

SURVEY RESEARCH & CASE STUDY

Research Methods in Social Work | High-Scoring Exam Answer

Dr. Mohammad Tahir | Department of Social Work, AMU Aligarh

PART A: SURVEY RESEARCH

1. Introduction

In social work research, professionals often need to collect information from a large number of people — about their needs, attitudes, living conditions, or experiences with services. The most widely used method for this purpose is Survey Research.

A survey allows a researcher to gather standardised information from many respondents simultaneously, in a systematic and scientific way.

Survey research is especially powerful in social work because it can describe the state of social problems across entire populations, identify trends, compare different groups, and measure attitudes that cannot be directly observed. It is the research method that gives social work its evidence base for policy advocacy and programme design.

2. Meaning and Definition of Survey Research

Definition

Survey research is a research strategy that involves collecting primary data from a target population to measure, describe, or analyse trends, behaviours, and attitudes. It involves defining research objectives, selecting a representative sample, crafting unbiased questions, distributing the survey, and analysing findings to make informed decisions.

The word 'survey' literally means to look over or examine comprehensively. In research, a survey is a structured method of data collection where standardised questions are asked to a defined sample of respondents so that the answers can be compared, counted, and analysed.

Example: A social work researcher in Aligarh wants to understand the housing conditions of migrant labourers. A survey of 500 migrant workers — asking standardised questions about rent, water access, sanitation, and crowding — produces data that describes conditions across the entire migrant population in the city.

3. Characteristics of Survey Research

- **Large-scale:** Designed to collect data from many respondents — making findings representative of a wider population.
- **Standardised:** All respondents are asked the same questions in the same way — ensuring data can be compared across individuals and groups.
- **Primary data:** Survey research collects fresh data directly from respondents — not from existing documents or records.
- **Systematic:** Follows a clear, planned procedure from objective-setting to reporting.

- **Quantifiable:** Most survey data can be converted into numbers, percentages, and statistics for analysis.
- **Flexible:** Can be conducted in person, by telephone, by mail, or online — adapting to the needs of the study.

4. Core Components / Steps of Survey Research

#	Component	Explanation with Social Work Example
1	Define Objectives	Clearly define what the study aims to find out. Example: 'To measure the prevalence of malnutrition among children under 5 in urban slums of Agra.'
2	Identify Target Population & Sampling	Identify who will be studied and how to select a representative sample. Example: Target = all households with children under 5 in 10 slum clusters of Agra. Sample = 600 households selected by stratified random sampling.
3	Survey Design	Choose the method (online, telephone, face-to-face) and design clear, unbiased questions. Use a mix of closed-ended and open-ended questions. Example: 'Does your child receive mid-day meals at school?' (Closed) + 'What barriers prevent your child from accessing healthcare?' (Open-ended)
4	Administration	Distribute the survey through appropriate channels. Follow up with non-responders to increase response rate. Example: Trained field social workers administer the survey door-to-door in the slum clusters over 3 weeks. A second visit is made to households that were unavailable.
5	Analysis & Reporting	Use statistical analysis to interpret findings and document results. Example: Data shows 48% of children are underweight (below -2 SD). This becomes the headline finding in a report submitted to the District Collector, advocating for expansion of the nutrition programme.

5. Types of Survey Research

Type	Meaning	Social Work Example
Cross-Sectional Survey	Data collected from a sample at a single point in time. Gives a 'snapshot' of the situation right now.	A one-time survey of 1,000 families in Aligarh to measure current levels of food insecurity — giving a snapshot of the problem today.
Longitudinal Survey	The same group is studied over months or years to track how behaviours, attitudes, or conditions change over time.	Surveying the same 500 women every year for 5 years to track whether their self-confidence, income, and domestic violence rates change after a women's empowerment programme.

Panel Survey	A specific type of longitudinal survey where the exact same individuals are re-contacted at each wave of data collection.	Re-interviewing the same 200 juvenile offenders every 6 months for 3 years to track whether they reoffend after rehabilitation.
Cohort Survey	Studies a group sharing a common characteristic over time — e.g., all children born in a specific year or all graduates of a training programme.	Following all women who completed a self-help group (SHG) training in 2020, surveying them annually to track income, savings, and empowerment outcomes.

6. Methods of Survey Data Collection

- **Face-to-Face Interview Survey:** A trained interviewer meets the respondent in person and asks questions. Highest response rate and allows clarification. Best for semi-literate or illiterate populations in social work. Example: Field social workers conduct door-to-door interviews in tribal villages where internet access is absent.
- **Telephone Survey:** Questions are asked over the phone. Faster and cheaper than face-to-face but limited to those with phones. Example: A rapid assessment survey of 300 NGO beneficiaries is conducted by phone during COVID-19 lockdowns.
- **Mail/Postal Survey:** Questionnaires are sent by post. Low cost but very low response rates. Example: A survey of retired government social workers asking about their job satisfaction and pension benefits.
- **Online/Digital Survey:** Survey forms are shared via email, social media, or website links. Fast and low-cost but excludes people without internet access. Example: A survey of MSW students about their field placement experiences is distributed through WhatsApp groups.
- **Schedule-Based Survey:** The researcher fills in the questionnaire based on the respondent's answers — useful for low-literacy populations. Example: A social work researcher fills in a detailed schedule while interviewing elderly residents of a government old-age home.

7. Types of Survey Questions

- **Closed-Ended Questions:** Respondents choose from fixed options. Easy to analyse statistically. Example: 'Do you have access to clean drinking water? Yes / No / Sometimes'
- **Open-Ended Questions:** Respondents answer in their own words. Provides rich qualitative detail. Example: 'What is the biggest challenge your family faced during the COVID-19 lockdown?'
- **Likert Scale Questions:** Measures degree of agreement or attitude on a 1-5 or 1-7 scale. Example: 'Women should have equal rights to property.' Strongly Disagree (1) — Strongly Agree (5)
- **Ranking Questions:** Respondents rank items in order of priority. Example: 'Rank the following community problems from most serious (1) to least serious (5).'
- **Multiple Choice Questions:** One best answer chosen from several options. Example: 'What is your main source of income? (a) Daily wage labour (b) Self-employment (c) Government job (d) No income'

8. Strategies for High-Quality Survey Research

- **Reduce Sampling Error:** Properly define the target population and use varied recruitment strategies — do not rely on convenience sampling alone.
- **Optimise Survey Design:** Use clear, simple language. Avoid double-barrelled questions (two questions in one). Avoid leading questions. Pilot-test the questionnaire before full deployment.
- **Use Balanced Questions:** Utilise Likert scales with an equal number of positive and negative options. Avoid 'fence-sitting' by including a midpoint option only when genuinely appropriate.
- **Maximise Response Rate:** Follow up with non-responders. Keep surveys short. Offer participation incentives where appropriate.
- **Ensure Anonymity and Confidentiality:** Especially critical in social work surveys on sensitive topics like domestic violence, addiction, or sexual health — respondents must feel safe to answer honestly.

9. Advantages and Disadvantages of Survey Research

Advantages

- **Large-scale data collection:** Can gather information from hundreds or thousands of respondents simultaneously — impossible with interviews or case studies.
- **Representative and generalisable:** With proper sampling, findings can be generalised to the entire target population.
- **Standardised and comparable:** Same questions for all respondents allow direct comparison across groups, regions, and time periods.
- **Cost-effective:** Especially online and telephone surveys — much cheaper than field-based qualitative research.
- **Statistical analysis possible:** Quantitative survey data can be analysed using means, percentages, correlations, and regression — producing precise findings.

Disadvantages

- **Superficial data:** Surveys capture what people say, not always what they actually do — respondents may give socially desirable answers.
- **Low response rates:** Especially in postal and online surveys — non-response can bias the findings significantly.
- **Inflexible:** Once the survey is distributed, questions cannot be changed — errors or ambiguities in the questionnaire cannot be corrected.
- **Not suitable for all populations:** Illiterate, very young, or cognitively impaired populations cannot complete self-administered surveys.
- **Cannot explain 'why':** Surveys can describe what is happening but rarely explain the underlying causes — qualitative methods are needed for deeper understanding.

10. Applications of Survey Research in Social Work

Example: Needs assessment: A district social welfare office surveys 2,000 households to identify the proportion of families below the poverty line, those with disabled members, and those without government ID — guiding resource allocation.

Example: Programme evaluation: Before and after surveys measure whether a women's literacy programme improved reading ability, confidence, and economic participation among 500 participants in rural Rajasthan.

Example: Community health survey: A survey of 1,000 slum households measures rates of malnutrition, diarrhoea, and immunisation coverage — informing the design of a community health outreach programme.

Example: Social welfare policy research: A national survey of social workers in India measures burnout, caseload, salary satisfaction, and professional training — producing evidence for policy advocacy demanding better working conditions.

Example: Attitude measurement: A survey measuring men's attitudes towards domestic violence in 10 districts of UP reveals which districts have highest tolerance — guiding targeted sensitisation campaigns.

PART B: CASE STUDY RESEARCH

11. Introduction

While survey research studies many people simultaneously, Case Study Research goes in the opposite direction — studying one person, one group, one organisation, or one event in extraordinary depth. Instead of breadth, it seeks depth. Instead of generalising across many cases, it seeks to fully understand one case.

In social work, the case study is not just a research method — it is at the very heart of social work practice. Every social worker maintains case records, writes case histories, and conducts case conferences. The formal research method of Case Study builds on this tradition, applying scientific rigour to the deep, contextual study of individual and collective human experience.

12. Meaning and Definition of Case Study

Definition

A case study is a detailed study of a specific subject, such as a person, group, place, event, organization, or phenomenon. Case studies are commonly used in social, educational, clinical, and business research. A case study research design usually involves qualitative methods, but quantitative methods are sometimes also used. Case studies are good for describing, comparing, evaluating, and understanding different aspects of a research problem.

Additional Definition

A case study is an appropriate research design when you want to gain concrete, contextual, in-depth knowledge about a specific real-world subject. It allows you to explore the key characteristics, meanings, and implications of the case. Case studies are often a good choice in a thesis or dissertation — they keep your project focused and manageable when you do not have time or resources for large-scale research.

In simple words: A case study is like a doctor conducting a thorough medical examination of one patient — studying every aspect of their history, symptoms, environment, and treatment — rather than quickly checking 1,000 patients with a brief questionnaire.

Example: A social work researcher conducts a case study of one family in Aligarh dealing simultaneously with a child with intellectual disability, an elderly parent with dementia, and domestic violence. The case study examines how all these factors interact — and what formal and informal support systems are helping or failing the family.

13. Purpose and Importance of Case Study Research

- **To gain deep, contextual understanding:** Understand complex phenomena in their real-life setting — not in a controlled laboratory.
- **To build or test theories:** Case studies can generate new theories (inductive) or test existing ones (deductive).
- **To study 'how' and 'why' questions:** Case studies answer questions that surveys cannot — not just 'what is happening' but 'how and why it is happening.'
- **To study unique or extreme cases:** Some cases are so unique, rare, or critical that they deserve individual study — e.g., a first-generation tribal woman who became a district judge.
- **To evaluate social work interventions:** A case study of one client's journey through a rehabilitation programme reveals what worked, what failed, and why.
- **To provide voice to marginalised individuals:** Allows the lived experience of one person from a marginalised community to be documented in full richness and complexity.

14. Types of Case Study Design

Type	Meaning	Social Work Example
Single-Case Study	Focuses intensely on one unique, critical, or representative case. Provides maximum depth but limited generalisability.	An in-depth case study of one child rescued from bonded labour — examining family background, exploitation history, rescue process, and rehabilitation journey.
Multiple-Case Study	Compares several cases to identify common patterns, differences, and to improve reliability. More generalisable than a single case.	Case studies of 5 different NGOs in UP that run domestic violence shelters — comparing their intake procedures, services, staff training, and client outcomes to identify best practices.
Embedded Case Study	Studies multiple sub-units within one larger case — looking at both the whole and its parts.	Case study of one district social welfare department (the case), with embedded sub-cases: its child protection unit, women's welfare unit, and disability services unit — each studied separately and then compared.
Intrinsic Case Study	Studied because the case itself is interesting or unique — not to	A case study of the first and only woman to head a tribal panchayat in

	represent a broader category.	a historically patriarchal district — valuable for its own uniqueness.
Instrumental Case Study	The case is studied to gain insight into a broader issue or theory — the case is a means to an end.	Studying one particular successful self-help group (SHG) to understand what factors make SHGs effective in general — the SHG is the instrument for understanding a broader principle.

15. Sources of Data in Case Study Research

Case study research is inherently multi-method — it combines multiple data sources to build a complete, triangulated picture of the case. This is called triangulation and is one of the greatest strengths of the case study approach.

Data Source	What It Provides — With Social Work Example
Interviews (In-depth)	The primary source. Semi-structured or unstructured interviews with the case subject, family members, social workers, neighbours. Example: 3-hour life-history interview with a woman survivor of 15 years of domestic violence.
Observations	Watching and recording behaviour in natural settings — home visits, day centre visits, court appearances. Example: A social worker observes a child's behaviour during play therapy sessions over 8 weeks.
Documents & Records	Case files, medical records, school reports, legal documents, police FIRs, welfare scheme application forms. Example: Analysing a child's school attendance records, teacher's notes, and medical reports as part of a child neglect case study.
Physical Artefacts	Objects, tools, or materials associated with the case. Example: Examining a tribal community's handicraft tools and market records as part of a case study on artisanal livelihoods.
Quantitative Data (Surveys, Scales)	Short structured instruments used to measure specific variables within the case. Example: Using the PHQ-9 depression scale administered monthly to a client in a mental health case study.
Archival Records	Historical documents, government data, census records relevant to the case. Example: Census data on the neighbourhood's poverty rates and migration patterns as background context for a slum family case study.

16. Steps / Process of Case Study Research

- 1. Define Research Questions:** Identify clear 'how' or 'why' research questions that require in-depth study. Example: 'How does a child with intellectual disability navigate the education system in a rural district of UP, and why do so many drop out before Class 5?'
- 2. Select Cases (Purposive Sampling):** Choose cases that will provide the richest, most relevant data for the research question — not random sampling. Example: Select 3

children with intellectual disabilities from different types of schools (government, special school, and inclusive private school) for a multiple-case study.

3. **Collect Evidence:** Systematically gather data from multiple sources — interviews, observations, documents, scales. Example: Conduct interviews with each child, their parents, teachers, and social workers; observe classroom interactions; analyse school records.
4. **Analyse Data:** Analyse, compare, and synthesise data across all sources. Look for patterns, contradictions, and key themes. Example: Across all three cases, one theme emerges clearly: parental shame and community stigma — not the child's ability — is the primary reason for dropout.
5. **Report Findings:** Create a detailed, narrative description of the case — rich, contextual, and evidence-based. Example: A 60-page case study report documenting each child's story, the systemic barriers they face, and specific policy recommendations for inclusive education.

17. Advantages and Disadvantages of Case Study Research

Advantages

- **In-depth and contextual:** Provides rich, nuanced understanding of complex situations that surveys and experiments cannot capture.
- **Studies real-world phenomena:** Examines people and events in their natural setting — not in an artificial laboratory.
- **Flexibility:** Can incorporate both qualitative and quantitative data. Can change direction as new information emerges.
- **Good for unique cases:** Ideal for studying rare, extreme, or critical cases that cannot be studied through other methods.
- **Generates hypotheses:** Exploratory case studies can discover new variables and relationships that later studies can test systematically.
- **Gives voice to individuals:** Allows the lived experience of marginalised persons to be documented in their full complexity and humanity.

Disadvantages

- **Limited generalisability:** Findings from one or a few cases cannot be statistically generalised to the entire population.
- **Researcher bias:** The researcher's values, assumptions, and relationship with the case subject can unconsciously influence data collection and interpretation.
- **Time-consuming:** Conducting thorough case studies with multiple data sources requires enormous time and effort.
- **Lack of rigour:** If not conducted carefully, case studies can be seen as anecdotal or unscientific — lacking the systematic rigour of surveys or experiments.
- **Selective reporting:** The researcher may unconsciously select evidence that supports their preferred interpretation while ignoring contradicting evidence.

18. Social Work Applications of Case Study Research

Example: *Child protection: A case study of a child who survived severe neglect traces how multiple systems — family, school, neighbours, ICDS worker, CWC — all failed to respond. The findings lead to a new inter-agency protocol for early identification of at-risk children.*

Example: *Mental health: A longitudinal case study follows one person with schizophrenia over 3 years — documenting their hospitalisation, discharge, relapse, community support, and recovery. The findings inform the design of a community mental health programme.*

Example: *Community development: A case study of one highly successful village in Rajasthan — where women's SHGs reduced domestic violence by 70% over 5 years — identifies the exact factors (leadership training, legal awareness, peer support, local NGO presence) that made the difference.*

Example: *Institutional study: A case study of one government children's home documents the daily lived experience of its residents — revealing informal hierarchies, bullying, inadequate nutrition, and staff absenteeism — becoming the evidence base for a reform petition to the Child Welfare Committee.*

Example: *Refugee family: A case study of one Rohingya refugee family in Delhi — documenting their flight from Myanmar, camp experiences, legal status, access to education and healthcare, and psychological wellbeing — provides a human face to a complex policy issue.*

19. Survey Research vs Case Study Research — Quick Comparison

Feature	Survey Research	Case Study Research
Core Focus	Breadth — collects data from many people	Depth — studies one or few cases intensively
Type of Data	Primarily quantitative (numbers, statistics)	Primarily qualitative (stories, meanings, contexts)
Sample Size	Large — hundreds or thousands of respondents	Small — 1 to a few cases
Research Questions	What? How many? How often? What percentage?	How? Why? What happened? What does it mean?
Generalisability	High — can generalise to the population with proper sampling	Low — findings are specific to the case studied
Data Sources	Questionnaires, scales, structured interviews	Interviews, observations, documents, artefacts, records
Strength	Representative, comparable, statistical power	Rich, contextual, deep understanding
Weakness	Superficial; cannot explain 'why'	Cannot generalise; time-consuming; risk of bias
Time Required	Moderate — data collection can be fast with digital tools	High — multiple visits, sources, and rounds of analysis
Social Work	Survey of 2,000 households to	Case study of one family living in

Example	measure poverty levels in a district	extreme poverty — how they cope, what help they receive, and what systems fail them
----------------	--------------------------------------	---

20. Conclusion

Survey Research and Case Study Research are two complementary pillars of social work research — each powerful in its own way, each serving a distinct but equally important purpose.

Survey Research gives social work its numbers — the prevalence of poverty, the percentage of women experiencing violence, the proportion of children who are malnourished. These numbers are essential for making evidence-based policy, securing funding, and designing programmes at scale. Without surveys, social work advocacy would be based on guesswork.

Case Study Research gives social work its stories — the lived experience of one person, one family, one community, in all its complexity, contradiction, and humanity. These stories are essential for understanding the 'how' and 'why' behind the numbers, for designing interventions that fit real life, and for ensuring that the voices of the most marginalised are heard and documented.

The best social work research uses both — surveys to establish the scale of a problem, and case studies to understand its depth. Together, they ensure that social work remains simultaneously scientific and humane: grounded in evidence, and rooted in human experience.

— End of Answer —