

# Involving the Public in Risk Communication

Katherine A. McComas, Ph.D.

University of Maryland



JOINT INSTITUTE FOR FOOD SAFETY AND APPLIED NUTRITION  
**Food Safety Risk Analysis Clearinghouse**

[www.foodriskclearinghouse.umd.edu](http://www.foodriskclearinghouse.umd.edu)

# What This Tutorial Covers

- Reasons for involving the public in risk communication
- A review of some common participatory methods
- Things to consider when choosing among methods of involvement
- Some outcomes of public involvement

# What Does “Involving the Public” Mean?

- There are many different types and ranges of public involvement.
  - Common forms of public involvement include:
    - Public hearings
    - Negotiated rule-making
    - Citizen panels or advisory committees
    - Mail or telephone surveys
  - These are just a few of many techniques available to risk communicators.

# Why Should the Public Be Involved?

- Fiorino (1990) poses three arguments for public involvement:
  1. *Substantive* – “lay judgments about risk are as sound or more so than those of experts” (p. 227)
    - The public may see things that the experts do not. The public is also often more aware of the social and political values related to the risk situation.
  2. *Normative* – “technocratic orientation is incompatible with democratic ideals” (p. 227)
    - The public has a right to be involved in decisions affecting their interests.
  3. *Instrumental* – “lay participation in risk decisions makes them more legitimate and leads to better results” (p. 228)
    - If we deny the public the right to participate in decisions affecting them, we only deepen their skepticism of risk institutions. Moreover, a broader degree of participation may reduce the probability of error in resulting decisions.

# Some Participatory Methods

- *Public hearings/meetings/scoping/availability sessions* – open forums where people come to hear and respond to agency proposals.
- *Initiatives* – issues are placed on ballots for citizens to vote for approval.
- *Citizen surveys* – solicit representative sample of public opinion on issue via questionnaires.
- *Negotiated rule making* – representatives of organized interests meet and negotiate environmental regulations.
- *Citizen review panels* – a “lay jury” of citizens evaluate science, consider alternative, and offer recommendations.
- *Citizen advisory committees* – a selection of citizens serve for a certain period in an advisory capacity to the agency.
- *Workshops* – citizens are invited to a formal or informal gathering where issues are discussed at length.

# Choosing Among Methods of Involvement

- How do risk communicators decide which participation methods to use? Here are some questions to ask:
  - What are the *legal requirements*?
    - Some techniques are required by law.
      - For example, Environmental Impact Assessments on proposed environmental projects may require a public hearing to receive public comments. These hearings are listed in the Federal Register.
    - Other techniques are used voluntarily.
      - For example, some agencies use “scoping sessions” with the public at the beginning of a decision making process to “scope out” potential areas of concern.

# Choosing Among Methods, cont'd.

- What are the *goals and objectives* for involving the public?
  - If the intention is primarily to provide information to the public and solicit the public's input, some options to consider include:
    - Informational public meetings (formats often include short informational presentations, audience comments, and a question and answer period);
    - “Open House” or availability sessions (formats often include poster-type displays attended to by experts or officials preceded or followed by formal or informal public meeting);
    - Mail or telephone surveys conducted with a representative sample to provide information to the public and generate feedback
  - If the intention to to allow for more extensive feedback from the public, other options include citizen advisory committees, workshops, and negotiated rule-making.
    - Each of these options arguably involves a more long-term, meaningful commitment from the organization and the public.

# Choosing Among Methods, cont'd.

- What *messages are we sending to the public* with this method of involvement?
  - Risk communicators may want to consider the unintentional messages they send to the public in the methods they choose for involvement.
    - e.g., Does the process satisfy normative criteria?
  - Fiorino (1990) suggests four criteria for evaluating public involvement according to normative criteria:
    - It allows for the direct involvement of amateurs in the decisions;
    - It enables lay audiences to participate directly in the process;
    - It provides structure for face-to-face discussion over time;
    - It offers citizens opportunity to participate on some level of equality with officials and experts.

# Some Outcomes of Public Involvement

- Besides satisfying democratic criteria, when used appropriately and effectively, public involvement can lead to better decisions and better relations with the public.
  - Benefits to the organization include enhanced credibility and enhanced public satisfaction.
- When used carelessly or disingenuously, public involvement can have negative outcomes.
  - Consequences include increased skepticism of the organization, dissatisfaction with the decision making process, and unwarranted concern about risk.

# References

- Chess, C., & Purcell, K. (1999). Public participation and the environment: Do we know what works? *Environmental Science & Technology*, 33, 2685-2692.
- Fiorino, D.J. (1990). Citizen participation and environmental risk: A survey of institutional mechanisms. *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, 15, 226-243.