

5

Practical Methods

Direct Observations and Windshield Surveys



Direct observations allow one to better understand the environment in which people interact and to see the things some residents may not be aware of, or to better understand a phenomenon. Direct observation may help distill useful information that may not be apparent from your other data collection methods. This type of data collection allows you, the observer, to choose a location, event, or phenomenon and then to directly observe human activities over a period of time.

Getting Started

Begin by vividly describing the location you are observing. Include details, but try not to get bogged down with clutter. These details may seem superfluous at the time, but future analysis may prove otherwise. You should also describe the people you see and what they are doing.

Things to Consider

Continually return to the main focus of the observation. Developing an observation form may help. A sample observation form can be found on pages 53–55. The form will help guide your observation and help you focus on specific items.

You will need to determine the most appropriate sites and gear the timing of your observation toward the phenomena in question. For example, if you observe a site too early in the morning, you may miss social interactions later in the evening that shed light on your community. You may want to observe different sites at various times to make the best overall direct observation.

Following your observation, try to document as much as you can immediately afterward, while the information is still fresh in your mind. The longer you wait to document these observations, the less vivid the experience will become for you, and you will forget details that may be important.

Things to Avoid

As an observer, avoid preconceived ideas. Any such expectations can bias your observations. Here are several things you can do to reduce potential bias:

- ◆ Be aware of your own opinions and prejudices, and strive to remain objective in your observations of people, neighborhoods, and communities.
- ◆ Provide an opportunity for at least two observers to observe independently.
- ◆ Conduct an in-house training session to help produce more reliable results.

Windshield Surveys

Windshield surveys are a form of direct observation that involve making visual observations of a neighborhood or community while driving—literally “looking through the windshield.” Windshield surveys are a relatively inexpensive, time-efficient method for assessing the social environment of a community. The purpose of the windshield survey is to gain a better understanding of the environment you are studying to provide insight to the resources available in a community. Specifically, windshield surveys allow for the observation of neighborhood boundaries, housing conditions, use of open spaces, shopping areas, schools, religious facilities, human services (such as hospitals and physician offices), modes of transportation, protective services (such as fire stations), and overall neighborhood life within the community. “Windshield” surveys can even be conducted on foot if a vehicle is not available.

*Remember
Document the vivid
details, but don't
get bogged down.*

Getting Started

If you are unfamiliar with the area you would like to observe, you can visit local realtors, who can provide useful information about the boundaries of local communities and neighborhoods. In addition, it is helpful to obtain a local map even if you are familiar with the neighborhood.

Identify Your Resources

The next step in preparing for the windshield survey is to assess your resources and your purpose. This will guide the size of your team and your equipment needs. If you have two or three people to conduct the survey, divide tasks as follows: one person can drive and record the route taken as well as navigate the map. The second person can write and record observations along the route of the windshield survey. The third person can take still photographs or video of important features along the route taken (see Photography and Videography starting on page 58 for more information).

If four to six people are available, divide tasks as follows: one person can drive and record the route taken. The second person can navigate the map for the driver. The third person can write and record observations. The fourth person can photograph important features along the route taken. If a fifth person is available, he or she can film the route; however, the still photographs may suffice. If a sixth person is available, that person should also write and record observations along the route of the windshield survey.

If you do not have a large team or equipment, your team could potentially consist of a driver and an observer. Regardless of the size of your team, written observations should always be included, supplemented by audiotapes, photography, and videography when possible.

Windshield Survey Required Supplies	Windshield Survey Optional Supplies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Map of neighborhood being surveyed. ◆ Windshield survey form (see pages 53–55). ◆ Writing supplies. ◆ Clipboard. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Audio recorders for each team member including audiotapes and batteries. ◆ 35 mm camera including batteries and film or memory card. ◆ Video recorder including batteries and memory card. ◆ Backup batteries for all electronic equipment.

It is not necessary to use a car to conduct a “windshield survey”! In the absence of the aforementioned resources, you could record observations while leisurely walking through a neighborhood. However, even when walking, it is useful to have more than one person conducting the windshield survey, because this provides more than one perspective on the community being observed.

Conducting the Windshield Survey

Before starting the windshield survey, map out a flexible route that can accommodate potential problems such as the direction of streets (i.e., one-way streets that are not clearly labeled on the map) and unexpected construction. In addition, the area of the windshield survey should be large enough to obtain relevant information about the neighborhood, but small enough that the observation does not take more than 3 hours. You will need time immediately afterward to process and complete all of your notes.

Once the team is on the route, immediately begin making observations. See the Windshield Survey Form on pages 53–55 for potential items to observe. It will be helpful for all team members to have their supplies readily available as the windshield survey begins.

Once the team is finished following the route outlined, it should meet to document and discuss individual findings as well as any difficulties encountered during the observation. The longer this team meeting is delayed the less vivid will be members’ memories of what they actually observed.

If using audiotapes, it may also be useful to have the recordings transcribed. If resources allow, hiring a professional transcriptionist can shorten turnaround time of the written documentation and allow analysis to begin sooner; otherwise, the transcription may be completed “in house.” A written record of the observations can aid in the analysis of the survey observations.

D. Shopping Areas

- ☐ What types of stores are in the area (shopping centers, neighborhoods stores, grocery stores, drug stores, laundries, etc.)?
- ☐ How are these resources distributed in the area? Are they spread throughout?
- ☐ Are there ethnic stores, ones that display other than English language?
- ☐ Do signs advertise tobacco, alcohol?

E. Schools

- ☐ Are there schools in the neighborhood? Are they public or private?
- ☐ Are there play areas, sports fields connected to the schools?
- ☐ Is graffiti evident in the schools?
- ☐ Do the school grounds appear to be well-kept?
- ☐ Are there school bus stops or crossing guards?

F. Religion

- ☐ What churches do you see? Who uses the churches?
- ☐ Do you see evidence of their use for other than purely religious purposes?

G. Human Services

- ☐ Where are hospitals and health services located in relation to the neighborhood?
- ☐ Are there physician offices, health clinics or centers, dentist offices?
- ☐ Are there alternative medicine centers (acupuncture, massage, etc.)?
- ☐ Are spiritualists advertised?
- ☐ Are social agencies (welfare, WIC, social services) available?
- ☐ Are there senior centers and child care facilities?

Windshield Survey Form

Observers _____

Weather _____ Temperature _____

City _____ Neighborhood _____

Day/Date/Time _____

A. Neighborhood Boundaries

- ☐ What are the boundaries of the neighborhood?
- ☐ Are there commercial streets or areas?
- ☐ Does the neighborhood have an identity, a name visible?

B. Housing

- ☐ What is the age of the houses, type of architecture, construction material of houses? How many stories?
- ☐ Are there single, multifamily dwellings, mobile homes?
- ☐ Do houses have space/lawns around them? Are they well groomed?
- ☐ What is the general condition of the houses? Are there signs of disrepair (broken doors, windows, railings)?
- ☐ Are there cars in the driveway? Does it appear everyone is at work?
- ☐ Are there vacant houses, boarded up or dilapidated buildings?
- ☐ Are there many houses for sale?
- ☐ Are there streetlights, sidewalks, curbs, gutters, open drainage ditches?

C. Open Spaces

- ☐ How much open space is there?
- ☐ Are there parks and recreational areas in the neighborhood? Are they lighted?
- ☐ Is the open space public or private? Who uses it?
- ☐ Is there trash, rubble, or abandoned cars in the open spaces?

H. Transportation

- ☐ How do people get in and out of the neighborhood (car, bus, train, bike, walk)?
- ☐ Are the streets and roads conducive to good transportation and to community life?
- ☐ Are the streets in good condition? Are they paved? Gravel? Brick? Dirt?
- ☐ Are formal bus stops or public transportation signs visible?
- ☐ Is public transportation available? If so, how frequently?
- ☐ Is this a high-traffic area? Are speed limit signs or speed zones posted?
- ☐ Is there a major highway near the neighborhood? Whom does it serve?

I. Protective Services

- ☐ What evidence do you see of police, fire, and emergency services?
- ☐ Are there fire station houses, fire hydrants?
- ☐ Do houses have security systems?
- ☐ Is there evidence of Neighborhood Watch programs?
- ☐ Are there emergency shelters for neighborhood use (e.g., tornado shelters)?

J. Neighborhood Life

- ☐ Whom do you see on the streets (women, men, mothers with children, teenagers, elderly)?
- ☐ What ethnic groups are part of the neighborhood? Bilingual signs?
- ☐ Are there informal gathering places/hangouts? What are they? For whom (teens, men, etc.)?
- ☐ Are there social clubs or cultural organizations?
- ☐ Is there evidence of interaction among neighbors?
- ☐ Is there evidence of homelessness?
- ☐ What animals do you see (stray dogs, watch dogs)?
- ☐ Are there parks or other recreational facilities in the neighborhood? Public or private?

Adapted from *Guidelines for a Windshield Survey*, Indiana School of Nursing, Department of Community Health Nursing.