

THE COMMUNITY ATTITUDE SELF-SURVEY

Department of Regional and Community Affairs School of Social and Community Services

MP 104 9/69/5M
University Extension Division
University of Missouri-Columbia

Archive version - See
extension-missouri.edu



Community Attitude Self-Survey

by E. Frederick List^{*}

Introduction

This pamphlet is primarily designed to assist those who are thinking about launching a community attitude survey. Our purpose is not to answer *all* the questions about such a survey, but to suggest that certain factors be taken into account during the planning stages. An early consideration of these factors will help you avoid some the oversights and shortcomings that have occurred in earlier surveys.

The material we are presenting is based on observation of, and participation in, the planning and carrying out of dozens of community surveys over a period of 12 years. Most of these activities were joint community development efforts in which consultants from state universities were involved.

Our suggestions are not intended to replace more sophisticated research methods. They are meant for the lay citizen who is interested in a practical self-help approach to identifying community issues and problems. In one sense this is "action research," for the subjects of the inquiry themselves seek the information needed and actually use the data gathered.

The term *community survey* as we use it, will refer to the process of obtaining public opinion or attitudes through a printed questionnaire. It should not be confused with *community study* which implies a search for facts and figures. In many community development efforts a *study* is an outgrowth of the *survey*.

As a matter of fact, one school of thought maintains that the community attitude survey is severely weakened if it is used to up-date census data, canvass the labor market, or serve as a retail buying habits indicator. These are of enough importance by themselves for special spot checks, samples, or complete studies to be run if warranted.

The Rationale

In community development work, citizens have looked for some time to the attitude survey for help in choosing which directions to take for study and action. One reason for using a survey is to avoid what Ronald Lippitt calls "The Collusion of Ignorance." In other words, community decisions should be based on what people actually think, rather than on what someone thinks they think. When



^{*}E. Frederick List is associate professor, Department of Regional and Community Affairs, University of Missouri - Columbia.

properly designed and conducted, the community survey can give a reasonable assessment of public opinion on one or on many issues.

A second reason to survey is to determine the relative importance of the various issues or problems facing the community. In the typical survey one, two, or three issues will emerge prominently when identified by a substantial percent of the respondents. This simplifies the selection of problems which should get first attention.

There is no easy way to create citizen interest within a community. Since the self-survey requires the participation of a considerable number of people, their early involvement can help to stimulate interest among other volunteers. This has been known to carry over to many of the householders--resulting in turn, in a widespread interest in community improvement.

Coupled with a community development effort, the attitude survey helps to create the climate in which community improvements can be initiated and supported by the people. It also offers the opportunity for citizens to deal with issues which are not addressed by existing organized structures--public or private.

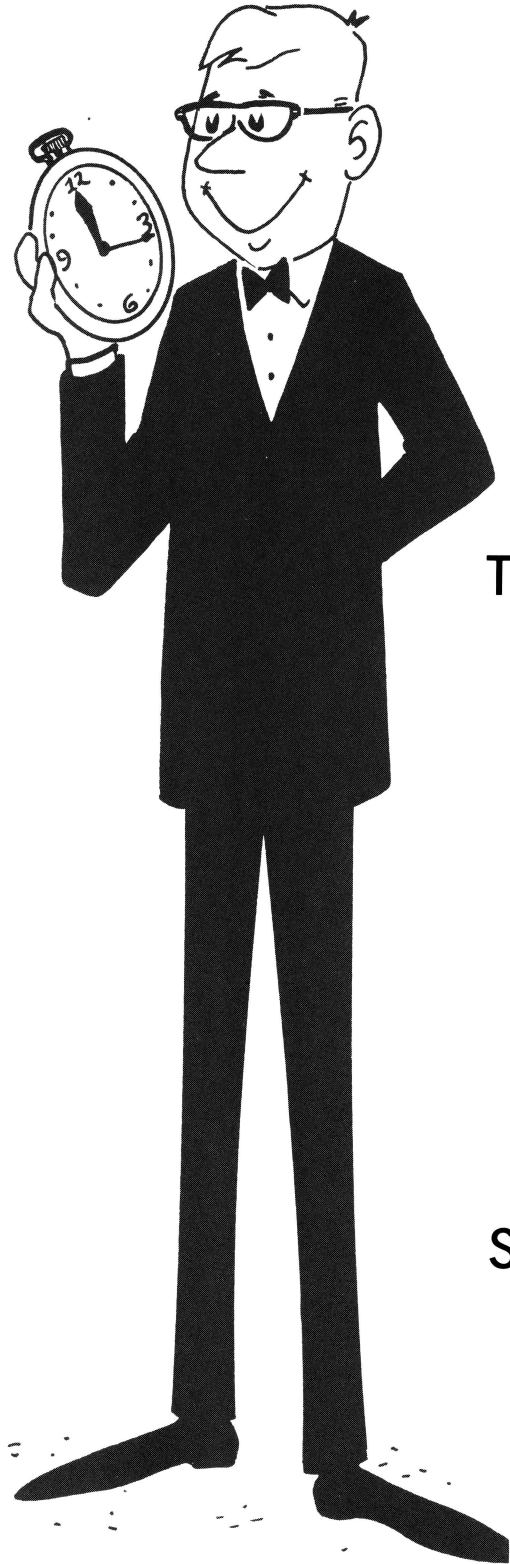
Timing

In these times citizens must look forward not backward. Though aware of the past, they must concentrate on the future. It is better to be alert to new opportunities rather than discouraged by dire predictions based on past trends. *In some cases these trends have been reversed.* Citizen interest, dedication, and action can have a profound effect on the future development of a community. It is not an easy task. Community development requires commitment and perseverance, for it is a long-term effort. Therefore, the ultimate question is *not* "What have we been?", nor "Where are we now?", but in light of these "What can we become?"

There are usually a few individuals in every community who are sufficiently dissatisfied with the status quo, that they will seize the opportunity to learn how many of their fellows are thinking along the same lines. If a community development effort has been launched in a particular area, sooner or later the question will emerge: How many local people are actually concerned about the issues facing our community? At this point, the group might well consider the possibility of using the community attitude self-survey.

Sponsorship

The success of a community survey also depends on its sponsorship. The groups behind the effort and the names that are associated with it can have a positive--or negative--influence. If, for example, the Chamber of Commerce of a particular town has built the reputation of working with a broad range of community interests, the chances are reasonably good that sponsorship by this group alone would suffice. On the other hand, if the chamber's activity has been limited entirely to retail promotion and industrial development, it would be well advised to augment its survey steering committee to include representatives from other organizations or a number of interested individuals outside the chamber membership. This would help broaden community involvement and avoid the

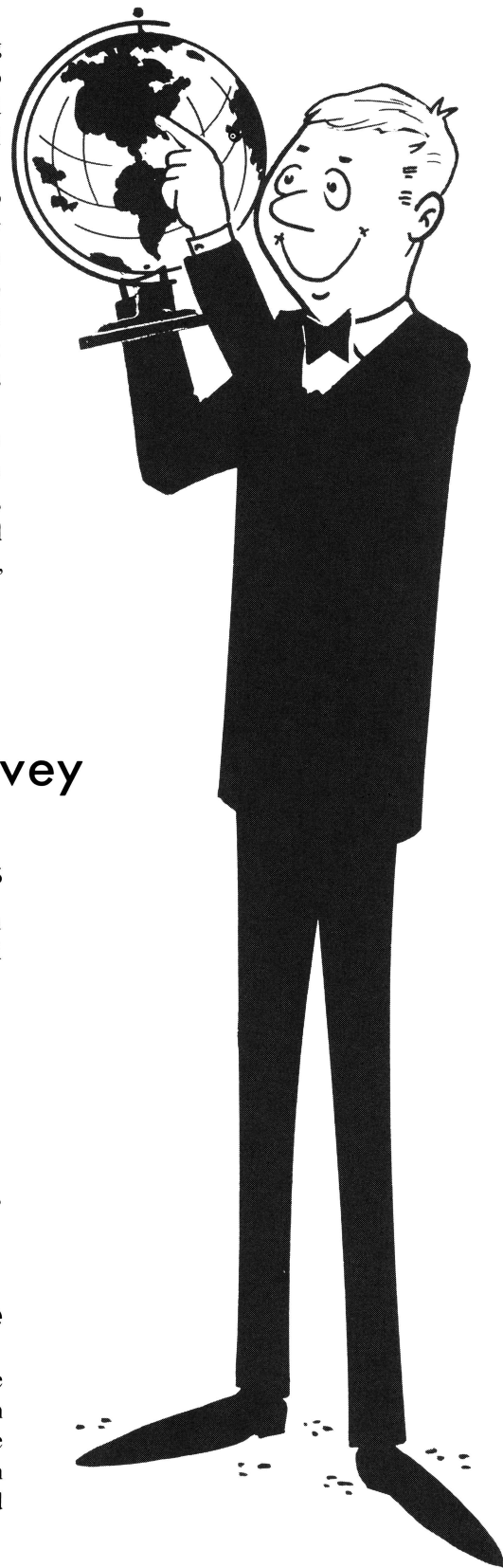


inevitable criticism--deserved or not--that "the survey is a one-organization project." The mixed nature of this committee and its sponsor relationships should be noted in all publicity for the survey.

Even better response might be expected with an "ecumenical" group having the backing and moral support of several formal organizations but still open to volunteer participation. Such a group can better identify itself as one concerned with the whole community, and not one seeking advantage for certain special interests.

It is important that the sponsoring group or organization have the capability to carry out the task. If a community development group or committee has already been established and recognized, and if it is willing to undertake the survey, the capability is assured. This is the ideal origin for the community survey. There is no question about motives and the project is not identified with narrow special interests. The survey becomes one phase of a long-range community development effort involving, over a period of time, many individual citizens and perhaps dozens of organizations.

Although sponsorship sometimes implies financial support, funds for the relatively modest needs of the community survey frequently come from various other sources than the primary sponsoring group. Such items as printing services, paper, and mailing costs, are often donated by public spirited individuals and groups. To the extent that these contributions come from several different sources, the survey becomes even more a "community" project.



Planning and Conducting the Survey

Geographic Limits

Scope of the survey content is often related to and somewhat dependent on the geographic limits. Sometimes the following questions need to be answered before proceeding:

Should the survey cover only those families in the corporate limits?

If not, how far beyond the town limits can we go? Can our committees and present sponsorship handle the additional workload and expense? Are the issues involved also of immediate interest to residents in nearby towns? Should this be a county-wide survey?

When these are answered and the actual limits of the survey decided upon, work can then proceed on the questionnaire.

Coverage

Another important factor is coverage within the geographical limits. If the population to be surveyed is quite large, perhaps a sampling technique might be in order. In cities the use of every second, third, fourth, or fifth house can hold the number of questionnaire forms within reason. In smaller cities and towns, each household is usually included in the distribution, depending on the manpower and other facilities available.

Scope

The sponsoring group or steering committee needs to decide what the survey should accomplish. To set this goal some thought will have to be given to the breadth of coverage of topics or issues. One survey cannot secure all prevailing opinions on all community issues. Compromises must be made on the amount of material covered and on the questions asked. Only those issues of primary interest and importance should be specified in the questionnaire. Thorough coverage on a few items is preferable to superficial treatment of many. The data gathered will be more meaningful.

Members of the steering committee usually agree on a few dominant issues on which opinions need to be expressed. Then it is customary to allow space for respondents to specify and express their opinions on other matters of importance.

Designing the Questionnaire

There is always the temptation to use an already prepared questionnaire or standardized form from another source. Unless the specific purpose is to fulfill a requirement for some predetermined project, a standardized form is likely to contain much irrelevant material and at the same time be inadequate for the particular community. It is not likely to point up the issues peculiar to the individual community.

If local citizens are designing their own questionnaire, they will need to do some careful planning. How the questions are grouped, their sequence within the groups, and the wording of the individual questions all affect the reliability and validity of the survey. It is at this point that most survey committees need some outside assistance. This assistance is not so much being told exactly what to do, as being reminded of some practices to avoid. (The final decisions on these matters, however, are made by the citizen committee.)

Here are some of those things to avoid:

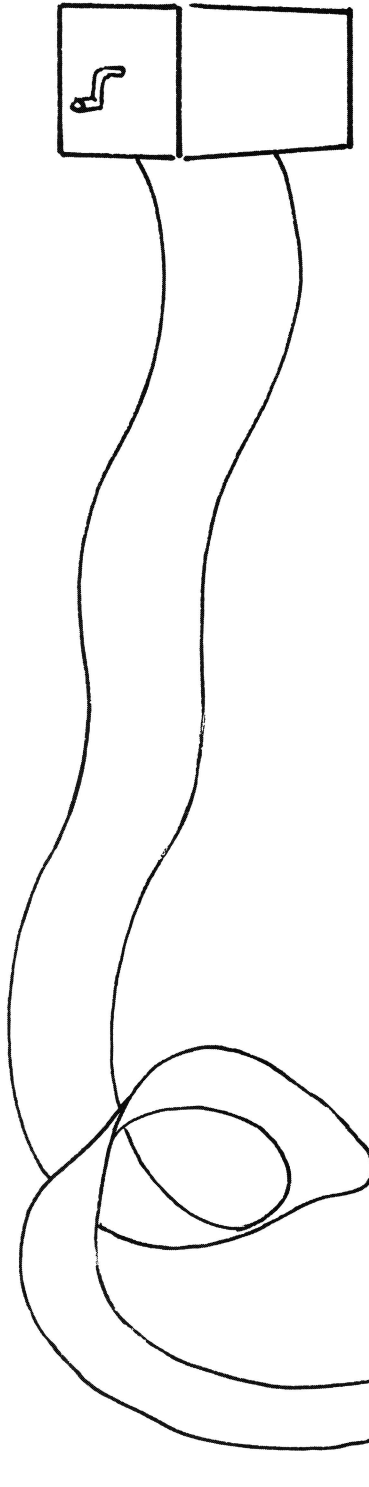
1. Leading questions

Examples--"Do you think our town needs better streets?" There is hardly a town in the country that does not need better streets! This question and dozens of others like it can only be answered--Yes. What then do you have with a series of yes answers to questions of this type? Anything on which to build for the future? Hardly!

Perhaps a more logical procedure here would be to use a series of two questions such as: "Would you support a bond issue for street improvement in our town? If so, which streets would you suggest for earliest renewal or repair?"

2. Questions on which the public is likely to be poorly informed, and on which citizen opinion is not needed. Example: Do you think the new city hall should furnish at least 100 square feet of office space for each worker?

Of more importance might be what functions will be housed in the new city hall. If this was the case the question should relate to these functions, and possible limitations placed on the space by financial considerations. Perhaps some choice can be expressed in relation to money, function, and space.



3. Trying to cover too much in the survey

Many questionnaires become so long that they lose their effectiveness. The respondent gets more careless as he turns the pages, or he leaves several questions unanswered. A questionnaire which takes more than 20 minutes to complete runs the risk of being returned inaccurate, incomplete, or both.

4. Raising false hopes about projects which have little likelihood of being launched or completed.

Sections devoted to recreation have been known to inquire into personal preferences for the use of leisure time. For example, if there is no intention of developing a stable or bridle trail, then suggesting horse riding for response is not a good practice. If, on the other hand, several respondents list horse riding of their own volition, there might well be sufficient interest to follow up.

In order to get a draft to work with, members of the committee sometimes take responsibility for questions in a particular section. With assistance from other interested individuals, each frames a number of questions which cover the pertinent aspects of the general topic and section involved. After these rough drafts are made, all are brought together for discussion and refinement. Again at this time, assistance from outside the community is often sought and can be helpful.

When a complete draft is ready, some committees prefer to run a test on the questionnaire. Sufficient copies are made and given to a selected group to get typical citizen reaction. If certain questions are unclear, or if other defects show up, there is still an opportunity to make modifications before the final mass printing.

A frequent practice in Missouri during the past few years has been to begin the questionnaire with a section asking for ideas from respondents on the following four questions, or some variation:

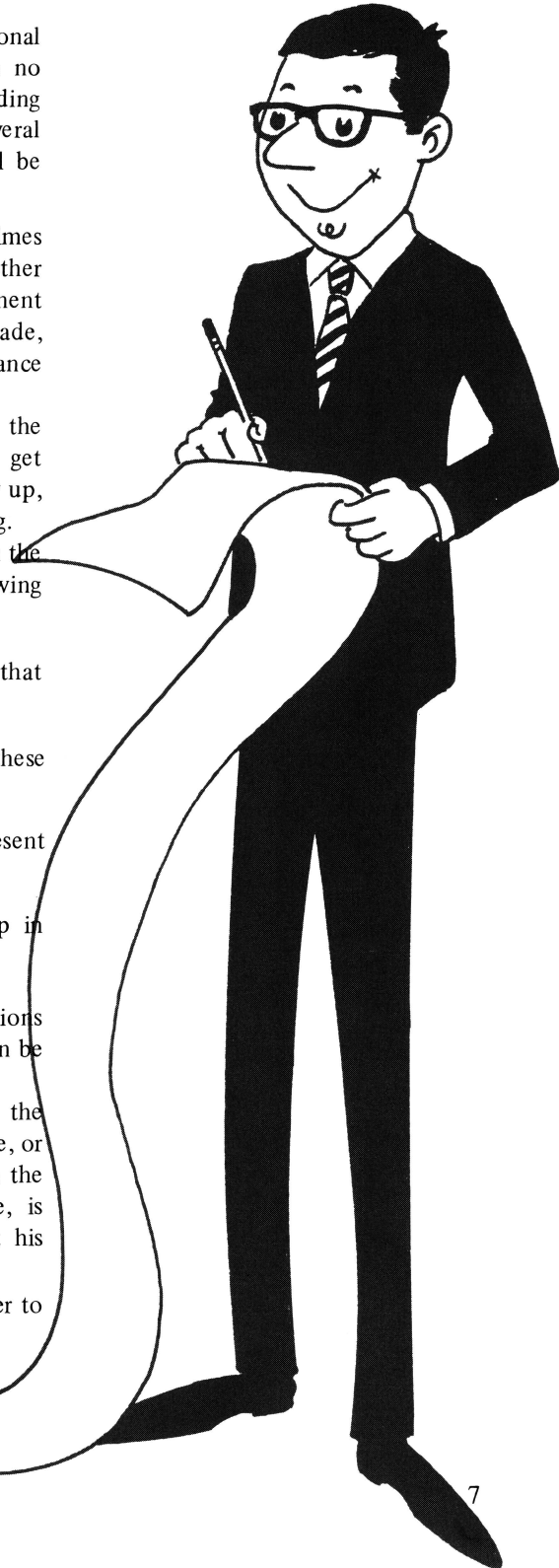
- What has been done in this community during the last five years that citizens can take pride in?
- What organizations or individuals do you feel were responsible for these accomplishments?
- What are the most pressing problems in our community at the present time?
- To whom would you look (individuals or groups) for leadership in tackling these problems?

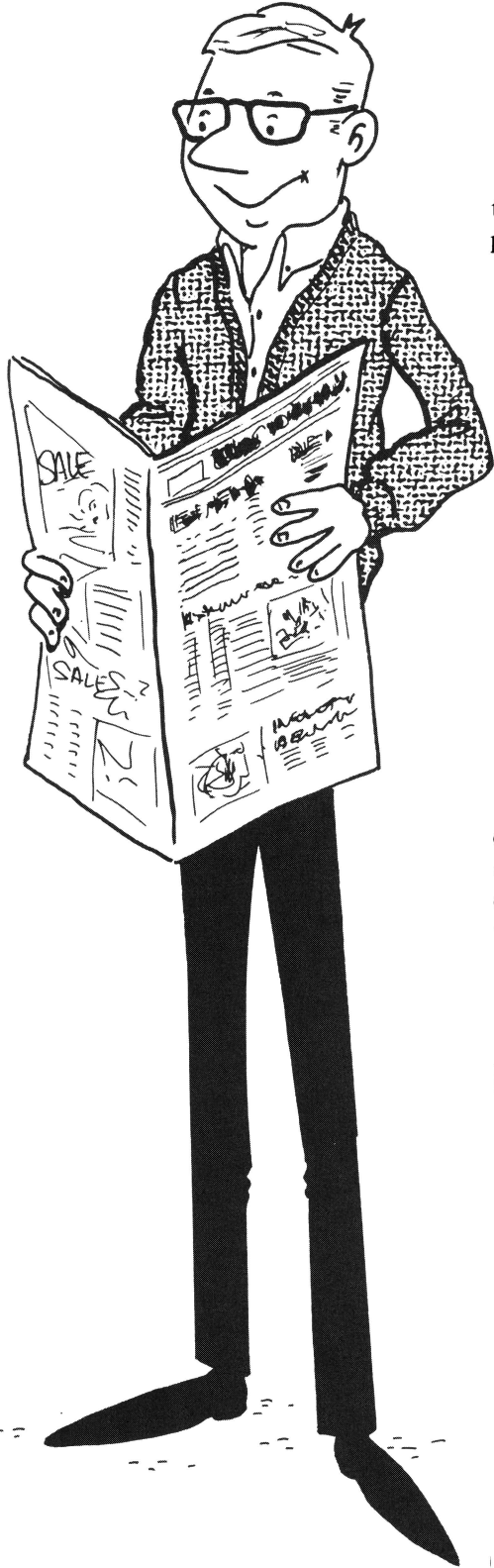
With this procedure the stage is then set for additional questions and reactions on specific aspects of community life. The names of individuals and groups can be useful to other committees for follow-up study and action.

The survey committee also faces the dilemma of what percentage of the questionnaire to design for simple answers (yes - no, multiple choice, rating scale, or number system) for faster and easier tabulation, and how much should be in the nature of essay questions. The latter, although much harder to tabulate, is considered much more productive since the respondent must think about his answer and write it.

Example: In the following list, number (from 1 to 5) the items you consider to be the worst eyesores in our city:

- _____ Smoke stacks
- _____ Rundown business buildings





- _____ Signboards
- _____ Dead trees
- _____ Junk yards on outskirts
- _____ Old railroad yard
- _____ Houses in need of paint
- _____ Unpaved parking lots
- _____ Sidewalks needing repair

In the form above, the answers are already suggested. All the respondent needs to do is to choose and rate five. Even though space is allowed for other items, most people will confine their numbers to those items mentioned.

This can be handled in another and more productive way:

“What do you consider to be the worst eyesores in this community?”

”What action would you recommend for eliminating or controlling these conditions?”

Example of possible response:

<u>Eyesore</u>	<u>Suggested Action</u>
Trash on vacant lots _____	Ordinance making owner responsible. _____
Utility poles and wires _____ _____	Require underground installation in new subdivisions; gradual conversion in older parts of town.

With the latter form there is wide latitude for identifying the eyesores. It is quite possible that some significant items will be mentioned which the committee overlooked. Also, the respondent is required to give thought to the means of elimination or control. Here again some valuable suggestions can be gathered from the respondents which would be missed entirely by the first procedure.

Publicity

Cooperative mass media is a real blessing. If they are not cooperative, appropriate steps should be taken to gain their wholehearted assistance. This might require that someone on the committee write press releases and speeches, but this is a small sacrifice for good publicity. If each phase of planning and execution of the community survey can be well publicized, there will be a minimum of lost time in explanations and a favorable reception by the public. This is very important for those distributing the questionnaire forms. A well informed public will speed this part of the project. Good publicity can make the difference between success and dismal failure.

Under no circumstances should such a survey be attempted without wide publicity. It is public business and the public should be fully informed. There should be no secrets about the personnel involved, nor about any of the operations carried on. Complete candor will help prevent vicious rumors and will be an immeasurable help to those taking responsibilities for the project.

Playing fair with the media will also pay dividends. There will be further activities to publicize. If good relationships are established early, those follow-up events can be given enthusiastic coverage and any necessary help from the press, radio, and TV.

Let us stress that this responsibility be given to a capable and dependable person serving on the survey committee.

Distribution and Collection

Experience has shown that the percentage of the return of completed questionnaires is in direct proportion to the personal contact made in the distribution and collection.

Forms sent through the mails have a very low percentage of return. Even with an all-out publicity campaign there is little chance of getting back more than a small percent in mail distribution. Somewhat better results have been obtained with the use of a return mailer, although most of these efforts are still disappointing.

The use of school children to distribute and collect forms has brought better results. However, there is usually some loss of coverage with this procedure. It is difficult to get the children thoroughly oriented to the distribution needed and then to supervise their work.

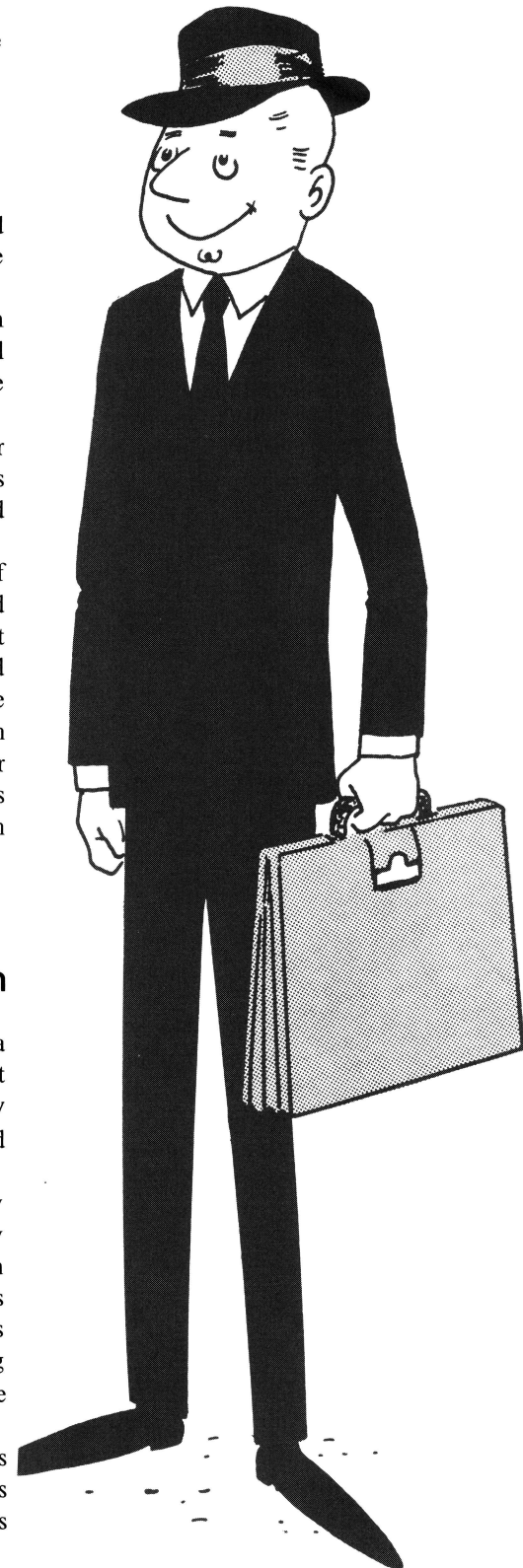
By far the best results are obtained with volunteer adults--often members of one or more of the women's or men's service clubs who personally distribute and collect the questionnaires. Using this method, returns of 80 to 90 percent are not uncommon. The volunteer leaves the questionnaire with an adult in the household and states that he (or she) will return to pick up the form in three days--or at some other stipulated time. On return, if the worker finds that the form has not been filled out, but that the residents are still interested, he can agree to come back later to pick it up. If there seems to be no interest, he might ask for the blank form. This is a great deal of extra work, but in the final analysis it insures a far better return and more accurate data on community attitudes.

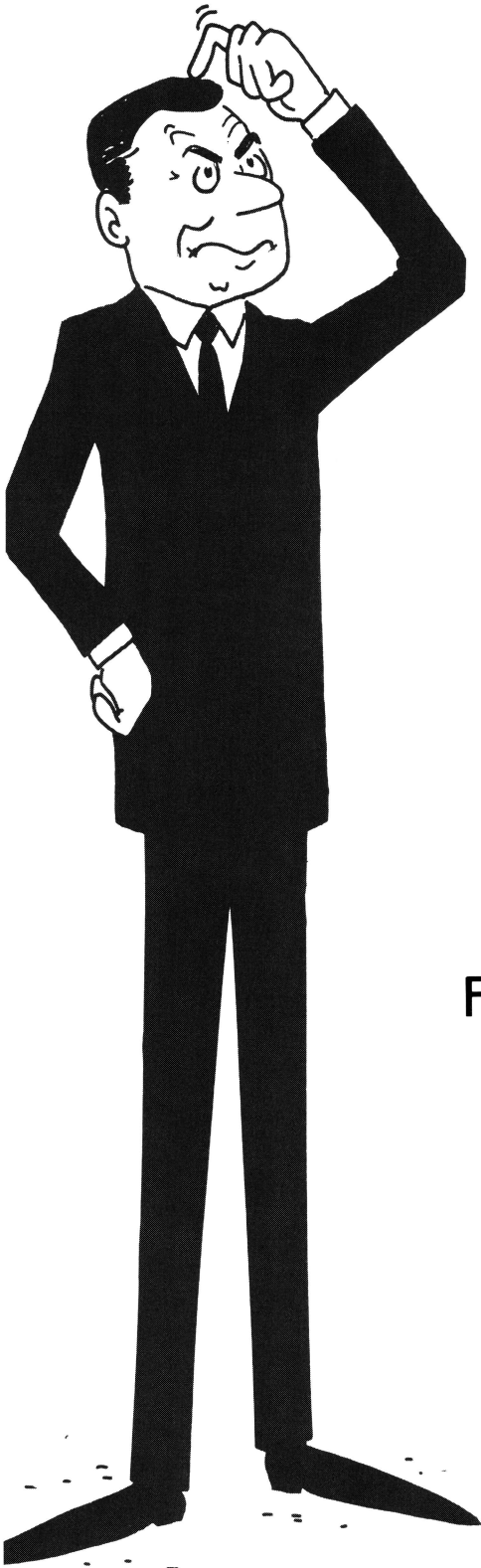
Tabulation

If it is decided to have questionnaire forms tabulated by automatic data processing equipment, understand in advance that there might be considerable cost involved; that there will be limitations on the design of questions, and possibly some delay in getting the processing done. (The machines are usually rented equipment and are heavily scheduled for maximum pay out.)

Unless several thousand questionnaire forms are involved, there are many advantages in doing the tabulating locally with volunteer workers. First, the survey remains a community project. Second, it involves more volunteers who then become potential supporters for future community activities. Third, there is less delay in getting results publicized and interpreted for the community. This means less time will elapse to the follow-up activity, and a better chance of keeping community interest at a high level. A long wait for processing the forms can be disastrous.

The only disadvantage--and this might be a misnomer--is that local tabulation is more work. In another sense, however, it can be fun. It is not difficult and is interesting and rewarding to the volunteer. Besides learning more about his community, he might make some new friends in the process.





Initially, tabulating the answers to essay questions gives workers the most difficulty. However, after running through several dozen forms, patterns begin to develop, and it becomes progressively easier to decide into which column a particular response belongs.

After the system begins to operate smoothly, the forms can be handled more efficiently on a sort of assembly line basis.

Interpreting and Reporting the Results

Whether the tabulation is done with machines or by hand, interpretation of the results is not complicated. It is merely a process of aggregating like responses to individual questions, and reading into these data what trends and conclusions become obvious. All of the workers involved should share in this interpretation. Each function has its own unique contribution to the conclusions to be drawn. Shadings and hidden meanings will often need to be taken into account.

After the results are thoroughly discussed, the committee might decide that a formal report is appropriate. This can be done through the newspaper or with a separate publication for wide circulation. One traditional method of disseminating this information is by the mass meeting.

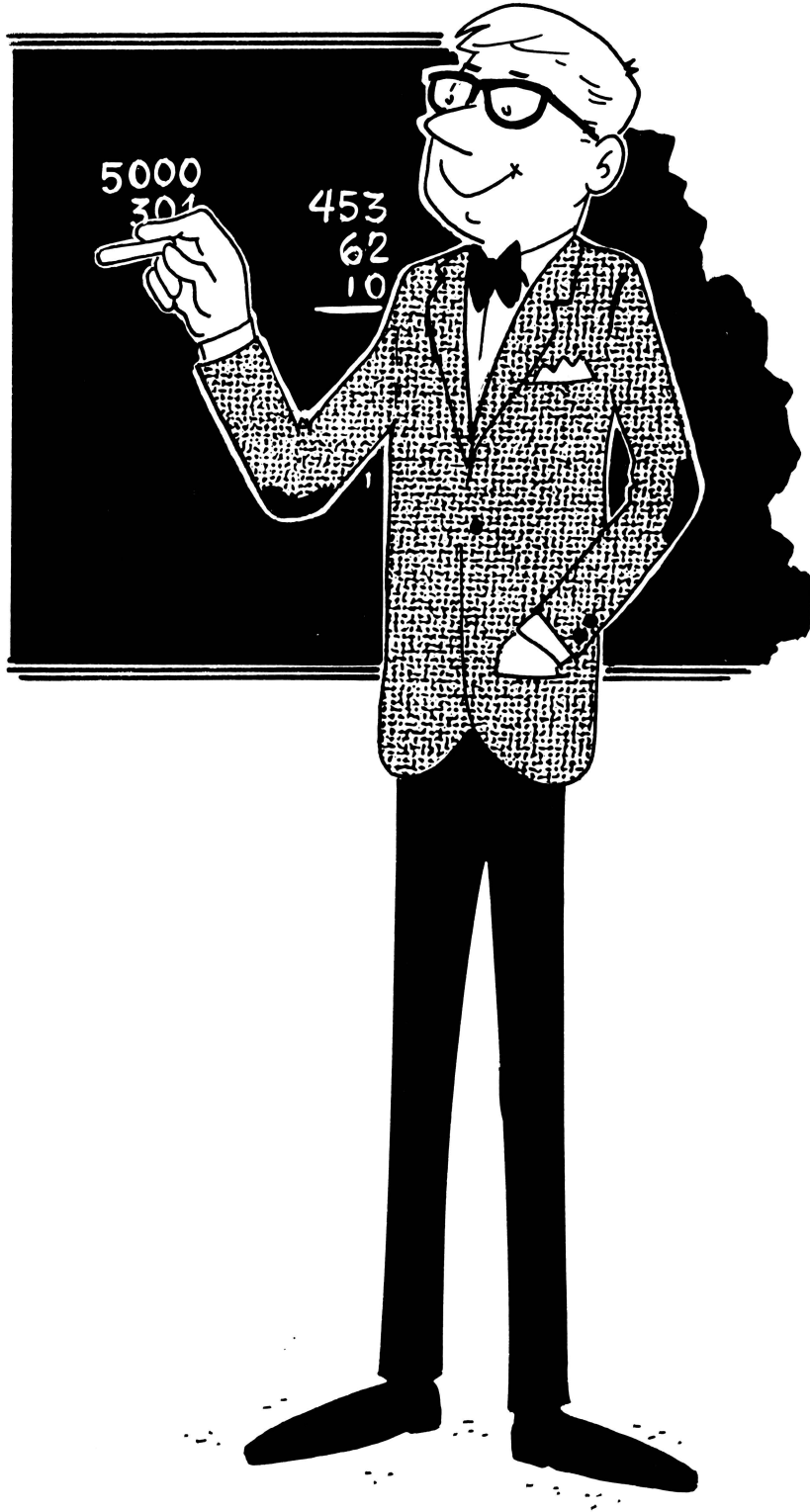
In some cases the mass media are fed information as it becomes available--sometimes daily--from the tabulation crew. The public is thereby kept up-to-date with frequent news releases. This is another technique for keeping community interest at a high level. It also allows other citizens to share in the interpretation since people will have been well informed of the survey results as the forms were processed.

Follow-Up

It is important that some continuity be built into the community survey structure. Obviously, there will be areas requiring study and investigation. Few, if any, of the needs and desires identified can be immediately turned over to the city council, the chamber of commerce, the service clubs, or some action agency. An ongoing community development group would facilitate the establishment of committees needed for further investigation. However, it is recommended here that only those committees be activated which are needed as indicated by the attitude survey results. This will avoid overtaxing the available manpower and will help to sustain interest among committee members.

Ideally citizens would volunteer for this committee work. Many will have a personal stake in the action ahead. Again, their commitment hopefully will go beyond study and fact finding. Some will want to pursue their committee's recommendations to insure that appropriate action is eventually taken.

At least one Missouri community has launched its second survey in four years. This spontaneous decision was partly attributable to the fact that its first attitude survey was a success. Since there has been considerable change and development in the area through those four years, it seemed logical to read again the pulse of the people, and to establish a new benchmark for future planning and action. Some of the same issues still exist. But some of these are now seen from quite different points of view.



5000
301

453
62
10



Issued in furtherance of cooperative extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. Carl N. Scheneman, Acting Vice-President for Extension, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Missouri, Columbia, Mo. 65201.