



## **The Health DATA List Serve February 2003**

### **The Power of Focus Groups**

Focus groups are a great way to assess community needs and collect useful data to address public health issues. Focus group research involves a structured discussion with a selected group of individuals to gain information and an understanding about underlying issues around a topic, such as health. It is a great vehicle for collecting qualitative data not available from other data collection methods such as surveys or interviews. Used in combination with survey data, focus group data reveal the human impact of cold numbers and rates and contribute to your understanding of how and why patterns of public health problems occur.

Focus groups require significant staff time and planning, although they are usually less costly than surveys. Costs for running a focus group may include fees associated with facilitating the discussion, travel expenses, meeting space rental, refreshments, and incentives for participants such as cash or coupons.

The following are a few basic components of planning and implementing focus group research.

- Collect and assess existing research data to determine what additional information you need from your focus group.
- Set a goal for your research, such as to learn what messages are most likely to promote healthy eating habits among Latino adolescents.
- Develop five to six “open-ended” questions that require participants to talk about their experience. Avoid “yes/no” questions (do you like ice cream) and those with single word answers (who makes dinner in your home).
- Carefully craft an agenda that is focused on a single topic.
- Group should be composed of 6-12 individuals representative of the population group you are studying. A helpful rule of thumb is to conduct 2-3 focus groups for each population of interest.
- Set ground rules for the discussion to keep participants on track. Ground rules may include respecting other opinions, equal group participation and getting closure on each question before moving on.
- Plan to record the session (audio or video recorder).
- Recruit a note-taker to operate the tape recorder and observe participant behavior.
- Allow significant time to analyze the focus group information since reading the transcripts, noting themes and variations, and writing up the results is time consuming.

*Be sure to look at our Internet links (quick picks) for a more complete description of what is involved in conducting focus groups.*

There are many advantages and uses for focus group data. For instance, focus group discussions may identify new areas or programs that are on target with community needs. It is important to note that the findings may be limited and may apply to that specific community. Focus groups are nevertheless a great approach for agencies to evaluate an existing health program, test educational material, strengthen funding proposals and reinforce arguments for needed policy changes.

References:

Krueger, R. A. (1994). Focus Groups: A practical guide for applied research. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

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### **Health DATA Internet Quick Picks**

#### **University of Arizona:**

<http://ag.arizona.edu/fcr/fs/cyfar/focus.htm> offers an overview of focus groups including, purpose of focus group research, structuring questions, and tips for analyzing data.

#### **International Nutrition Foundation for Developing Countries:**

<http://www.unu.edu/unupress/food2/UIN03E/uin03e00.htm#Contents> provides a manual for the use of focus groups.