Which Question First

Choosing an inquiry you can finish

FOR:

the people in a community organization who decide what the group will study, and the members they answer to

INCLUDES:

five tests for comparing candidate questions, a guide to what each kind of question demands, ways to narrow a question until it can be finished, a comparison table, a decision record, and wording for explaining the choice to members

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01

The choice you are making

When a group decides to gather its own evidence, members usually arrive with several questions at once, all of them real. The temptation is to fit them all into one survey. That is the most common reason community inquiries stall: too many questions, too few people to ask them, and a report nobody can finish.

This guide helps you choose **one question to answer first**, and explain to members why. It does not help you design the study; that is the job of the *Community Study Plan*. Choosing first matters because every later decision, from who you ask to what goes in the brief, depends on it.

A good first question has five qualities. Someone can act on the answer. Your group can actually answer it. Asking it is safe. The people affected want it asked. And you can finish it before the answer stops mattering.

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02

Step 1: Write every candidate down

List every question members have raised, in their own words. Do not judge them yet. Then rewrite each one as a single question with a question mark, and note who raised it.

A residents' group in a mixed neighborhood listed four candidates:

- A. "Since the bus route changed, are people missing work or appointments?"
- B. "Why do so many young people stop using the recreation center after age 14?"
- C. "Is the city's new parking enforcement aimed at our streets more than others?"
- D. "Do families who use the food pantry know they may qualify for other help?"

All four are worth asking. The group can only do one well this year.

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Step 2: Apply the five tests

Test 1. Can someone act on the answer, and when?

Name the person or body who could change something because of your answer, and the date or meeting when they decide. If you cannot name one, the question may still matter, but it is not the one to answer first.

Ask: Is a decision coming up? A budget hearing, a contract renewal, a service redesign, a board meeting? Is the decision-holder someone your group can reach?

Test 2. Can your group answer it?

Different kinds of questions need different kinds of evidence. Some are well within reach of a community group. Some need resources few groups have.

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Kind of question	Example	What it usually needs	Within reach for a small group?
How many, how often?	How many households have waited more than a month for a repair?	A clear list of who you will ask, the same questions for everyone, and careful counting	Often yes, if the group of people is clearly defined and reachable
What is it like?	What happens when a parent tries to get a pediatric appointment?	Conversations or group discussions, recorded and read systematically	Often yes, and often the best first question
What do people want or need?	What would make the recreation center worth coming back to?	Structured listening, with care to hear from people who do not usually speak up	Yes, if you plan who you will hear from
Did something change after X?	Did missed appointments rise after the bus route changed?	Information from before and after, about the same people or place, counted the same way	Sometimes. You rarely have the "before" unless someone else recorded it
Did X cause the change?	Did the route change cause people to lose jobs?	A way to rule out other explanations, usually a comparison group and records over time	Rarely, on its own. Consider a descriptive question first, or ask the institution for its data
Is one group treated differently?	Is enforcement heavier on our streets?	Comparable records for several areas, counted the same way	Usually not by gathering it yourself. The institution often holds the records

Two rules of thumb follow from the table. First, questions about what happens and what it is like are usually the best first inquiry for a community group, because you can answer them well with modest means. Second, when the evidence you need sits in an institution's records, asking for those records may beat gathering your own. The companion collection on evidence requests covers that route: *Asking an Institution for the Evidence Behind a Decision*.

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Test 3. Is it safe to ask?

Think about the people who would answer. Could being asked, or being seen to answer, cause them trouble with a landlord, employer, school, agency or immigration authority? Could the questions bring up painful experiences without any support to offer? Could anyone be identified from the answers because the group is small?

A question that fails this test is not automatically off the table, but it needs stronger protections, more experienced help, or a different approach. It is rarely the right first inquiry for a group still learning.

Test 4. Do the people affected want it asked?

Whose question is this? A question raised by the organization's leaders is not always the question members or residents would choose. Check with the people who would be asked: would they want to answer this, and would they want the answer used this way? A question people want asked will get more and better answers.

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Test 5. Can you finish it before it stops mattering?

Count what you actually have: volunteers and their hours, money for printing, translation, refreshments or payments, and the weeks before the decision date. Then count what the question needs: how many people you must reach, in how many languages, how often, and how long it will take to read the answers and write them up. Leave time for the meeting where you share findings with participants before they go anywhere else.

If the answer would arrive after the decision closes, choose a different question or a smaller version of this one.

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Step 3: Compare the candidates

Fill in a row for each question. Use plain words, not scores. Scores invite arguments about numbers and hide the reason that actually settles the choice.

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The group's comparison:

Question	1. Who acts, and when	2. Can we answer it	3. Safe to ask	4. Wanted	5. Can we finish in time	Notes
A. Bus route	Transit authority; service review in spring	Yes, if narrowed to "what has happened to you since the change" rather than "did the change cause it"	Yes	Strongly, raised at three meetings	Yes, if limited to riders on the affected route	Before-and-after comparison is out of reach; experience question is not
B. Recreation center	Parks department; no decision scheduled	Yes, with group discussions	Yes, with parental permission for under-18s	Young people not yet asked	Yes	No decision-holder yet. Strong second choice
C. Parking enforcement	Police and city council; no date	Not by gathering our own; the city holds ticket records	Some risk for people with unpaid fines	Yes	No	Better as an evidence request for the city's records
D. Food pantry	Pantry board; meets monthly	Yes	Sensitive; people may fear losing help	Not known	Yes	Partner, the pantry, should lead or co-own

The group's choice: A, narrowed to "What has happened to riders on the affected route since the change, and what do they need from the spring service review?" It has a decision-holder and a date, it is answerable, it is safe, it is wanted and it can be finished. B is kept for next year once a decision is in view. C goes to an evidence request. D is offered to the pantry as a joint inquiry.

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Step 4: Narrow the question until it can be finished

Most first questions are too big. Narrow them along these lines, one at a time, until the question passes Test 5.

- **Narrow the people.** “Riders on the affected route” rather than “everyone in the neighborhood.”
- **Narrow the place.** One building, one street, one school, one clinic.
- **Narrow the period.** “Since the change in March” rather than “in recent years.”
- **Turn a cause into a description.** “What has happened since” rather than “what caused.” You can still report what people say caused it, as their account.
- **Keep only the part the decision depends on.** If the review is choosing between two route options, ask what riders need from each, not everything about transit.

Stop narrowing when the question still matters to the decision-holder and the people affected. A question so narrow that nobody cares about the answer has failed Test 1 and Test 4.

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Step 5: Consider the alternatives to gathering evidence yourself

Before you settle, ask whether an inquiry is the best route at all.

- **The evidence may already exist.** The institution, a university or a public statistics office may already hold it. Ask for it first.
- **A shorter route may serve.** A public hearing, a petition or a meeting with the decision-holder may get the result without new evidence.
- **A partner may be better placed.** If another organization is trusted by the people affected and already doing this work, offer to support them rather than duplicate them.

Choosing not to run an inquiry, or not yet, is a legitimate decision. Record it the same way.

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Step 6: Record the decision

Keep this record with the organization's minutes. It answers the question members will ask later: why this one?

Field	Your entry
Question chosen, in final wording	
Who can act on the answer, and when they decide	
Kind of question (how many; what it is like; what people want; change; cause; difference)	
Why your group can answer it	
Risks to people asked, and how you will reduce them	
How you checked that the people affected want it asked	
Time, people and money needed; date findings are due	
Questions not chosen, and what happens to each (later, evidence request, partner, dropped)	
Who made the decision, and on what date	
What would make you change course	

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Step 7: Explain the choice to members

People whose question was not chosen deserve a clear reason. Say what was chosen, why, and what happens to their question. For example:

> “We have chosen to start with riders on the bus route, because the transit authority decides on the spring service review and we can finish in time to be heard. The recreation center question matters too. Nobody is deciding about the center this year, so we will plan it for next year and start by asking young people what they want to know. For parking, we will ask the city for its ticket records, which will tell us more than our own survey could.”

Avoid language that ranks people’s concerns. The choice is about timing and what the group can do well now, not about whose problem matters more.

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Mistakes to avoid

- **Asking everything at once.** A survey with five purposes answers none of them well.
- **Choosing the question the institution would find easiest to accept.** Choose the one your community needs answered, then plan to answer it well.
- **Choosing a cause question because it sounds stronger.** A well-answered description is more useful than a weak claim of cause.
- **Letting the loudest voice decide.** Use the tests and record the reasons.
- **Forgetting the decision date.** Work backward from it.

RELATED: *Running a Community Inquiry That Institutions Can Act On*, for carrying out the inquiry; *Community Study Plan*, for planning the study; *Asking an Institution for the Evidence Behind a Decision*, for requesting the evidence behind a decision.

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Further reading

1 **University of Kansas Center for Community Health and Development, Community Tool Box, Chapter 3: Assessing Community Needs and Resources**. Practical sections on choosing among community concerns and matching methods to questions.

2 **Chicago Beyond, Why Am I Always Being Researched? (2018)**. Questions about who sets the research agenda and whose questions get asked.

3 **American Evaluation Association, Guiding Principles**. Principle A on systematic inquiry and Principle E on the common good and equity.

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