The methods used in community studies
• Community studies are associated with various research methods, often in some combination.

• Most commonly, they are associated with ethnographic research methods.
• Community studies appeal because they provide vivid descriptions of community members’ lives.

• Fieldwork of a year is often mentioned. Keeping a fieldwork notebook is a key skill.
• Observation is frequently combined with participation (‘participant observation’).
• Participation in community activities often leads to deeper understanding.
• Participation also helps to gain access and build trust.

• Exit from the field can be difficult; an exit strategy needs to be planned.
• Ethnographic fieldwork frequently involves interviews of various types.
• Walking interviews have grown in popularity.
• Visual methods are employed in their own right as a way of capturing ‘community’.
• Photographs are not the only visual material. Maps are another.
• Maps can take several forms, e.g. network maps.
• This social network map shows dense kinship connections between dots (households) in an upland parish in Wales studied by Alwyn Rees (1950).
• The connections shown are only those within the administrative area.

• Visual material is selective in the same way that other types of data are.
• Partial coverage can be a serious problem with the use of documentary materials, especially historical documents.
• Nevertheless, documents provide an important safeguard against the problem of past community relationships being romanticised.
• Concern over the unreliability of subjective impressions is one reason why community researchers may use surveys.
• Even so, there are systematic patterns of uneven involvement in survey research in relation to gender, ethnicity, age, and other lines of social division.
• Official statistics are another quantitative method.

• Swansea census data showed that patterns of household formation had changed dramatically.
• Recently-married people typically used to live with one or other set of parents, but this has virtually disappeared (Nickie Charles et al. Families in Transition, 2008).
• The comparative method can be useful, studying the same community at two points in times or studying two or more communities.
• This has particular appeal in research designed to address a policy issue.
• Sometimes opportunities arise when policy initiatives take the form of natural experiments.
Many research methods are available, including ethnographic observation, interviews, visual methods, social network analysis, documentary analysis, surveys, official statistics, comparative methods, and several more.
• With so many methods available, community studies typically involve a mixed methods approach (combining quantitative and qualitative elements), or at least a multi-method approach.
• Methodological pluralists argue that no one key opens every lock, and so a flexible combination of methods has advantages.
• But there is no certainty that the results of different methods will combine smoothly.

• People’s accounts of community relationships and official statistics may be in tension.
• Not all approaches to research into community relationships sign up to methodological pluralism.

• For action researchers, their value stance and commitment to change agendas makes their approach distinct.
• Action researchers use participatory methods which tend to favour a sub-set of the methods available.
• There will also be personal preferences involved in the choice of methods.

• Rarely are individuals skilled practitioners of the full range of methods available.
• Teams reduce this problem, but create others.

• And choices will be influenced by what previous researchers did, if links are made to their work in order to build a cumulative body of knowledge.