

Writing a Survey for a Vulnerable Population: Chaplaincy Services in Federal Prisons

Part A

Researcher Amy Lawton works at the Chaplaincy Innovation Lab (CIL). As part of her work, she was contacted by Chaplaincy Services, a branch of the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP). The BOP is charged with providing all inmates with “reasonable and equitable opportunities” to practice their religion. Prison chaplains are the people who carry out this charge. They are responsible for providing spiritual care for approximately 150,000 inmates in 122 facilities across the country.¹

Chaplaincy Services contacted Amy because they wanted to know more about how chaplains are utilized by federal inmates. Chaplaincy Services was inspired to poll the population of inmates by another BOP entity, the Food Service Branch. Every year, the Food Service Branch conducts a survey on inmate food preferences. The menu survey helps ensure that the dietary needs of inmates are met and that resources are not being wasted. Likewise, Chaplaincy Services wanted to know if the worship services, sacred text study, group counseling, and faith-based reentry services were helpful to inmates. Chaplaincy Services wondered: Are spiritual care resources being used? Who is using the resources? Do federal prison inmates even know that these resources exist?

Amy agreed to draft a survey to be distributed by the BOP, but she knew there would be challenges. She had to craft a survey that would yield useful information for Chaplaincy Services, which would be more complicated than a survey of food preferences. She reviewed the menu survey used by Food Services. It simply presented the prison menu and asked inmates to rate every item as “like” or “dislike.” Amy knew it would make more sense for the Chaplaincy Services survey to have multiple choice questions with more than two responses.

Chaplaincy Services also provided Amy with some other general guidelines for designing the survey. She couldn’t ask about staff performance. She had to provide the questions in both English and Spanish. For the question about religious affiliation, she had to use the BOP-provided survey question, which asked about small religions that are not common in the general population.

Questions for reflection:

1. Why would the responses “like” and “dislike” be bad responses for a survey about prison chaplains?
2. How should Amy think about the educational and reading backgrounds of respondents when drafting the survey?

¹ This number is from 2024. Visit this link to learn about the current federal prison population: https://www.bop.gov/about/statistics/population_statistics.jsp

3. What are some of the ethical concerns about researching prisoners?
4. Does this project count as research and, if so, which IRBs need to be consulted?
5. What specifically might pose a risk to prisoners if they are asked to divulge information about their religion/spirituality?
6. To analyze the survey results, do we need to know if the inmate regularly attended a place of worship before incarceration? Why or why not?
7. How do you think this survey could be distributed to inmates?

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Part B

Amy began to draft the survey. She thought about how federal inmates have a lower average reading level than the general population. While a general population survey should be written at an 8th grade reading level, Amy researched the population of federal inmates and decided that a survey for inmates should be written at a 5th grade reading level for maximum accessibility.

The BOP told Amy that the survey would be distributed through common-area computer kiosks in the prisons. This delivery system influenced how Amy designed the survey. She wrote groups of questions that could be “blocked” together on short pages.

Amy saw that one major difference between the Food Service survey and the Chaplaincy Services survey was that, while everyone needs to eat food, not everyone would describe themselves as religious and/or spiritual. She wrote the first block of questions to learn more about the target population.

1. *Do you consider yourself to be religious?*
2. *Do you consider yourself to be spiritual?*
3. *Did you attend a church, mosque, or other place of worship before being incarcerated?*
4. *Do you pray/meditate?*

The second block of questions asked about familiarity with chaplains (e.g. “Do you know a Chaplain who works at your facility?”) and the third block asked about participation (e.g. “How often do you participate in worship services at your facility?”). These questions could be answered on a Likert-type scale. Scale questions are a nuanced way to gauge attitudes or opinions. For example, a person might pray more than once a day, daily, weekly, monthly, almost never, or never – data that would not be captured by a simple “yes or no” question.

The last block of questions asked for demographic information. Even anonymous demographic data can potentially reveal the identity of the respondent, so for every question, Amy was always careful to include the option “Prefer not to answer.”

Amy drafted a 20-question multiple choice survey and sent it to be reviewed and approved by the Bureau Research Review Board.

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Teaching Notes

Case Summary: This case discusses social scientific research of religion in a carceral setting. The Federal Bureau of Prison's Chaplaincy Services enables federal inmates to practice religion while incarcerated. A researcher designed a survey to help Chaplaincy Services learn more about religious prisoners. This case discusses common difficulties with studying a vulnerable population, such as prisoners.

Teaching Objectives

- Students will understand the basics of survey research with a vulnerable population.
- Students will think critically about the challenges of tabulating data gathered by a quantitative survey.
- Students will have increased understanding of the role of Chaplaincy Services in Federal Prisons.

Target Audience

- Undergraduate methods students in the social sciences
- Chaplaincy students with an interest in research

Additional Topics:

Measuring Religion

The BOP provided the following 25 responses to be used for the question, "What is your religion today, if any?"

- a. Adventist
- b. Atheist
- c. Buddhist
- d. Catholic
- e. Christian Non-Trinitarian
- f. Christian Science
- g. Church of Christ
- h. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
- i. Hindu
- j. Humanist

- k. Islam
- l. Jehovah Witness
- m. Jewish
- n. Messianic
- o. Moorish Science Temple of America
- p. Nation of Islam
- q. Native American
- r. Nothing in particular
- s. Other
- t. Orthodox Christian
- u. Pagan
- v. Pentecostal
- w. Protestant Christian
- x. Rastafarian
- y. Santeria

Contrast this with the standard social science questionnaire list of religions used by the Pew Research Center: "What is your present religion, if any? Are you Protestant, Roman Catholic, Mormon, Orthodox such as Greek or Russian Orthodox, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, atheist, agnostic, something else, or nothing in particular?"

Discuss the intersectional reasons for including a broader range of responses on the prison survey as opposed to the general population survey.