

Primary Data Collection Methods

Data is essential to understanding the prevention problems that may exist in our communities. It also helps us to determine which, if any, groups are experiencing poorer behavioral health outcomes, and to quantify the extent of these disparities. The more we learn about these populations, the more we can help identify those characteristics and situations that place members at higher risk for substance misuse, as well as those factors that might mitigate those risks.

Practitioners frequently engage in primary data collection efforts to better understand the needs of at-risk populations not captured in standardized surveys or surveillance systems. In the following pages, we provide a quick overview of three common data collection methods: interviews, focus groups, and surveys. When selecting a method, or combination of methods, think carefully about which to employ and understand that a one-size-fits-all approach to data collection is unlikely to reveal the critical needs of those populations most often underserved.



It is also important to involve members of these groups, from the start, in the data collection process, in making decisions about methodology, developing tools and questions, and in interpreting findings. The greater the involvement of community members, the greater the likelihood that data collection strategies and survey questions will reflect the culture and attitudes of the populations experiencing disparities.

INTERVIEWS

Interviews are structured conversations with specific individuals who have experience, knowledge, or understanding about a topic or issue about which you want to learn more. Relatively easy to prepare for and conduct, interviews offer practitioners the chance to find out how community members are thinking about an issue or situation. Interviews can be conducted in-person or by phone. The structure of the conversation is also somewhat flexible. Questions and topics can be added or omitted as needed.

Key informant interviews are conducted with select people who are in key positions and have specific areas of knowledge and experience. These can be useful for exploring specific problems and/or assessing a community's readiness to address those problems.



One-on-one community interviews, typically conducted by coalition members, tend to be less formal and offer excellent opportunities to build relationships, raise awareness, and inform community members about pressing problems and prevention efforts.

 INTERVIEW PROS	 INTERVIEW CONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low cost, assuming relatively few are conducted • Respondents define what is important • Have relatively short turnaround time • Make it possible to explore issues in depth • Offer opportunity to clarify responses through probes • Can be source of leads to other data sources and key informants • Have generally lower refusal rates • Offer opportunity to build partnerships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be time consuming to schedule • Require skilled and/or trained interviewers • Have limited generalizability • Produce limited quantitative data • Have potential for interviewer bias • May not be good for sensitive information unless rapport is established • May make it more difficult to summarize and analyze findings

FOCUS GROUPS

A focus group is a systematic way of collecting qualitative or descriptive data through small-group discussion. Focus group participants are chosen to represent a larger group of people from whom you want information. Through focus groups, practitioners can explore prevention related topics in depth and participants can share their unique perspectives.



Specifically, in focus groups prevention practitioners can ask participants questions that may be difficult for them to answer in writing and help them clarify their responses by asking follow-up questions. Focus groups create an opportunity for rich dialogue as participants build on one another's responses. They also generate narrative information that is compelling and easy to understand.

 FOCUS GROUP PROS	 FOCUS GROUP CONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relatively low cost • Have relatively short turnaround time • Participants define what is important • Offer some opportunity to explore issues in depth • Offer opportunity to clarify responses through probes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be time consuming to assemble groups • Produce limited quantitative data • Require trained facilitators • Offer less control over the process as compared to key informant interviews • Make it difficult to collect sensitive information • Have limited generalizability • May make it more difficult to summarize and analyze findings

SURVEYS

Surveys provide standardized data that is relatively easy to manage and can be compared to other surveys that use the same questions. They are beneficial in situations where you want to collect information across a large geographic area, hear from as many people as possible, and explore sensitive topics.

Survey modes of administration can include phone, paper (mailed), and online surveys. Phone and mailed surveys can be expensive and time consuming to implement. On the other hand, respondents may be more likely to respond honestly to questions presented in an anonymous, written survey than to those posed during a one-on-one interview. Online surveys are less expensive to administer but tend to yield lower response rates.

 SURVEY PROS	 SURVEY CONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be highly accurate • Can be highly reliable and valid • Allow for comparison with other/larger populations when items come from existing instruments • Generate quantitative data • Make it easy to summarize and analyze findings • Make it possible to add more sensitive questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relatively high cost • Take time to design, implement, clean, and analyze • Accuracy depends on who is surveyed and the size of the sample • Accuracy is limited to willing and reachable respondents • May have low response rates • Offer little opportunity to explore issues in depth • Questions cannot be clarified • Offer no opportunity to build rapport with respondents