondents know that they could receive a copy of the final report findings by contacting the professor. The professor's contact information (email, mailing address, and fax) was provided within the cover letter and on the survey (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Front page of survey.

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Research Ethics: Institutional Review Board–Human Subjects Exemption

We were ready to hit the streets, right? No. Before the survey could be distributed to businesses, the instrument needed to receive approval from the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Because the survey required asking questions of human subjects, students were required to complete the University's training process for undergraduates involved in class or group research projects. This online training was completed through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative's (CITI) online modules. Students were required to complete the core modules and three additional modules of their choice. Once completed, students forwarded their completion certificate to the professor.

After everyone had completed the required online training, a member of the University's Office for the Advancement of Research and Scholarship (OARS) visited our class to

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walk us through the IRB review processes. He provided a template for the informed consent form which included eight elements that had to be addressed:

- description of project
- description of potential benefits/reasons for participating
- description of activities
- description of how confidentiality will be maintained
- discussion of risk
- discussion of use of data
- description of voluntariness
- contact information for researcher and University's Research Compliance Office

For the class, students were required to draft a consent letter to potential survey respondents and submit it to the professor. The project required the final survey instrument to be reviewed by the IRB to determine whether it was exempt from human subjects requirements.

The survey instrument and draft consent form (cover letter), along with a Human Subjects Research: Exempt Certification Application, were submitted to the University's IRB. The instrument received human subjects exemption because the focus of the research was not individuals, rather data were to be collected from businesses. The exemption was sought because the proposed research was to be conducted using survey procedures whereby 'any disclosure of the subjects responses outside the research could not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation' (IRB form). The human subjects exemption was granted.

Once this approval was granted, we were ready to deliver the survey packets to businesses in the study area. The survey packet included the cover letter (consent form), survey, and a business reply envelope. The business reply envelope was included as a mechanism to increase the response rate, since respondents would not be responsible for paying for a stamp to return the survey.

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Method of Distribution

Options for disseminating the survey were discussed. Potential methods included in-person interview of the owner or manager of businesses, mailing the surveys to the businesses, dropping off the surveys, even if no one was around to personally take it, or hand-delivering surveys to the business owners or managers. Cost and time were prevailing factors in determining how the surveys would reach their destinations.

Interviewing business owners would require setting an interview time which would expend a considerable amount of effort in both the scheduling of the appointment and conducting the survey itself. The cost of postage prohibited the mailing of the surveys to all businesses in the study area. Dropping the surveys off unattended at businesses, while quick and easy, was not seen as desirable because they might not reach their intended target. It was suggested that the survey be taped to the door if the owner was not in. The group decided that would not be a good idea because it could be taken by a passerby and it would be difficult to track who had actually received the instrument. After a great deal of discussion and deliberation, it was determined that the best method would be to physically hand-deliver the survey packet to business owners/managers or their representatives. According to William M.K. Trochim (2006), the household drop-off survey, or hand-delivered survey, provides the best of both worlds in combining advantages of the mail survey and the group-administered survey. The advantages include (1) the ability of the respondent to answer questions in private on their own time and (2) the ability of the respondent to ask questions due to the face-to-face interaction with the student delivering the survey. A third advantage for our project was that this method allowed us to deliver the majority of our surveys to 196 businesses without having to incur the cost of postage.

Students would make two attempts to deliver the survey packet and if contact was not made after the second attempt, the survey would be mailed via the United States Postal Service (USPS). Although there were costs to be incurred, time was limited and the surveys needed to be delivered as expeditiously as possible so that they could be returned, the data entered and analyzed by the end of the semester. Adding to this time crunch was the fact that we received a lot of snow and the university had canceled a number of our class sessions due to the inclement weather.

Another measure implemented to increase responses rates was a follow-up card. This card was delivered to all addresses in the study area. The card thanked those that had already returned the survey and also reminded those who had not yet returned the survey to do so. In the event someone had misplaced the survey, instructions were included on how to obtain a new one. The reminder card was expected to increase response rates (Dillman, 1999).

Who Are We Going to Ask? Where Are They Located?

Gathering Information on Businesses in the Study Area

Obtaining frank feedback was a critical component of this research and it was felt that respondents would be more forthcoming if they knew their identities could not be tracked back to their responses. The survey was confidential; no identifying information was requested from the respondents. The identities of the businesses were tracked by a unique identifier. Each survey was printed with a unique number on the last page of the four-page survey (see Figure 3). This enabled us to track when the survey was delivered, when it was returned, and whether any follow-up was needed, and it ultimately allowed for the aggregation of responses to the block level in terms of concerns and problems, and ideal times for patrol allocation.

Figure 3. Unique identifier.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your input is appreciated.

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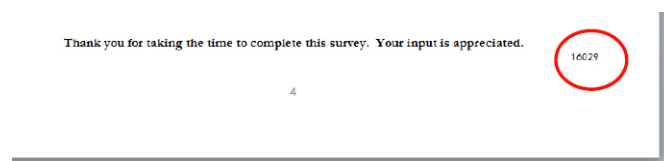
The study area was divided into three geographic areas: German Village (pilot), East, and West. The pilot test in the German Village allowed us to pretest the process in a smaller area. There were approximately 50 surveys delivered. After distribution, the students had a debriefing session to go over issues that they had incurred and how those could be addressed in the future. Next stop: Main Street.

Survey Packet

One class period was dedicated to assembling the envelope with the survey, consent form, and postage reply envelope for the pilot area. Two students graciously volunteered their time to assemble the packets for the main corridor over their spring break. Again, the level of detail required to ensure that all of the information was included, that the letters and survey instruments were inserted in the same direction, gave yet another example of how important details are to the survey process.

Managing Workflow and Data Collection

There were 196 establishments for which survey data were going to be collected, a spreadsheet was created to track the responses. It was important that the dates of delivery be tracked so that those that were not deliverable could be reattempted; upon the second unsuccessful attempt, the survey packet would be mailed via USPS. The spreadsheet was updated once the completed surveys were returned.

Next, an online data entry interface was created through a web-based survey application in order for survey responses to be entered. This enabled multiple students to enter the data simultaneously. Once the responses were entered, the data were exported into a spreadsheet and analyzed.

Field Protocol

Because the method of delivery was face to face, students were aware that appearances and perceptions mattered. Students created a protocol which included a

script and addressed how to present oneself in terms of physical appearance. Students decided that business casual was preferred. Students also wore name tags with their first name and the University's logo for identification purposes.

The class was again divided up to drop-off surveys. I sorted the lists by street name and then by even and odd numbers to aid in the ease of delivery. Students worked in pairs and were given specific address ranges to deliver the surveys. Issues of safety were addressed in class. In the event of an emergency, students were instructed to dial 911. Also, all students and the professor had each other's phone numbers in case they needed to make contact while they were out in the field. The professor accompanied the students in the field for the pilot survey and subsequent survey of the central business corridor.

Students found that many businesses were not opened at 8:30 a.m., the time that our class started. A second attempt was made to deliver the surveys to the owner or manager. If this was not successful, the survey packet was mailed to them via USPS.

Pilot Test

The German Village area was added to the project by the police department. This was good because it provided a small geographic area to test out the field protocol in delivering the surveys and to address any issues expected and unexpected that came about. After the pilot, the group debriefed. Initially, the survey was going to be left with only a manager/owner—no surveys were going to be left unattended. It was determined that as long as the survey would not be left out in the elements it could be put in a mail slot. Canvassers were specifically instructed not to put the envelopes into USPS mailboxes in accordance with federal postal regulations.

Lessons learned: If you are using an organization's postage reply permit, make sure that it is valid. It may be wise to drop one prepaid postage reply envelope in the mail and wait for its return. Our pilot surveys were hand-delivered the Thursday before spring break. The week after spring break, envelopes were still not returned. Upon checking, it was discovered that the postage reply permit was canceled due to lack of activity. Needless to say, this was not an anticipated event.

In the Field!

The kick-off to deliver the surveys along the central business corridor happened on 1 April 2014. It turned out to be a beautiful day to be out in the field. As an added bonus, it was April Fool's Day, a day on which practical jokes are customary. A business owner along the corridor (and in our study area) was a practical joker. He had a faux skunk on a string hiding in a recycling bin. When people would walk by, he would be inside the restaurant and would pull the string with the skunk on it across the public sidewalk in an effort to prank passersby. We had quite a few chuckles watching pedestrians' reactions. This wasn't something we could have experienced in the classroom. Being in the field to distribute the surveys gave students another perspective of the city—one they do not often see unless on foot. It also allowed them to see the environment in which the establishments were operating. Again, this was not something that could be equally accomplished in the classroom.

The project enabled students to be involved in research outside the classroom, gave students a chance to interact with community members, and provided them the opportunity to put research skills into action. For those students who had research methods prior to this course, it is hoped that it solidified concepts discussed in that class. Students who have yet to take research methods will be able to draw upon experiences from this project to form a better understanding of methodological concepts.

Deliverables

Working in a collaborative manner, students entered the survey results, analyzed data, wrote the research report, and gave a presentation to the police department. Recommendations based on the extant literature regarding programs and policies other communities have implemented to increase partnerships between the police and business communities were also included. In the end, students have a report that includes the entire research process that they can share with prospective employers as

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an example of their research capabilities. The report will be provided to the police as well as the businesses who participated in the survey.

The university sponsors an Undergraduate Research Forum each spring for students to present their individual or class project research. A few students were interested in participating in the poster sessions; however, the delays in getting the surveys out and returned impacted the time schedule to enter data, thereby limiting the data available to analyze. Unfortunately, students were not able to participate in the forum.

Overall, this research project covered the entire research spectrum, with a particular focus on conducting survey research. The benefits of this project were multiple: (1) students were able to have a hands-on experience with research, (2) the police department and community benefitted by having the expertise of an academic faculty member leading the effort with the assistance of her students to carry out the research at minimal cost to the agency, and (3) furthermore, it is hoped that the process lays the foundation for future practitioners to understand and appreciate the researcher–practitioner relationships that can exist between universities and criminal justice agencies.

The design was cross-sectional; however, this effort is to serve as the baseline to evaluate future efforts of the police in terms of citizen satisfaction and other measures of the police. It is expected that it will be re-administered each year. This project was conceived to create a baseline of information from which the police department could use to compare future efforts in subsequent years. It is possible that this could become part of the capstone experience where future students could become involved in the research process. However, at that point many of the challenges that were experienced on this maiden voyage can be anticipated and corrected with much less time being spent on overcoming the unexpected.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

- 1. What sources could students have used to identify the business (non-residential) establishments in the study area? In your community, what resources exist to compile a list of businesses/services in a defined block?

Make a list. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each of these sources of data?

- 2. Why is it important for local governments (including the police) to be concerned with how well they are doing in the eyes of their citizens?
- 3. Discuss how an online survey could be administered. What information would be required to conduct a survey online? How do you think the response rate would compare to that of mailed or telephone surveys?
- 4. What qualitative methods could have been incorporated into this project?

Web Resources

Reisig, M. D. (n.d.). *Conducting Community Mail Surveys. Michigan State University.* Retrieved from http://cj.msu.edu/assets/Outreach-NCCP-ES10.pdf

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