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### **The Challenges of Conducting a Survey of Youth in Nunavik UVIKKAVUT QANUIPPAT?**

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# The Challenges of Conducting a Survey of Youth in Nunavik UVIKKAVUT QANUIPPAT?

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## Abstract

In 2022, the Institut de la statistique du Québec conducted a survey of high school students in Nunavik, a unique, remote region of Quebec. The survey aimed to develop a portrait of the state of the students' physical and mental health, their lifestyle habits and their environment. This article describes the challenges encountered during the survey and the solutions put in place to overcome them.

Keywords: School survey; Remote region; Logistical collection challenges.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Institut de la statistique du Québec

The mission of the Institut de la statistique du Québec (ISQ), the province of Quebec's official statistical agency, is to provide reliable, objective statistical information on a variety of aspects of Quebec society. The main fields of statistical production and publication are demography and population; health and well-being; society and living conditions; education; culture and communications; employment and labour market; economy; science, technology and innovation; and the environment and sustainable development. The main sponsors are Quebec government departments and agencies.

### 1.2 UVIKKAVUT-QANUIPPAT?

The purpose of this article is to illustrate the efforts involved in designing and conducting the UVIKKAVUT-QANUIPPAT? survey of high school students in the Nunavik region and to detail the logistical challenges encountered throughout this survey.

## 2. Context and issues

### 2.1 Geographic description of Nunavik

Nunavik is a territory roughly 500,000 km<sup>2</sup> in size in the far north of Quebec, bordered by Hudson Bay to the west and Ungava Bay and Hudson Strait to the north. It is home to 14 Inuit communities. There is one high school in each community.

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The distance between the different communities and the harsh climate conditions pose major logistical challenges, particularly in terms of transportation and supply, since transportation between the communities or between them and southern Quebec is only possible by air.

### **3. EQSJS: Quebec Survey on the Health of High School Students**

#### **3.1 History and objectives of the EQSJS**

The Enquête québécoise sur la santé des jeunes du secondaire (EQSJS) is an initiative sponsored by the Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux (MSSS) and conducted by the ISQ since 2010. This survey is conducted every six years and aims to develop a portrait of high school students in Quebec in terms of the state of their physical and mental health, their social adjustment and their lifestyle habits. It is part of the Plan national de surveillance (PNS) and the Plan ministériel d'enquêtes sociales et de santé, designed to support ongoing monitoring of the state of population health.

More specifically, the purpose of the EQSJS is to

- develop a portrait of the state of students' physical and mental health;
- collect data on indicators not covered or insufficiently studied at the regional level;
- study the links between students' state of health and their individual characteristics;
- produce provincial, regional and local estimates; and
- track changes in the state of health of high school students' and its determinants.

The EQSJS was conducted in 2010, 2016 and 2022.

#### **3.2 EQSJS target population**

The survey population is made up of all students enrolled in the youth sector in the fall of the reference year in private or public schools, from Secondary 1 to Secondary 5. All of Quebec's health and social services regions are invited to take part in the survey, except for Terres-Cries-de-la-Baie-James and Nunavik.

#### **3.3 EQSJS collection procedure**

Data for the EQSJS are collected directly in schools, in each class selected. Teams of two interviewers visit each class to distribute the questionnaire to students. The questionnaire takes about 30 minutes to complete.

Each team visited the schools based on a schedule of collection days and times. Students were asked to complete their questionnaire during a class period using a tablet connected to a server that was completely separate from the school's Wi-Fi network to ensure data confidentiality and security.

As an example, in the most recent edition of the survey in 2022, 3,181 classes in 483 schools (out of 641 schools across the province) participated in the study, the objective being to produce provincial, regional and even local estimates for certain regions. Because participation of schools in the survey is mandatory, the response rate from schools and classes is very high. The overall non-response rate observed in this survey is largely attributable to students for whom the survey is not mandatory, especially to absenteeism. The overall weighted response rate to the EQSJS in 2022 was 88.0%.

#### **3.4 Links between the EQSJS and UVIKKAVUT-QANUIPPAT?**

Although Terres-Cries-de-la-Baie-James and Nunavik are not immediately included in the regions covered by the EQSJS, we nevertheless contacted the authorities in those regions for each edition to gauge their interest in participating. In 2016, the Nunavik Regional Board of Health and Social Services (NRBHSS) and the Kativik School Board expressed interest.

Nunavik could not be integrated directly into the EQSJS for many reasons, including

- the extent of logistical issues;
- the willingness of authorities to adapt the EQSJS questionnaire to better reflect the reality of youth in their region; and
- the NRBHSS' and the Kativik School Board's willingness to be involved in the survey process.

As a result, the ISQ, MSSS, NRBHSS and Kativik School Board (Kativik Ilisarniliriniq) formed a partnership to prepare and plan activities for this survey project.

The involvement of each partner was of great importance in planning and carrying out this mandate.

## **4. Preparation and pretests**

### **4.1 Preparing the questionnaire**

A working group made up of the partners worked on adapting the EQSJS questionnaire to add content specific to the region's particularities: consumption of traditional foods; cultural skills; traditional activities; and the importance of the Inuit language and identity.

### **4.2 The 2018 pretest**

In 2018, an initial pretest was conducted in the community of Akulivik, north of Hudson Bay, to assess the feasibility of the survey in this northern region. Only one community (and one school) were chosen for this pretest to limit travel costs. A medium-sized community was chosen to ensure a sufficient number of students without having to go to a large community such as Kuujuaq, south of Ungava Bay, where living conditions differ from those in smaller communities.

The main objective of this pretest was to time the questionnaire—in other words, to determine the average time required to complete it. The pretest was also used to assess the logistical approach and to determine the total duration of the classroom visit, including distributing and collecting materials, giving instructions to students, and the time spent completing the questionnaire. The computer equipment (routers, servers, tablets, etc.) and saving the data were tested in this particular context.

The results showed that the questionnaire was too long to be completed in one class period, which was desired to keep the students' attention. As a result, adjustments were necessary to shorten the questionnaire.

It was also observed that many students were absent during the first periods of the morning and afternoon. As a result, it was preferable to avoid those periods. In addition, make-up periods at the end of the day were added in an attempt to bring together students who were absent during the originally scheduled periods.

Moreover, only the English version of the questionnaire was used in this pretest. However, we noticed that several students had difficulty reading the English questions. In Inuit schools, instruction in pre-kindergarten, kindergarten and the first two years of elementary school is in Inuktitut (the traditional language). The second language is gradually introduced in the third year of elementary school, and from the fourth year onward, teaching is in the second language, but 20% to 30% of the content is in Inuktitut. For this pretest, students could listen to the questions in English using headphones and an audio function. To make things even easier, an Inuktitut audio function was added to the planned French audio function.

### **4.3 Translation into Inuktitut: A challenge**

Translating certain documents into Inuktitut brought its own challenges. There is no application for translating Inuktitut orally. We therefore needed to find someone who could translate the questionnaire into that language, record

the questions in audio files and ensure that those files were put in the right places in the questionnaire. This person was also responsible for translating the invitation letter informing the students' parents about the survey.

#### 4.4 The 2021 pretest

In 2021, after the pandemic, a second pretest was conducted in Umiujaq, another medium-sized community, but located south of Hudson Bay. This pretest was specifically designed to check whether the changes made to the questionnaire shortened the time required to complete it so it could be done in a single class period and whether students' comprehension of the questions improved by adding the Inuktitut audio. Makeup periods at the end of the day or the end of the school week were also tested.

Again, after the pretest, the results indicated that the questionnaire was too long to be completed in a single class period. However, the project continued with this version of the questionnaire, but two class periods were scheduled so students could complete it.

Many students used the Inuktitut audio, which was proof of the importance of the translation. Make-up periods were also useful for some students.

#### 4.5 Other recommendations for the main survey

Other recommendations were made after the 2018 and 2021 pretests:

- **Inuit researcher:** Add an Inuit interviewer to the team to facilitate communication and establish a climate of trust.
- **Resource person in the schools:** Have a reassuring person available to whom students can refer if they feel uncomfortable with the sensitive nature of the questions.
- **Raise awareness among the students:** Organize an activity in the classes before the survey takes place to explain the importance of the survey and the statistics.
- **Team training:** In-person training to promote team cohesion. It should be noted that during the pretests, this was done virtually.
- **Material management:** Prepare materials before students arrive to minimize in-class preparation time.
- **Instructions in Inuktitut:** With the help of Inuit interviewers, give instructions in Inuktitut to enhance student understanding.

These recommendations aimed to improve the quality of the data collected and ensure the success of the main survey.

## 5. Organizing primary data collection and the challenges

### 5.1 Creating the teams

Primary data collection took place over six to eight weeks (depending on the team) in the 14 Nunavik communities. The aim was to survey the entire high school population (from 1,350 to 1,400 students) in the region. The initial objective was to create four teams of two consisting of an ISQ interviewer and a local interviewer. Unfortunately, only two local individuals could be hired, so two of the four teams consisted entirely of ISQ interviewers.

Despite this obstacle, collection went smoothly thanks to the teaching staff in the classrooms.

### 5.2 Context of a survey in Nunavik

Over the years, research teams have conducted many studies on Inuit because of their unique traditional heritage and way of life. Their resilience, their ability to adapt to extreme environments and their sustainable practices pique the interest of researchers from a wide range of fields. Inuit populations also face health challenges and disparities

compared with southern Quebec populations, prompting many research teams to conduct studies to better understand the causes of this and to try and develop interventions better suited to these populations. Historical and current social issues stemming from colonization have been studied in depth to explore the impact on communities and defend Inuit rights and self-determination. The remote, isolated locations of Inuit communities and the challenges posed by these environments have also attracted the attention of researchers.

Today, efforts are being made to ensure that research partnerships are carried out in a collaborative and respectful manner, principles on which this project's planning and design were based.

### 5.3 Planning the collection schedule

A number of challenges were encountered during data collection planning in Nunavik, including determining the ideal time for collection. The winter and summer months, as well as May, should ideally be excluded from the calendar, mainly because of extreme weather conditions, schools being closed, and hunting. In the end, the period from September to October 2022 was chosen, which left little room to manoeuvre for collection.

Given that each community has only one hotel and that rooms are often booked well in advance, it was difficult to find accommodations for the teams in all 14 communities. The collection schedule had to be adjusted based on hotel availability and flight schedules. After much effort, an initial schedule was finalized.

Throughout the collection period, other factors disrupted this schedule: weather conditions caused flight delays or cancellations and school closures. Some important community events (funerals) also affected the schedule. Each event has a considerable impact on every community member, because everyone knows each other. Sadly, tragic events such as suicides occur all too frequently, causing a wave of strong emotions in the community. These events can lead to schools closing or increased absenteeism among students.

### 5.4 Student participation and incentive strategies

One of the Nunavik survey's main challenges was to ensure a high level of student participation. Several strategies were put in place to maximize this:

- **Avoid first class periods:** The first periods of the day and of the afternoon were often marked by absences or late arrivals. Therefore, no data collection was planned during those periods.
- **Offer incentives:** Students who took part in the survey received a \$20 gift card from the Fédération des coopératives du Nouveau-Québec, which motivated them to participate.
- **Offer make-up periods:** Make-up periods were offered at the end of the day or at the end of the collection week to students who had been absent during the originally scheduled periods.

### 5.5 Interviewer training and communication

The interviewers received two types of training: one was given by ISQ human resources (HR) before they left for Nunavik, and the other was mainly about the interviewers' work.

The training provided by HR covered occupational health and safety to minimize the risk of illness and to avoid certain hazards. This meant that the interviewers had to drink only purified water and be wary of animals, especially stray dogs and bears. The interviewers were also given information on how to handle luggage to avoid injury. They were provided with equipment to ward off bears, purify water and treat themselves in the event of injury.

Interviewer training took place in person in Kuujuaq, Nunavik's largest community, with the data collection manager. This training enabled the teams to spend time together and adjust to the region.

Each team was given the opportunity to collect data in a Kuujuaq high school class to find out what it would be like to work on the project. They visited a class with the collection manager, which gave them the opportunity to receive immediate feedback. All the visits were followed by a debriefing on the challenges observed, and the teams discussed how they could adjust their methods.

The training lasted five days. In addition to participating in collection activities, the interviewers also had the opportunity to visit the Kuujjuaq region with a local, who shared her experiences on life in the North, which helped the staff to better prepare for the weeks ahead.

Because each team was in a different community, providing support to the teams was another challenge. There is no cellular network in Nunavik, and the Internet is often very slow. Nevertheless, with Internet access available in hotels and schools, the teams were able to communicate by SMS or Messenger and organize periodic meetings to supervise the work and share best practices.

After the training, one team stayed in Kuujjuaq while the others moved on to different communities. The collection manager returned to Québec.

## **5.6 Travel**

As with the EQSJS, students were asked to complete the survey on tablets provided by the ISQ. The interviewers therefore had to carry a large amount of electronic equipment. In addition to the essential collection equipment, a suitcase was also packed with an extra set of tablets and paper questionnaires to prevent any technological glitches or loss of equipment that might occur during collection.

In addition to handling the equipment and its weight, transporting it from one Inuit community to another was also a challenge. The planes that operate in the Nunavik region are small; therefore, the weight of baggage allowed on board is very limited. For each flight, teams had to ask the passenger attendant to make sure that at least one equipment kit was on the flight to avoid further compromising the schedule. Fortunately, the equipment made it every time.

## **5.7 Supporting the students**

Finally, since some of the questionnaire topics could be difficult or sensitive for students, given the reality of life in these northern regions, the presence of a resource person was required in the schools when we visited. If necessary, the students could talk to this person. They could also seek support from the local health centre when they felt the need, which seems to have been appreciated.

## **6. Recommendations for a future edition**

Despite the strategies used to encourage class attendance (incentives, not using periods with high absence rates, addition of make-up periods at the end of the day), class absenteeism rates remain high and partly explain the 52% response rate for this survey. In a future edition, it would be important to look at developing strategies for completing more questionnaires, such as extending collection periods in each community, offering more make-up classes for those absent, and contacting students at home.

## **7. Conclusion**

Although we encountered many challenges, we attained the objectives for this survey. The changes made, such as adapting the questionnaire and integrating audio for several languages, helped us to collect comprehensive and inclusive data. The success of this survey illustrates the importance of culturally adapted research practices and community involvement. Through this survey, the ISQ will provide valuable information on the physical and mental health, lifestyle habits and social adjustment of Nunavik's youth and contribute to positive social change and the well-being of these youth.