

Qualitative Interviewing for Reentry Program Evaluation

Collecting qualitative data through interviews or focus groups can help reentry program evaluators gain insight into staff and participant experiences in, perceptions of, and feelings about the programs with which they are involved.



Interviewers and focus group moderators need good listening, interpersonal, and observation skills to ask questions that elicit the richest data.



Avoiding these common pitfalls will help ensure that you collect rich, valid, and interpretable data.



Making Assumptions

Don't assume you know what a participant means. Ask them to clarify terms, phrases, or feelings.



Anticipating

Avoid anticipating how a participant will answer by offering up what you think they might say or suggesting answers.



Asking Leading Questions

Questions that prompt a participant to respond in a specific way result in biased answers that may eclipse the participant's real feelings.



Not Following Up

You're looking for stories—specific information on what, where, when, why, and how. Ask for more details.



Talking Too Much

Remember: This interview is about the participant, not you! It's ok to share things to build rapport and trust, but keep it short.



Judging Answers

Judging responses ("great answer," "that's not right," "really interesting") can unintentionally discourage honest answers.



Rushing Through Questions

Questions about incarceration experiences or returning home may be difficult. Give a participant time to think and respond.



Paraphrasing

If the interview isn't recorded, avoid paraphrasing participant responses in interview notes, as that could change the meaning.



Not Being Flexible

It's ok to be skip around the question protocol sometimes. If a participant just disclosed trauma, you may want to be sensitive to what you ask next.

An interview or focus group protocol will have essential items that help you answer your overarching research questions, but it is important to ask follow-up questions when participants respond. Below are some sample questions probing for more details about what participants have already raised. They focus on form; an interviewer or focus group moderator would adapt the content for the specific context of their interview.

General follow-up questions

"Can you say more?"
"Talk to me about that."
"How does that work?"
"When would that happen?"

"How did that make you feel?"
"Why do you think that is?"
"What effect did that have on you?"
"How did you respond when that happened?"

"Can you think of other reasons?"
"What makes you say that?"

Questions about typical experiences or specific examples

"Can you walk me through a typical day in the reentry program, from when you arrive to when you leave?"
"When would you typically offer that form of counseling to a participant?"
"Can you share some experiences you've had looking for a job since you've been home?"

"Can you give an example of how you've used the things taught in job training?"
"Can you tell me what happened the last time you asked your supervisor for a smaller caseload?"

Clarification questions

"Can you explain what you mean when you say you were 'caught lacking'?"
"When you say the staff was 'helpful,' how did they help you?"

"Is 'the rooms' the phrase you use for 12-step meetings?"
"When you say that the group facilitator cared, what gave you that impression?"
"How was it overwhelming?"
"You said that the program participants are very diverse. Can you tell me a little more about that diversity?"