

Public Life Tools

Using Public Life Tools: The Complete Guide

This guide will teach you how to carry out surveys of public spaces
and the public life that takes place in them.

LET'S STUDY PUBLIC LIFE

What is public life and why do we measure it?

Public life is the social activity that takes place in everyday public spaces -- on streets, in parks and plazas, and in spaces between buildings. We measure certain aspects of public life to better understand what's already happening in a place and what changes might provide public benefits. We also measure public life to better understand the impact of our projects, which might include design interventions (such as building a new playground) or cultural programming (such as organizing a concert series).

What is a survey? What are these tools?

By **SURVEY**, we mean a study of the physical and social elements of a place. A survey can encompass many forms of data collection, from mapping benches to counting cyclists to conducting interviews.

By **TOOLS**, we are referring to the research methods developed by Jan Gehl, Gehl (the design and planning practice), and/or Gehl Institute. These are the methods of mapping benches, counting cyclists, conducting interviews, etc. On our website, we host the tools in the form of downloadable, editable templates.

Of course, these tools only tell us part of the story about a space; they must be complemented by local knowledge that can only be accessed through robust community engagement and working closely with community partners. Sometimes, the most valuable information you gather in a public life survey is something you observe, or a conversation you have, that simply comes out of spending hours at a time in a space.

Keep reading for information on how to:

- Draft a research question
- Determine the scale of your survey
- Pick the right tools
- Plan the survey
- Train the surveyors
- Execute the survey
- Tell stories with data

We hope you find these steps useful! If you have any feedback, let us know at publiclife@gehl.institute.org

1. DRAFT A RESEARCH QUESTION

What specifically do I want to study?

Surveys work best when they are built around a central research question. Your research question can be fairly broad, but it should address something measurable, and it should be directly related to your project goals.

For example, you might ask questions like these:

“People walk in other parts of town, why not in my neighborhood?”

“Will building a new plaza in the neighborhood bring people together?”

“Will my project have any long-term effects in the neighborhood?”

1. If a project goal is to get more people moving by foot or using wheelchairs outside (“People walk in other parts of town, why not in my neighborhood?”) you might study:

- The characteristics of other streets in your city where people enjoy walking
- How physically accessible the neighborhood is for people who walk, use wheelchairs, or push strollers
- The reasons why some people choose to walk as opposed to drive cars, and vice versa

2. If a project goal is to bring people together and create a space for them to coexist (“Will building a plaza in the neighborhood bring people together?”) you might study:

- The relationship between people and the design of the space
- The types of social interaction that take place and what brings them about
- The demographic and economic mix of people using the space

3. If a project goal is to create a foundation for civic engagement (“Will my project have any long-term effects in the neighborhood?”) you might study:

- Whether the project has inspired local residents to act as stewards of the space
- Whether residents involved in creating the project express an increased sense of connectedness with their local community, and which aspect(s) of the project respondents attribute this to

STEP 2. DETERMINE THE SCALE OF YOUR SURVEY

At what scale should I survey in order to answer my questions?

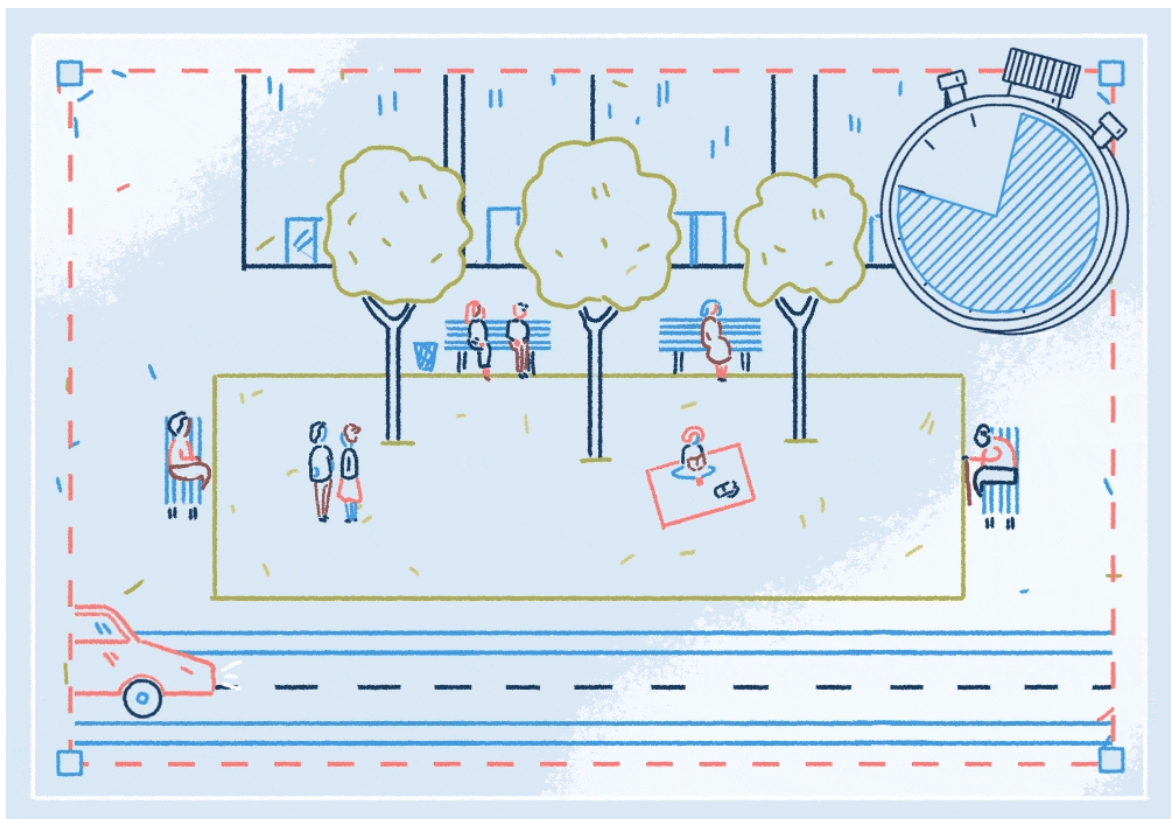
When deciding on the scale of the survey, think about whether you need to extend beyond the project area to answer your research question. For example, measuring pedestrian traffic on neighboring streets, or the social activity in a similar public space nearby, might provide useful information about the project area itself.

We recommend thinking about scale on three levels: **site**, **neighborhood**, and **city**.

Studying a **SITE**, such as a plaza, a street, or a block, can identify the challenges, potentials, and impacts of change on a local scale. Most of the public life tools we offer look at cities from this scale.

A NEIGHBORHOOD SCALE study can identify the challenges, potentials, and impacts of change within a broader urban area.

A CITY SCALE study can display challenges and potentials on a larger scale and serve as a base for a citywide strategic framework plan.



3. PICK THE RIGHT TOOLS

What tools can be applied to answer my research question?

On our website, you can find public life tools, in the form of templates, to be used for surveys of public spaces and public life. With these tools you can collect “people data” that will provide insight into the impact of your projects, inform stories about this impact, and leverage those stories for change!

Why mix and match?

We recommend mixing and matching tools to best answer your research question. While it isn't necessary to use each tool, one tool on its own may not provide adequate answers. The best stories are often told when multiple data sets can be drawn on.

If you're wondering, for example, why few older adults are spending time in a park, it's worth counting the age of visitors, assessing the physical quality of the space (are there plenty of places to sit?), researching the age diversity of the neighborhood, and keeping track of how people choose to spend time in the space. This data provides a more comprehensive portrait of the space than research with any single tool could.

What follows is a sampling of some of the tools for surveying public space and public life.

People Moving Count

- This tool provides data on how people move around in the city.
- Use it to understand: How many are moving through the space? Where? When?

Age + Gender Count

- This tool provides a picture of who uses and moves through the city. The balance between different ages and genders can be an indicator of who enjoys and feels comfortable spending time in public space.
- Use it to understand: Who is walking? Who is spending time in a place? Where? When?

Stationary Activity Mapping

- This tool provides a snapshot of what people choose to do in a public space.
- Use it to understand: How many people are there? What are they doing? Where? When?

Intercept Survey for Social Mixing

- This tool is an intercept survey tailored specifically to understand social mixing and social interaction in a space. The survey can be edited to better focus on your research question.
- Use it to understand: Who is interacting and how? What does this interaction lead to? Do people of different socioeconomic backgrounds spend time in the space?

4. PLAN THE SURVEY

How do I recruit and organize volunteers? Where and when should I plan my survey?

Estimate what to survey (and where to do it) based on your research questions, framework, and selected tools. Then ask:

How many surveyors are needed?

- Estimate the NUMBER OF VOLUNTEERS needed based on the size of the survey
- A single surveyor can only cover so much ground within an hour, so make sure that shifts are reasonable. We recommend 4 to 5 hours shifts.
- Remember that people moving counts will always take 10 minutes per location and that stationary activity mapping and age + gender counts may take longer.
- Make sure to factor in time to move between locations.
- Allow time for breaks if shifts are longer than an hour.
- Intercept surveys vary in time depending on how many questions are asked, and how many people are at the site. We recommend that volunteers conducting intercept surveys are only committed to this one task.

Who should be surveyors and how do you recruit them?

- Getting city staff across agencies involved as surveyors and out experiencing their city's public life can be key in a change process.
- University students are a great resource for enthusiastic volunteers. Reach out to architecture, city planning, and social work graduate programs.
- What local organizations would be particularly interested in the project succeeding? Identify and reach out to them as soon as possible.
- Involve members of the local community! The survey is a great way to tap local knowledge and gain insight into the daily lives of people who use the space.

On which dates should you survey?

- **Weekday versus weekend:** People behave differently and go to different places on weekdays and weekends. For this reason, we recommend carrying out surveys on both weekdays and weekends to document both.
- **Seasons:** People use the city differently in different seasons. Pleasant weather will bring out the maximum amount of people into public space, whereas rainy, windy, very hot, or very cold weather will reduce the amount of people in public space. If only one survey will be conducted, we recommend doing it during ideal weather in order to isolate the effects of urban design on public life from the effects of climate.
- **Avoid extraordinary events:** If the purpose of your public life survey is to measure and understand the daily rhythms of a city, it's best to avoid extraordinary events that will give you a distorted sense of the activity that generally takes place there. Recurring events such as a weekly farmers' market may be of interest in select cases.

Do you need a before and after survey related to a specific project?

- Determine if both pre- and post- survey will broaden impact understanding
- If the survey is planned in order to measure the impact of a temporary installation or other changes to a given public space, it is important to collect baseline data in order to document and understand the impact "before and after." If you are surveying in an area with very low activity it is important to consider which tools will give you usable data

when doing a pre-survey. Baseline data can also be seen as a way to document change in general by repeating surveys over time.

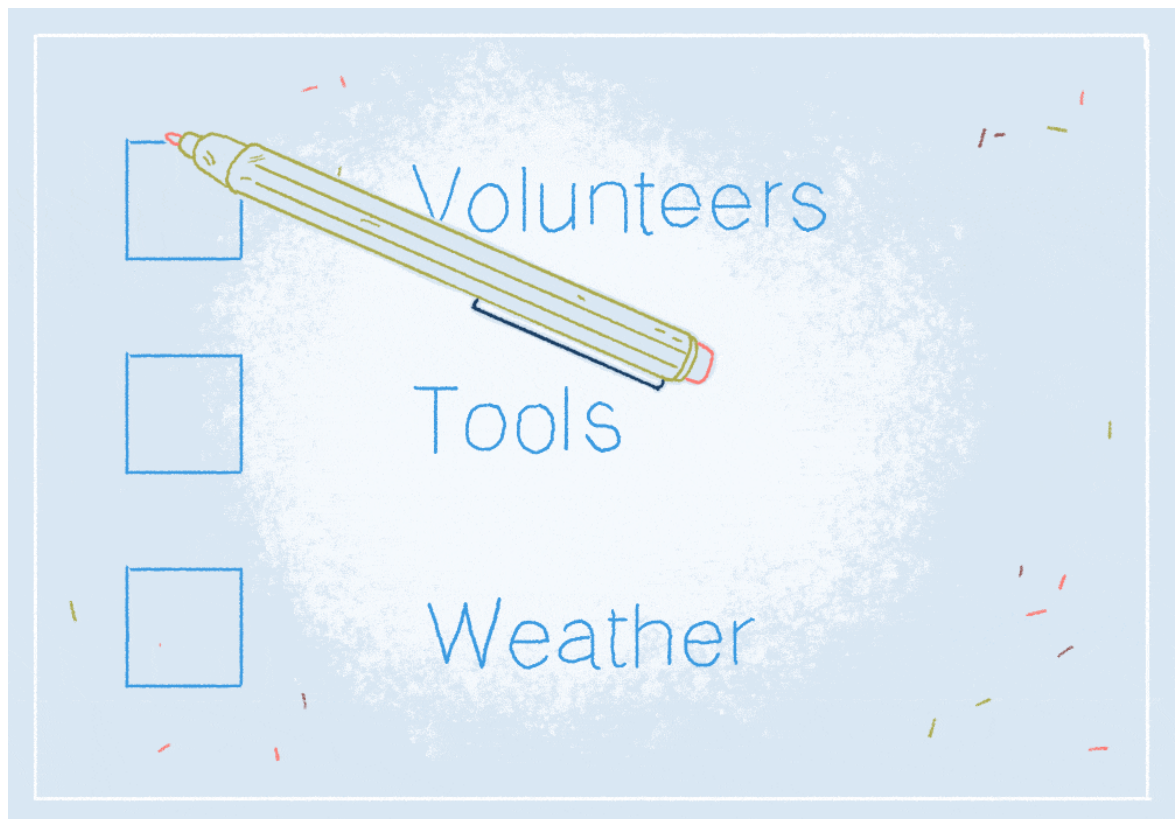
Once you've answered these questions, the next steps are to prepare the survey materials, create the survey schedule, and distribute the tasks to your volunteers.

Prepare your survey material using the provided templates

- Print enough survey sheets for all surveyors, for each shift (it's worth printing extra sheets just in case).
- Label maps so that surveyors can orient themselves - not everyone will know the area.
- Keep things simple! The process is new to most people, so try to communicate as straightforwardly with volunteers as possible.

Organize your survey schedule and tasks

- Provide all volunteers with the training date and location in advance.
- Plan well, but be flexible as items may shift! It's always good to have a backup surveyor, or for the survey manager to be ready to fill a shift.
- Distribute tasks beforehand and have survey sheets ready for each volunteer, shift, and site.
- We also recommend using a Google Sheet or an online provider such as Sign Up Genius. This way, volunteers can sign up for shifts and location before attending the training event or on-site pre-survey training.



5. TRAIN THE SURVEYORS

How do I train volunteers before the survey?

Pick the right place for the training

For most surveys, it's ideal to host a training event a day or two in advance with all the volunteers. This works especially well for surveys with many volunteers, since training a lot of people on-site can be very time-consuming.

For smaller groups, it may be preferable to do the training on-site prior to surveying. This is less formal and allows for one-on-one questions.

Inform volunteers why you are doing the survey

The volunteers are an invaluable part of your team! Inform them about the project background, as well as the survey methodology and the philosophy behind it. It's worth providing a short presentation or introduction that explains why you are carrying out this specific survey. Explain the vision that the volunteers are contributing to and what results may come from their work. Get people excited to be a part of something great!

We have two animated shorts on public life and the history of the public life tools, which can be viewed [here](#) and [here](#).

Describe the tasks at hand using the how-to guides (included with each tool)

Different surveyors can be given different tasks, but everyone should get a sense of all the data that will be collected. Some surveyors may collect public life data, others may administer intercept surveys, and others still may map public space information. Shifts will likely look different from surveyor to surveyor depending on what needs to be counted and where.

Take people through the process of using the tools to collect data. When instructing the volunteers, make sure to emphasize that surveyors must add their name, survey date, and survey time (hour) on ALL their sheets. It's also worth emphasizing that not all counts are based on time.

Provide people with a location, where they can hand in their sheets when they have completed their shifts.

Don't forget to provide people with a PHONE NUMBER to contact if any questions or issues come up while in the field. Express that if the surveyors find themselves in an uncomfortable situation they should leave and inform the survey manager.

Make sure to allow time for questions!

STEP 6. EXECUTE THE SURVEY

I'm ready to carry out a survey! What steps should I follow?

Steps for surveyors:

- Be ready to start your shift at the hour instructed. Starting late can skew your entire shift and the data collected.
- Follow instructions from training. If you have questions, check out the How-To Guides or call your survey manager.
- Make sure to mark name, hour, weather, location, and date on all your sheets.
- Hand in sheets after your shift.

Steps for survey managers:

- Oversee the survey, check in with surveyors and be available for questions.
- Take photos to document the survey in action and the places being surveyed.
- Be ready to fill in “no show” shifts or arrange for standby volunteers to fill in.
- Be ready to cancel the survey if **extreme weather conditions occur and be sure to inform all surveyors.**



Common Mistakes!

If your survey involves counting people moving -- either using the age + gender count or people moving count tools -- make sure that surveyors understand that they are counting people moving ACROSS the line on their map and NOT along the line. If surveyors make this mistake, their data won't be usable.

If your survey requires the stationary activity mapping tool, or uses the age + gender count tool for people spending time in a place (not moving), make sure that surveyors know to walk in a regular circuit around the space filling out their form. They should NOT stand at a single vantage point and simply count the people they see.

Other important considerations for survey managers:

Organization

During a shift the survey manager will organize and manage all survey materials, ensuring that all volunteers have the materials they need. Be ready to fill in for a shift or reorganize volunteers if some do not show up, but avoid this when possible!

Supervision

The survey manager will supervise surveyors during the shift. Check in on surveyors and be sure that each has the survey manager's phone number in case of questions or emergencies.

Collecting survey sheets

Collect the survey sheets at the end of each shift. Either meet the surveyors at the site or at a location provided beforehand, where surveyors can hand in their sheets.

Photos

Take lots of photos. Be sure to capture the survey in action, take before and after photos in the case of events or interventions, and represent different scenarios of users and use cases in the public space. It is extremely important to photo document in order to visualize the story alongside the data.

Sample Survey Manager Shift (two people recommended)

- 7:00 am - Arrive at survey site with clickers and extra survey materials in case people forget theirs. Bring coffee or snacks for surveyors if you can.
- 7:15 am - Last minute training for volunteers who missed the training
- 7:30 am - Surveyors arrive for first shift to collect survey materials, ask last minute questions, and get into position
- 8:00 am - Survey Shift 1 begins
- 8:00 - 9:00 am - Survey managers check in with Survey Shift 1 to ensure they are doing counts correctly. Don't be shy to ask to see people's sheets to check that they are doing it correctly. Often times people's pride prevents them from asking questions. Make surveyors feel comfortable.
- 9:00 - 11:00 am - Survey Managers perform public space analysis or take a break
- 11:15 am - Cycle for Survey Shift II begins. Last-minute training for volunteers who missed the training.
- 11:30 am - One survey manager greets volunteers arriving for Survey Shift 2. One survey manager checks each survey sheet as they are returned by Survey Shift I volunteers. If possible, Survey Shift 1 Volunteers are able to chat with Survey Shift 2 volunteers about where they stood and other particularities of their survey site.
- 12:00 - 1:00 pm - Survey Managers check in with Survey Shift 2 volunteers

REPEAT

7. TELL STORIES WITH THE DATA

I've successfully completed my survey. Now what?

A bunch of data has now been collected. That's great! But in order to visualize impact it needs to be more than just numbers. We recommend entering your data into Excel or Google Sheets and creating charts and graphs to display your findings.

Tips for handling your data:

- Select the most compelling stories, but don't cherry-pick findings
- Be honest with the data. Interpret, but don't misrepresent
- Keep it simple! Publish data stories together with photos and diagrams; this will resonate stronger with a variety of recipients
- Compare one variable at a time. If comparing two different locations, make sure you're not comparing a weekday at one site to a weekend at another site
- Don't worry about fancy analysis or visualization software (Excel works great)
- Consider intervening factors. If pedestrian volumes are low in the evening, is the city not supporting nightlife or was it raining?

Synthesize the findings into stories for impact

On our website, you can peruse case studies that show how public life tools have been used to collect interesting data that has informed projects.

Example findings:

The D.C. Superstop

- "The Superstop changed how people saw the neighborhood: during the intervention, 59% of Intercept Survey respondents said they felt positively about the neighborhood, compared to 36% before the intervention."
- "After the installation, Stationary Activity Mapping revealed a 100% reduction in secondary seating: instead of sitting on the ground, milk-crate, stoop, or planter edge, people had a comfortable, creative, community-designed place to wait."
- "Twenty percent more people stood at the site to enjoy the Superstop as compared to before its installation."

Prototyping on Market Street

- “The festival attracted a variety of age groups, which generally signifies that the public realm felt accessible and safe. Compared to the baseline study, the number of older adults (65+) increased by an average of 25% during the Festival while children under the age of 14 increased by an average of 40%.”
- “The number of people engaged in lingering activities such as standing, waiting for transport, bench sitting, and playing increased by an average of 55% on weekdays and 176% on weekends -- even reaching a high of 700%.”
- “Although a broad mix of people attended the festival, not all of them were aware of it prior to encountering it on the street. In fact, 73% of people surveyed stated that they discovered the festival by chance.”

Celebrating the Historic West End

- “Stationary Activity Mapping revealed that 78% of street activity comprised people standing and waiting for the bus. Yet bus stops often had no seating, shade, or cover from the rain.”
- “The plaza became a place that people wanted to care for and support; 92% of visitors felt positively about it and 63% wanted to actively participate in its maintenance.”
- “Research revealed that more and safer crosswalks were needed to reach the plaza along West Trade Street. People Moving Counts showed that for every nine people who crossed West Trade Street, only one used the crosswalk.”

QUESTIONS?

Thanks for your interest in studying public life! If you would like to reach out with comments, please email: publiclife@gehl institute.org