

CONDUCTING SURVEYS WITH YOUTHS IN LOW-INCOME URBAN NEIGHBORHOODS

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ABSTRACT

Written surveys of youths were conducted for each of four years in public housing neighborhoods in Huntsville, Alabama, and during one year in public housing and other low-income neighborhoods in Mobile, Alabama. Response rates for targeted youths in Huntsville ranged between approximately 79% and 94% across years, while the response rate for targeted youths in Mobile was 59%. Advantages and disadvantages of neighborhood surveys (as opposed to school surveys) of youths are considered. Among the advantages of neighborhood-based surveys is their ability to include youths who are not in school, either because they have dropped out, or been suspended or expelled. Disadvantages of neighborhood surveys, particularly in low-income urban neighborhoods, include the high cost of door-to-door recruitment, safety concerns, logistical complexity, and the absence of a controlled environment.

PROCEDURES

Field Sites

Surveys were conducted in public housing neighborhoods in Huntsville, Alabama, between 1993 and 1998, and in public housing and other low-income neighborhoods in Mobile, Alabama, in 1998. Both are MSAs with approximately 200,000 people living in the central city.

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument consisted of between 174 (Year 1 in Huntsville) and 294 (Mobile) questions addressing issues that are important to young people as they are growing up. These include educational experience and aspirations; family structure and function; expectations about the future; self-esteem; peer support and peer pressure; attachment to neighborhood and sense of community; attitudes and behaviors related to violence, drug and alcohol use, and sexuality; and accidental injury. All questions were asked in a close-ended format, and respondents marked the answer that best described them in a printed response booklet.

Participants

Huntsville. In Huntsville, during the first year of data collection, the population of interest was youths

aged 10-18 living in six public housing neighborhoods. In the second and subsequent years, a seventh neighborhood was added to the study. We obtained from the Huntsville Housing Authority a list of the addresses of all units in the six neighborhoods in which youths aged 10-18 were listed on the lease, as well as their ages. (The Housing Authority would not provide us with the names of these youths.) We attempted to make contact with residents at each address, to (a) explain the study to a responsible adult; (b) verify the number of eligible people living at the address; (c) obtain informed consent from a parent or guardian for the young people to participate in the study; (d) explain the study to the young people residing at the address; and (e) solicit their participation in the study. Each person was promised \$10 for participating in the survey.

In our door-to-door canvas of the neighborhoods, which sometimes led us back to the same door ten or more times so as not to miss anyone, we found that some of the families listed had moved away, and some of the youths listed had never lived with or no longer lived with their families at that address. In addition we found a number of youths who lived at these addresses but were not listed on the lease, and a number who had moved into the neighborhood since the list had been compiled a month earlier. This yielded an adjusted population of 678 youths, aged 10-18, living in the neighborhoods.

In each neighborhood, we identified a community center where we administered the survey to groups of 10-20 participants. Since most participants were in school during the day, the survey was scheduled in the afternoon and early evening. On the day before each participant was scheduled to complete the survey, he or she was re-contacted with a reminder.

As might be expected, not everyone showed up at their assigned times. Some did not come at all; other got their times confused. Those who came at the wrong time were accommodated then if possible, or they were asked to return at the correct time. Those who agreed to participate, but who did not come, were re-contacted and asked if they were still interested in the survey. Those who were still interested were rescheduled (several times if necessary). In the final analysis, 538 of the 678 youths we had originally identified as eligible participated in the survey, for a response rate of .794. Of those who did not participate, 5 (0.7%) were excluded due to special needs that would have prevented them from being able to complete the question-

naire; 16 (2.4%) were never contacted, despite repeated attempts; 67 (10%) indicated an unwillingness to participate, or their parents refused to sign a consent form; and 52 (7.8%) did not come to any of their scheduled administrations. The response rate for individual neighborhoods in Huntsville during Year 1 ranged from .71 to .879.

Recruitment for Year 2 in Huntsville was similar to Year 1, and the overall response rate increased to .873. During the third and fourth year, we were unable to obtain a Housing Authority listing of addresses where youth lived, but by then, our familiarity with the neighborhoods and the residents' familiarity with us, made the recruitment much easier. We supplemented our previous lists and the self-identified recruits with a door-to-door canvas of households where we were unsure about the presence of eligible participants.

Mobile. In Mobile we focused on thirteen low-income neighborhoods, corresponding to single or multiple census block groups with more than 60% of the residents living below the poverty level. Seven of these were public housing neighborhoods, and six were other residential neighborhoods. In the public housing neighborhoods, we targeted approximately half of the apartments where records indicated that youths between the ages of 10 and 18 lived; and in the non-public housing neighborhoods (where no such lists were available), we targeted approximately half of the houses and apartments. Recruitment and administration procedures were similar to those used in Huntsville. The overall response rate for youths in the targeted neighborhoods was .589

Non-Targeted Participants. In both Huntsville and Mobile, once word got out that we were paying participants \$10, a number of youths who did not actually live in targeted households wanted to participate in the survey. Most often they lived in or spent a good bit of time in the neighborhood or were from a nearby similar neighborhood. We allowed these youths to participate and receive \$10, so long as we were able to obtain written consent from an adult caregiver. These respondents, who might be considered a convenience sample, are not included in our calculation of response rates. In Huntsville, the number is rather small (47 in Year 1), while in Mobile, there are many untargeted respondents (875), although only 180 of these did not live in our targeted neighborhoods.

Data Collection

We usually read the questions aloud, and asked each respondent to mark the appropriate answer in his or her survey booklet. If some youths were having

difficulty keeping up with the group, or circumstances required individualized attention, we would divide the group into smaller subgroups after the first set of questions. In some cases, again when situations warranted, we allowed respondents to read the questions to themselves. About halfway through the survey we invited the participants to take a short break, and we provided a canned drink for each of them. When all participants in a group or subgroup had finished the survey, which typically required a little more than an hour to complete, we collected the survey booklets and paid each participant \$10 in cash. In some special circumstances, we scheduled an individual home administration rather than a group administration. In Mobile, for example, approximately 10% of all the surveys were administered in the respondent's home.

OUTCOME RATES

Using the May 1998 edition of *Standard Definitions* published by AAPOR, we calculated several outcome rates for our various samples. It should be pointed out that, unlike a household survey, we were attempting to survey all the eligible children within each household. Therefore, our unit for reporting is the individual. When a household level refusal was given by a parent, that was multiplied by the number of eligible children in the household, if it was known. If the number of eligibles could not be determined (this was most likely to happen in the non-public housing) we used an estimate based on the average number of children in the homes in that neighborhood. Those who initially agreed and were scheduled for a survey, but never came or could not be found for rescheduling were counted as refusals.

Based on the conventions of AAPOR, the following codes are used in the calculation formulas:

I = Complete interview (survey)

R = Refusal (or no-show)

NC = Non-contact with known eligible respondent

O = Other (unable to participate)

UO = Unknown if eligible respondent

UH = Unknown if household unit

Response Rates

The response rate is the number of complete interviews divided by the number of eligible units in the sample. In non-public housing neighborhoods, where no list of household residents is available, *UO* and *UH* can be taken into account. For the public housing neighborhoods, however, there are no cases of unknown eligibility or unknown household units. Since there are no partial interviews, the response rate for non-public housing areas is defined as:

$$RR_1 = RR_2 = I/(I + R + NC + O + UH + UO).^1$$

In public housing neighborhoods, response rate is defined as:

$$RR_3 = RR_6 = I/(I + R + NC + O).$$

Huntsville response rates are specified by neighborhood and year in Table 1.

Table 1: Huntsville Response Rates by Neighborhood

	Yr. 1	Yr. 2	Yr. 3	Yr. 4
TOTAL	.794	.873	.943	.889
NH 1	.710	.828	.980	.946
NH 2	.773	.833	.919	.885
NH 3	-----	.808	.862	.825
NH 4	.827	.822	.906	.900
NH 5	.731	.892	.971	.860
NH 6	.871	.923	.937	.982
NH 7	.879	.956	.989	.875

Mobile response rates are lower: 56.4% (with a range between 41.5% and 71.6%) in public housing neighborhoods and 64.4% (with a range between 39.3% and 71.0%) in non-public housing neighborhoods.

Cooperation and Refusal Rates

The cooperation rate is the proportion of cases interviewed from all eligible units contacted. A conservative measure of cooperation includes *O*:

$$COOP_1 = COOP_2 = I/(I + R + O).$$

A refusal rate is the proportion of all cases in which a housing unit or respondent refuses to participate from all potentially eligible cases. The refusal rate is defined as:

$$REF_1 = R/(I + R + NC + O + UH + UO).$$

As with response rates, *UH* and *UO* are not applicable to the public housing neighborhoods, yielding:

$$REF_3 = R/(I + R + NC + O).$$

Table 2 reports cooperation and refusal rates for the Huntsville and the Mobile data.

Table 2: Cooperation and Refusal Rates

	Huntsville				Mobile	
	Yr. 1	Yr. 2	Yr. 3	Yr. 4	PH	non PH
<i>COOP</i> ₁	.813	.892	.957	.946	.644	.712
<i>REF</i> _{3 (or 1)}	.176	.098	.042	.050	.281	.255

Differences Between Huntsville and Mobile Rates

Response rates and cooperation rates are considerably higher, and refusal rates are considerably lower in our Huntsville project than our Mobile project. The Huntsville project offers perhaps the best of circumstances for maximizing response rates for a study of this nature. Here we are dealing with well-defined housing projects and smaller neighborhoods. Furthermore, in addition to conducting the youth survey, we were also conducting an intervention in the neighborhoods, which placed several staff members from our project in the neighborhoods on an almost daily basis, and they worked with some of the youths in after-school programs. Therefore, we were familiar to the youths and to many of their parents, and we knew the neighborhoods (both physically and socially) quite well. With each year, the recruitment became easier, as the youths looked forward to the "test" and their \$10. Parents also became less skeptical over time as they saw that no one was suffering any negative consequences as a result of their participation and that we kept our promise of confidentiality. Finally, in Huntsville, we targeted all youths in the seven neighborhoods, thus any child of the appropriate age living there was eligible for the survey. This simplified our recruiting efforts. And because of the smaller size, we were able to return more times to each household and be more persistent in our recruiting efforts and re-scheduling efforts when respondents missed their appointed times.

In contrast, the target neighborhoods in Mobile are much larger, and the boundaries are not as well defined. This is particularly true, of course, in the non-public housing areas. We were completely unknown to the residents in Mobile, and we were less familiar with the area ourselves, making the recruitment somewhat more difficult. Because of the large size of the neighborhoods, approximately half of the households in each neighborhood were targeted for the sample, rather than all the households. Many other youths wanted to participate, however, and we felt it would be problematic and perceived as unfair to deny them this opportunity to earn \$10. As a result, we have almost equal numbers of targeted and untargeted respondents in the Mobile neighborhoods. The one advantage we had in Mobile is that we recruited during the summer, rather than winter. Thus the youths were out of school, and we were able to conduct surveys throughout the day, rather than only in the late afternoon and evening. The longer days also provided more hours for recruiting in the relative safety of daylight.

¹ All rate designations and formulas are based on AAPOR's 1998 *Standard Definitions*.

ADVANTAGES AND IMPORTANCE OF NEIGHBORHOOD-BASED SAMPLES

There are a number of methodological advantages to conducting youth surveys in the neighborhoods where the youth live as opposed to conducting surveys in schools, which is the more common practice. Not being constrained by the time frame of class periods, for example, allows one to use a longer survey and to make allowances for those who might work at a slower pace. Similarly, we were able to adapt our procedures to ability level of the participants in each group. A read-aloud format is feasible, which avoids the problems of inadequate reading levels, and which can be standardized by training all the staff in this phase of administration. In addition, one can give individual attention to those who would otherwise simply be left behind or would produce large amounts of missing or meaningless data. By going door-to-door and seeking active informed consent, researchers can explain the project to parents more adequately than might be done in a letter sent home from school. Neighborhood-based surveys do not require the approval of authorities such as school superintendents and local school boards, and thus one might be able to ask more sensitive questions than would be permitted on a school survey. It is also easier to target specific demographic or geographical groups, as we did for this survey.

Perhaps the most important advantage to the neighborhood-based survey is that it can involve adolescents who do not attend school on any given day, either because they have dropped out or been suspended or expelled. Looking at the Mobile data as an example, we found that overall, 3.2% of the respondents had dropped out of school, while 32.0% had been suspended during the previous school year, and 11.7% had been expelled during the previous year. Among 14-17 year old boys, the rate for suspensions reaches 50%. (See Table 3 for rates by age and gender and Figure 1 for rates plotted by age.) This would indicate that on any day, a school-based survey would miss a significant number of these youths. Yet, the respondents who did not attend school at some time, due to suspension, expulsion, or dropping out, were vastly different from the other respondents on all five risk behaviors we selected for analysis—getting high or drunk, using marijuana, carrying a gun, pulling a gun or knife on someone, and having sexual intercourse. In all cases, the means on scales measuring the recency and frequency of these behaviors were significantly higher for those who had been out of school than for those who were in school. Figures 2 and 3 show this comparison for suspensions and expulsions. Means for two of the measures are plotted by gender and age in Figures 4 and 5. The differences are quite dramatic,

and this might indicate that the youths who are most at risk are the least likely to be participating in a school-based survey. Leaving them out of such surveys not only affects the data, but might lead us to miss some important clues about these behaviors for those most at risk.

Table 3: Rates of Suspensions, Expulsions, and Out of School During Previous Year

Age	Out of school last year		Suspended in past year		Expelled in past year	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
9-11 total	1	0.2	70	16.4	26	5.7
Males	1	0.5	52	25.2	20	8.9
Females	0	0.0	18	8.3	6	2.6
12-13 total	5	1.1	143	33.2	43	9.7
Males	3	1.3	84	37.8	30	13.1
Females	2	1.0	59	28.4	13	6.1
14-15 total	7	1.8	168	44.1	57	14.5
Males	4	2.1	90	47.9	35	17.5
Females	3	1.6	78	40.4	22	11.3
16-17 total	19	6.2	120	39.2	54	17.0
Males	14	9.0	79	52.3	40	24.8
Females	5	3.3	41	26.6	14	9.0
18-19 total	21	20.8	37	26.8	26	17.7
Males	8	14.5	29	42.0	18	23.1
Females	13	28.3	8	11.6	8	11.6
All Males	30	3.6	334	40.0	143	16.0
All Females	23	2.8	204	24.2	163	7.3
TOTAL	53	3.2	538	32.0	206	11.7

Figure 1. Adolescents Who Might be Unavailable for School-Based Surveys

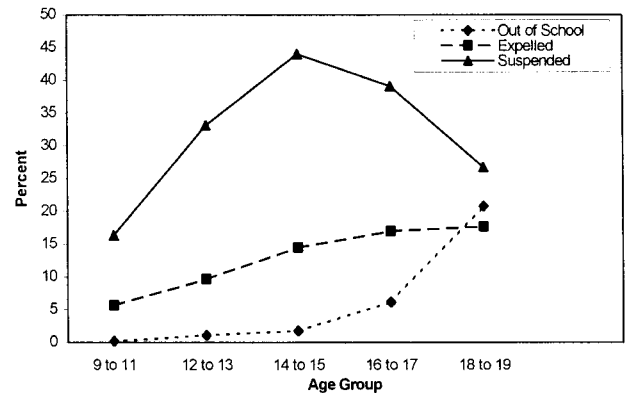


Figure 2. Behavior by School Suspension Status During Past Year

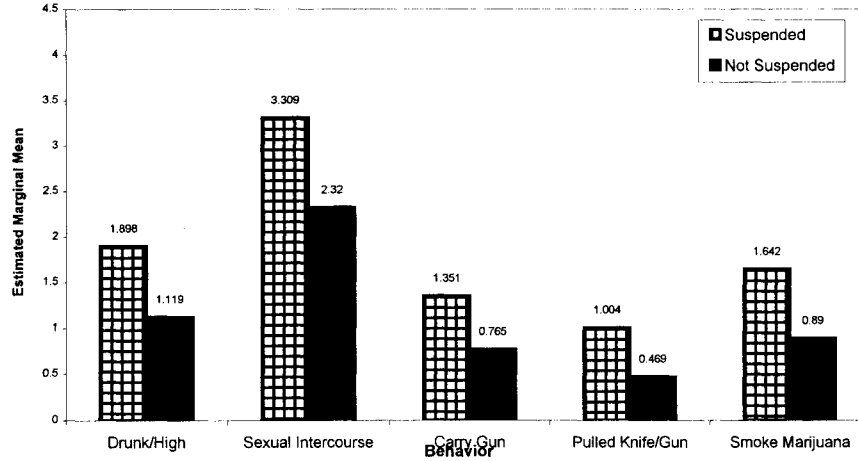


Figure 3. Behavior by School Expulsion Status During Past Year

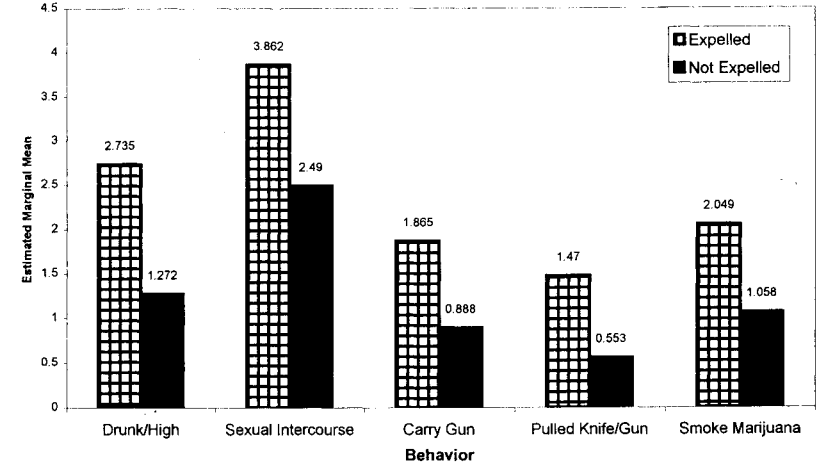


Figure 4. Smoked Marijuana

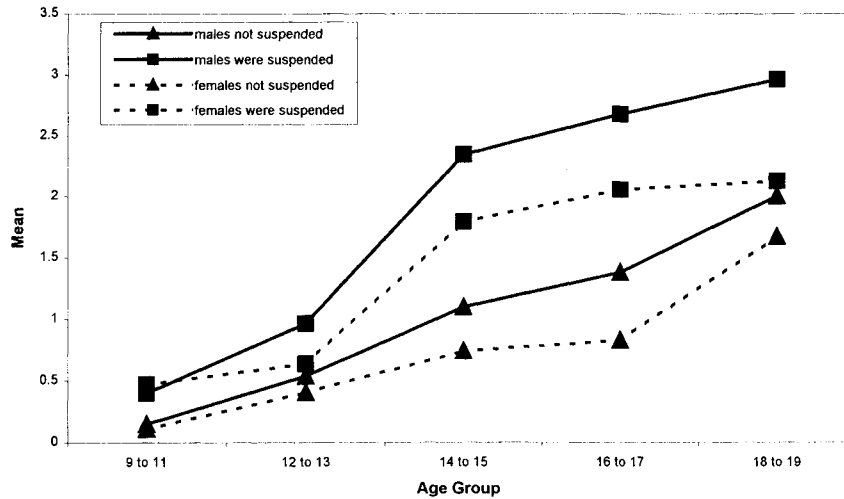
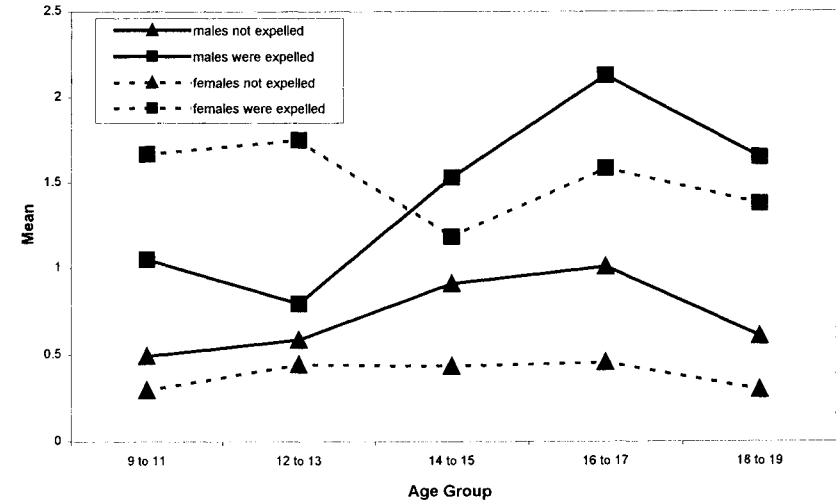


Figure 5. Pulled a Knife/Gun



CHALLENGES OF NEIGHBORHOOD-BASED SURVEYS

For all their advantages, the challenges of neighborhood-based surveys are considerable. One of the most obvious challenges is the cost of conducting a survey in the way that we have described. Costs for the first year of our Huntsville data collection are estimated at \$60 for each completed survey; this includes about \$35 for personnel, \$10 for travel, and \$15 for supplies, copying, and payment of participants. This was the least expensive of the years, as we added staff in later years to ease the burden of recruitment and administration. In Mobile, our costs were nearly \$90 per completed survey, breaking out to about \$60 for personnel, \$12 for travel and \$15 for supplies, copying, and payment of participants. A school-based survey, on the other hand, where participants typically are not paid, can probably be conducted for less than \$10-\$15 per completed survey, depending on the method of distribution and administration. Beyond the printing and distribution costs of a school survey, the neighborhood methodology requires door-to-door recruitment; payment of participants; extra printing for door hangers, flyers, appointment and reminder cards; revisiting and rescheduling; some individual administrations; considerable travel; extra staff for administrations (we tried to have a minimum of four staff for each group administration); and some extra time for the recruitment staff to play with the children in the neighborhood or talk with some of the adults in order to release tension, feel more comfortable, and build rapport.

Although not dealing with school hierarchies can be an advantage, there are many neighborhood gatekeepers to work with in conducting a neighborhood survey. In public housing, there is the Housing Authority, which can be either a helpful partner or a formidable barrier, depending on the approach and style of the administration. There also are in some areas strong neighborhood associations or tenant associations that control much of what happens in a neighborhood. Their involvement can be critical to the success or failure of a study. Additionally, other neighborhood-based organizations often have some influence on the residents in an area and help to set a tone which can facilitate or interfere with a project.

Identifying eligible respondents can be a very difficult task outside of a school setting. Sometimes it was possible to obtain lists of tenants or addresses from the Housing Authority, but they were not always willing to share this information with us. Even when they did provide such data, it was sometimes inaccurate and quickly outdated. Of course, in the non-public-housing areas, no such lists were possible.

Conducting surveys in the field requires complex logistics and serious organization. Teams are formed to "sweep" a neighborhood over a period of a week or two, trying to recruit the targeted youths, giving them an appointed place, date, and time to do the survey. The day of the survey, those who are scheduled receive a reminder card, and if they do not show up, often a staff member will go out to try to find them. If they cannot be found, someone goes to visit them again to reschedule for another time. As most of the staff move on to a new neighborhood, a few remain behind to conduct individual surveys with those who missed the group administrations. Coordinating all of the staff so there are enough people recruiting and enough to administer the group surveys all the time is a difficult task, particularly when funding is limited or there are time constraints, such as completing the project during the twelve weeks of summer.

Finally, there are legitimate safety and security concerns, as well as a good dose of "fear of the unknown" and fears based on stereotypes and media hype to cope with in planning a survey of youths in low-income urban neighborhoods. We always let local law enforcement units know that we are in the area, and we carry a letter of approval from the mayor's office. But beyond that, we do not take extraordinary measures. Using common sense, courtesy, and ordinary safety measures (e.g., don't walk in the neighborhoods after dark, travel in pairs, answer questions straightforwardly, watch where you're walking to avoid broken glass, drink plenty of fluids, etc.) we have been able to avoid injury or incident. Furthermore, we have found the residents of these neighborhoods to be friendly, helpful, hospitable, and cooperative. The youths are generally glad for an opportunity to express some of their feelings, and they certainly welcome the money they receive.

REFERENCE

The American Association for Public Opinion Research. 1998. *Standard Definitions: Final Dispositions of Case Codes and Outcome Rates for RDD Telephone Surveys and In-Person Household Surveys*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: AAPOR.

AUTHOR NOTES

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