**Conducting questionnaire surveys in the community**

In an excellent article, Lynne Allery describes how to use questionnaires for research in medical education1. At St George’s University of London, as a “student selected component” (SSC) in primary care, medical students can learn how to design and conduct a questionnaire survey, enter and analyse data using SPSS, and if possible publish their findings as a letter2-8. As an example we describe two 2015 SSCs exploring the characteristics of people attending a homeless support centre and a food bank.

In the first study at the Ace of Clubs homeless support centre in London, attenders were asked if they were willing to take part in a short, anonymous survey. As many participants had limited writing skills, the questions were asked verbally and responses entered by ZK.

The response rate was 82% (65/79). Most responders (78%) were male, the age range was 32-76 years, and 33% were born outside the UK. Eight (12%) were currently working, all as cleaners; but 71% had previously worked- in the building trade (31%), in offices (8%) as chefs (5%) or in other occupations. Most responders (65%) were smokers, 39% drank alcohol, 14% used heroin and 11% smoked marijuana. The most frequent medical conditions were mental health problems: depression 20%, anxiety 11% and schizophrenia 9%.

The second study explored characteristics of attenders at the Vineyard Church food bank in Dartford, Kent. People attending the foodbank were approached by IB and asked if they were willing to complete a brief anonymous questionnaire. The response rate was 91% (61/67), 53% were women, and mean age was 47 years (range 21-74). Only 18% identified themselves as from an ethnic minority and 77% had children. Most responders (82%) came to collect a food parcel every week. Nine percent said their highest qualification was a university degree, 10% had A levels or a BTec, 27% had GCSEs and 32% had NVQs or similar. Only 22% said they had no educational qualifications.

The majority (79%) were receiving social benefits. Of 59% (36/61) who answered the question about employment, 83% said they earned no money, and the average weekly earnings of those in paid work were £204.

As well as learning questionnaire methodology, these students encountered people on the fringes of UK society. Other students have surveyed general practice patients and people in cafes4;5;8. In line with Allery’s article, we suggest that questionnaire surveys based in the community can provide a practical and cost-effective educational opportunity.

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