Pilot Testing Survey Questions

Often, when SSPs are asking about emerging or sensitive topics, validated survey questions or scales are unavailable or not well suited to use in an SSP setting. For SSPs running point in time surveys, survey questions may need to be written from scratch or adapted to a specific topic or local context. Writing and adapting questions is hard! Getting feedback allows you to make sure your questions and answers make sense across a variety of outlooks, education levels, and life experiences.

Well tested questions will achieve the following goals:
- **The question is direct** (meaning is broadly understood, clear, and straightforward)
- **The question is precise** (only asks about one thing)
- *If applicable,* **the question has a reasonable time frame** (easy to understand, feasible to recall information)
- *If you're using multiple choice or select all that apply answers*, **answer options are exhaustive** (include all possible answers)
- *If you're using multiple choice or select all that apply answers*, **answer options are exclusive** (each answer is clearly distinct from the others)

After you've drafted your questions and answers you'll prepare to test them. The more people that you can test them with, the better!

Observation when pilot testing questions
Your biggest tool in pilot testing is observation. **Take notes when you show or ask questions to people!**

Here's some common changes that need to be made:

If they ask questions about the question, don't know how to answer it, or you need to explain the question to them
- Then they may not understand the question as written, and you may need to reword it.

If they are uncomfortable answering,
- Then the topic of the question, the way the question is worded, the answer options, or something else may be making them uncomfortable. You may need to consider rewording, changing, or removing the question.

If they answer in unexpected ways or give an answer not listed,
- Then they may have answers you haven't thought of or can't be categorized by your current system, and you may need to add or edit answer options, recategorize answers, or add information about how to categorize those answers into the interviewer guide.

If the questions or survey bring something up for them,
- Then they may have new questions and need additional resources, and you may need to provide appropriate training and resources for your staff to provide them. For example, if your questions ask about hepatitis C and afterwards participants ask how often they should get tested, you'll want staff to be able to answer and to be able to refer them to testing.

Process for pilot testing questions

Testing is an iterative process. Once you've drafted the question and answers, you'll want to get feedback, note the needed edits or revisions, make the changes, and test again. Unfortunately, there isn't a set number of times to go through the process that leads to a well written question. See an example of a question's evolution in Appendix A.

1. Draft question and answers or adapt from existing survey instrument
2. Test internally with staff
   a. Show questions and response options to 1-3 staff members
      i. Note down any feedback, questions they ask, or observations
      ii. Make revisions
   b. Implement question with 1-3 staff members (ideally staff who haven't seen the questions yet)
      i. Ask the question to them as it will be asked in the survey
      ii. Record their answer
      iii. Note down any feedback, questions they ask, observations, or answers they give that don't fit into your current categories.
      iv. Make revisions
3. Test externally with participants
   a. Show questions and answers to 1-3 participants
      i. Note down any feedback, questions they ask, or observations
      ii. Make revisions
   b. Administer question to 1-3 participants (ideally participants who haven't seen the questions yet)
      i. Ask the question to them as it will be done in the survey
      ii. Record their answer
      iii. Note down any feedback, questions they ask, observations, or answers they give that don't fit into your current categories.
      iv. Make revisions

Appendix A – Testing Newly Written or Adapted Questions Example

During its annual point in time survey, an SSP is interested in learning more about participants who inject alone. Below is the first draft of the question they have written to understand the reasons participants inject alone.

Question	Answers	Notes from testing	Edits
Version 1			
In the last three months, what are reasons you have used alone? *Select all that apply*	• Was alone/Didn't have anyone to use with • Safety • No one knows I use	Testing with staff • What if they don't use alone, how should they answer? • Is three months too long a time frame? Folks can move a lot in that amount of time, hard for them to remember • Likely they are other reasons people are using alone • What if they smoke, but don't inject...do you want them to answer this question?	Question needs to be split into two questions, one about if/how often they use alone and add skip logic, if yes they use alone, what are the reasons Language is unclear, what if they are smoking alone-make about injecting
Version 2			
1. In the last three months, have you injected alone?	• Yes • No	Notes with staff • How do we mark it if participants are uncomfortable answering? • Should there be response options that show nuance since people using alone once may have different level of risk than people who always use alone? • What do you mean by safety?	Add decline to answer options
2. *If yes to #1*, in the last three months, what are reasons you have injected alone? *Select all that apply*	• Was alone/Didn't have anyone to use with • Safety • No one knows I use	Notes with participants • Folks having trouble with the time frame...too long, cut down to one month	Make time frame one month and confirm continuity with other survey questions Add answer options

		• Participant answered, didn't want to share drugs	• Didn't want to/couldn't afford to share drugs • Safety is unclear, change to 'Concern about consequences of others knowing I use' • 'Other'
Version 3-Final version			
1. In the last month, have you injected alone?	• Never • Sometimes • Always • Decline to answer		
2. *If sometimes or always to #1*, in the last month, what are reasons you have injected alone? *Select all that apply*	• Didn't have anyone to use with • Didn't want to/couldn't afford to share drugs with others • No one knows I use • Prefer to use alone • Concern about consequences of others knowing I use • Other: _____ • Decline to answer		