



## Guidelines for Surveys of the American Pediatric Surgical Association

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For the 2010 APSA Outcomes and Clinical Trials Committee

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Received 11 March 2011; revised 12 May 2011; accepted 13 May 2011

### Key words:

Survey;  
Methodology

**Abstract** Pediatric surgery is defined by the rare performance of complex operations in children. As a consequence, pediatric surgeons have difficulty identifying high-level evidence to help guide management decisions. The American Pediatric Surgical Association (APSA) Outcomes and Clinical Trials Committee is dedicated to helping our membership identify best practices and appropriate standards for clinical management of pediatric surgical diseases. Often, the best available evidence will be the opinions and experience of our membership, and therefore, quantifying this experience and opinion correctly is of critical importance. The APSA Outcomes and Clinical Trials Committee has therefore developed guidelines for survey development and administration for use by the APSA membership.

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With the exception of a handful of centers that attract higher volumes of surgical patients with uncommon anomalies, pediatric surgery is defined by rare performance of complex operations. Most of our literature is defined by case series within single institutions and usually include a

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small number of procedures performed over many years [1]. Within this context, research surveys are an effective tool for collecting data regarding the beliefs, practices, and knowledge of surgeons [2]. Surveys are used in many aspects of health care and can be used in pediatric surgery to improve specific aspects of surgical care. Information gathered from surgeons can be used to shape the future of the field by helping to establish recommendations for patient care, providing guidance in the design of clinical studies, and focusing efforts in policy change that will benefit the welfare of patients. In addition, identifying opinions and rationales regarding treatment options for specific diseases can help to establish clinical equipoise between treatment options that is ethically essential before enrolling patients in a randomized clinical trial. Understanding this principle, researchers are performing surveys of stakeholders involved in the care of specific patient populations with increasing frequency [3].

Although designing questions for a survey may seem straightforward and intuitive, in reality, survey instrument design, administration, and interpretation involve a sophisticated methodology [4,5]. One of the American Pediatric Surgical Association (APSA) Outcomes and Clinical Trials Committee's (OCTC) responsibilities as assigned by the APSA Board of Governors is to examine and approve surveys requested for distribution to the general membership. The purpose of this study is 2-fold: to provide general information to the APSA membership on how to recognize a well-designed survey and to inform the APSA membership of guidelines that should be adhered to for all surveys that are being submitted to the APSA OCTC for distribution to the APSA membership at large. Survey instruments that are submitted to the APSA OCTC for consideration should be accompanied by a supporting document addressing each of the elements that follow.

## 1. Survey design

There are 2 basic types of surveys: (1) descriptive, enumerative, or census type and (2) analytic or relational type. A descriptive survey generates *count data* based on a population sample that can be used to make inferences to the general population, and the results are also very useful for planning. For example, descriptive designs may be used in pediatric surgery studies to estimate the number of surgeons who favor a certain surgical technique or who have a certain characteristic and how often that characteristic occurs. They do *not* explain a relationship between variables such as preference of a surgical technique and subsequent patient outcomes. Descriptive surveys are not hypothesis driven. Analytic surveys, on the other hand, are designed to examine group/subgroup differences and *relationships* between variables. These surveys focus more on exploring associations and predictions. Analytic surveys are hypothesis driven. A survey designed to explore the practice patterns of surgeons

based on number of years of experience, patient volume, and other relevant variables would be an example of an analytic survey. Choosing the appropriate survey design is therefore dependent on the aims of the study. Although descriptive surveys are useful for identifying current general opinion and practice, the APSA OCTC encourages the use of analytic/relational type surveys. Ideally, surveys of the membership should be a part of a larger series of investigations and should identify relationships between responses that can in turn be used for hypothesis generation of subsequent studies.

Survey results are most accurate when high response rates are achieved, thereby reducing response bias. This is primarily accomplished by identifying a research topic in which the respondents are interested and invested and by limiting the participant burden by keeping the survey clear and concise. Researchers therefore need to optimize the response rate from their target audience. The background, specific aims, sample size, survey mode, statistical methods for analyzing data, and the survey instrument itself need to be carefully planned.

### 1.1. Background

The survey should include clear and concise background information concerning the relevance of the study within the context of the topic and the literature published on the specific topic. The relevance of the survey to the target population should be addressed in the background. For descriptive surveys, the main objectives (eg, a needs assessment survey to define where further work or education is required) should be clearly stated up front. For analytic surveys, the author should clearly state the hypotheses to be tested. Upon reading the background, the reader should be able to understand clearly why a survey is needed to complete the proposed research. For example, a survey can generate essential data from a larger population on a specific topic uniquely relevant to pediatric surgery, may be used to identify variations in treatment options, or may be used to acquire pilot data to improve comprehensiveness of prospective study designs [6].

### 1.2. Specific aims

The reader should be able to understand clearly the objective(s) of the study, the target population, and the relevance of each specific aim. For analytic surveys, the specific aims should be hypothesis driven and focused on clarifying the main outcomes that will answer the research question. The study aims should be well articulated and succinct. Generally, the specific aims should also identify the type of survey that has been constructed. The 4 most common types include (1) epidemiologic surveys, (2) knowledge assessment surveys, (3) attitude surveys, and (4) practice preferences/behavior surveys. Epidemiologic surveys are used to describe the core elements of disease

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