



UCLA CENTER FOR HEALTH POLICY RESEARCH

Section 2: Focus Groups

Purpose

Focus groups involve a series of guided discussions about specific topics with selected small groups, and are a way to obtain information about the needs in your community.

When to use focus groups

Use focus groups when you want:

- Narrative information about opinions, experiences, beliefs or perceived norms.
- To get feedback in your clients' own words about program strengths and weaknesses.
- To gain an in-depth understanding of a certain topic or issue.
- To support and expand on findings from surveys or other quantitative (numerical) data you have collected.
- To identify major categories and themes about a specific health problem and see how they relate to each other.

Planning a Focus Group

The following are steps involved in planning and implementing a series of focus groups.

- 2.1 Gather and review existing data*
- 2.2 Determine your purpose*
- 2.3 Choose your target audience*
- 2.4 Develop a discussion guide*
- 2.5 Schedule focus groups*
- 2.6 Recruit focus group participants*
- 2.7 Recruit moderator and note-taker*
- 2.8 Plan and conduct focus groups*
- 2.9 Compile and organize focus group data*

2.1 Gather and review existing data

Collect and review existing data to decide what additional information is needed from your focus groups. You can piece together a great deal of information about a community or issue from existing sources. Review existing data before you decide to do focus groups, as the information you need may already be out there.

2.2 Determine your purpose

It is important to define your purpose by identifying the information you want to get from your focus groups. Some questions to ask yourself include: What is the problem? What is the purpose(s) of your community assessment and focus group research? What do I need to know to address the problems? See *Step 3: Identify the Information (Data) You Need* (page 4-17) in the “Performing a Community Assessment” curriculum for more information on how to best prepare your questions. Once you have determined the primary questions, you can decide what type of data is needed. For example, do you want to collect data on community practices, community opinions, existing services, or service utilization?

2.3 Choose your target audience

To ensure that your focus group participants have the type of experiences and perspectives you are hoping to capture in your discussion, you need to select the participants carefully. You will want to capture differing experiences, but participants should also be similar enough so they feel comfortable sharing their views in the group. You may want a short survey to screen out people so your group has the demographic characteristics you want. For instance, if you want to do focus groups to learn more about sexual practices of Latino adolescents ages 13-18 in your particular community, you will want to make sure participants fill these requirements, i.e. that they are Latino adolescents between 13-18 years of age and living in your neighborhood.

As a general rule, your focus group participants should be similar and selected based on a set of criteria, such as the same age group, gender, and race/ethnicity. Your focus group criteria will depend on the community and problem you are investigating. If you are looking at the accessibility and quality of pre-natal care services in your community, then you want to conduct focus groups with recent mothers living in your community.

The following are some sampling techniques to help you choose your focus group participants:

Sampling Techniques

A. *Convenience Sampling:*

This sampling process saves time and effort. It is also the fastest and most inexpensive. A convenience sample is one where individuals are selected because they are handy or easy to find. For example, they could be clients from your organization or recruited from places where your target population often go, such as shopping malls, laundromats, hair salons, health fairs or the *Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)* offices.

B. *Snowball Sampling:*

This sampling process is helpful if you do not have a place to easily recruit people or are working with hard-to-find respondents, such as illegal drug users or adolescent runaways. The main advantage to this process is that you can get referrals to potential participants you would otherwise not be able to find.

- Start by identifying one person who meets the criteria you have defined.
- Ask them to refer you to others they know who also meet the criteria (friends, family, or acquaintances).
- As each new person identifies more names the snowball gets bigger!

C. *Purposive Sampling:*

This involves selecting a focus group sample with specific characteristics. Your community assessment might be interested in people who have a particular health condition, such as asthma. You might expect that the experiences of people with asthma vary by its severity, or by their health insurance type, or by their immigration status. You would want to set up focus groups that represent the relevant variations.

- Start by identifying the different types of people who are important to include, such as those with severe and less severe disease.
- Identify where you can find these people. For people with severe disease it may be possible to recruit all participants from a single clinic. In order to find different people by health insurance type it might be necessary to recruit from a community clinic that accepts Medi-Cal, a public hospital where the uninsured go, and a private clinic that takes only private insurance.

D. *Probability Sampling:*

The methods discussed above are all called “nonprobability samples” since they do not select individuals at random. Probability samples, like picking a name out of a hat, gives every person in a group the same chance of being chosen. This is more difficult to do than the other methods. The advantage is that it allows you to generalize your statistics to the larger population. Because of the small number of people involved in most focus group studies, probability sampling is a less common

sampling strategy than nonprobability sampling. See *Section 3.4 Choose your target population and sampling technique* (page 5-28) for more details on probability sampling.

How many focus groups?

The number of participants you need to recruit depends on how many focus groups you want to conduct. A helpful rule of thumb is to plan two to three focus groups for each population of interest. It's always best to have more than one group for each population to ensure that the perspectives and experiences you capture are representative of a larger population group. The more times you hear a particular idea or opinion discussed by different people, the more common the idea is likely to be. For instance if you are looking at adolescent sexual behavior you may want to conduct two focus groups of teenage girls and two focus groups of teenage boys. You will be surprised at how different one focus group can be from the other, even when recruiting from the same population group and using the same discussion guide. The more focus groups you can afford to conduct, the greater your chances of capturing discussions that accurately reflect the most common views of your population.

2.4 Develop a discussion guide

Focus groups involve focused discussions on specific topics, so a discussion guide is a tool needed to keep the discussion focused. It is a document that has an outlined script and list of carefully selected and sequenced open-ended questions that generate discussion. The discussion guide includes a script for the introduction, purpose, ground rules, focus group questions and closing statements. In addition, the discussion guide also makes sure that the different focus groups are conducted in a similarly structured way, ensuring that the data is collected systematically.

Finally, it is important that the discussion guide has the order of the questions you want answered. The following provides an outline to sequence the questions:

- **Introductory questions:** the first couple of questions help participants think about the topic. For instance, these could be general questions about their health such as what they typically do to take care of themselves.
- **Transition questions:** questions that get participants to move from the introduction topics to the ideas contained in the key questions. If conducting a focus group about breast cancer, transition questions could include those that ask where women go for information or services.
- **Key questions:** two to five questions important to getting the information you want to collect.
- **Ending questions:** questions that provide closure and reflection. These questions may also ask for suggestions or recommendations.

- **A summary question:** the moderator or note-taker summarizes the major themes heard throughout the discussion in a short oral summary (two to three minutes), then asks the participants if the summary covered all the major points.

Important note: Early questions take up the most time, so make sure you are conscious of the time so that the important questions are answered and you cover every question.

2.5 Schedule the focus group

Keep your focus group participants in mind when selecting a location and time of day. For instance, select a place in the community that is easy to get to. Also, select a time that will give you the best representation and attendance. The following are some guidelines for scheduling focus groups:

Choose a location

The focus groups should take place in a convenient and accessible location for participants. Look around for a location that is quiet and private. There needs to be enough space to set up a tape recorder and food. It is also important to select a neutral environment. Beware of potentially hostile or intimidating locations, or hosting organizations that may pose a conflict of interest with the topics to be discussed. Do a little investigative work and confirm with people to make sure you have selected the most appropriate, convenient and inviting location.

Select the time of day

Your focus group participants determine when you can conduct the focus group. For example, if you are looking at recruiting adolescents for your focus group you may want to schedule them in the afternoon right after school. For working adults, early evenings may be a good time, especially if are providing food.

2.6 Recruit focus group participants

It is very important to have the right people participate in your focus group. A screening tool can help you get the right people. The tool is a questionnaire that asks about a person's background to make sure they have the characteristics you are looking for in your group. The screening tool is also helpful in recruiting focus group participants.

Develop a screening tool

The following are the various parts of a screening tool:

- Introduction and explanation of the focus group, which includes background on the project and the information you are collecting.

- Questions that qualify people into your focus group recruitment targets. Depending on what information you are seeking and who you want to recruit, you may have several qualifying questions. For example, qualifying questions ask about the neighborhood where they live, their race/ethnicity, or their health insurance status. Demographic questions, such as age, marital status, number of children, education, and income are also common qualifying questions.
- An invitation could be made to those who meet all of your criteria. The screener can encourage the person to attend the focus group, highlight the incentives offered, and give the person specific information about the date, time and location of the focus group. The screening tool plays an important role in recruitment.

Recruit participants

- Invite those who meet all your criteria
- Use the screener to make the focus group sound interesting and worthwhile
- Recruit participants at least a month in advance and call to remind them one week before the focus group
- Call again one day before the focus group
- Over-recruit by at least 20%, as not all participants will show up
- Highlight any incentives that will be offered

Offer incentives

Incentives include:

- Childcare
- Transportation
- Food
- Clothes (such as t-shirts or baseball caps)
- Gifts (such as coffee cups, water bottles or gym bags)
- Gift certificates
- Cash

These incentives may help you recruit and attract participants, and demonstrate that you value their time and insight. Determine the amount you can afford to attract and recruit participants, and give them out at the end of the focus group as an incentive to stay and contribute. Make sure what you give is appropriate for the population participating. Keep in mind that the chance to discuss their experiences and opinions may also be an incentive to some potential participants.

2.7 Recruit a moderator and note-taker

Identify a moderator to lead the focus group discussion. The discussion guide you develop with your partnership guides the moderator with the questions you want answered. During the focus group the moderator is responsible for setting up ground rules, keeping the discussion focused and on track, drawing out comments from quiet participants, and asking for clarification or additional information from participants when needed.

Moderator's Role and Skills

The following outlines the moderator's responsibilities and some of the skills required. This list can help you choose the most appropriate and qualified moderator. The ideal moderator:

- Is comfortable and familiar with the focus group process.
- Has experience facilitating groups or meetings.
- Creates and maintains a comfortable environment for participants.
- Remains neutral; does not provide personal feelings or opinions on what is being discussed.
- Maintains control over the group and the topics being discussed, but is careful not to lead the discussion or appear aggressive or controlling.
- Is a good listener; understands what is being said and knows when to ask probing questions that get participants to expand on or clarify their comments.
- Is a good observer; notices when participants want to speak and gives them an opportunity to share their comments. Draws out quiet participants and creates a safe place where they can talk.
- Doesn't put anyone on the spot, but watches for opportunities to bring quiet people into the discussion.
- Maintains group enthusiasm and interest.
- Respects participants and their comments.
- Communicates clearly in writing and orally.
- Has a good sense of humor.

Based on the focus group and topic being discussed, a moderator's own demographic characteristics should be taken into consideration. For example, if conducting a focus group on domestic abuse, a male moderator may not be the most appropriate person.

Note-taker's Role and Skills

Each focus group needs a note-taker who takes detailed notes and writes down observations. Since an audio tape will capture the details of the discussion, the note-taker will not need to write down everything word for word. Instead, this person's job is to listen carefully, observe group interactions, and summarize points and observations that are not captured by the audio tape.

The note-taker is responsible for the following:

- Making name tags for participants and moderator, using first names only.
- Operating the tape recorder.
- Handling environmental conditions (air conditioning, room set up, lighting, etc.).
- Taking care of food and refreshments.
- Handling and distributing incentives at the end of the discussion.
- Handling unexpected interruptions (such as late comers or outside noise).
- Keeping track of the time (being time keepers).
- Assisting in summarizing key points made.

Documentation methods (tape-recorder and note-taking)

It is a good idea to tape-record the focus groups and have note-takers. The tape-recording approach captures what was said by the participants while the note-taking approach records observations of the participants. Combined they can present a clearer picture of what was said and how participants responded or reacted.

Note-taking tips

- Make notes as complete and as clear as possible.
- Be alert for cues, posture, gestures, comments, or facial expressions that might explain how the participants feel and react to the question.
- Listen for cues as to important points, transitions from one point to the next, repetition of points for emphasis, and other issues.
- Do not try to take down everything that participants say. It is impossible and unnecessary because not everything is equally important. Spend more time listening and trying to capture the main points. The tape-recorded discussion should help you fill in any missing gaps.

2.8 Conduct the focus groups

A. *Ground rules and procedure*

Begin the discussion with a welcome and introduction, followed by an overview of your project, an introduction to the note-taker, moderator's role, ground rules, comments on confidentiality, and discussion questions. The overview should be a frank discussion on what information you are seeking, and the importance of the topics that will be discussed. Emphasize how the participants and their community will benefit from what is learned. Ground rules include respecting others' opinions, ensuring equal group participation, and getting closure on each question before moving on. Finally, it is very important to stress to participants that there are no right or wrong answers.

B. *Confidentiality*

In addition to providing participants with information about the focus group, also assure them that you will not use their names or any other identifiable information in any publications or reports that you write. You may also want to tell them that the individually identified information and comments they provide will be kept confidential and not shared with anyone. It will be necessary for you to repeat this during the screening process and at the focus group in order to make participants more comfortable and open to participate. This may also help participants to share their perceptions and beliefs (please see *Section 2.9 Compile and Organize the Data* on page 5-22 for more information on confidentiality).

C. *Using a discussion guide*

As the moderator you should use the developed discussion guide as a road map to guide the discussion and follow it closely. It is important, however, to be flexible if the order of the questions change or you run out of time. Be prepared for this and have a plan for asking key questions before you run out of time.

D. *Moderating techniques**

- **Pause and Probe.** After asking a question, pause for five seconds. This five-second pause gives participants a chance to jump in and give their comments. Sometimes silence helps people build up the courage to speak. Follow-up probing questions, like "Would you give me an example?" should also be used when necessary to get more information from participants. Use probing questions only if issues do not surface.

* This section was adapted, in part, from *Using Focus Groups for Evaluation* by Mary Marczak and Meg Sewell. Retrieved from the University of Arizona, March 2003.

- **Responding to participant comments.** Remember to stay neutral. Avoid using positive verbal responses such as "correct" or "that's good." Moderators should use encouraging remarks such as, "thank you for sharing that with us."
- **Be aware of group dynamics.** Watch for the dominant talker, quiet participant, or rambler, to see if they are affecting the discussion.
- **Don't let any one person dominate.** If you allow people to constantly interrupt or let one or two participants take over, you run the risk of having other participants get angry and frustrated. To help prevent this, set up a ground rule about equal participation beforehand. At the first sign of trouble, refer to the ground rule about equal participation.
- **Draw out quiet participants.** Don't put anyone on the spot. Watch for opportunities to bring quiet people into the discussion. Learn participants' names and use them. (Note: participants will have nametags.) It may be helpful to say after a few questions, "Let's hear from those who haven't had a chance to talk yet."
- **Let participants respond to one another.** Encourage interaction among the group. If questions or comments are directed at you, try to deflect them and pose the question back to participants. If a participant looks at you and says, "Isn't that right?" ask the group, "has anyone else had a similar experience?" (Note: Moderators should speak less than any other person in the group.)
- **Keep the discussion on track.** Since important issues are usually related to each other, it is easy for groups to move into other areas. Participants need the freedom to explore connections and ideas, but try to keep the discussion related to the session's topic. Moderators should listen well and think quickly on their feet making sure the discussion stays focused.
- **Summarize comments before moving to the next question.** This helps participants know that you are about to move on to the next question.

E. *Length of focus groups*

Focus groups last one to two hours. It is generally a good idea to have two-hour focus groups for adults and one-hour focus groups for adolescents. This provides enough time to go through several questions and get a good amount of information.

F. *Focus group size*

Groups should be made up of six to 12 individuals who share the characteristics of the population you are studying. Try to over recruit and invite more people than 12, as there will always be no-shows.

2.9 Compile and Organize the Data

As soon as your partnership starts the process of collecting the focus group data, you will suddenly have a lot of data to manage. It is important to think about this while in the planning phase of data collection. Specifically, you want to discuss the following with your partnership and note your decisions.

- A. *What will the focus group data look like once it is collected?*
 - The information is comprised of narrative comments, which may fall into logical categories. They may be similar or may vary.
- B. *How will the data be collected and compiled?* (See *Appendix B: Computer Software to Compile and Analyze Data* on page 5-63 for software programs and computer resources that may help you with compiling the data).
 - ⇒ The focus group data you collect will be qualitative. After each focus group the moderator and note-taker should make notes and write down any additional comments. Within the next couple of days the note-taker—or other designated person—should type up the focus group notes, using the tape recordings to fill in any gaps or make clarifications. Really long documents are not very helpful, as there is no easy way to see relationships across different focus group discussions. So the designated person may want to consider organizing qualitative data right from the start into major categories. These categories are most commonly the focus group questions that were asked. This way, you have in your document all of the participants' discussion organized under each question.
 - One individual or agency should be assigned for creating the master file, developing the categories, and cutting and pasting the notes into the corresponding categories.
 - One individual or agency should also be assigned for keeping track of the audiotapes.
- C. *Where will the survey data be processed and compiled?*
 - It is important to plan ahead of time where the data is coming from and going to at all times during the data collection process. This eliminates any confusion that may arise when multiple partnership members and agencies take on the focus group collection and compilation activities. It also clarifies ahead of time what steps need to be undertaken to collect, enter, compile, and analyze the different data pieces.

- Once your partnership has thought through the above two points, then you should have a clear idea of where each focus group will take place and where the data will be kept.

D. *What about participant confidentiality?*

- ⇒ Ensuring confidentiality is critical. Depending on the nature of the topic it is a good idea to let focus group participants know that you will not use their names or other identifying information in your final report or publications. Assure them that their responses will be kept confidential. Results should focus on the content of the group discussion rather than identifying who said what. This may help encourage them to participate, and make them more comfortable and willing to openly share their opinions about your topic.
- ⇒ After collecting data from individuals—referred to as human subjects, there are a few important rules to consider when handling their responses:
 - Keep any identifying information in a locked place (such as name, phone number, address, social security number, notes and tape recordings from focus groups). This can be simply a locked filing cabinet drawer or password protected computer, which ensures that no one has access to the confidential responses of your sample population.
 - Keep identifying information in one place so that fewer people have access to private information. (repeat of above?)
 - Remove any identifying information that is associated with data. When transcribing your tape-recorded focus group conversations, indicate each respondent in your word document by assigning a unique number. You can start with “Respondent 1” and assign a different number to each participant you enter. Keep your focus group notes and any printed documents in a locked drawer.
 - Avoid collecting unneeded information. You can ask for demographic information and responses to questions without asking for personal information.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Focus Groups

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Flexible• Captures rich, in-depth data• Immediate results• Encourages and stimulates individuals to share more openly• Data can be combined with quantitative data to provide a complete picture about an issue	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• May be challenging to recruit busy and/or hard-to-reach participants• Need to schedule at least 2-3 focus groups to capture diversity• Difficult to generalize results to the larger population• Difficult to compare results across groups

Resources:

- American Statistical Association, Section on Survey Research Methods. **What Are Focus Groups?** <http://www.amstat.org/sections/srms/brochures/focusgroups.pdf>
- National Science Foundation: **The 2002 User-Friendly Handbook for Project Evaluation.** <http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/2002/nsf02057/start.htm>
- Washington State University. **Community Ventures: Focus Groups- A Tool for Understanding Community Perceptions and Experiences.** <http://cru.cahe.wsu.edu/CEPublications/wrep0128/wrep0128.html>

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