



## Introduction and Overview

Focus groups are a fast and effective way to elicit information and perspectives from a variety of key informants simultaneously. In public health, it is often a standard research methodology that is used to gauge health beliefs, perform needs assessments, and evaluate programs. Focus groups are an important tool in program development and evaluation, as they provide the contextual information necessary for a program that meets the needs of the population in focus. This research brief describes focus groups and the settings in which they are used, their use in program development and evaluation, and some considerations for conducting effective focus group research.

## What is a focus group?

Focus groups are a qualitative research technique used to gather information about insights, feelings, expertise, and experiences from a small group, usually 8-12 participants, who share a similar experience or background (Morgan, 1996). Focus groups are different from one-on-one interviews and interviews in which individuals are interviewed in a group setting in that they emphasize interaction between participants as crucial to the process, enabling a fuller assessment of the group's perspective and experience (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Morgan, 1996). They are helpful in understanding stakeholders' perspectives on specific experiences or incidents (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999) and the reasons behind attitudes and behaviors (Greenbaum, 2000).

Focus groups originated as a form of market research that would provide quick, in-depth feedback regarding specific products and services (Morgan, 1997). Beginning in the late 1980s, public health practitioners and other social scientists began using focus groups in order to supplement other qualitative research techniques in developing programs, policies, and interventions to promote health and wellbeing (Basch, 1987). Focus groups have been established as effective methodology in many disciplines, including sociology (Morgan, 1996), public health (Basch, 1987; Makosky Daley et al., 2010), medicine and health care (Kevern & Webb, 2001; Lehoux, Poland, & Daudelin, 2006), psychology (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996), education (Vaughn et al., 1996; Wilson, 1997), social work (Linhorst, 2002), and program planning and evaluation (DesRosier & Zellers, 1989; Krueger & Casey, 2009; Massey, 2011).

## Focus groups in program development and evaluation

Focus groups are often used in program development and design. Practitioners developing an intervention to address a specific concern or health problem use focus groups to explicitly involve the community of focus in identifying their needs and assets, as well as barriers and promoting factors for a particular program or intervention (Buttram, 1990; Kruger et al., 2012; Makosky Daley et al., 2010). Focus groups are quick and relatively inexpensive to administer, and can offer richer and more in-depth responses than quantitative surveys (Morgan, 1997). In the program planning process, researchers and program administrators can use a variety of focus groups to understand the language used by the

participants to describe the topic in question, explore the breadth of opinion and anticipate concerns, and generate ideas that can be further tested (M. K. Straw & Marks, 1995).

Program evaluation teams also utilize focus groups for post-program evaluation as well as needs assessment and strategic planning (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Focus groups have been successfully used to evaluate public assistance programs, such as an evaluation of a state energy assistance pilot program (Magill, 1993). Focus groups have also been indicated as useful for evaluating federal and state policies and demonstrations, as the focus group methodology can generate answers to a wide variety of questions that can be difficult to address in time- and resource-limited environments (R. B. Straw & Smith, 1995). For participants from low-income and other marginalized communities, the group setting may provide participants with support from other group members that enables them to feel more comfortable in describing personal experiences or expressing critical views (Magill, 1993; Makosky Daley et al., 2010).

### **Some important considerations**

While focus groups can be conducted successfully in many settings, several elements must be considered for most effective use. Recruitment techniques, facilitator selection, and analysis plan are all important to the effectiveness of focus groups. While recruitment of a sufficient number of participants can be a challenge, strategies such as over-recruiting, repeated contact with participants, offering incentives, and choosing a setting and time convenient to participants can help to ensure adequate attendance (Morgan, 1995). Recruitment of participants for separate focus groups according to particular criteria (e.g. new TANF recipients versus those who have received TANF for more than two years) allows researchers to compare differences in opinions and experiences among subgroups in the population of interest (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Selection of facilitator is important when the researcher is unknown to the participants, there is potential for mistrust, or the subject matter is sensitive; choosing a facilitator or co-facilitator with a similar background to participants may create an atmosphere more conducive to self-disclosure (Makosky Daley et al., 2010; Morgan, 1995). Ensuring adequate resources for analysis plan selected (i.e. audio-recording, transcription, and detailed coding of qualitative data versus more informal note-taking and reporting) as well as time and staffing for analysis is important for effective use of results (Massey, 2011; Morgan, 1995).

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

In program planning and evaluation, research has demonstrated that focus groups are an effective way to obtain a diverse range of information for effective, meaningful and relevant program design (Basch, 1987; Morgan, 1997). With careful consideration of recruitment, facilitation, and analysis, focus groups can be a valuable technique in all phases of program administration, including assessing needs and perspectives of the population in focus, understanding attitudes, barriers, and facilitators to programs in development, gathering ongoing feedback, and evaluating completed programs. Conducting focus groups with participants in public programs can provide administrators with information that can strengthen programs and enhance outcomes for participants.

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