

# FOCUS GROUPS

## ...Helpful Tools for Strategic Prevention Planning

### Publication Description

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This publication includes three parts<sup>1</sup>: Part 1 provides background information about focus groups – what they are, the reasons to use them, and their advantages and disadvantages. Part 2 describes the process and strategies for conducting focus groups, recruiting focus group participants, ensuring participant attendance, facilitating well, and analyzing focus group data. Part 3 includes sample questions to utilize during focus groups.

## PART 1 – The Role of a Focus Group

### What is a Focus Group?

A focus group is a small number of people that reply to a set of predetermined, structured, open-ended questions. Researchers and evaluators use focus groups to obtain information about a specific topic. Facilitators select focus group participants as a sample to represent a larger population for data analysis.

### Reasons to Use Focus Groups

Surveys and statistical analyses provide information about how often something happens, where it happens, when it happens, how much of it happens, and other quantifiable features of an issue. Conversely, focus groups provide information about the qualitative elements of an issue – why something happens, what people think about an issue, and their personal experiences and opinions. Focus groups can be useful during any community assessment process to help identify problems, inform program and policy development to address those problems, and evaluate program and policy outcomes.



Whenever possible, use both qualitative and quantitative data to gain a complete perspective surrounding an issue. However, sometimes quantitative data is unavailable. For example, surveyors may merge survey results from several jurisdictions to preserve participant anonymity, which would eliminate the quantitative detail about each jurisdiction. In these cases, qualitative data may be the only data available. Focus groups can help provide the missing information. If focus groups are the main source of data, it is a best practice to implement several focus groups in different locations. If a significant amount of quantitative data already exists, implement fewer focus groups.

**Advantages and Disadvantages** – Focus groups involve a number of advantages and disadvantages that should be weighed. Exhibit 1 outlines some of these considerations.

<i>Exhibit 1. Focus Group Advantages and Disadvantages</i>	
<b>Advantages</b>	<b>Disadvantages</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus groups allow people to express personal perspectives on a variety of issues. Focus groups can be especially useful forums for those individuals who are not accurately represented in data, such as people who are disabled, marginalized, youth, elders, and similar populations.</li> <li>• Complex issues such as substance abuse can be examined in greater detail through open-ended and follow-up questions.</li> <li>• Focus groups provide personal testimonies for assessment and evaluation reports. Policymakers and stakeholders are more apt to respond to individual responses than statistics.</li> <li>• Focus groups are one of the least expensive formats of data collection.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Typically, focus groups have between six and twelve participants. With such a small representative sample, participant responses may not accurately represent the priority population or issue.</li> <li>• Outspoken people may dominate conversations or sway other participants' perspectives.</li> <li>• Focus groups generate a lot of information, making it challenging to analyze and form conclusions. Time and effort are required to transcribe and examine information accurately.</li> <li>• A focus group requires at least one trained facilitator; two facilitators are highly recommended.</li> <li>• The cost to implement focus groups may vary and can include participant stipends, food, refreshments, child care, transportation, and other related costs.</li> </ul>

## PART 2 – How to Conduct a Focus Group

### Identify the Appropriate Population

Before recruiting participants, it is important to first identify the population that will best reveal information about the specified topic. Is your topic underage drinking? Cannabis abuse? Prescription drug misuse? Consider the demographics of the people you want to include. What factors are relevant for the research: age, gender, geographic location, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, spoken language, etc.? If your topic is broad and complex – for example, alcohol use by high school students – consider conducting separate focus groups for males and females. Also, since substance use among teens is correlated with both gender and age, separate gender groups for different grades. Exhibit 2 provides further examples of demographic considerations.

### Recruit Focus Group Participants

Once the priority demographic is identified, locate survey participants. There are two common methods utilized to locate potential participants. One method is to find an individual who meets the participant requirements and ask them to recommend other participants. Continue to ask for recommendations until the appropriate number of participants is available. Community members, coalitions, nonprofits, county offices, and other stakeholder groups can provide referrals for potential participants. When recruiting by recommendation, it is important to inform the recommender of the project plan. Interview prospective participants to ensure that they meet the participant requirements.

Another method to recruit focus group participants is to visit communities consisting of people who illustrate the identified requirements. For example, if interested in exploring marijuana use by children of Vietnamese immigrants, consider going to a teen center, nonprofit agency, or service club that serves families of Vietnamese immigrants. To examine issues around prescription drug abuse by seniors, visit nursing homes, retirement homes, senior centers, or adult protective services.

### Encourage Participation

Once prospective focus group participants are identified, obtain their buy-in for participation. Strategies to encourage participation may include:

- Describe the entire focus group process to the prospective participant and clarify the participant roles and responsibilities.
- Explain how their participation will provide them an opportunity to have their opinions heard and benefit the community. People are usually more willing to join a focus group if they think their participation will make a difference.
- Make participation as easy as possible. Conduct group sessions in locations in the community of the participants. Provide transportation, translators, or child care, if needed.

### *Exhibit 2. Demographic Considerations*

Perhaps counterintuitively, the less diverse your group is the better. No teen, for example, can represent all teens. But 10 teens who are all female, all Latina, and all 17 years old, can give you a good idea about the thoughts, attitudes, and experiences of 17-year-old Latina females. Research indicates people are more likely to talk honestly about sensitive issues around the people they perceive to be most like themselves. It is also a best practice, whenever possible, to choose people who do not know each other. If participants know each other, they may avoid revealing sensitive information or conform to the views of others.



- Schedule focus groups at times people are available. For example, if the participants are working parents, schedule the focus group during the weekend. If the participants are teachers, schedule the focus group after school.
- Discuss confidentiality with prospective participants. Assure participants that the focus group is confidential and the focus group sponsor and facilitator will never use names when analyzing or reporting data.
- Provide incentives such as a meal during the focus group or gift certificates to movie theaters, gas stations, cafés, or grocery stores. While incentives encourage participation, people may view them as entitlements rather than rewards for participation.

### **Ensure Attendance at the Focus Group**

After recruiting participants, additional care should be taken to ensure they come to the focus group.

Strategies to promote attendance may include:

- When interviewing participants before a focus group, ask their preferred method of communication. Contact participants by phone, e-mail, text, private Facebook message, or reminder post card a couple of days before the focus group meeting.
- Explain to participants that receiving an incentive is contingent on their participation in the group.
- Consider recruiting 20% more participants than are required to prepare for “no-shows.”

### **Develop Questions and Timeframes**

Develop a set of 8-10 open-ended (rather than yes/no) questions that will address the topics and areas needed for the research. It is helpful to sequence the questions. First, begin with engagement-type questions that introduce the topic. Next, introduce exploratory questions that address the main topic. Finally, offer a closing question that gives people the chance to add additional information. For example, an introductory question in a focus group on underage drinking could be, “We hear that underage drinking is common here. Is that your experience?” Such a question invites people to talk about the issue without necessarily revealing any personal information. Later, ask more specific questions about the location at which youth obtain alcohol, the kinds of problems youth experience as a result of drinking, or the services that might help youth with drinking problems.

Decide the amount of time to devote to each question. Fewer questions allow more time for each question. Research suggests eight questions is an ideal number. Focus groups should not exceed 90 minutes. For a general sense of how much time to devote to each person’s answer, divide the total time allotted for the focus group by the number of questions, and then by the number of participants. For example, a 90-minute focus group ÷ 10 questions ÷ 9 participants = exactly one minute for each person to answer a question. This formula does not include time for introductory statements, closing statements, or spontaneous questions that arise from the conversation. Figuring out the necessary timing in advance can help decide the appropriate session length, the number of questions to ask, and the number of participants to invite to the session.

### **Prepare to Lead the Focus Group**

It takes a lot of preparation to conduct a successful focus group.

*Preliminary planning may include:*

- Choose a public location for the group that is neutral, safe, and easily accessible. Choose a location along public transportation routes, if possible. Meeting rooms in libraries or community centers are ideal. The meeting space should be comfortable and safe to encourage honest conversation without influencing participants’ responses. For example, a police department conference room may not be the ideal location for a youth focus group on underage drinking.

- While a focus group can be led by one facilitator, it is highly recommended to have two facilitators for the session. One can lead the group, ask questions, recognize the next speaker, and manage the discussion. The other facilitator can take detailed notes, keep time, and handle any housekeeping responsibilities. Decide the roles for each facilitator in advance.
- Determine ground rules for the focus group. Plan to share these rules with participants.
- It is highly recommended to record each session. Purchase recording equipment and plenty of batteries. Test the recording equipment to ensure it is working correctly.
- If participants are youth, develop parental consent forms and collect the consent forms prior to the focus group meeting.
- Purchase all the supplies needed for the focus group session. Useful supplies may include: notepads, pens/pencils, flip charts, markers, masking tape, name tags, time keeping equipment, recording devices, batteries, and refreshments.
- Develop the necessary forms needed, e.g., parental consent forms, demographic questionnaires, check-in sheets, name tags, and focus group questions.

*Prior to the beginning of the focus group:*

- Arrange chairs in a U-shape or circle, or seat everyone at one table, so participants can see one another.
- Place the recording devices among the participants, not next to the facilitators.
- Set out food and refreshments.
- Check people in as they arrive.
- If utilizing name tags, ask people to write their first names to protect confidentiality.
- Distribute necessary handouts, e.g., focus group questions and demographic questionnaires.
- Obtain participant permission to record the session before asking the first question. Assure participants that no one other than the facilitator(s) will listen to the recording.

### **Facilitate the Focus Group**

Focus group facilitation is a skill. Thoughtful facilitation leads to productive responses. Consider the following facilitation strategies:

*Set the tone.* Initially, the facilitator(s) and participants should introduce themselves. Introductory remarks should provide an overview of the focus group purpose, the role of the facilitator(s), how researchers will use the results, how long the group will last, the commitment to confidentiality, and the ground rules. Explain to participants that the focus group is an opportunity to express personal opinions, observations, thoughts, and experiences. It is not a forum to debate issues, solve problems, determine right from wrong, or make decisions about issues. Encourage contributions by telling participants they were selected to share their unique opinions. Inform participants that they are likely to hear views that differ from their own, and that hearing different views is one purpose of the focus group. Address basic ground rules and request additional input on ground rules from the participants.

*Facilitate wisely.* The facilitator(s) should always strive to be fair, encouraging, and neutral. Ask questions in the predetermined order. Invite and encourage participation. If someone has not spoken, feel free to personally invite their response. However, avoid using confrontational language or pressuring participants into responding if they have nothing to contribute. After asking a question, provide 5-10 seconds for a response before the next question. Use neutral language if a follow-up or probing question is needed. For example, “Can you say more about that?” or “Can you give us an example?” or “Does anyone else have any thoughts about this?” Similarly, respond to answers with a neutral tone to suggest all responses are equally interesting. Frequently nod and acknowledge responses while participants are talking to convey, “I’m listening” and

“Continue talking.” When people are finished talking, “Thanks!” is always a useful response. “Wow, that’s a great answer!” is not an effective response. If the facilitator replies to a participant this way, other participants may believe their responses are not as great, which may stifle their participation. Likewise, facilitators should not state their own opinions, show pleasure, or show displeasure with participants’ responses through body language, facial gestures, or tone of voice.

*Maintain order.* It is the facilitators’ job to handle different levels of participation: those who dominate the conversation, those who do not speak, those who ramble, and those who want to debate issues. To handle those who dominate the conversation, you can withdraw your eye contact and say something like, “Thanks, Bob. Let’s hear from others. How do the rest of you feel?” To help those who do not speak, make eye contact, smile, and call on them by name. To deal with people who ramble, wait for them to inhale and say, “Thanks, Bob. Now I’d like to hear from the rest of you,” before repeating the question. To be more assertive, you can say, “I’m sorry to interrupt you, Bob, but we are almost out of time, and I want to make sure everyone else has the chance to answer the question;” then repeat the question. To handle people who want to debate, remind them of the ground rules by saying, “This is a group where it is important to hear everyone’s opinion and not debate whose opinion is right or wrong.”

### After the Focus Group

If the focus group is recorded, transcribe and analyze participant responses. Transcribe the focus group session immediately to follow threads of conversations and identify who is speaking.

*Prepare the transcript.* The facilitators of the focus group should be the primary analysts. However, it is good to include at least one person who did not attend the focus group to review the transcript (not the recording) to ensure objectivity. Before sharing the transcript with an outside reviewer(s), proofread the transcript and remove nonessential words.

*Analyze the transcript.* Analysts should assess the focus group data independently. Look for key points, trends, surprises, common themes, and useful quotes. Track useful insights or quotes by grouping them into large categories. This can be done using a spreadsheet or table.

<b>Q. 5: Consequences of getting caught drinking on campus by school personnel</b>	<b>Summary:</b> Participants stated that although school personnel may catch students drinking at campus events, personnel usually "look the other way" and the consequences are nonexistent or minimal.
	<i>"A lot of kids drink before games. Sometimes they drink at the game, too. No one really cares."</i>
	<i>"You don't get in trouble for drinking at dances unless you're getting really rowdy or something. Then they just tell you to go home. They ask if someone's driving you, but you can lie and they don't check."</i>
	<i>"I've heard teachers say it's better for them [students] to drink at school events than somewhere else, where they might get into trouble."</i>

*Compare analyses.* Once independent analysis is complete, analysts should compare findings. If more than one focus group is conducted, it works best to share findings by question. For example, discuss responses to Question 1 for all focus group sessions before proceeding to the responses for Question 2. To identify a process to come to a final transcript, consider how the data will be used. Will the data help inform policy, create a new program, or develop a strategic plan? These decisions will help identify the most appropriate synthesis process for your team.

Utilize your focus group data. Synthesize these analyses into a report, strategic plan, or other document that captures the findings. Consider developing other materials, such as a press release or presentation, to share findings with the public. The focus group transcript will include useful quotes that illustrate problems or support conclusions from other data sources. The combination of qualitative and quantitative data is far more powerful than either by itself.

### PART 3 – Sample Questions

This section provides sample assessment and evaluation questions that can be used for focus groups. These sample questions assume that participants are youth and the questions address underage drinking and prescription drug abuse. The sample questions are adaptable to other demographic groups and substances and can be used for key informant interviews as well. Modify the questions to adhere to the assessment needs. **There are more sample questions than time will typically allow. Be selective about what questions are chosen.**



### Sample Questions for Assessing Underage Drinking

*The questions are adapted from:*

New Mexico Prevention. (2014). Focus Group Intro and Instruments. Santa Fe, NM: Office of Substance Abuse Prevention. Retrieved from [http://www.nmprevention.org/Project\\_Docs/Focus%20Group%20Intro%20&%20Instruments%202014.docx](http://www.nmprevention.org/Project_Docs/Focus%20Group%20Intro%20&%20Instruments%202014.docx)  
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1. *How common is it for youth to drink alcohol in your community?*
  - a. What do you think the average age is that youth start drinking in this area?
  - b. Describe the young people who drink. What about youth who don't drink? What are they like? Probe for different communities, age groups, gender, social groups ("jocks," "geeks," "nerds," or other social identifiers), and education level (high school, middle school, college).
2. *How hard do you think it is for youth to get alcohol in your community?*
  - a. How do youth in our community typically get alcohol? Probe for social sources (family members, friends, parties, and strangers) as well as retail sources (stores, bars, restaurants, and use of fake IDs).
  - b. Are some types of alcohol easier or cheaper to get than others?
3. *Where do youth usually drink here? Probe for known hotspots (homes, teen parties, family events, friends' homes, bars/restaurants, school, beyond town/city limits, while driving, on campus, etc.). Why do they like drinking there? Does the location matter if the youth are underage or not?*
4. *What kinds of problems do you see in youth who use alcohol in your community? (Examples include problems with school, family, the law, or friends; no problems.)*
5. *What generally happens when school personnel catch a student using alcohol on campus or at school-related events?*

- a. Do students get caught? Why or why not?
  - b. What are the consequences? Are they the same for everyone? Why or why not?
6. *What generally happens here when police catch underage youth drinking?*
- a. Do youth get arrested? Why or why not?
  - b. Do the people who provided the alcohol get arrested? Why or why not?
  - c. What happens when youth are caught drinking and driving? Do school officials respond differently to drinking and driving than law enforcement officials?
  - d. If the youth is under 18, does it change how likely they are to be arrested? Or, if the youth are older than 18 but still under 21, does that matter?
7. *Let's discuss young people who are not in school or college right now.*
- a. What do they do socially? What are their interests? What kinds of groups do they spend time with? (Examples include close family, workmates, groups based on race or gender, groups with shared interest in sports, etc.)
  - b. What makes life difficult for people who have not graduated from high school, or who have graduated but haven't gone on to college? Are they treated differently? How? By whom?
  - c. Who can young people count on when they are in trouble or have problems? (Examples may include friends, family, community leaders, mental health or social service providers, etc.) Why or why not?
  - d. How do young people who are not in school or college talk about your community?
  - e. What would be good ways to reach young people who are not in school or college to provide help or information? (Examples include Facebook, Twitter, or other social media, at work sites, at cafés, bars, or community centers; etc.)
8. *Some people claim that when teens are involved in school activities, they are less likely to drink. What do you think?*
9. *Some people claim that when teens are involved in their community, they are less likely to drink. What do you think?*
10. *Some people claim that when your friends drink, you are more likely to drink. What do you think?*
11. *Some people claim that what your parents think and how they feel about underage drinking affects how likely you are to drink. What do you think?*
12. *Tell us about resources that exist in your community to help protect people from having problems with alcohol. Are there certain places, people, organizations, or groups that offer help? Are there resources for teens and for young adults?*
13. *What do you think is the silliest thing adults try to do to prevent underage drinking?*



## Sample Questions for Assessing Prescription Drug Abuse

1. *How do young people learn about using prescription drugs for fun?*
  - a. Do youth typically know the difference between different types of prescription drugs (painkillers, sedatives, uppers, downers, etc.)? Or do they take any pills regardless of whether they know what kind they are?
  - b. How do young people think using prescription drugs will affect them? (Probe for how harmful or dangerous they think this is. Why?)
2. *How common is it for young people to use prescription drugs – recreationally or prescribed? (Probe for different age groups and communities.)*
3. *How do young people talk about prescription drugs? Do they name the medication or use other terms? What other terms are used?*
4. *Where do young people usually get prescription drugs they use recreationally? (Examples may include their doctor or dentist, family members, friends, dealers, or at parties.)*
5. *How hard is it for young people to get prescription drugs for recreational use? Are young people given the drugs voluntarily or do they take/steal them?*
6. *Why do young people use prescription drugs? Do people use them for medical reasons? Do they use them to relax, get high, or when they party?*
7. *How do young people use prescription drugs recreationally? (For example, do they combine medications? Do they use them with alcohol or with other drugs like meth, cocaine, or marijuana?)*
8. *Do high school students use prescription drugs differently from college students or from young people who are no longer in school? How is it different?*
9. *What kinds of prescription medications do young people use a lot or misuse here? (Examples may include Valium, Ritalin or other uppers, benzos or other downers, and other drugs. Probe for terms used and for different age groups and communities.)*
10. *What problems do you see in youth who misuse prescription drugs in your community? (Examples may include addiction; problems with school, family, the law, or friendships; no problems.)*
11. *What generally happens when a young person gets caught misusing prescription drugs? (Probe for different communities and age groups.)*
  - a. What are the consequences? Are they the same for everyone? Why or why not?
  - b. Do youth get referred somewhere for help (counseling, student assistance program, faith-based leaders, etc.)? Why or why not?
  - c. Do youth get arrested? Why or why not?
  - d. Do the people who provide youth with prescription drugs get caught and get in trouble? Why or why not?
  - e. Do you see any difference between what happens at school when someone is caught versus what happens in the community?

- f. Do you know if local high schools have a system in place for addressing prescription drug abuse? What about local colleges and universities? What do these systems look like?

12. *Let's discuss young people who are not in school or college right now.*

- a. What do they do socially? What are their interests? What kinds of groups do they spend time in? (Examples may include close family, workmates, groups based on race or gender, groups based on shared interest in sports, etc.)
- b. What makes life difficult for people who have not graduated from high school, or who have graduated but do not attend college? Are they treated differently? How? By whom?
- c. Who can young people count on when they're in trouble or have problems? (Examples include friends, family, community leaders, mental health or social service providers, etc.) Why or why not?
- d. How do young people who are not in school or college talk about your community?
- e. What would be good ways to reach young people who are not in school or college to provide help or information? (Examples may include Facebook, Twitter, or other social media, at work sites, at cafés, bars, or community centers, etc.)

13. *Tell us about resources that exist in this community to help protect people from having problems with prescription drugs. Are there certain places, people, organizations, or groups that provide help? Are there resources for teens and for young adults?*

### **Sample Questions for Evaluating Substance Use Disorder Prevention Policies or Programs**

Focus groups can help evaluate substance use disorder prevention programs. The following questions assume a focus on underage drinking, but these questions are equally applicable to other substances.

Note: Young people do not always know that they are “in” a program, or the name of the program. Fill in the blanks with something that young people will recognize – a description of the prevention program, the name of the person who leads it, the time of day/location where it was offered, etc.

1. *What changes have you noticed in yourself/others as a result of \_\_\_\_\_?*
  - a. Have you cut down on or eliminated drinking?
  - b. Has that been easy? What's been difficult about that? What's helped the most? What hasn't helped?
  - c. What's been the difference in your school work? Have you missed fewer days at school? Are you interested in any outside/afterschool activities that you weren't interested in before?
  - d. Are your relationships with your family/friends any different? How so?
2. *How available do you think alcohol is in your community? Do you notice any difference since the start of the program? (This question may be used to assess environmental efforts to reduce access to substances.)*
3. *What changes have you seen in your friends, classmates, or in the community at-large as a result of \_\_\_\_\_?*
4. *What do you think worked about \_\_\_\_\_?*

5. *What could we do to improve \_\_\_\_\_?*
  - a. Were there things we placed too much emphasis on?
  - b. Too little emphasis on?
  - c. Things we completely forgot to address?
6. *If you talked to friends or family about \_\_\_\_\_, what did you tell them? Would you recommend \_\_\_\_\_ to others? Why/Why not?*
7. *Imagine it is five years from now and you're looking back over your experiences with \_\_\_\_\_. What's one thing you think you'll remember?*
8. *If you needed support in the future around substance use, where would you go and who would you contact?*

## REFERENCES

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<sup>1</sup> Sources consulted for Parts 1 and 2:

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5. Education Development Center, Inc. (2004). Focus Groups. Retrieved December 12, 2016 from <https://www.oasas.ny.gov/prevention/needs/documents/FocusGroups.pdf>



**Community Prevention Initiative**

Toll-Free Phone: 1-877-568-4227

Website: [www.ca-cpi.org](http://www.ca-cpi.org)

**The Community Prevention Initiative (CPI)** provides no-cost technical assistance and training in **substance use disorder prevention**. CPI is administered by the [Center for Applied Research Solutions](#) and funded and directed by the [California Department of Health Care Services](#).