

RAPID POLICY ASSESSMENT & RESPONSE



Module III: Qualitative Data

*Focus Groups —
Training Materials*

Focus Groups

Purpose and Intended Products

Purpose

- To learn qualitative data about key domains:
 - police behavior towards IDUs, people with HIV, CSWs, and MSM-IDUs
 - perceptions
 - access to harm reduction services
 - social stigma
 - social risk
 - social attitudes
- To identify potential key informants

Intended Product

1. Qualitative data regarding knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions about police behavior on toward IDUs
2. A list of key informants to be interviewed

After the Meeting:

- Organize the data you collected in the attached data organization form.
- Add new notes as needed for the RPAR.

AT A GLANCE

Focus Groups

A focus group is a number of individuals who are interviewed together because they:

- Have common experience
- Come from a similar background
- Have a particular skill

These characteristics provide both:

- A focus for discussion
- And help people express individual and shared experiences and beliefs

A focus group may require:

- A location that is as neutral, comfortable, accessible and free of interruption as possible
- A guide of discussion issues or topic areas
- A tape recorder and extra batteries, tapes and labels
- A blackboard, whiteboard or paper and pens
- A key informant to help recruit participants

Rapid assessment team members may be required to act as:

- *A moderator* - a member of the rapid assessment team who takes part in the focus group and encourages participants to talk about interesting and relevant issues
- *A note-taker* - a member of the rapid assessment team who will observe and record significant verbal and non-verbal details

Focus groups are good for:

- Producing a lot of information quickly
- Identifying and exploring beliefs, attitudes and behaviours

The key disadvantages are:

- The researcher has less control than in an interview
- The data cannot tell you about the frequency of beliefs and behaviours
- The group may be dominated by one or two participants who can influence the views of others

Steps to Conducting Focus Groups

This section provides a step-by-step approach to conducting a policy focus group. There will be three focus groups, each consisting of six to ten participants. Three groups will be convened, the first consisting of law enforcement personnel; the second, of risk interventionists such as outreach workers, public health providers and the like; and the third, of drug treatment providers and clinicians treating drug users.

For all groups, follow the following approach:

Step 1: Understand Focus Group Discussions

Step 2: Identify Appropriate Focus Group Participants

Step 3: Recruit Focus Group Participants

Step 4: Coordinate Focus Group Logistics

Step 5: Review Your Topic Guide

Step 6: Define Role of Focus Group Moderator

Step 7: Moderate the Focus Group

Step 8: Collect Data from Focus Group Discussions

Step 1: Understand focus group discussions

What is a focus group?

A focus group is a number of individuals who are interviewed together because they have had a common experience, come from a similar background, or hold a particular expertise relevant to the rapid assessment. This does not mean that individuals in a focus group will know one another, although they may. A focus group is not the same as a group interview. A group interview also has a researcher asking a group a series of questions but participants provide answers to these individually. Focus groups encourage individuals to discuss and explore questions. Focus groups are small and usually consist of no more than 6 - 10 people.

What is a focus group useful for?

Focus groups are good for collecting information quickly. A focus group will often arrive at an agreement or consensus about an issue through group discussion. At an *early* stage of the rapid assessment a focus group can be used for:

- Discovering opinions, information, and behaviours that the rapid assessment team may not know much about, that existing data do not address, issues that had not been considered by the researcher
Generating hypotheses and ideas, and new directions for research
Providing detail about issues that might not get uncovered in any other way

During the *middle* period of the rapid assessment a focus group may be used for:

- Validating, triangulating, and crosschecking findings from other data and hypotheses. Participants can be asked about a particular issue and their responses compared with other data sources
- Exploring further what the group feels about a topic. Changes in opinion and attitude could be recorded and possibly related to wider external factors

Definition

Validation is a way of checking whether two sources of data are in agreement and assessing differences. For example, a focus group of police officers might conclude that few heroin users are arrested, and arrest data might show that many heroin users were arrested. This contradiction can be explored in a focus group in order to understand why the two sources differ.

At the *concluding* stage of the rapid assessment focus groups may be used for:

- Validating and cross-checking findings from other methods
- Assessing the representativeness of emerging findings. A focus group could be held in an area outside of the original study with groups of a similar composition and the results compared
- Judgement of the reaction of selected groups to suggested interventions arising from the rapid assessment. Participants may be able to identify cultural obstacles, problems and issues.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of focus groups?

Strengths of focus groups

Focus groups:

- Can produce a lot of information more quickly and at less cost than individual interviews
- Are useful for identifying and exploring beliefs, attitudes and behaviours
- Are useful for identifying questions for individual interviews
- Can indicate the range of beliefs, ideas or opinions in a community

Weaknesses of focus groups

- Group dynamics can influence who speaks and what they say. Participants who are uncomfortable with speaking in groups are at a disadvantage.
- The number of questions that can be addressed is smaller than in individual interviews
- It is hard to facilitate a focus group. It is important to know how to manage the group so that all participants are able to share their views.
- Taking good notes during focus group discussions is difficult, and transcribing from tape recordings is time consuming and costly
- Researcher has less control over discussion's flow (compared to the individual interview)

- Focus groups can only represent the opinions of the people in the group and cannot give information about the opinions of the whole community.

Step 2: Identify appropriate focus group participants

Which participants should be included in a focus group?

There will be three focus groups, each consisting of six to ten participants. The first group will consist of law enforcement personnel; the second, of risk interventionists such as outreach workers, public health providers, harm reductionists and the like; and the third, of drug treatment providers and clinicians treating drug users.

Focus groups cannot be used to generalise about the reaction or behaviour of an entire population. Therefore, the simplest method for selecting participants is choosing individuals you think will provide the most useful information. This is known as *purposive sampling*. The general rule for selecting such participants is that they should be reasonably *homogeneous*.

Definition

Homogeneous - a common characteristic, experience, or expertise. Examples of homogeneous focus groups include: a group of young drug injectors; a collection of law enforcement personnel; or staff from an STD clinic.

This can be difficult. Individuals who are similar in some respects have very different backgrounds. This could restrict the range of the discussion.

Example

Law enforcement officers who work on the street may be very different from higher-level police. One difference is that street officers may differentially enforce the law or have other informal practices. Front-line police may be very reluctant to admit to these practices in front of their supervisors. Researchers will want to consider occupational roles as part of preparing for the focus group.

The researcher has to consider how homogenous focus groups need to be. An awareness of an individuals' background will allow appropriate groups to be assembled. For example, groups may be assembled on the basis of what type of work a participant does, with attention to diversity within each group, making sure that women or important minorities are represented. However, such organisation may not always be possible.

During a rapid assessment, you may come across a number of individuals who were not previously available for questioning, or resource constraints may mean that a

researcher does not have the time to interview participants individually. In such cases, spontaneous focus groups can be held with groups of people. If this happens it may be useful to bear the following in mind:

- You may wish to exclude individuals from the focus group who are likely to obstruct the flow of the discussion or even disrupt discussion
- You may wish to conduct the focus group with a non-homogenous set of individuals. Here, good moderator skills are required. If acceptable, you should tape record the discussion. This will allow you to concentrate on the issues being discussed.
- If necessary, identify the most important participants and choose to conduct individual interviews instead. Attempt to arrange to talk with other individuals at a later time.

You can fill in the attached form to track potential focus group participants.

Step 3: Recruit Focus Group Participants

How to organize a focus group

Think creatively about how to recruit members. For this assessment there will be three focus groups, each consisting of six to ten participants. The first group will consist of law enforcement personnel; the second, of risk interventionists such as outreach workers, public health providers, harm reductionists and the like; and the third, of drug treatment providers and clinicians treating drug users.

Recommendations for focus group members should be solicited from the CAB. In addition, researchers may wish to do their own recruiting of focus group members who may be part of organizations not known to the CAB members. Every effort should be made to recruit people who will have a diversity of opinion.

Example

The CAB may only recommend police officers that are considered “good” representatives of the department. The researcher could ask a recommended police officer to recommend someone in the Department “who is different from you”. He may select someone with a different approach to policing, enforcement, a woman, or someone who differs in another way. Using this method, sometimes called “snowball sampling”, can produce focus groups that are relatively homogenous, but where members may represent different points of view.

Once you have decided who should attend the focus group those participants need to be informed about it. Recruitment should begin as early as possible to allow potential candidates who decline to participate to be replaced. Potential focus group candidates should be told:

- Why they have been recruited, the topic that you wish to discuss and how many people are likely to be in the group. You may also mention the importance of that person’s contribution to the success of the rapid assessment
- Where, and on what date, the focus group will take place, the time participants should arrive and how long it will take
- Of any incentives offered to encourage people to take part. These may include gifts, money, or refreshments. Check local knowledge to find out what incentives are acceptable, desirable and appropriate. This may vary according to local customs and the time of the year.

Step 4: Coordinate focus group logistics

Secure a location

You should record a contact address and phone number for participants as this allows notice to be given if arrangements change. Regular contact should be maintained with participants if a focus group is organised for the near future. Remind individuals at regular intervals that the focus group is ‘a week away’, ‘in 3 days time’, ‘tomorrow’, or ‘today at 3:00pm’.

Although focus groups may be conducted in any location that facilitates discussion and encourages participants to attend (such as a health center, a classroom or just under a tree), careful attention should be given to the following:

- The location should be as *neutral*, *free of interruptions* (such as telephone calls, other members of staff) and *comfortable* for participants as possible. This could include hiring a local school classroom or relocating from a busy town square to a quieter side street. It is probably a good idea not to hold the focus group in the offices of a participant unless you can conduct the group after working hours when the staff has gone home.
- The location should be *accessible* – participants should be able to find and get to the site easily.
- The location needs to be *private*. In pursuing topics, which may be culturally “delicate”, it may be preferable to hold the group in a discrete location.

Step 5: Review Your Topic Guide

The *topic guide* in the training materials section contains a list of questions that will be addressed within the focus group. It is best to prepare this guide in advance to keep the conversation on track. This is important, as participants can lose interest in a discussion where a researcher is poorly prepared, disorganised or unconfident. The research team should all become familiar with this topic guide. Practicing moderating and using the topic guide in advance with a group of friends can be very useful.

Step 6: Define role of focus group moderator

Running a focus group is a skilled task.

The *moderator* must be able to control and mediate discussion between a number of individuals, focusing and maintaining their attention on issues relevant to the rapid assessment. Discussion not directly related to the rapid assessment should be kept to a minimum. However, relevant discussion should be encouraged and moderators need to make sure that one or two individuals do not dominate the focus group. This task may be best accomplished by someone with experience of qualitative research, facilitating public debates and meetings, or from a background in journalism.

It is useful to have an additional *note-taker* or observer. The note-taker does not moderate or participate in the focus group. The note-taker takes notes on how the participants were acting, emotional cues they may give, and any other observations that may help later, when the tape is examined. They are able to observe and record information that the moderator could overlook.

Step 7: Moderate the Focus Group

Asking questions

A moderator must have control of the group. **High control** is good when you have a strong agenda or need confirmation of previous findings. **Low control** is good for exploration of new questions. In these focus groups, we have specific topics to focus on, so the moderator should exercise high control over the group, always referring the topic guide to direct conversations.

Avoid asking leading or opinionated questions. You can ask spontaneous questions, but if a participant gets off topic, you can focus the group by going on to the next question from the topic guide.

Examples

Leading or judgmental questions

"Everyone here would agree that drugs are bad, correct?"

- Better way: How do people feel about drugs?

"Do people think that sex workers are dirty?"

- Better way: Tell me about sex workers.

Probing

Probing is the practice of eliciting good follow-up comments.

A good probe:

- Is specific
- Is connected to the discussion underway
- Can sometimes just be silence or waiting for more comments
- Can be a "listening response" – repeating what the speaker is saying so that the speaker knows you are listening
- Is not a judgmental statement or a statement of opinion.

Dealing with certain problem participants

You might experience the following personality types in your focus group, and you should know how to deal with them.

- **Experts:** people who *must* tell everyone everything they know
- **Non-participants:** people who remain quiet
- **Limelight hogs:** people who need attention and will talk louder than the other participants

The three important periods in an initial focus group process are the:

- Greeting, acquaintance-making period
- Either an “ice-breaker” or informal chatting period
- Focus group start-up and introduction period

Example

Ice-breaker Exercise

The point of this exercise is to have everyone introduce someone else. After forming into pairs, the first person interviews the other person to find out their name and institution and other non-professional things such as hobbies, pets, or favorite vacation spot. At three minutes, the leader calls time and the second person interviews the first. At three minutes everyone returns to the circle and then each member of the group introduces their partner.

Ten steps to conducting a focus group:

1. Arrive early at the location where the focus group is to take place.
2. Arrange the location so that the group will sit in a loose circle. This allows everyone to see and hear what is going on. The moderator should sit with the participants, but note takers and any observers can sit anywhere outside the circle where they can hear and that has a good view.
3. Ensure that the location is as quiet and as free of interruptions as possible. The tape recorder should ideally have an external microphone to pick up individual voices. You will also need extra batteries, tapes and labels. Test the recorder before the session begins.
4. Welcome participants warmly and when assembled introduce yourself and any assistants present. Explain why the focus group is taking place. Participants may never have been to a focus group before, and you may need to outline what is expected. Reassure members why people are taking notes, watching them and asking for their consent to tape record the discussion. Stress the fact that anything said is confidential.
5. Either use the introductions ice-breaker exercise or allow participants to briefly introduce themselves to the group. This may be a good opportunity to test if the tape recorder is working. Introduce the first topic slowly and coax participants into talking. Participants should have informal nametags so that the moderator and others will address them by name. This is useful to have on tape so that speakers can be identified later.
6. Be a good listener and cultivate the habit of asking 'why' and 'how'.
7. Summarise the discussion at appropriate points. You may wish to do this on a large piece of paper taped to the wall so everyone can remember the points already covered.
8. Refreshments and breaks may be required in longer focus groups. Find out what is culturally appropriate beforehand. In some cultures people do not eat during specific times of the year or day, or may not accept food from strangers.
9. When the focus group is finished, summarise the key issues and opinions and ask if anyone has anything that they want to add.
10. At the end, thank participants and if you have not already done so, take down any contact details. You may wish to contact them in the near future.

One of the last questions of the focus groups is to inquire about people who should be interviewed in individual, in-depth interviews. These people can be divided into two kinds of people: 1) people with knowledge about *systems* that affect IDUs and 2) people with first-hand knowledge of IDUs, also known as *interactors*. Both kinds of interviews are important in order to develop a complete picture of how IDUs are treated.

Examples of people with overall knowledge about systems affecting IDUs include: police chiefs, directors of health clinics, the mayor, elected representatives, the director of the needle exchange program, or prison officials. People who have a systems perspective may have never encountered an IDU personally but may have in-depth knowledge of how their system is organized and what the implications might be for the health of IDUs.

Examples of people with first-hand or interactor knowledge of IDUs include prison guards, the receptionist at the drug treatment clinic, an outreach worker with many contacts among IDUs, street-level police officers, or even people such as bartenders or particular pharmacists who sell needles to IDUs. An interactor has daily contact with IDUs and first hand knowledge of IDUs daily lives.

Both systems and interactors people should be nominated by focus groups as candidates for individual interviews. Record these suggestions on the System and Interactor Interview Candidate List.

Step 8: Collect Data from Focus Group Discussions

How to manage data from a focus group

Immediately after the focus group, the research team should discuss how the focus group went and any immediate reactions that they had. The notes should be added to the note-takers records for use during the analysis. The focus group will still be fresh in your mind and you may have observations that you wish to discuss with colleagues.

Immediately after the group, when participants have left, you should:

- **Label and date the tape** This makes it easier to identify and locate tapes at a later date. The label and date should be both on the tape and the case. In addition, the moderator should say the date into the tape at the start. Materials should be kept in a safe place to ensure confidentiality.
- **Play back the recording or parts of the recording** If other researchers are involved compare notes and discuss their significance.
- **Write a summary of the key points of the group** This should be done by all the researchers present. Are there any weaknesses in the way the focus group was carried out? Were any topics missed? What useful issues arose that hadn't been previously considered?

NOTE: This process cannot be left to a later time, as it is difficult to remember all the things that happen in a focus group. It is best to debrief right after the meeting.