PROVA GUIDES

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Seven stages, from question to reply

Running a Community Inquiry That Institutions Can Act On

Your own question, asked your way, answered well enough to be taken seriously

FOR:
tenants' associations, resident groups, parent and youth groups, faith and cultural organizations, and small community organizations planning to gather their own evidence on a small budget

INCLUDES:
what makes community evidence hard to dismiss, the stages of an inquiry from question to reply and which document helps with each, why consent and data ownership come first, keeping a log, making sense of the answers together, and the usual reasons institutions push back

EDITION: 19 October 2026

01 Why run your own inquiry

Most evidence about a neighborhood is gathered by someone else: a city department, a housing provider, a school district, a university. They choose the question, decide who is asked, keep the answers and write the conclusions. People who live with the result often see none of it.

A community inquiry turns that around. Your organization chooses the question, decides how to ask it, holds what people tell you, and says what it found. Done carefully, it gives you something a list of complaints cannot: a record that an institution has to answer on its merits.

This guide is the starting point for the collection. It explains what “done carefully” means when you have little money, no research staff and a lot of goodwill to protect. It does not ask you to behave like a university. It asks you to be clear, fair and honest about what you know, which is within reach of any group that takes the time.

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02 What makes community evidence hard to dismiss

Institutions sometimes set aside community findings by saying they are anecdotes, unrepresentative or biased. Sometimes that is a way of avoiding an uncomfortable answer. Sometimes the objection is fair. You cannot control the first. You can make the second much harder to say. Five things do most of the work.

1. A question someone can act on. A strong answer to a question nobody is deciding goes into a drawer. *Which Question First* shows how to check this before you commit.

2. A method you can describe in three sentences. Say who you asked, how you reached them and what you asked. If a reader can picture how the answers were gathered, they can judge them. If they cannot, they will assume the worst.

3. Counts that add up. Say how many people you tried to reach, how many answered and how many answered each question. Show your numbers as counts as well as percentages ("31 of 58 households"), so nobody has to trust your arithmetic. Keep a record of every change you made to the questions or the list of people asked.

4. Claims no bigger than the evidence. Say what your answers show about the people who gave them. If you want to say something about a whole building, street or group, say why your answers can stand for them, and what would change the picture. Two companion guides cover this ground in depth: *How Much Evidence Is Enough?* and *The Missing People Problem*. Read them before you write any finding.

5. Visible respect for the people who answered. Institutions increasingly ask how evidence was gathered: whether people agreed freely, whether anyone could be identified, whether answers were protected. A group that can show its consent and data-ownership terms, and show that it kept them, is harder to dismiss than one that cannot. More important, it is doing right by its neighbors.

None of these needs a large budget. All of them need decisions made before the first question is asked, not after.

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03 The stages of an inquiry

Every inquiry in this collection follows the same seven stages. The documents that follow help with the stages marked.

Stage	What you do	Where to find help
1. Choose the question	Pick one question that someone can act on and that you can finish	*Which Question First* (decision guide)
2. Plan	Decide who you will ask, how, with what questions, on what budget and timeline	*Community Study Plan* (template)
3. Agree consent and ownership	Decide what people are told, who holds the answers and what happens to them	*Community Study Plan*, sections 5 and 6
4. Gather	Ask people, record answers as agreed, keep a log of what happened	This guide; *Community Study Plan*, section 4
5. Make sense together	Count, read and discuss the answers with the people affected before you decide what they mean	This guide
6. Write the brief	Put the findings, their limits and your request on two pages	*Two-Page Findings Brief* (template)
7. Ask for a reply	Send the brief to the decision-holder with a date for their answer, and record what they say	*Two-Page Findings Brief*, last section

The worked case, *A Tenants' Survey From Question to Brief*, lets you practice the hard calls at each stage on an example before you make them for real. Work through it together before you start gathering.

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04 Consent and data ownership come first

People who answer a community inquiry are usually neighbors. They may depend on the same landlord, school or agency you are asking about. That raises the stakes in two directions. Your neighbors may trust you more than they trust an outside researcher, so they may tell you things they would not tell anyone else. And if what they told you reaches the wrong person, the harm can be immediate: a strained tenancy, a child singled out, a benefit questioned.

So settle what people will be told, who holds their answers and who may see them before you gather anything, not after. The *Community Study Plan* sets these out as terms you can adopt and sign (sections 5 and 6), including what to say when an institution, a partner or a journalist asks for the answers. Treat each term as a promise, and make only promises you can keep. The worked case shows what happens when one is tested.

If a university, hospital or government-funded partner joins your inquiry, their own research ethics rules may apply, and in the United States that can mean review by an institutional review board. Ask them early what their rules require. Their review does not replace your own terms with your neighbors. Keep both.

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05 Gathering: keep a plain log

You do not need special software. You do need a log, kept as you go, that records:

- the date each part of the work started and finished;
- every change to the questions, the list of people to ask or the method, and why;
- how many people were approached, how many said yes, how many said no, and how many could not be reached;
- anything that went wrong: a lost form, an interpreter not available, a building where nobody answered the door;
- any concern a participant raised, and what was done.

When an institution asks “how do you know?”, this log is your answer. It also protects volunteers, because it shows the group made its choices openly.

Pay attention to who is doing the asking. People answer differently depending on who is in front of them. A tenant asking a neighbor about repairs may hear more than a stranger would. A volunteer who is also a building representative may hear less about problems with the building representatives. Note who asked whom, and think about whether it matters.

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06 Making sense together

Counting the answers is a task. Deciding what they mean is a judgment, and it belongs partly to the people who gave them.

Before you write any findings, hold at least one meeting where the people affected see the first counts and hear the main themes. Ask them three things: does this match what you know; what is missing; and what would you want the institution to hear first. Record what changes as a result. If someone disagrees with a reading, write the disagreement down rather than smoothing it over. An institution is more likely to trust findings that show where people disagreed.

Three questions for the people affected, before any findings are written

Does this match what you know?

What is missing?

What should the institution hear first?

Keep the stories, but keep them in their place. One vivid account can show what a problem is like. It cannot show how common the problem is. Your counts do that. Use both, and say which is which.

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07 What institutions say, and how to be ready

What you may hear	What sits behind it	How to be ready
"These are just anecdotes."	They cannot see how many people were asked or how answers were gathered	State who was asked, how, and the counts. Keep stories as illustrations, not proof of scale
"Your sample is not representative."	They think the people who answered differ from those who did not	Say exactly whose answers these are. Read *The Missing People Problem* and say what you did to reach people who are harder to reach
"You asked leading questions."	They doubt the wording	Publish the questions as asked. Have someone outside the group read them for bias before you start
"Our records show something different."	Their data and yours count different things, or different people, or different periods	Ask what their records count, since when and for whom. Put the two side by side and explain the gap. A difference is a finding, not a defeat
"You are an advocacy group, so you are biased."	They doubt your motives	Show your method, your limits and the answers that did not support your view. Being open about what you hoped to find is a strength
"We will look into it."	No commitment	Ask who will look into it, and by what date they will reply in writing. Record the answer

You will not win every exchange. A good inquiry still changes the conversation, because the institution now has to answer evidence instead of a feeling.

RELATED: *Which Question First*, for choosing a question you can act on; *Community Study Plan*, for planning and consent terms; *Worked Case: A Tenants' Survey From Question to Brief*, for practicing the hard calls; *Two-Page Findings Brief*, for writing up findings and your request; *How Much Evidence Is Enough?*, for claims no bigger than the evidence; *The Missing People Problem*, for who your answers leave out.

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08 Further reading

1 **Chicago Beyond, Why Am I Always Being Researched? A guidebook for community organizations, researchers, and funders (2018)**. On the imbalance of power between communities and researchers, and questions community organizations can ask about who owns and benefits from research.

2 **Israel, Schulz, Parker and Becker, Review of community-based research: assessing partnership approaches to improve public health, Annual Review of Public Health 19 (1998)**. A widely cited account of the principles of research done with communities rather than on them.

3 **University of Kansas Center for Community Health and Development, Community Tool Box, Chapter 3: Assessing Community Needs and Resources**. Free, practical sections on surveys, interviews and listening sessions written for community groups.

4 **American Evaluation Association, Guiding Principles**. Professional principles on systematic inquiry, integrity, respect for people and the common good.

Check any legal duties that apply to your organization, such as privacy law or mandatory reporting, with a qualified adviser.

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Cite as: Prova (2026). Running a Community Inquiry That Institutions Can Act On. byprova.com

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