



# Interviewing Guidelines

## *2023 Minnesota Homeless Study*

The following document describes best practices for conducting interviews with people experiencing homelessness. Please remember to approach each interview with respect, empathy, and patience, knowing that a unique set of circumstances brought each respondent to this point in their lives. If you have questions about this document, or the overall Homeless Study interviewer training, please contact [interviewers@mnhomeless.org](mailto:interviewers@mnhomeless.org).

### Interviewing guidelines

- 1. Read the introduction on the first page:** Before beginning the interview, read the respondent the introduction printed on the first page. It is especially important for them to understand that their *responses will be kept confidential* and that *participation is voluntary*.
- 2. Read the questions exactly as they are worded:** It is important that all interviewers ask the questions in the same way across the interviews. This helps to ensure consistent responses.
- 3. Read the entire question before accepting an answer:** Sometimes a respondent wants to answer a question before you have finished reading it. If the respondent interrupts, please continue reading the question. This allows the respondent to hear the entire question and also discourages future interruptions.
- 4. Ask each respondent every appropriate question, in order:** Please ask questions in the order that they appear in the survey. There are arrows and bolded interviewer instructions to help guide you through the interview; please follow these instructions. In some cases, you will skip over questions. For example, if someone answers “no” to serving in the U.S. military, you would skip the Veterans section by following the arrows and instructions printed in the survey.
- 5. Don't skip a question because you know the answer:** Although it is tempting to skip a question because you feel the respondent has already answered it, always ask each question in its entirety. If you think that the respondent has already provided information, you can preface the question with the following language: *“I know you've already mentioned this, but I need to ask every question in this survey.”*
- 6. Don't answer a question for the respondent:** Do not assume an “answer” you got in passing is the correct answer to a specific question at a particular point in the interview. Do not direct the respondent by mentioning an earlier answer.
- 7. Clarify a question only if the respondent requests more information:** If a respondent wants you to clarify a question, you can use one of the three strategies below:
  - Repeat the entire question or part of the question.
  - Use clarifications or definitions discussed in the training session.
  - Use the phrase, *“Whatever \_\_\_\_\_ means to you.”*
- 8. If the respondent asks you to repeat one response option, please repeat them all:** Please repeat all response options to avoid biasing the respondent toward one answer.

**9. If the respondent does not directly answer the question, probe for further clarification:**

Effective and neutral probing involves listening actively to the respondent. Below are some suggested phrases and techniques you could use:

- Pause to let the respondent know you want them to continue their response.
- Repeat the question or part of the question.
- Ask one of the following clarifying questions: “*What do you mean?*” “*Would you tell me more about your thinking on that?*” “*Which option would be closer to the way you feel?*”\
- It is also OK to clarify the meaning of a word or phrase if a respondent does not understand the question.

**10. Probe a “don’t know” response at least once:** When a respondent answers “I don’t know” to a question, it might mean that the respondent:

- Doesn’t understand the question.
- Doesn’t want to answer the question.
- Is taking time to think about their answer and using “don’t know” to fill the silence.
- The respondent really doesn’t know or doesn’t have an opinion on the subject.

The most effective probe for a “don’t know” response is either to repeat the question or to pause. The respondent has the right to refuse to answer any question. Use your judgement as to when to stop probing.

**11. Let the respondent know you are listening to them:** Throughout the interview, show the respondent you are listening by providing neutral feedback such as, “*I see...*” or “*Uh-huh.*” Sometimes it is helpful to use phrases like, “*That’s helpful to know...*” or “*It’s useful to get your ideas on this.*” However, remain neutral; do not give your own opinions.

**12. Try to keep the respondent focused on the interview:** If a respondent begins talking beyond question answers, try to tactfully pull the respondent back to the interview by repeating the question or going on to the next question. You may say something like, “*I’d be interested in talking about this further, after we finish the interview.*”

**13. Read questions at a reasonable pace:** Remember that, although you may have read these questions many times, the respondent is hearing them for the first time and needs to understand the questions and to decide on the answers.

**14. Thank the respondent at the end of the interview.**

### Other notes

A **household** is defined as including: 1) The respondent (the person being interviewed), 2) Their spouse/partner/significant other, and/or 3) Any dependents. Anyone outside of that group should be interviewed separately, such as non-dependent adult family members or friends.

Before you conduct the interview, please make sure you understand (and can pronounce) specific words and terms; again, practice will help you be as prepared as possible.

After you have completed an interview, please take a few minutes to go through your whole interview form and make sure it is completed correctly. If there is something you really weren’t clear about, you can write a brief note in the margins next to the relevant question and we will try to figure that out on our end. Just make sure that everything is complete; this is a very critical step in the process.