

How to Gather Community Information

What Information to Gather:

The first step in deciding what information to gather from or about your community is to clearly define the questions you want answered.

Example Questions:

- *How much of a problem is targeted violence in our community?*
- *What gets in the way of people reporting their concerns?*
- *What does our community expect in a strategy to prevent targeted violence?*

How to Collect the Information:

Then decide *how* you'll collect the information and *who* will do it. Information to answer project outcome questions is typically gathered by assembling data that is already collected (such as **crime statistics** or **census data**) or collecting new data via **surveys**, **interviews**, and/or **focus groups**.

Existing crime data may be accessed locally through law enforcement. This may include information about how many calls law enforcement responds to that are linked to targeted violence (such as domestic violence, threatening behavior, stalking). You may also be interested in understanding more about how many mental health calls law enforcement is involved with that result in someone being detained because they are potentially a danger to others.

Census data can be accessed online through the Census Bureau website (data.census.gov). Very small communities may be part of a county dataset. Explore the site to see what you can find out about the people and characteristics of your community.

Choosing Between a Survey, a Focus Group, or an Interview:

Whether you choose to use surveys, interviews, or focus groups depends on what type of information you want to gather. Surveys are ideal for collecting quantifiable data (numbers) from a lot of people. Interviews with a few people provide rich insights into complex topics but are time-consuming and harder to generalize. Focus groups encourage discussion and reveal group dynamics but require skilled moderation. Use surveys for statistical trends, interviews for personal insights, and focus groups for collective perspectives.

1. **Surveys** are used to ask questions with fixed response options (as opposed to interviews and focus groups which use open-ended questions). Whom you survey will depend on the question(s) you would like to answer.
2. **Interviews** typically involve having an interviewer ask a pre-determined set of questions to gain more in-depth perspectives about a topic.
3. **Focus Groups** (Group Interviews) usually include no more than 12 people who

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respond to questions posed by someone who serves as the facilitator. The job of the facilitator is to keep the discussion focused so the questions are answered.

How to Design & Conduct a Survey:

Surveys are used to collect information from many individuals. Survey questions are less in-depth and generally require less time than an interview for the person responding. Surveys should take no longer than 15 minutes to complete.

Steps to Conduct a Survey:

1. Preparation:

- **Define Objectives:** Clearly outline why you are gathering the information.
- **Develop Questions:** Design questions that align with your objectives.
 - Write questions that are clear and easy to understand.
 - Write questions that ask only about one thing.
 - Place questions in an order that makes sense given what you would like to know.
 - » Place your most important questions first.
 - Test your questions
 - » Ask other people to read your questions and let you know if any questions are unclear or confusing.
 - » Ask your question testers what they believe a question means, to ensure your meaning is clear.
- **Good survey questions** are clear, specific, unbiased, and provide balanced answer choices. Use multiple-choice for quick responses, Likert scales¹ for opinions, and open-ended questions for detailed feedback.

Example Questions:

- *How likely are you to report a behavior that concerns you to the police?* (Likert scale)
- *What was the most valuable part of the training?* (Open-ended)
- *Which of the following services have you used?* (Multiple choice)

- **Format Survey:** Make your survey as user-friendly as possible.
 - Maintain consistent formatting of questions throughout the survey.
 - Use more spacing between questions than within questions.
 - Include instructions with the question rather than in the survey introduction.
 - Ask one question at a time.
 - Place questions with the same response categories one after another.
 - List answer categories vertically rather than horizontally.
 - Avoid drop-down display of answer categories (relevant for online/mobile, not paper).

1. A Likert Scale is a rating with anchors – for example, 1 to 5 with 1 anchored as Most important and 5 as Least important.

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- Maintain consistency in the direction scales are displayed. **Example:**

Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree
OR
Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree

- Minimize required questions – allow respondents to answer what they want to answer.
- Add a thank you at the end to those who took the time to complete the survey.
- **Select Survey Participants:** Determine what group could provide information relevant to what you want to know.

2. Plan Survey Distribution:

- **Determine Survey Method:** Use an online survey platform or paper surveys.
- **Decide Collection Procedures:** How will you get the survey to people?
 - If using an online survey:
 - » Distribute an online link by email or use a QR code to provide to people in person.
 - If using a paper survey:
 - » Distribute in person and allow enough time for people to complete the survey.
- **Determine Timing:** When will you conduct the survey?

- Consider the purpose of your survey and pick the timing that makes most sense.
- Build survey response time into your activity.
 - » If you're hosting an event, create time in the schedule for attendees to complete the survey.

HOT TIP: USE INCENTIVES

Everyone is busy, and it's easy to forget to take a survey, even with the best of intentions. Consider ways that you can incentivize participants to respond in a timely manner.

3. Conduct the Survey²:

- Follow your plan to collect the survey.

Ethical Considerations:

- **Confidentiality:** Surveys can often be collected anonymously. If this is not possible, protect the identity and information of survey respondents.
- **Voluntary Participation:** Ensure that participation is voluntary and that survey respondents can stop at any time.

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How to Design/Conduct an Interview:

An individual interview can take various forms. It could be a 10 minute conversation during an informal visit. It could also be a longer and more structured discussion using a series of questions on a particular topic. Interviews are used to get deep information about needs, perspectives, and experiences of individuals. Interviews are used to get a lot of information from a few people. Interviews are most useful when you are trying to understand differing perspectives.

Conducting an Effective Interview:

1. Preparation:

- **Define Objectives:** Clearly outline what information you want to gather.
- **Select Participants:** Choose individuals who can provide relevant insights.
- **Develop Questions:** Prepare open-ended questions to encourage detailed responses. (Start questions with how, what, or when. Avoid using “why” to start interview questions.)

2. Documentation:

- **Take Notes:** Record key points, quotes, and observations.
- **Seek Permission:** If recording the interview, ensure you have the interviewee's consent. Let them know how you will be using the recordings. For example, transcribing the

interview, taking notes from the recording, keeping the person's name separate from the recording.

3. Setting:

- **Choose a Comfortable Environment:** Ensure the location is safe and free from distractions.

4. Conducting the Interview:

- **Build Rapport:** Start with introductions to make the interviewee comfortable.
- **Provide an Overview:** Start with a quick overview and the reason for the interview.
- **Ask your Questions:** Ask questions and give the person time to answer.
- **Active Listening:** Pay close attention to the interviewee's words and non-verbal cues. Be comfortable with silence. Let the person know you are listening by nodding and maintaining appropriate eye contact.
- **Flexibility:** Allow the conversation to flow naturally, even if it diverges from your prepared questions.
- **Clarification:** Ask follow-up questions to gain deeper understanding.

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5. Closure:

- **Summarize:** Recap the main points to confirm understanding.
- **Express Gratitude:** Thank the interviewee for their time and insights.
- **Next Steps:** Inform them how their information will be used and any follow-up actions.

6. Ethical Considerations:

- **Confidentiality:** Protect the identity and information of interviewees.
- **Sensitivity:** Be aware of cultural norms and personal boundaries.
- **Voluntary Participation:** Ensure that participation is voluntary and that interviewees can withdraw at any time.

How to Design and Conduct a Focus Group (Group Interview):

A focus group usually includes 3-12 people invited to discuss specific topics in detail. One person serves as a facilitator for the group, asking questions and maintaining order in the group. The facilitator encourages discussion by asking participants to share their perspectives and experiences. Groups may include people who have something in common or who have different experiences. Sometimes group participants are simply convenient – for example, you may have access to everyone at a single meeting or event.

Steps to Conduct a Focus Group:

1. Planning:

- **Define Objectives:** Clearly state the purpose of the discussion.
- **Select Participants:** Choose a group relevant to the topic, typically 6-12 individuals.

- **Develop Questions:** Develop open-ended questions to guide discussion.

2. Documentation:

- **Record Key Points:** Take notes or record the session with consent.

3. Setting:

- **Venue Selection:** Choose a neutral, comfortable location free from distractions. Consider comfortable seating arrangements in a circle.

- **Timing:** Schedule a convenient time for participants and let them know in advance how long you expect the group to last.

4. Facilitation:

- **Introduce the Session:** Explain the purpose, process, and talk about confidentiality. You can ask participants to keep the group discussion confidential, but be clear that you cannot promise complete confidentiality, given the group setting.

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- **Encourage Participation:** Prompt all members to share their views. Some participants may be reluctant to talk while others may overshare or seem to dominate the conversation. Plan how you will manage this if it happens.
- **Set Ground Rules:** Forecast how you want the group to work. For example, you may decide you want to give everyone a chance to speak, or you may ask for a few volunteers to answer each question. Share your expectations that all members of the group treat one another with respect and politeness.
- **Ask Your Questions:** Ask follow-up questions to elicit detailed responses.
- **Review:** At the conclusion, the facilitator sums up the conversation and lets everyone know how you will be using the information.

Ethical Considerations:

- **Confidentiality:** Protect the identity and information of interviewees.
- **Sensitivity:** Be aware of cultural norms and personal boundaries.
- **Voluntary Participation:** Ensure that participation is voluntary and that interviewees can withdraw at any time.

GOOD FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS ARE OPEN- ENDED, CLEAR, AND ENCOURAGE DISCUSSION.

Examples:

- *What are your thoughts on [topic]?*
- *What challenges do you face with [issue]?*
- *How has your perception of [topic] changed?*
- *What improvements would you suggest?*

Avoid:

- Yes/no questions (*Did you like it?*)
- Leading questions (*Wasn't this helpful?*)
- Vague questions (*Tell me about your experience.*)

Reference:

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