

# Analyzing Interview and Focus Group Data for Reentry Program Evaluation

Interviews and focus groups can provide important information about reentry programs from the perspectives of participants and staff. This guide covers the basic steps to analyzing the qualitative data generated by these data collection methods.

## Step 1 Get to know the data by reading and rereading the transcripts and notes.



## Step 2 Organize the data.



Use qualitative software such as Atlas.ti, NVivo, or Dedoose to upload a large number of transcripts and notes. Use Microsoft Word or Excel to organize smaller amounts of data (e.g., from three participant focus groups or five stakeholder interviews). One way to organize data is by question. Put each question in bold at the top of a page or worksheet and cut and paste all participants' responses to that question below it.

## Step 3 Identify categories and themes in the transcripts and notes.

These are referred to as "codes." Choose codes in advance based on the evaluation research questions and prior evidence or see what ideas or themes emerge from reading the data. What common experiences, behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions do the interviewees discuss? Identify the most frequent themes and give them clear definitions. A list of these codes and their meanings is called a codebook. If a theme only comes up a small number of times or among a small number of individuals, it is not likely to become a code.

Sample Codes	Definitions
Poverty	A reentry participant describes challenging financial situations, including things like difficulty obtaining employment; paying bills; taking care of other needs like food, clothing, and childcare; or makes references to "poverty," "being poor," etc.
Substance Use	A reentry participant describes their own or someone else's substance use, including alcohol, illegal drugs, and misuse of prescription drugs.
Challenges to Implementation	A staff member or stakeholder discusses what has made running the program difficult or identifies barriers they have faced in their work, including things like staff turnover, insufficient resources, or the pandemic.
Screening and Assessment	A staff member or stakeholder discusses how or when reentry program participants are screened or assessed, what tools are used, when and by whom tools are administered, how the information is used, and the tools' helpfulness or limitations.

## Step 4 Go through all the transcripts and notes and apply the codes to the data.

Apply codes to relevant sections of text where themes are present. In Microsoft Word, use the “Insert Comment” function to select areas of text and write the appropriate codes in the comment box. Or use the “Highlight” function to color code sections of the text, with each color representing one code. (Add colors to the codebook.) If using Excel, make each code its own column and insert a “1” into the cell where the text meets the code. This allows for summing the number of times a code is applied, and for easy filtering by code to see all relevant excerpts for a specific code once the coding is complete.

Some text excerpts might have more than one code. Other sections might not need any codes at all. Not all data is interesting or needs to be coded. Sometimes an interviewer does not remember to **follow up**, or a participant provides limited responses. Do not “force” a code on these text excerpts. For example, the following passages would likely be left uncoded because there is not enough information provided to be interpretable or meaningful:

Interviewer: “What did you like most about participating in the substance use group?”

Participant: “I learned a lot.”

Interviewer: “What was helpful about the needs assessment you administered?”

Staff Member: “It gave us information.”

## Step 5 Develop themes and offer interpretations.

Look for similarities and differences within the codes (e.g., by staff role, participant age, gender) and for relationships between codes. Do some codes often appear together in the same text passages? What is the relationship between those codes? How are participants interpreting their experiences with reentry or with the program? What meaning do they give to these experiences? See below for an example on how to develop themes and interpret them

**Evaluator:** What have been some of the challenges these last two months since you returned to your community?

**Participant 1:** I'm not gonna lie. I don't have money for rent or my phone bill. Nobody wants to hire me because of my record. How am I supposed to survive?

**Participant 2:** Yeah, it's hard just to eat sometimes. I'm lucky 'cause there's a church nearby that gives free dinners every day, so I go there at night.

**Participant 3:** Rent in this city is crazy! Don't have a job, don't have money, it's hard not to turn back to the streets. My aunt sometimes lets me crash at her place though. When I'm at her house, I stay out of trouble, have a roof over my head, cousins there to talk to. I don't have to go do robberies.

### Codes

Poverty, Discrimination, Community Support, Law Breaking Behavior

### Interpretation

Poverty is one of the main challenges participants face when returning home. Often when they talk about poverty, they also mention receiving different forms of community support that help them survive in the face of economic hardship. Community support is also associated with a decrease in reported criminal behavior. Providing returning community members with housing, food, and space for peer interactions in the early months of their release may help reduce short-term recidivism.

## Step 6 Write up findings.

Summarize information within and across categories and themes. When synthesizing findings, choose good quotes to illustrate themes. Good quotes are directly relevant to the theme being described, without a lot of extraneous content.

### Strong analysis/quote relationship:

Participants felt that securing a job was a big challenge since returning home. They connected their inability to obtain legal employment with perceived discrimination based on criminal records.

*“Even though the background section is kind of scarce now—they said that they took it off applications—but in reality, I think they still do the background check because they want to know who’s going to work. And they see, ‘Oh, he’s got a robbery,’ and think twice. They go with the person that doesn’t have a record. You might have all the work experience, but you’ve got two felonies. He might have no work experience, but he doesn’t have any felonies, and they’re going to choose him.”*

### Weak analysis/quote relationship:

When asked about barriers to implementing the program, most staff members’ responses centered on a lack of resources—too few case managers, a limited food budget, and insufficient classroom space. One group facilitator stated:

*“The pandemic made things hard. How are participants and staff supposed to form relationships over Zoom? If we can’t interact in person, we can’t build trust, and they also don’t get the peer support they need.”*

Focus on writing up the findings that relate to the evaluation research questions and the purpose of the study. Conclude with next steps for reentry programs, practitioners, and policy makers that stem directly from the results. When appropriate, before finalizing, ask for community comments and input to ensure issues are correctly framed.

### For more resources on qualitative data analysis, see:

Glaser, B.G. & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine.

Newton Suter, W. (2012). *Qualitative Data, Analysis, and Design*. In *Introduction to Educational Research: A Critical Thinking Approach*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

Saldafia, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. London: Sage Publications.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.