



Module on Survey Methods: Survey Methods Overview

Module Section Title

“Survey Methods in Social Science Research: From Design to Data”

Course Level

Undergraduate

Duration

1-4 weeks (can be shortened or expanded)

Survey Methods Overview Section Description

This module section introduces students to survey research as a foundational method in the social sciences. Students will examine how surveys are used across various disciplines, including sociology, psychology, political science, public health, and education, to gather data about people’s beliefs, behaviors, and experiences. Emphasis will be placed on the entire survey research process, including identifying research questions, designing instruments, sampling, administering surveys, analyzing results, and considering ethical issues. In the subsequent weeks, students will explore public opinion polling as a specialized and highly visible application of survey research.

Through interactive tools and hands-on survey development, students will learn to critically assess and apply survey methods in academic and real-world settings.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this module, students will be able to:

- Describe the role of surveys in social research across disciplines.
- Identify key components of the survey research process (research questions, sampling, design, administration, analysis).
- Recognize common sources of bias and error in survey data, including nonresponse, measurement, and coverage errors, and understand more comprehensive error metrics beyond just the margin of sampling error.
- Develop and refine survey items using best practices for question wording and format, applying methods like the Tailored Design Method.

- Apply principles of ethical research, including informed consent, confidentiality, and data validity, especially when integrating survey responses with external data sources.
- Distinguish between different modes of survey administration (e.g., in-person, phone, online, mail, text-message) and their strengths/weaknesses, considering shifts in modern polling practices.
- Analyze and interpret basic survey data, including an understanding of large-scale weighting adjustments.
- Explain the role of public opinion polling in society and evaluate the quality of reported polls, considering institutional constraints and the complexities of predictive framing.

Key Topics

- The role of surveys in social research.
- Types of surveys (cross-sectional, longitudinal, mixed mode).
- Writing effective survey questions and constructing a questionnaire.
- Sampling strategies: Probability and Nonprobability (random, stratified, convenience, snowball).
- Modes of survey administration (in-person, phone, online, mail, text message).
- Common errors: Total survey error framework, including measurement error, sampling bias, nonresponse bias, coverage error, and the limitations of the conventional margin of sampling error.
- Ethical issues in survey research: IRB, informed consent, confidentiality, privacy, data validity, and the ethical implications of linking non-survey data.
- Emerging tools for public opinion research in the digital age, including modeling-heavy approaches and the ethical risks associated with them, like “pollwashing”.

Suggested Readings

To provide a comprehensive understanding of survey methods and public opinion polling, the readings are categorized into **Core Texts** for foundational knowledge and **Specialized Readings** for contemporary issues and ethical considerations.

I. Core Texts & Foundational Methodology:

- **Schutt, Russell K. 2014. *Investigating the Social World: The Process and Practice of Research*. 8th ed. Pp 459-554. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.**
 - This chapter offers an accessible and foundational overview of survey research, introducing key principles of questionnaire design, modes of survey administration, sampling, and ethical concerns. It is particularly effective in explaining how different survey techniques impact data quality and validity.
- **American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR). 2024. “Code of Ethics and Transparency Initiative.” AAPOR.org.**
 - AAPOR's ethical guidelines and its Transparency Initiative are foundational documents in modern polling. They emphasize the importance of full disclosure of methods, responsible data handling, and honesty in reporting poll results. This source is central to understanding the ethical and professional standards shaping the contemporary polling field.

- **American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR). 2024. Ethics and Standards. Washington, DC: AAPOR.**
 - AAPOR's Code of Professional Ethics and Practices outlines expectations for transparency, accuracy, and integrity in public opinion research. It serves as the foundation for ethical polling and underpins AAPOR's Transparency Initiative, which encourages disclosure of methods and limitations in all survey reports.
- **Kennedy, Courtney, et al. 2023. "How Public Polling Has Changed in the 21st Century." Pew Research Center.**
 - This Pew report outlines key shifts in polling practices over the past two decades, such as the rise of text-message surveys, declining landline response rates, and the growth of nonprobability online panels. It explains how polling organizations have adapted methods to preserve data quality in the face of technological and social change.
- **Noy, Shakked, et al. 2023. "Emerging Tools for Public Opinion Research in the Digital Age." *Harvard Data Science Review* 5(3).**
 - This article critically examines the shift from probability-based sampling to modeling-heavy approaches driven by digital data. It addresses ethical risks like "pollwashing" and proposes standards for transparency. The work is a timely reflection on how the digital era is reshaping public opinion research.
- **Roper Center for Public Opinion Research. 2025. "About the Roper Center." Ithaca, NY: Cornell University.**
 - The Roper Center hosts one of the world's largest archives of public opinion data, including over 850,000 questions from historical and contemporary surveys. It provides researchers with access to a comprehensive database for trend analysis and historical comparison.
- **Roper Center for Public Opinion Research. 2025. Roper iPoll Databank. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University.**
 - The Roper iPoll Databank is a comprehensive archive of U.S. public opinion survey questions dating back to the 1930s. Maintained by the Roper Center hosted at Cornell University, it aggregates data from major polling organizations, including Gallup, Pew, and NORC, major news media and select commercials polling outlets, making it an essential resource for trend analysis and historical research in public opinion.

II. Specialized Readings & Contemporary Challenges:

- **American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR). 2024. "To Build Trust in Polling, We Must Consider Institutional Constraints." AAPOR Newsletter, August 29.**
 - This editorial argues that traditional "horserace" polling often oversimplifies elections by ignoring institutional complexities like the Electoral College. AAPOR calls for greater contextualization in polling results or a shift away from predictive framing to rebuild public trust.
- **American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR). 2024. "Building Trust Through More Realistic Expectations and a More Accurate Margin of Error." AAPOR Newsletter, August 29.**
 - AAPOR critiques the conventional use of "margin of sampling error," suggesting it often understates the actual uncertainty of poll results. It proposes more

comprehensive error metrics that include non-sampling error to better inform public interpretation.

- **American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR). 2025. *Ethical Issues in Linking Non-Survey Data to Survey Data: A Practical Guide*. Washington, DC: AAPOR.**
 - This guide explores the ethical and methodological challenges of integrating survey responses with external data sources (e.g., digital traces, administrative records). It offers practical recommendations for ensuring consent, privacy, and data validity in hybrid designs.
- **Dillman, Don A., Jolene D. Smyth, and Leah Melani Christian. 2000. *Mail and Internet Surveys: The Tailored Design Method*. 2nd ed. New York: John Wiley & Sons.**
 - A foundational handbook offering a detailed approach to survey design, emphasizing personalized communication, response rates, and multi-mode data collection techniques.
- **Groves, Robert M., Floyd J. Fowler Jr., Mick P. Couper, James M. Lepkowski, Eleanor Singer, and Roger Tourangeau. 2011. *Survey Methodology*. 2nd ed. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.**
 - This comprehensive work covers the full range of survey methodology, from sampling and questionnaire construction to data collection and error reduction. It emphasizes the total survey error framework and provides in-depth discussions on nonresponse, measurement, and coverage errors.
- **Nardi, Peter M. 2018. *Doing Survey Research: A Guide to Quantitative Methods*. 4th ed. New York: Routledge.**
 - Nardi presents a clear, student-friendly introduction to quantitative survey research, guiding readers through the entire process from designing questions and choosing samples to analyzing data and reporting results. The fourth edition expands on modern concerns, including Big Data, digital survey tools, and ethical implications.
- **Pew Research Center. 2024. "Key Things to Know About U.S. Election Polling in 2024." Washington, DC: Pew Research Center.**
 - Pew outlines modern polling techniques, emphasizing the use of large-scale weighting adjustments and diverse sampling frames. The piece also discusses challenges in predicting voter turnout and interpreting early poll results.
- **Sheatsley, Paul B., and Warren J. Mitofsky. 1992. *A Meeting Place: The History of AAPOR*. Princeton, NJ: American Association for Public Opinion Research.**
 - Documents the founding and development of AAPOR, highlighting key moments, figures, and debates that shaped the field of public opinion research.

Assessment Options

- Participation in discussion and group activities.
- Quiz on key concepts: sampling, question design, bias, survey errors, etc.
- Assignment: Evaluating a Roper iPoll Public Opinion Poll

Teaching Tips

- Encourage interdisciplinary survey examples from the Roper Center (e.g., mental health, education, voter behavior, healthcare access).
 - Use free tools like Google Forms or Qualtrics for quick survey prototyping.
 - Assign group activities to collaboratively rewrite poorly designed survey items.
 - Use polling errors from real news stories as case studies to analyze bias and interpretation, drawing insights from AAPOR's critiques of margin of error and institutional constraints.
 - Connect surveys to broader course themes, such as research design, causality, generalizability, and ethics.
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Weeks 1-2: Core Survey Research Methods

- The role of surveys in social research.
- Types of surveys (cross-sectional, longitudinal, mixed mode).
- Writing effective survey questions.
- Sampling strategies: Probability and Nonprobability (random, stratified, convenience, snowball).
- Modes of survey administration (in-person, phone, online, mail, text message).
- Common errors: measurement error, sampling bias, nonresponse bias, coverage error, and the total survey error framework.
- Ethical issues in survey research (IRB, informed consent, confidentiality, data validity, linking non-survey data).

Weeks 2 - 4: Special Focus — Public Opinion Polling

- The history and role of public opinion polling in democracy and media.
- Evaluating the credibility of polls (margin of error, sample size, question design, non-sampling error, institutional constraints).
- The AAPOR Code of Professional Ethics and Practices.
- Polls in politics, media, and policy debates, including modern weighting adjustments and predictive framing.
- Hands-on analysis of public opinion data (e.g., Pew, Gallup, Roper iPoll Databank).
- Activities and Assignments.

Link to Roper Center Roper iPoll Databank for hands-on analysis:

https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/Roper_iPoll/trend/ffeeb92a-847f-46a4-ac63-c3ced45b7610