

# Collecting Sensitive Information from Drug Users

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# Introduction

- We describe the challenges of gathering data from recently-arrested drug users
- We present some approaches and strategies to effectively gathering this sensitive data in less-than-ideal circumstances.
- This presentation & paper draw on data from studies of past efforts to gather data from drug-using arrestees and the authors' many years gathering similar data in the context of ethnographic and survey-based studies

# The challenge

- All drug users have every reason to lie about their use in most contacts with strangers because of the informal and formal sanctions against drug use
- Recently arrested drug users have just been forcefully reminded of the latter



# Variations in disclosure I

- All studies of illegal behavior struggle with the issue of study participants under-reporting (and sometimes, over-reporting) illegal or socially-sanctioned behaviors.
- ADAM participants were *very* accurate in reporting their criminal justice histories  
Johnson, B., A. Taylor and A. Golub. 2005. Research Note: How Accurate Are Arrestees' Self-Reports Of Their Criminal Justice Histories? *Journal of Justice Research and Policy* 7(1): 81-102.
- BUT much less accurate in disclosing their drug use



# Variations in disclosure II

In the ADAM program, willingness to disclose drug use varied substantially by:

- Drug type
- Data-Collection Site
- Race
- Top Charge

Golub, A., H. Liberty and B. Johnson. 2005. The Variation in Arrestees' Disclosure of Recent Drug Use Across Locations, Drugs, and Demographic Characteristics. *Journal of Drug Issues* 35(4): 917–940.



# Strategies to increase the rate of disclosure

- Arrestees' perceptions of the researchers' intent will be influenced by a variety of cues
- If staff exhibit appropriate cultural cues, they will be perceived as “not the police”
- The result will be more accurate data, because arrestees will be less likely to fear their answers will be used against them



# Make it clear to arrestees that the research is not part of their criminal case

- Interactions with law enforcement & corrections staff should take place “at arms’ length”
- Study staff should wear prominent identification
- Study staff should dress and otherwise present themselves in a way that connotes “civilian” identity
- Clipboards are a useful “prop”



# Interviewers should be culturally appropriate For local arrestee populations

- Factors to consider:
  - Race/ethnicity
  - Age
  - Class
  - “Cultural” factors: Clothing associated with “hip hop” or “outlaw” country and western music, e.g.
- This is not to say that staff must always be of the same race/ethnicity, age, class, or wear the same shoes as the local arrestee population
- BUT they should be people the interviewees will feel comfortable talking to



# It matters who's asking





# Interviewers should be given appropriate cultural competence training

Staff should be very familiar with:

- *Local slang and terminology* used by drug users & sellers
- Typical *local criminal income generation strategies* and the terminology associated with them
- Other factors relevant to arrestees' lives:
  - Local social welfare & income-maintenance programs
  - Local places and events



# Interviewers should be given appropriate cultural competence training

- Asking about drug activity in a *neutral and non-judgmental manner* will gather the most accurate data
- Expressing (even or especially in non-verbal cues) views about the consequences of drug use will limit interviewees' willingness to disclose
- Training is particularly important with staff who are themselves former or recovering drug users



# Summary

- Gathering data about drug use from recent arrestees is challenging, because they are used to lying about drug use: they need a reason to disclose
- In ADAM, disclosure varied substantially
- Strategies for increasing disclosure:
  - Make it clear to arrestees that the research is not part of their criminal case
  - Interviewers should be culturally appropriate For local arrestee populations
  - Interviewers should be given appropriate cultural competence training

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