

OPA EVALUATION TA



Online Survey Data Collection Brief

Office of Population Affairs (OPA) Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program grantees can use a variety of methods to learn more about youth and program participants and improve the effectiveness of their programs. Surveys, particularly online surveys, can be an efficient way to appeal to youth and learn about participants' backgrounds, experiences, and opinions. This brief will outline considerations and best practices for designing online surveys and collecting survey data, including assessing feasibility; designing, testing, and administering a survey; obtaining appropriate approvals; and selecting a platform.

Assessing feasibility and appropriateness

The first step is to determine if an online format is the best option for your organization and the population you serve.

Would an online survey be accessible to your population?

A survey is useful only if participants can easily access it. Learn what you can about whether the population you serve can complete an online survey. The types of devices participants regularly access will affect the survey design, so it is important to consider at this stage. If you do not have the capacity to provide devices to participants for the survey, consider using a different format (for instance, paper-and-pencil or telephone surveys).

How long is the survey?

Ideally, online surveys are brief—taking fewer than 20 minutes to complete. In particular, completing lengthy online surveys on a cell phone can be difficult. If you are considering an online survey and you think your instrument will take longer

Questions to consider

- Do participants have access to a mobile phone, tablet, or computer?
- Do the schools or organizations you work with have a sufficient number of computers for participants to use?
- What about reliable Internet access or cell phone service?



than 20 minutes to complete, you could consider one of two options: (1) reduce the survey to critical questions only to shorten the overall length or (2) split it into smaller surveys that respondents can take in more than one session, so any individual session is no longer than 20 minutes.

What types of questions are you asking?

The content, structure, and order of your survey questions can help determine if an online format is the right choice.

- **Risky behaviors.** Using an online or web platform that youth access at home can be a good strategy if your survey includes questions about risky behaviors. Allowing youth to read questions on their own versus having someone read to them ensures the questions are asked without judgment. Participants might feel more willing to answer truthfully if they can take the survey in the privacy of their own home versus in a classroom.
- **Open-ended responses or feedback.** Open-ended responses can be a rich source of data, but they can be time-consuming for youth to fill in and for your team to review and synthesize. Be realistic about how much open-ended response data you and your team need and can review and analyze effectively, particularly when you expect youth to respond on their phones.
- **Skip logic, routing, or if/then questions.** One benefit of an online survey is that it can automatically skip questions that do not apply to the respondent. This reduces the burden on respondents, and it reduces the chances of internally inconsistent data resulting from people answering questions they should not have received.

Identifying the most critical questions in the survey will enable you to think strategically about which questions to require or prioritize toward the beginning of the survey.

Designing a questionnaire

If you determine an online survey is suitable for your intended population, here are a few tips to consider when designing or revising your survey and protocols.

- **Reading level and comfort with technology.** When writing or choosing survey questions, keep the reading level of your audience in mind, as well as your audience's comfort level with technology. Provide on-screen definitions for potentially difficult words or phrases, as well as instructions for navigating between questions and screens. (Details follow on conducting a survey pre-test to explore how you can address these issues further.)
- **Contact information.** You should provide contact information in the invitation and the survey so participants can contact your organization with questions about the survey. This will reduce the likelihood that a potential participant will refuse to participate or only partially complete the survey.
- **Required versus optional questions.** Online surveys enable you to mark some questions as required, but respondents can leave others unanswered. You should make priority questions required and/or place them near the beginning of the survey. Without the ability to leave some questions unanswered, especially sensitive ones, some youth might become fatigued or frustrated and quit before completing. On the other hand, unanswered questions mean you will miss important data points. When designing the survey, take this trade-off into account and determine which questions you can forgo for the sake of participants' comfort and which are your highest priority.
- **Unique identifiers.** The survey platform you choose should provide participants with a unique survey link or log-in information that enables them to access previously reported answers if they need to complete the survey in more than one sitting. If possible, create a unique identifier for each participant to enter the web-based survey so it is not necessary to enter any personally identifiable information (PII). However, if you need to collect PII—for instance, if you want to link surveys for individual participants over time—make sure you consider the security provided with the platform you choose and what a data breach could mean for your participants. For more information, see the data collection section of the tip sheet titled [Evaluation Strategies for Virtual Implementation in Response to COVID](#) (Buonaspina 2020).

Testing, launching, and monitoring the administration of your survey

Testing the survey before launching it is a critical step to ensure all questions look and flow the way you want them to. If the survey includes skip logic, going through test scenarios with fake data will enable you to check the programming. If feasible, consider performing a pre-test of your survey with people who were not involved in developing it, which could be other members of your organization or, ideally, a small group of youth who are similar to the intended audience. To do this, allow testers to take the survey as intended, and then debrief them about their experience and whether and where they had any difficulty. This debrief should focus on three main topics:

1. **The survey questions themselves.** Are the questions clear? Do the youth interpret them the way you expected? Are there words or phrases that are confusing or unfamiliar to this audience? Are there responses the youth wanted to provide but could not because of the question's construction? (For example, for a high school audience, could a youth who has dropped out answer school-related questions as "not applicable"?)
2. **The online administration.** Is the survey programmed correctly? For example, do items route or skip as expected? Is the survey easy to navigate on the devices you expect the audience to use? Are there any typos?
3. **The time it took to complete the survey.** How long did the survey take to complete? When you have an estimate, remember to include this in any invitation materials so respondents can plan appropriately. In addition, some survey platforms have an option to display the participant's progress through the survey. Giving survey respondents an idea of the anticipated time commitment for the survey could also reduce frustration (and is sometimes required by the institutional review board [IRB]).

If you plan to administer the survey outside the classroom, at least for some participants, it is best to have multiple modes of contacting participants. Youth will vary in the method of contact they prefer or use most often (such as email, phone number, and address). You should gather email addresses—both personal and school, if applicable—and other forms of contact information on your consent forms; the form should ask for permission to send text messages, too. If you have passive consent—in other words,

the school or organization used an opt-out method versus an active opt-in method—you might be able to work with your contacts to obtain other forms of contact for consented youth. Whatever process you use, be sure you follow the appropriate IRB, school district, and state and federal laws that apply to your data collection. For more information on the IRB process, see the [OPA Institutional Review Board Tip Sheet](#) (OPA 2020).

Finally, establish data collection monitoring plans so that when the online survey is live, you can make sure it works and that participants complete it as expected.

- Developing a monitoring strategy will enable you to designate targets and milestones, such as total and interim completion rates (for example, what percentage of your sample you expect to finish in the first week). The plan should also define your approach for nudging participants to complete the survey—both those who have not started and those who have not finished. Will you follow up with reminder emails, phone calls, text messages, or letters? How often? Who will be in charge of the reminder effort? Some survey platforms can send email reminders to participants with outstanding surveys to reduce burden on staff.
- Develop a plan to review your data periodically. This will ensure you can promptly identify and correct any unanticipated issues that arise. If you export data from the survey data collection platform to review, ensure you have designated a secure place to store the files.

Security and privacy considerations

If your organization is interested in administering online surveys, you will have to confirm whether collecting data electronically complies with the guidelines of your cooperative agreement, IRB, the school board, and any relevant state or federal policies. Understanding the rules will help you limit your search to platforms that meet your security standards for compliance. You will have to confirm several items:

- What security requirements must the online survey platform meet?
- Where can the data be stored (for example, on a server or in the cloud)?

- What is the anticipated burden? Note that if you switch from a paper-and-pencil survey to an online survey, you can reduce participants' burden by incorporating efficiencies such as skip logic. Pre-testing (described above) will help you determine the estimated burden.

COPPA outlines federal rules related to online activities involving children younger than 13. It is illegal to collect data online from youth younger than 13 without explicit parental consent.

You will also have to confirm whether you can collect certain types of information using an online format, including sensitive information (for example, risky behaviors) or PII (such as names and dates of birth). As discussed in the “Designing a questionnaire section,” you could use a unique participant code that enables you to avoid collecting PII online.

You should also familiarize yourself with the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, or COPPA, legislation that outlines rules related to online activities involving children younger than 13, including online data collection efforts (COPPA 1998). If you are not already familiar with COPPA, this [Frequently Asked Questions](#) (FAQs) website is a good resource to ensure any of your online activities with minors comply with this protective legislation, which includes the fact that it is illegal to collect data online from youth younger than age 13 without explicit parental consent—passive consent is not sufficient. The beginning of their FAQs outline the eight main steps to comply with COPPA, under “General questions about the COPPA Rule: What is the Children's Online Privacy Protection Rule?”

Similarly, you should familiarize yourself with the Family and Educational Rights and Privacy Act, or FERPA (U.S. Department of Education 2020) if administering the survey in schools, and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996, or HIPAA (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services n.d.), if administering the survey in a medical setting. These federal policies outline protections for privacy of information in these settings.

Choosing a data collection platform

If you have determined an online survey would be beneficial, the next step is to select a platform. The questions below might help guide your considerations, especially because a few might influence cost and security (see Appendix for additional information).

1. Which platform(s) comply with your grant or IRB data security requirements?
2. Who will need access to the data?
3. How long will you need to use the platform? Will this be a one-time effort, or will you need ongoing access to the platform (for instance, you have rolling program delivery and data collection)?
4. Will you need to offer the survey in more than one language?
5. How complicated will your survey be (for example, will it require skip logic programming)?
6. How many people will be in your survey sample, and how will you manage your sample?
7. What device(s) will participants use to complete the survey?
8. What reporting does the platform offer?

Table 1 (next page) provides a list of common online survey platforms your organization might want to investigate. These platforms have packages that enable you to use different question types (for example, multiple choice and open-ended) and skip logic, include multiple dissemination options (for instance, via email or by a web link), and offer reporting and analysis features. Of course, the available features will depend on the type of subscription your organization decides to use. Use the previous questions to guide your investigations or conversation with the platform support staff.

Table 1. Common online survey platforms

Platform	Pricing	Potential features
Alchemer (formerly SurveyGizmo)	Free version, or monthly or annual subscription options	Allows for integration with other applications, such as Salesforce, Tableau, and MailChimp
Google Forms (through Google Workspace)	Free version, or monthly or annual subscription options	Free version allows for unlimited surveys and questions
Qualtrics Core XM	On request (with a free trial option)	Allows for integration with other applications, such as Facebook Messenger, Slack, Tableau, and Salesforce
REDCap	Free to nonprofits that join the REDCap Consortium	Capable of HIPAA compliance
SurveyMonkey	Free version, or annual subscription options	Translated navigation buttons Allows for surveys to be taken in Facebook Messenger or offline using the company's app

Note: Pricing and feature information as of April 2021.
HIPAA = Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996.

Additional resources

Buonaspina, A. "Tip Sheet: Evaluation Strategies for Virtual Implementation in Response to COVID." Washington, DC: Office of Population Affairs, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020.

Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998, 15 U.S.C. § 6501–6505 (1998). Available at <https://www.ftc.gov/enforcement/rules/rulemaking-regulatory-reform-proceedings/childrens-online-privacy-protection-rule>.

Office of Population Affairs. "Institutional Review Board Tip Sheet." Washington, DC: Office of Population Affairs, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020.

U.S. Department of Education. "Family and Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)." December 2020. Available at <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/index.html>. Accessed January 2021.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. "Health Information Privacy." n.d. Available at <https://www.hhs.gov/hipaa/index.html>. Accessed January 2021.

Suggested citation

This report is in the public domain. Permission to reproduce it is not necessary. Suggested citation:

Feeney, K. "Online Survey Data Collection Tip Sheet." Washington, DC: Office of Population Affairs, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021.

Appendix A. Choosing a Data Collection Platform

The following are additional details on some of the questions you might consider when choosing an online data collection platform.

1. Which platform(s) comply with your grant or IRB data security requirements? As mentioned before, this is especially important if you plan to collect PII (such as respondents' names or email addresses).

- a. Do you have requirements about where you can store the data (for instance, on a local server or in the cloud)?
- b. Does your grant or IRB have requirements about destroying data when the survey effort ends? If so, you will have to make sure that any cloud-based platform can and will destroy your data per your requirements.

Data destruction is a best practice that ensures any data about participants gathered during a survey effort is securely destroyed after it is no longer needed. This protects personal data from being compromised after the effort ends.

2. Who will need access to the data? The number of users determines pricing for many online survey platforms.

3. How long will you need to use the platform? Will this be a one-time effort, or will you need ongoing access to the platform (for instance, you have rolling program delivery and data collection)? Many business accounts for these platforms are billed annually, so they might not be cost-effective for a one-time survey effort.

4. Will you need to offer the survey in more than one language? Some survey platforms have buttons already translated (for example, the navigation button displays "Next" for an English survey and "Siguiente" for a Spanish survey).

5. How complicated will your survey be (for example, will it require skip logic programming)? Many platforms have this capability, but these features might cost more.

6. How many people will be in your survey sample, and how will you manage your sample? Having a sample management plan is critical to collecting data successfully. Confirm how the platform tracks participation and whether you can automate additional outreach or reminders to youth who have not yet completed the survey, including those who have not started and those who started but did not complete (partial completes). You do not want to recontact youth who have already completed or refused to participate.

7. What device(s) will participants use to complete the survey? Unless you can provide devices for participants to use, some participants will need or want to access the survey with a mobile phone or tablet. Many survey platforms automatically change the survey display based on the participant's device, but it is best to confirm the platform offers this feature.

If your online platform does not already include mobile or tablet views, we recommend that you limit the number of questions or text on any given page to reduce the amount of scrolling needed.

8. What reporting does the platform offer?

- a. Does the platform provide standard reporting, custom reporting, or both? This could include metrics such as completion rates and summaries of responses to questions (including whether respondents leave particular questions blank or unanswered).
- b. Can you download the data yourself? In what formats (for example, Microsoft Excel or PDF files)? If you want to do further analysis, you should be able to access the data in an editable format (such as Excel). We recommend that you save an unedited copy of the file before manipulating the data.

