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# Focus Groups for Injury Prevention: A Primer

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*Lawrence Berger, MD, MPH, Clinical Assistant Professor of Pediatrics, University of New Mexico School of Medicine, Albuquerque, New Mexico; and Stephen R. Piontkowski, MSEH District Environmental Health Officer, Phoenix Area IHS Office of Environmental Health and Engineering, Lakeside, Arizona*

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Focus groups are a powerful tool for planning and evaluation. Originally designed as a marketing tool for the business world, focus groups are now widely used in diverse arenas, from clinical practice,<sup>1-5</sup> to public health initiatives,<sup>6-10</sup> to law and politics.<sup>11,12</sup> The goal of this primer is to demonstrate how focus groups can facilitate community-based services and interventions, using examples from the field of injury prevention.

## What Are Focus Groups?

A focus group is a well-planned, structured event in which invited participants provide ideas, perspectives, and insights on a specific program-related topic.

## When Are Focus Groups Useful?

Among other things, focus groups can help develop a work plan for an intervention or program; craft specific messages (slogans, themes, logos); determine the best channels for dissemination of information (newspapers, radio, word-of-mouth); and identify key stakeholders, role models, target audiences, and potential obstacles. They are also invaluable to assess proposed materials (such as posters, PSAs, and handouts) for content, cultural appropriateness, and appeal, and to obtain feedback on current program activities (See Table 1).

## How Do Focus Groups Differ From Other Types of Meetings?

There are several key elements that make focus groups very different from other types of meetings (Table 2). The goal of a focus group is to elicit attitudes, perceptions, ideas, beliefs, and suggestions on specific topics.

In place of an agenda, focus groups utilize a thoughtfully-crafted “moderator’s guide” (Table 3). The guide is essential for the trained moderator to cover the important questions, but also for the designated note-taker(s) to closely follow the proceedings and the group’s relevant comments for each question. The moderator’s guide should address no more than three or four key issues related to the topic. Each issue will have one or more open-ended questions, often followed by

several probing questions. The guide should begin with questions that are non-controversial and aimed at putting the participants at ease. More sensitive or controversial questions should appear later, when trust has been established among participants and with the moderator. Take time to pilot the guide with one or two people representative of the target audience to ensure they understand what the moderator is asking for, you are receiving the desired feedback, questions are unambiguous and easily understandable, and conversation flows well. For example, the use of “child occupant restraint” may be the most accurate phrase in public health circles, but with the target audience, “car seat” might be a better term to use. Piloting the guide will also ensure you meet your goal within the allotted time.

A focus group session usually involves eight to twelve people. Having fewer than eight people reduces the likelihood of obtaining an adequate spectrum of opinions. Having more than 12 participants makes full participation by each individual less likely and can actually reduce the amount of interaction. They are strictly time-limited, usually lasting no more than one to two hours, with one hour preferred.

Participants should be representative of the target group or “audience segment” for the planned program or draft media item. A focus group to help plan a seat belt campaign targeting male drivers ages 16-24 years, for example, should obviously recruit males in this age group. If the planned approach involves a school-based component, a separate focus group of high school teachers would also be valuable. Ideally, participants should not know each other, so they can offer unique perspectives and not be constrained by consideration of personal relationships. In small communities, however, recruiting residents who don’t know each other may not be feasible.

## What Are the Advantages and Limitations of Focus Groups?

Focus groups have a number of advantages over other forms of information gathering. In addition to obtaining facts about a topic, focus groups can reveal perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and feelings of the target audience. In-depth feedback about a topic is promoted by the flexible format. The moderator can ask additional probing questions when unanticipated aspects of an issue arise or clarification is needed. The interactive nature of focus groups promotes more expansive thinking among participants, as one participant’s idea can trigger additional suggestions from others in the group. Compared to large-scale written or interview surveys,

**Table 1. Examples of the Usefulness of Injury Prevention Focus Groups**

<p>Purpose: Identify extent of support and reasons for support and opposition to a law.</p> <p>Participants: Adult tribal members.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There should be a warning period and a media campaign first, to let people know about the law;</li> <li>• Fines should be \$25–50</li> <li>• People with certain medical conditions should be excluded from the law.</li> </ul>
<p>Topic: Smoke alarm distribution program.</p> <p>Purpose: Identify reasons why many installed smoke alarms are not functioning after one year.</p> <p>Participants: Adults in households who received smoke alarms.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People don't know whether they have an ionization or photoelectric smoke detector installed in their home;</li> <li>• Nuisance alarms happen most often with smoke from frying in the kitchen or steam from taking a shower;</li> <li>• Hush buttons don't work well—often need to pull out the batteries to stop a nuisance alarm.</li> </ul>
<p>Topic: Head Start child car safety seat program.</p> <p>Purpose: Identify how to increase car seat usage rates.</p> <p>Participants: 1) Parents whose children attend the local Head Start program; 2) Head Start program staff.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff need hands-on training to help parents feel comfortable using the car safety seats correctly;</li> <li>• Have an incentive program, e.g., a lottery for a prize, to encourage parents to use the car seats;</li> <li>• Make extra car seats available to grandparents and others who transport children;</li> <li>• Have a tribal law requiring that children be transported in car safety seats.</li> </ul>
<p>Topic: Draft brochure on fall prevention among elders.</p> <p>Purpose: Assess the readability, acceptability, and likely effectiveness of the brochure.</p> <p>Participants: Adult members of the community.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Too much text;</li> <li>• Too much jargon;</li> <li>• Photos should have local people;</li> <li>• Include a phone number so people can get more information.</li> </ul>
<p>Topic: Community seat belt media campaign.</p> <p>Purpose: Identify logo, messages, venues for marketing the campaign.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have a tribal artist design the campaign logo;</li> <li>• Include messages that tribal law enforcement takes seat belt enforcement seriously.</li> </ul>

focus groups are relatively inexpensive, require minimal resources, and provide rapid feedback.

One major limitation of focus groups is that the information gathered from them is not quantitative. One cannot conclude, for example, that 80% of the community would favor implementation of a certain program simply because eight out of the ten participants in a focus group favors it. There is also no guarantee that the participants in a specific focus group are representative of the target population. Despite your best efforts to recruit a diverse group of individuals, the majority may share a particular background or perspective that skews the feedback they provide. Because participants are answering “face-to-face”, they may avoid vital, but sensitive, issues. Furthermore, an unskilled moderator may influence the responses of participants or not elicit responses from all the individuals.

### What Are the Steps in Organizing Focus Groups?

The first step is to clearly define the purpose of the focus group and the essential questions that need to be addressed. Although it is often tempting to want to answer many questions, narrowing the focus to one topic and three or four key issues is a necessity.

When planning the focus group, seek the assistance of individuals familiar with the target audience and the topic of the focus group to decide:

- How best to recruit participants (ads in newspapers, word-of-mouth, appearances at community events, mailings to individuals are commonly-used methods)
- What potential barriers need to be addressed, such as language issues requiring a translator, or scheduling conflicts (consider the best time of day for participants)

**Table 2. Focus Group vs. Committee/Working Group**

Focus Group	Committee or Working Group
1. Goal: Elicit attitudes, perceptions, ideas, beliefs, and suggestions	1. Goal: Make decisions, solve problems
2. Structured moderator’s guide with specific questions	1. Meeting agenda
3. Moderator is trained to conduct focus groups	2. Chairperson usually moderates
4. Designated note-taker to record comments and observations	3. Minutes taken to record votes, summarize the discussion items
5. Optimal to have 8–12 participants and limit the focus group session to about one hour	4. No standard limits on the number of participants or length of meeting
6. Participants are members of a target audience	5. Participants are often decision-makers
7. Participants are preferably strangers and do not meet as a group after the focus group session	6. Participants often know each other and meet on a regular basis

- Where the focus group might be held (ensure a quiet location with limited distractions)
- What incentives might be appropriate (e.g., certificates of participation, reimbursement for travel expenses, gift cards of \$10 - \$25, and child care for parents of young children)
- Appropriate content of the moderator’s guide
- What participant demographics (gender, age, clarifying that they indeed represent your target audience, years lived in the community, etc.) you wish to collect and how to collect them (written questionnaire) while they arrive to the session
- If a “privacy pledge” for team members and/or an “informed consent form” for participants are needed
- Whether the note-taker should use a paper and pad or a laptop, and whether additional recording devices (e.g., voice or video recorder) would be acceptable.

Pilot test your moderator’s guide with colleagues and/or members of the target audience. Arrive at the focus group site early to arrange seating, set up any equipment, and prepare the refreshments. Make sure the room is comfortable and has few distractions. Arrange the seating so participants have eye contact with each other and with the moderator (usually, a horse-shoe or circular arrangement). Distribute “name tent” cards or name badges for participants (first names only).

**How Are Focus Groups Conducted?**

A basic focus group “team” consists of the participants, a moderator, note-taker, and session facilitator. The moderator guides the session through the following elements: welcome and introduction, ground rules and instructions for participants, optional collection of anonymous demographic information, facilitated discussion based on the moderator’s guide, and

closing (Table 4). During the discussion, the moderator’s primary job is to elicit as many ideas and perspectives as possible from all the participants on each of the major questions contained in the moderator’s guide. A skilled moderator will be able to create a relaxed and friendly atmosphere, clearly establish and enforce the ground rules, encourage participation by every person, and guide the discussion in a way that balances flexibility (e.g., pursuing unanticipated issues or insights that arise, asking additional probing questions when necessary) and adherence to the moderator’s guide and time constraints.

It is extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible, for a moderator to both successfully conduct a focus group *and* take adequate notes of the proceedings. A note-taker is therefore essential for most focus groups. The notes can be handwritten, or typed into a laptop computer. The note-taker sits away from the participants, so they are not distracted. A voice or video recorder can be used as a complement to notes, but shouldn’t substitute for notes entered during the session; trying to reconstruct a session if the recording apparatus fails is a very difficult task. Successful note-taking requires skill in deciding when to record a participant’s exact words vs. key points; following the flow of conversation as the moderator often jumps from one item to another or omits certain questions altogether; and making observations about individuals and group dynamics. Consider designating a second note-taker dedicated to recording observations about individuals (e.g., body language) and group dynamics.

A session facilitator can have a number of roles. He or she help greet the participants, address potential distractions (such as unexpected visitors, phones ringing in the session room), ensure the refreshments are well-stocked, adjust the room lighting and temperature, and distribute the incentives at the end of the focus group.

**Table 3. Sample Moderator's Guide for a Tribal Housing Safety Focus Group**

<p><b>A. Safety concerns</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. In your neighborhood, what do you feel are the most common causes for people to be hurt or have accidents inside their home or apartment?</li><li>2. In your neighborhood, what do you feel are the most common causes for people to be hurt or have accidents outside the home?</li><li>3. What are some ways those injuries or accidents might be prevented?</li></ol> <p><b>B. Safety brochure</b></p> <p>Here's a brochure about home safety. Please take 5 minutes to look it over.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>4. What do you like about this brochure?</li><li>5. How could it be improved?</li><li>6. How else might this information be given to residents of Tribal housing? <i>Probes:</i> Would the tribal newspaper be a good way? Why or why not? What about radio or television? Any other ways to get the information across?</li><li>7. What other comments do you have about this brochure?</li></ol> <p><b>C. Home safety training</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>8. What are some things you wish someone had told you about before you moved into your house/apartment?</li><li>9. If you attended the training session given by the housing authority for new renters, what do you remember about it? <i>Probes:</i> What topics were discussed at the training session? What was useful? What might be changed or added?</li><li>10. If you did not attend the training session, why didn't you?</li><li>11. What is the best way to provide training to new renters? <i>Probes:</i> Would you rather have a group session with other renters, or a visit to your home? Would a video be better? If so, do most people own a videotape or DVD player? Why do you prefer one or another approach?</li></ol> <p><b>D. Violence</b></p> <p>Violence and violent behaviors are a problem in many communities around the country.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>12. Is violence a problem in your community? <i>Probes:</i> What kind of violence is common here? Is there domestic violence a problem? Gang violence?</li><li>13. Why do you think these kinds of violence happen in your community?</li><li>14. What are some ways these kinds of violence might be reduced? <i>Probes:</i> What could the tribal police be doing to reduce violence? What might the schools do? How else could violence be reduced?</li></ol>
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### **How Are the Results of a Focus Group Summarized and Reported?**

A debriefing session among the focus group team members should occur immediately after the session concludes and participants leave. The moderator, note-taker, and other observers should consider these questions:

- How do you think the focus group went?
- Did the moderator elicit all the information desired?
- Was participation adequate?
- What could have been done differently?
- What struck you most about the participants' comments?

These immediate responses often prove invaluable in analyzing and summarizing the results of the focus group.

The goal of the written summary is to provide insight into major themes and specific items that warrant attention. The summary can be as simple as grouping comments under the essential questions (Table 5) or can involve sophisticated, software-assisted narrative analysis.<sup>13,14</sup> The latter approach is especially useful for large-scale initiatives involving multiple focus groups at multiple sites. We have not needed software to analyze results from our community-based focus groups.

### **How Many Focus Groups Should Be Held For a Given Topic?**

The number of focus groups to hold depends on several factors:

- How much staff time and money is available to conduct the focus groups?
- What is the project timeline? Does a project need to end in the next month, or is there an extended planning period built in?
- How many audience segments need to be addressed?

Will program elements be targeting different age groups, one or both genders, providers and consumers? Are there unique geographic considerations, such as urban and rural populations?

Ideally, multiple focus groups are held for each audience segment until no new ideas or themes emerge. In practice, many topics are satisfactorily addressed by a single focus group, especially when a single audience segment is targeted and the topic is narrowly defined.

## What Are Other Approaches to Obtaining In-Depth, Qualitative Data?

Focus groups are often used in conjunction with other approaches to obtaining qualitative data.<sup>15</sup> These include key informant interviews, questionnaire surveys, and community observations. Included in the last category is a technique called “participant observations” where researchers directly participate in the activities they wish to learn more about. For example, a member of a violence prevention coalition volunteers to work as a classroom aide in order to gain insights into school bullying; or a pediatrician with anthropology training conducts extended interviews with adolescents in his practice who attempt suicide.<sup>16</sup> An adaptation of focus groups that is based on the “Sharing Circles” of First Nations communities has been used by injury prevention advocates in Canada.<sup>17</sup> The Healthy Native Communities Partnership (HNCP), a non-profit organization that “helps communities realize their own vision of wellness,” has been promoting community dialogue through several innovative avenues, including “Café,” Open Space, blogs, and wiki sites.<sup>18</sup>

## How Can I Learn More About Focus Groups?

There are numerous publications and websites addressing all aspects of focus groups.<sup>19-25</sup> Perhaps the best single reference is a concise paperback entitled, “The Wilder Nonprofit Field Guide to Conducting Successful Focus Groups.”<sup>19</sup> Reading is no substitute for practical experience, however. Consider serving as a participant in one or more focus groups that might be hosted by agencies in your community. To receive moderator training, invite a skilled moderator to conduct a focus group for your program and discuss how you might co-moderate some or all of the session. The IHS Area Injury Prevention Specialists and non-profit organizations that serve American Indian/Alaska Native communities (such as the HNCP, Inter Tribal Council of Arizona, and others) can recommend experienced moderators. You can also contact your local college or university to see if they offer courses on focus groups or have faculty members with skills in moderating them.

## Final Thoughts

Most community-targeted focus groups require only a meeting space, some refreshments, a trained moderator, a note-taker, and 8 - 12 participants. A single focus group can provide vital feedback for a proposal, project, program, or media activity. Organizing a focus group to obtain feedback from members of your target audience before you launch an activity or intervention can help you avoid embarrassing and costly mistakes and greatly enhance the likelihood that your activity or materials will be well-received and effective.

Table 4. Format for a Focus Group

### Welcome/Introduction

- Good morning and welcome everyone.
- My name is . . .
- Thank you all for coming this morning.
- As you know, we are part of a group of people who work for tribes or the Indian Health Service from all over the country. We are here to learn about . . .
- Your participation is very important in helping us learn about what people think about these issues. Please help yourself to refreshments at any time. Please be sure you have a name tag.

### Instructions and guidelines for participants

Our meeting today will work in the following way:

- In the next hour, I am going to be asking a series of questions designed to collect your ideas on . . .
- The people sitting outside the table will be taking notes about what you say. No names will be used in our report. All of the comments that you make today will be summarized so that your privacy will be completely protected. No names will ever be reported.
- When answering these questions, please speak one at a time.
- Please raise your hand to speak if several people want to speak at the same time.
- Say what you think, not what you think someone wants to hear. Your honest impressions are what is important.
- Remember that there are no right or wrong answers! We are here to gather information and ideas, not to come up with any decisions.

### Optional

Let's have you take a minute or two to fill out this short form. Do not write your name on it. It's just for us to have some basic information about your age and so forth.

Distribute forms, collect them when completed.

### Conduct the focus group using the moderator's guide (Table 3)

### Closing

Are there any other thoughts or comments anyone would like to make before we close?

Thank you all for your participation today. Your comments will be very helpful in our work. Please accept this token of our appreciation for your help (e.g., envelopes with financial incentive, thank you letter).

**Table 5. Summary of Comments: Focus Group on Cultural Aspects of Injury Control**

**1. What does it mean to have a “culturally competent” program?**

- Use of local language, not exclusive use of English language, in written materials, media campaigns.
- Involvement of elders.
- Personnel learn about sensitive issues regarding interactions with community people, such as touching, eye contact, personal space, how to show respect for elders.
- Absence of stereotyping and derogatory comments.
- Written materials, such as textbooks, include local statistics and information about the community (history, geography, demographics, etc.).
- The program hires people from the community.
- Illustrations for program activities incorporate local people and practices, traditional images.

**2. How can programs become more culturally-competent?**

- Provide a mandatory orientation for all staff on reservation life and cultural issues.
- Strike a balance between cultural aspects and strictly professional roles.
- Strike a balance between socializing and professional roles.
- Provide on-going feedback to staff on cultural issues as they arise.
- Allow individuals to choose whether they will make use of or avoid traditional approaches (such as herbs or sweat lodges).
- Emphasize positive values and strengths of the community, such as respect for elders and love of children.
- Involve elders in decision-making, such as through focus groups, community meetings, or as an advisory committee.
- Conduct focus groups to get feedback on program plans and materials.
- Start from a foundation of mutual respect, care and concern for the community and all people.

**3. What are some cultural issues that make injury prevention efforts particularly challenging?**

- Bringing a family member on the job may violate confidentiality.
- Working with multiple tribes may lead to conflicts about symbols, language, and practices.
- Local beliefs, such as discussing death and injury may bring on adverse events.
- Tension among different clans or other kinship groups may complicate working relationships.
- Even within a community there may be differences in cultural beliefs and approaches, such as among different healers, Christians/non-Christians.

**4. What are some aspects of culture that can be incorporated into prevention efforts, such as brochures, billboards, PSAs and videos?**

- Using the Native language.
- Symbols: e.g., feathers, colors, circle, medicine wheel, four directions.
- Music.
- Involve community members, respected tribal leaders and celebrities.
- Photos of local vehicles, locations, and community members.
- Traditional crafts.

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### Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Carolyn Crump and Robert Letourneau of the University of North Carolina, who helped develop focus group materials for the IHS Injury Prevention Fellowship Program; and to many individuals who contributed to our knowledge and experience with focus groups, including Gordon Tsatoke, Amanda Parris, Jon Peabody, the Inter Tribal Council of Arizona, and the San Carlos Apache Police Department.