

Focus Group Guide for Reentry Program Evaluations

What is a focus group?

A focus group gathers information on a topic of interest by bringing people together for a facilitated discussion. Reentry program staff may use focus groups to assess the needs and strengths of their population or to get feedback on intervention design. Evaluators of reentry programs may use focus groups to inform the development of data collection instruments, to get formative information, or to understand quantitative findings.

In a focus group, a moderator guides the discussion and encourages communication between participants. This interaction makes it different from individual interviews; participants get to hear and comment on each other's answers to questions, and the group environment may shape what participants say. This format generates new data that might not have surfaced in a series of one-on-one interviews.

This planning guide is for reentry program evaluators who want to collect focus group data from program staff, participants, or stakeholders as part of their evaluation, and for program staff who want to better get feedback from their participants. It provides information on focus group staffing, logistics, protocols, and tips for successful facilitation.

Sample focus group goals for reentry program staff and evaluators:

- Hear from families welcoming home a loved one about their needs and resources before developing activities to best support them
- Speak to potential participants about whether they'd prefer group or individual counseling and why
- Before a staff survey gets administered, assess whether the survey questions truly capture the concepts of interest
- Capture participant feedback on what's working well and what's not helpful regarding job training
- Understand what might be contributing to the gender differences in program graduation rates

Logistics

A focus group usually lasts **60-90 minutes** and includes from 6 to 10 participants. This group size allows time for everyone to share their insights while capturing different experiences and opinions. Ideally, focus group participants share characteristics that are valuable for answering research questions or providing feedback on how to improve the program. For example, suppose an outcome evaluation of a reentry program found that women have lower program success rates than others. In that case, the evaluator could bring together women participants in a focus group to shed light on what the barriers to successful participation were.

Staffing: There are two essential jobs during a focus group: a moderator and a note taker.



- The **moderator** leads the group from start to finish, keeping an eye on the time to ensure the conversation stays focused and all questions get answered in 60-90 minutes. The moderator stays mindful of group dynamics—encouraging participation and engagement from everyone, preventing anyone from dominating the discussion, asking for alternative viewpoints, and eliciting deeper responses. Moderators must have good listening and observation skills; be comfortable being assertive; and be ok with silence, allowing participants time to reflect and then add to the conversation.



- The **note taker** silently observes the group and takes notes on content and non-verbal communication. The note taker can also help with logistics, such as setting up food before the group begins and distributing compensation for their time once the group is over. The note taker can be on hand to help late arrivals integrate so as not to disrupt the flow of the group.

Logistics cont.

Time: It is essential to consider the best time and day of the week to host a focus group to maximize convenience for participants. The time may vary by group. If some program participants are in school during the weekday, a group can be scheduled in the evening or on the weekend. For those who have yet to connect to employment or school, a second group could be offered during the day. If program staff are amenable to allowing a focus group to occur during a time participants already meet—for example, during a regularly scheduled program timeslot—that often leads to higher attendance. When thinking about time of day, also account for what meal might be needed and factor time to eat into the overall schedule. For example, if the focus group is from 9:30-11:00 am, let participants know they can come at 9:15 for bagels and coffee before the group starts.

Location: Choose a location familiar to focus group participants, neutral, and non-threatening. The location should also be easily accessible—close to most participants' homes, near public transportation, or in a location where they are already present for some other purpose.

Seating and layout: The room where the focus group is held should be large enough to comfortably seat all participants, the moderator, and the note taker, with space for a food table. The room should be quiet so that external noises do not distract from the group and things said within the group cannot be heard by people outside of the room. (It is helpful if the moderator can see the space in advance to determine if it will be free of disruptions.) The moderator and note taker should arrive early to arrange chairs in a circle (around a table or with no table). The circle formation will help facilitate within-group discussion. The moderator should sit within the circle, but the note taker can sit outside of the circle. If participants agree to be recorded, place the recorder in the center of the room where it can capture everyone's voices.

Materials: On the day of the focus group, it is crucial to bring the following materials:



- **Focus group protocols** The moderator and the note taker will need a printed copy of the focus group protocol. A focus group protocol lists questions to be asked or topics to be covered. Moderators should familiarize themselves with the protocol in advance so they are not dependent on reading from it during the group.



- **Consent forms** Participation in research must be voluntary. For non-research focus groups run by program staff for informing program improvements, it is still a good idea to use a consent form that has these same items. A [consent form](#) will ensure participants' right to have all necessary information related to the purpose and nature of the study, the research protocol, and possible risks and benefits before deciding whether to join the focus group. Bring one copy of the consent form for the moderator and two for each participant (one for them to fill out and return and one for them to keep). Have pens available for people to use to sign the consent forms. Bring a large envelope or folder to keep all signed consent forms.



- **Audio recorder** Though there is a note taker, it is also an excellent idea to audio record the focus group if all participants consent to be recorded. This allows the moderator, note taker, or their colleagues to listen back later to capture anything they might have missed or pull direct quotes. Ensure that the audio recorder has space for a 90-minute recording and bring extra batteries in case the recorder dies before the group is over. If needed, the audio file can be transcribed prior to data analysis.



- **Laptop** The note taker will need a laptop computer to take notes, even if the focus group is audio recorded.



- **Compensation** It is considered ethical research practice to compensate participants for their time, but what this compensation is will vary by setting and funder. For example, if allowed, compensation for a 60-90-minute focus group in a detention facility might be money added to a participant's commissary. For a similar focus group in a community location, compensation might be cash or a gift card ranging from \$20-\$35 in value. If using gift cards, they should be for a place that is easily accessible in the community. For safety precautions, it is best to put compensation in individual envelopes ahead of time. After the focus group is complete, where applicable, the moderator or note taker can hand each participant an envelope without taking out large amounts of compensation at once.



- **Food** It is common to offer focus group participants a meal or snack before or after the group—something particularly encouraged if the group is held during a mealtime, such as after a workday when people might otherwise be having dinner. The moderator and note taker should get to the space early to set up the food table. Food that will be delivered should be ordered early and coordinated for delivery at the appropriate time. It is best if participants can eat the food relatively quickly and without utensils. Pre-cut bagels, pizza, or sandwiches fit these criteria. Reentry program staff may be able to offer guidance on what foods are most appropriate for cultural norms within the program target population. Napkins, plates, cups, and beverages are also needed. Those hosting focus groups must pay attention to any limitations on funding sources that may restrict grant funds being used for food.

Question protocol

A typical focus group protocol involves an **opening script** with key information about the group that the moderator conveys to the participants. It includes:

- ***Welcoming participants and introducing the moderator and note taker (and any other team members present), their roles, and which organizations they represent;**
- **†Providing a few sentences on the topic to be discussed, how the information collected will be used (e.g., to make improvements to the program), and why they were invited to participate (i.e., what made them eligible for the focus group); and**
- **§Outlining the ground rules for the group discussion. These rules should be things like one person speaks at a time, cell phones should be on silent and put away, there are no right or wrong answers and it's okay to have different opinions, participation is voluntary, and the group will last no more than 90 minutes.**

A sample opening script might look like this:

**Thank you for attending this focus group. My name is [moderator's name], I'll be facilitating today's discussion. This is [note taker's name], they'll be taking notes. We work for an organization in [location] called [name]. Our organization is evaluating [reentry program name], and we're here today to learn from you about your experiences in that program.*

†Specifically, we are trying to understand why some women in the program are dropping out or cannot complete the requirements and what supports they might need to help them successfully graduate. This information will help us make recommendations to [reentry program name] on how they might adapt future programming to be more responsive to women's needs. So, that's why we're here talking to you today!

†We invited you because you participated in this program and may have unique insights to share. We're running about five of these groups over the next month, so you're one of about 40 people we'll be talking to. We won't use anybody's name in our write-up; we'll summarize the main themes that we heard. The primary purpose of the focus group is to have an open discussion about what challenges you faced when participating in the program. §Some of your responses may be personal but remember that you don't have to answer any question you don't want to answer, and there are no right or wrong answers. The purpose is not for everyone to agree, so if you find yourself having something to say that is different from someone else in the group, please speak up. We want to hear from everyone. We ask that you be respectful, so if someone else is talking we ask that you don't talk over that person.

The focus group will run for about 90 minutes, and we'll be recording it so we can go back and listen to it later to make sure we capture everything you say. At the end of the group, we have \$25 for you as a thank-you for your participation. We'll have food and drinks at the end, too. Sound good? Okay, let's first start with introductions.

After the script, it is good to start with an **opening question** that is easy for participants to answer and gets them talking. Then the moderator moves into asking **critical questions** of the group that **help to answer the overarching research questions**. These are usually open-ended and ask participants about their experiences. These questions take up the bulk of the time of the focus group.

Many focus groups end with a **recommendations question**—e.g., “If you were to give two suggestions to the program staff about how to better support women in the program, what would those be?”—and a **final question that gives participants space to share anything that the moderator may have missed** but is important. At the end of the group, the moderator thanks everyone for coming and briefly reminds them of how the information they shared will (and will not) be used and shared.

When designing a focus group protocol, it is best to **avoid yes/no questions**. Instead, questions should get at context, experiences, perceptions, opinions, reasoning, and meaning. The moderator can ask **follow-up questions to elicit richer information**. It's best not to jump right into sensitive subjects.

Tips for successful facilitation

The moderator plays an essential role in making the focus group successful. Strong facilitation will maximize the amount of rich data that can be generated in a 60–90-minute group. Some key strategies include:

Building rapport

Building rapport with participants can be difficult but can help participants feel more comfortable sharing. Some suggestions for the moderator include:

- Being friendly as people enter the room.
- Addressing participants by name. The moderator should pay careful attention during introductions to capture everyone's name or write them down in the order the participants are sitting.
- Being patient. Participants may not have talked about these topics before and may need time to think about their responses or reflect on others' answers before speaking up.
- Incorporating humor where appropriate.
- Valuing each participant's contributions equally and without judgment.

Encouraging participation

Encouraging participation is an integral part of facilitating a focus group. This can be done non-verbally (e.g., nodding at participants) or through questions such as, "How do other people feel?"; "Has anyone had a different experience?" The moderator can also invite quieter participants to share (e.g., "Sam, what would you like to add?") or remind the group that it is important to hear from everyone.

Limiting digression & domination

Limiting digression and domination is essential. For the former, the moderator can jump in to say something like, "That sounds like an important topic and if we have time later, we can get back to it, but right now I'd like to return to my original question." For the latter, the moderator can interrupt the speaker, summarize their point, thank them for their input, and tell the group you want to hear from others.

Summary

Reentry programs can use focus groups to gather information to inform program development or refinement, and as part of their evaluation. Key things to remember are:



- The ideal focus group size is 6-10 participants.



- A moderator facilitates the conversation and keeps the group focused within the designated 60-90 minutes. They build rapport, encourage participation, and limit digression. A note taker captures the conversation and assists with logistics.



- The discussion is guided by a focus group protocol. The protocol includes an opening script and questions that capture context, experiences, perceptions, opinions, reasoning, and meaning to help answer the overall research questions. The moderator asks follow-up questions based on what participants say.



- It is critical that the time and location of the group be maximally convenient for participants. The room where the group is held should be quiet and private. Chairs can be set up in a circle to foster in-group discussion.



- Be sure to bring copies of focus group protocols, consent forms, an audio recorder, a laptop for taking notes, and compensation (if applicable). It is also common to provide food.