Polls & Surveys
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Slide 1: Title page.

Slide 2: The importance of surveys and polls

Each time a national election comes around, we see polls about the candidates covered in the news. Opinion polls about presidential candidates can be very interesting, but there are many other reasons why reporters may want to report on or conduct a poll. Businesses often use surveys to gauge how satisfied customers are with their products or services. Local governments often conduct surveys to see how the community feels about a proposed policy change or law. Journalists may conduct a survey with their audience members to see what public opinion is on an important story. Student journalists also want to know where public opinion stands on a variety of issues that are important to the students at their school.

Slide 3: Reporting on surveys and polls

When we are thinking about reporting on a poll or survey, we have to keep several things in mind:

1) If the poll is objective
    a. Was the poll conducted by someone who has something to gain in the outcome of the poll? If a candidate running for student council president was to conduct a poll to see who is likely to win the election for student council president, the results of the survey might not be accurate. The results might make the student council president candidate look like the projected winner, when students may prefer someone else.

Slide 4: Reporting on surveys and polls

2) If the survey questions clearly and accurately measure what the survey intended to measure
    a. The way questions are phrased in the survey might lead participants in a poll to answer a certain way (or not). If questions are unclear participants may not know exactly how to respond, and your results will be confusing as well.

Slide 5: Reporting on surveys and polls

    b. Or sometimes participants try to answer a question the way they think they *should* answer a question. This is called the social desirability effect. For example, when high school students are asked how many hours a day they spend studying, they may overestimate the amount of time each day they spend studying, because studying is a socially desirable thing for high schoolers to do (according to their parents and teachers, at least).

Slide 6: Reporting on surveys and polls

c. The order in which a survey asks questions of participants can also skew results. This is called priming. If we were to ask students if they think it was unfair for school administrators to get rid of vending machines in the school, and then ask them if they want the school administrators to bring the vending machines back, they are much more likely to say yes to the second question because the first question suggested it was unfair to remove them in the first place!

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3) Who participated
    a. Participants in a survey should represent the population they were drawn from. Representative samples are samples that "represent" the population (like the student body at a high school) from which participants were selected. This means that we can reasonably expect the opinions expressed in the poll to represent all of the individuals in the population.

Slide 8: Reporting on surveys and polls

b. Some items to consider when evaluating a high school survey to determine if it is a representative sample is gender, race and ethnicity, socio-economic status (class) and grade-level. If these groups are included in the sample in approximately the same numbers that can be found in the population, then we can say a survey is a representative sample.

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4) If there are any problems with the poll
    a. For instance, if a survey was conducted several months or years ago, it may no longer represent the opinions of the population. Students may have changed their minds on an issue, or the graduating seniors may have had very different opinions than the incoming freshman do.

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b. Also, it's important to remember that many voices are better than a few. If you only survey a handful of people, the results may not be accurate—they may not reflect the opinions of the population you were interested in. Yet, polling everyone in a population is often not possible, and there comes a point where more participants will not make you more confident in your results.

Slide 11: Designing your survey and your questions
Keeping these items in mind are not just helpful for evaluating a survey or poll you may report on; they are also very helpful for thinking about a survey or poll you create. Let's assume that a high school paper plans to conduct and report on a survey. That means the student journalists need to ask if their questions:

Slide 12: Designing your survey and your questions
1) Actually measure what you want to find out. In other words, use the clearest, most direct language possible in your questions. Don't try to hide what you really want to ask about in tricky or vague questions.

Slide 13: Designing your survey and your questions
2) Lead the participants to specific answers. Remember, this can take many forms, like social desirability or priming, which were mentioned before. Also, individuals who may be asking participants survey questions in person should be careful to be as neutral as possible, and not lead participants to answer a specific way by the tone of their voice or the way they look at the participants.

Slide 14: Designing your survey and your questions
3) Allow for a variety of opinions. Most surveys ask participants if they agree or disagree with a statement or issue. Sometimes a survey may allow participants to state when they have no opinion. It can be a good thing to give participants an opportunity to express an opinion that is not just on one side or the other, but mixed, especially when dealing with complex issues. Ask a series of clear, concise questions about the different parts of a complex topic, so that you can better report on the nuance of opinions about the particular parts of that issue.

Slide 15: Examples of good survey questions
There are several types of "good" questions that researchers can ask in surveys. For the most part, researchers ask participants questions about their opinions, feelings and behaviors. Surveys and polls are a good way to collect this type of data, and participants are usually willing to share this type of information. Also, researchers always ask demographic questions, because there may be important differences between groups. For example, young men and young women in the student body may have different opinions on what the prom theme should be in a given year, and that would be important to know.

Slide 16: Examples of good survey questions
An example of each type of question follows:

- Opinions:
  - If you were to vote today, would you vote for student council president candidate A or candidate B?
- Feelings:

    - Which student council president candidate do you believe gave the best presentation at the assembly, Candidate A or Candidate B?
- Behaviors:
    - Did you volunteer in any student council campaign activities before the election?
- Demographic data:
    - Gender
    - Age/grade-level
    - Race/ethnicity
    - Income

Slide 17: Picking the right sample

The hardest part of conducting a survey or poll is finding the right group of people to ask to participate. This group, called the sample, should be representative of the population directly affected or influenced by the issue at hand. For example, if you were interested in what students thought about this year's prom theme, you would not ask teachers or parents! You would want to *sample* students who are likely to attend the prom, meaning, you would want to ask several of the seniors about the theme. You would also likely want to avoid the seniors who participated on the prom committee, as they were the ones who selected the theme (and we have a good idea what they think).

Some things you need to keep in mind when thinking about your sample include:

Slide 18: Picking the right sample

1) Your sample should accurately represent the population you are interested in. It can be as big as the entire population of students at your high school, or it can be as distinct as student athletes in your high school who, let's say, are now going to be affected by a new, higher GPA policy.

Slide 19: Picking the right sample

2) Once you know your sample, you should make sure that everyone in that group has an equal chance of being a participant in your sample. This is called random sampling, and there are several different ways to go about it.

Slide 20: Picking the right sample

a. Using our student athletes example, the easiest way to go about randomly sampling the student athlete population would be to list every student athlete, then assign each one a number (between 1 and the total number of student athletes), and then to randomly draw numbers (you can find free computer programs online that can do this—no hat needed!), and ask the athletes who have been assigned those numbers to participate. This is called a simple random sample.

Slide 21: Picking the right sample

b. Another way you could randomly sample is to start at a random point on the list, and choose to ask every *n*th person (for example, every 5th person, every 10th person, etc.) to participate, moving down the list to the end. This is called systematic random sampling.

Slide 22: Picking the right sample

3) Sometimes it's not possible for you to get a random sample of your population. It's usually because you cannot get a complete list of the entire population. Then you might find yourself using a convenience sample (for example, if you asked several student athletes in your lunch block to participate in your poll) or a volunteer sample (you sent out an email to all of the student athletes you know asking them to participate). While these samples are probably fine for your reporting purposes, the survey results of these samples do not reflect what all student athletes at your school feel about the new policy. For example, we might see that student athletes who really dislike the new GPA policy are much more likely to fill out your poll and tell you that they don't like it!

Slide 23: Picking the right sample

4) One of the biggest questions students may have is, "How big should my sample size be?" Well, it depends! Typically, you want to be 95% certain in your results. This is also called a confidence interval, and it's important to those who conduct surveys and polls. Those who routinely conduct surveys and polls recognize that the only way to reach 100% confidence is to survey everyone in a population—which is often not possible—but that anything below a 95% confidence interval gives too much opportunity for their results to be inaccurate. So, if you had 200 student athletes in your target group, and you wanted to be 95% certain that you had poll answers that reflected what every student athlete thought, you would need a sample of 132 student athletes.

Slide 24: Picking the right sample

It's important to note, however, that larger populations do not need the same percentage of participants in the sample to be that confident. This is called the law of diminishing returns. There comes a point where asking more people from your population to be in your sample doesn't actually mean you can be more confident in your results. So, if you wanted to know what all 600 seniors at your high school thought about the prom theme this year, and you wanted to be 95% certain of your results, you would only need to ask 234 seniors to participate in your poll. You can find websites online that can help you determine what size your sample needs to be in order to be 95% confident in your results.

Slide 25: Analyzing the results of your poll
Once a survey or poll is complete, the results must then be processed and analyzed. The type of analysis done typically is determined by the type of questions asked in the survey:

Slide 26: Analyzing the results of your poll

1) If the answers are a simple yes or no, agree or disagree, then the data should be tabulated (counted) and a confidence interval calculated. The confidence interval tells you how closely your sample of participants represents your population. Confidence intervals are also related to the margin of error.

Slide 27: Analyzing the results of your poll

2) If the participants were able to select their response from more choices, and the survey was interested in relationships between those choices (do participants who like product x also like product y, which parts of products x and y do participants like, etc.), then more involved statistical measures are required.

Slide 28: Analyzing the results of your poll

3) If the survey asked open-ended questions (such as, "What is your favorite part of Homecoming?"), and allowed participants to respond in their own words and not from a set of pre-determined choices, then analysis consists of reviewing those answers carefully, looking for words or phrases (otherwise known as codes) that are repeated over and over again (which represent themes). Those themes are reviewed, and good examples of those themes are selected from the responses. Journalists then report on those themes and use the illustrative examples in their work as evidence.

Slide 29: Reporting your findings
Journalists have to accurately and clearly report what a survey found, and what implications it may have, to their audience. This is true both for an outside poll they've evaluated, or a survey their newspaper has created. Surveys and polls can be used in a variety of ways for reporting. They can be used for:

- To introduce an important issue
- To help readers better understand the issue
- To allow readers to explore how others in their community view the issue

Slide 30: Reporting your findings
When reporting on a survey, it is important to keep the results clear enough for the readers to understand without losing any context that may change the way the audience interprets the results. Infographics are one common way for journalists to report on survey findings in a clear, easy to understand format for readers. That being said, we

must be careful to make sure not to oversimplify the results of a poll in an infographic, which may misconstrue the results.

Slide 31: Reporting your findings
Again, it's best to keep the questions we discussed about reporting on polls (and conducting your own poll) in mind when writing about your poll. Your readers will appreciate knowing which questions you asked, who your sample represents, and the margin of error. This information not only allows your readers to understand the issue more fully, thanks to your careful polling and reporting, but it allows the readers to take the information presented and draw their own conclusions from it.

Slide 32: Contact information page.