Gathering Information from People in Your Community

Key Informant Interviews

What are key informant interviews?
Key informant interviews are one-on-one conversations with people who have special knowledge of and/or experience with an issue, population, or community. They may be highly or loosely structured or unstructured. The interviewer uses open-ended questions and probing to obtain the information needed. This type of interview generally lasts up to one hour.

Who should be interviewed?
In developing a local suicide prevention program, you would include people who know the needs of the audience you are trying to reach. They might include:
- Community leaders
- Government officials
- Program directors in community-based organizations
- Health and mental health care providers
- School staff
- Suicide attempt and loss survivors
- Representatives of the key racial/ethnic groups in the community

What are the advantages of key informant interviews?
- You can obtain information from people working directly with the issue or in the community.
- The respondents can determine what is important.
- You can ask questions as they fit with the flow of the interview.
- It is possible to explore issues in depth and understand complex issues.
- You can learn about gaps in services and programs and generate ideas for developing new ones.
- There are opportunities to clarify responses through asking further questions.
- They can add to or clarify information gathered from surveys, focus groups, and other data sources.
- The information obtained is readily understandable and may include compelling quotes.
- The process is fairly simple to set up and less expensive than focus groups or surveys.

What are the disadvantages of key informant interviews?
- It may be time-consuming to arrange interviews with people who are busy.
- Only a small number of people can be reached, compared to other methods of collecting information.
- The information gathered may be hard to summarize and not generalizable beyond that situation.
- Key informants may have biases or personal agendas and may try to move the interview to benefit their own interests.
- Interviewers may have biases that keep them from taking in information that contradicts their views.

For more information on key informant interviews:
Focus Groups

What are focus groups?
Focus groups are small-group discussions led by a trained facilitator who guides the group to increasing focus and depth on an issue. Group participants are encouraged to share their opinions and respond to other members’ opinions as well as to the facilitator’s questions. Focus groups are generally conducted in 1½ to 2 hours.

Who should be members of the group?
Focus groups should be comprised of people who have an interest in the issue to be explored. They are selected to represent a larger group about whom you want information, i.e., your target audience. For example, in developing a local suicide prevention program for parents you might conduct a focus group with 10 parents from the local community.

What are the advantages of focus groups?
- You can obtain information on needs and opinions from members of the target audience.
- The interaction of the participants can stimulate richer responses and enable new ideas to come out.
- You can ask questions as they fit with the flow of the discussion.
- It is possible to explore issues in depth.
- There are opportunities to clarify responses through asking further questions.
- You can observe group interactions and non-verbal communications.
- They can add to or clarify information gathered from surveys.
- They can identify issues for additional follow-up.
- The information obtained is readily understandable and may include compelling quotes.

What are the disadvantages of focus groups?
- It can be time-consuming to set up the group(s).
- They require trained facilitators, some of whom may need to be paid.
- The group(s) may not represent a random sample of the population.
- It may be difficult to get participants to talk openly, especially if the issue is sensitive.
- Some participants may feel pressured by others to agree with their opinions.
- The facilitator has less control over the process than an interviewer with one individual.
- The information gathered may be hard to summarize and not generalizable beyond the specific situation.

For more information on focus groups:
Surveys

What is a survey?
A survey is a method of collecting information that represents the views or needs of a whole community or group. Surveys use a standard tool, such as a questionnaire, to collect information from members of the community or group. They are usually administered in written form and can be distributed by e-mail, a website, or mail. However, they are sometimes conducted in person or on the phone with the questions being read to each person so that the questions remain the same. Surveys vary in length depending on the topic and audience, but in general the longer they are the less likely people will be to do them at all or complete them.

Who should be surveyed?
Surveys are usually given to a sample of the members of a community or group, unless the group is small enough to realistically survey everyone. Participants must be chosen carefully to ensure that they accurately represent the views or needs of the community or group. The sources for more information listed below describe some methods for choosing a sample.

What are the advantages of surveys?
- You can collect information from large numbers of people.
- They provide quantitative data.
- The results can be statistically valid and highly reliable.
- They allow for comparisons with other large populations when the same questions are administered in the same way.
- With written surveys, the respondents can remain completely anonymous and respond at their convenience.
- They avoid interviewer bias that can occur with key informant interviews and focus groups.

What are the disadvantages of surveys?
- The response rate is often low.
- Intensive follow-up may be needed to obtain responses.
- They require expertise and can take a long time to design, implement, and analyze the results.
- The accuracy depends on who is sampled and how many people.
- Participants can skip sections.
- There is little opportunity for alternative expression of responses or exploring issues in depth.

For more information on surveys:

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Additional Resources


