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## **Focus Groups**

**A Valuable Tool for  
Public Policy**

*By Joel Cohen*

**FEBRUARY 2000**

**CRB Note, Vol. 7 No. 1**

C A L I F O R N I A      R E S E A R C H      B U R E A U

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## INTRODUCTION

Focus groups are used widely in market and political campaign research (especially in initiative campaigns) and are thought to provide important insights. They have not been used broadly for policy research, however, and may offer a promising means for gaining useful information. This paper provides (1) a general overview of how focus groups are conducted, (2) a discussion of a recent series of focus groups of school children that explored safety issues, and (3) some policy issues that might benefit from focus group research.

Focus groups are a very popular and effective means of exploratory, qualitative research. Their main purpose is to generate ideas, not numbers. In private industry, focus groups help to draw out subtle, complex aspects of the relationship between the user and the product, service, advertising or sales effort. In government, focus groups can provide insight into the relationship between citizens and policies, programs or services. Focus groups can also elicit evidence of problems and concerns. In both cases, focus groups give a “feel” for the individual user’s thought process. This is especially important in government, where certain constituencies generally do not provide opinions and insight during the public comment process. These constituencies can include the young and the sick.

A focus group is a small group interview in a relaxed and non-threatening environment. It brings together six to 12 targeted users to discuss issues and concerns about the features of a service or policy. The group typically lasts about one to two hours and is run by one or more than one moderator who maintains the group's attention.

Focus groups often elicit users' spontaneous reactions and ideas. In addition, people can discuss how they perform activities that span many days or weeks, something that is expensive to observe directly.<sup>1</sup> However, focus groups can only assess what users say they do and not the way they actually operate a product, or interact with a service.

The purpose of focus groups in policy analysis is to gain a better

- understanding about people’s knowledge regarding the existence of certain services
- analysis of the reasons people use a certain service
- view on proposed legislation, codes, and/or regulations
- insight into the “everyperson” opinions on services and environments.

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<sup>1</sup> Anecdotal evidence is useful in understanding why certain actions occur.

## **CONDUCTING A POLICY DISCUSSION FOCUS GROUP**

The process of conducting a policy discussion focus group can be broken into eight steps:

1. Define Research Objectives
2. Select a Sample
3. Choose an Effective Moderator or Moderators
4. Choose a Suitable Site
5. Prepare for the Discussion
6. Moderate the Discussion
7. Provide Thank You Gifts
8. Write the Report

### **1. Define Research Objectives**

The first step is to identify the convener's expectations of the focus group. This includes analyzing the marketing, policy, administrative or technical problems that need to be addressed. Specifically, what key issues are the focus group being convened to discuss. The convener then defines the group's objective so that it will shed light on these issues. The objective should be as specific as possible. For example, if a government agency or official wants to analyze a specific service, focus groups could be used:

- to gain reaction to different, yet similar services
- to identify unmet service needs
- to find out if services are needed
- to gain ideas about how service needs might be met.

Each of these objectives would require a separate focus group, because each group addresses only a limited range of issues.

### **2. Select a Sample**

Focus groups are composed of a sample of six to 12 people. More than 12 people are hard to control in a focus group situation. The sample should contain diverse, representative members of the target market. Different groups bring unique experiences and views, so careful selection is very important. For example, homeowners would respond to real property tax issues differently than renters. Teenage athletes would respond differently to issues regarding athletic field conditions than non-athletes. In addition, certain groups of people should not be mixed. For example, employers, direct supervisors, or people who may exert influence over the opinions of others should not be present.

In choosing the actual participants, it is important to reconfirm that the participants fit the sample. For example, when the California Research Bureau (CRB) convened focus groups

to discuss school safety issues, students that did not fit the category of “average”<sup>2</sup> were asked to leave the group. High achieving and disaffected students generally did not hold representative views.

### **3. Choose an Experienced and Effective Moderator**

The moderator is the most important member of an effective focus group. It is critical that the moderator remain neutral during the discussion. The moderator must have excellent communication skills, be well trained in psychology, have experience and a good knowledge of the service at issue, and be able to lead and control the conversation in a subtle manner. An experienced moderator can also encourage a spirit of group cooperation that may bring forth ideas that go beyond the questions and comments.

For participants, the focus group should feel free-flowing and relatively unstructured. However the moderator must follow a preplanned script with specific issues and goals for the type of information to be gathered. During the focus group, the moderator has the difficult job of keeping the discussion on track without inhibiting the flow of ideas and comments. The moderator also must ensure that all group members contribute to the discussion, and must avoid letting any one participant’s opinions dominate.

Interested parties may observe some focus groups, but this must be carefully done. For example, if children are participating in the focus group, parents, teachers and school officials should not observe. Observers may be extended an opportunity by the moderator to forward questions to the group.

### **4. Choose a Suitable Site**

Focus groups may be informal and take place in a lounge or living room situation, or may be formal and take place in a meeting room. Either way, the room should be well lit, and the room should not have any furnishings that may distract the participants.

### **5. Prepare for the Session**

The moderator prepares a script that determines the exact order of questioning. Questions should move from general issues to specific issues, so that no biases are introduced early in the process. Group participants must first introduce new topics. For example, if questions were used to address school safety and security, the moderator would wait until a participant used a term (such as “rape”) before asking for more detail. In addition, the moderator may ask participants to define their terms to ensure that everyone understands the usage of the word.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Average students in this frame refers to students who do not participate in school leadership (academic, scholastic, or sports) positions or attend the equivalent of honors or advanced placement courses.

<sup>3</sup> If the participants define a term incorrectly, but the group agrees to its definition (i.e., a gang is merely a social organization), the moderator does not rectify the situation by explaining the correct usage.

## 6. The Meeting

- If possible, serve light foods and refreshments prior to beginning a focus group. Food usually encourages a positive mood and informal interaction among participants prior to the beginning of the focus group.



- The moderator should introduce him/herself and explain the purpose of the group. It is important to create a trusting and discreet environment by stressing that what is presented or discussed in the focus group will remain confidential. Information from the group will only be reported in an anonymous fashion. In addition, the participants are asked to not discuss the contents of the focus group once the session is over.
- The moderator asks for names and information about the participants to encourage familiarity. Topics that adults might discuss include marital status, children, vacations, and employment. Topics children might discuss include school day activities, siblings, hobbies, ambitions, and sports.
- The moderator reconfirms the demographics that should form the group with the participants. For example, if a focus group is to reach stay-at-home mothers, an opening question might be, “Does anyone here work outside the house?”
- The moderator asks general questions to initiate the conversation, and works towards specific issues. One approach is to ask specific questions and have participants write down their answers. Another approach is to distribute pages on which the questions are already written. In either case, when everyone has written their answers, the issue is opened for discussion. (Sometimes, participants write the answer to the verbal or written question after the discussion.)
- Young children can be asked to draw a picture instead of writing an answer to a question.
- The moderator’s role is to ensure that everyone's thoughts are revealed and that no one exercises undue influence in the group. The moderator should be part of the group, but move the flow of conversation evenly around the group allowing everyone to express their feelings. Sometimes a person dominates the conversation and must be quieted down and asked to allow others to speak, or (in severe instances) removed in order to eliminate a potential bias in the results.
- In order to keep the moderator’s attention focused on the discussion, focus groups can be video- or audiotaped for record-keeping purposes. Children’s focus groups in particular are audiotaped. Important quotes or subjects that are discussed can be

written down. However, participants tend to think that a moderator who writes too much is not paying attention to participant comments.

## **7. Thank You Gifts**

It is customary for focus group participants to receive a small gift or gratuity. Adults generally receive money (\$15 to \$40). Children may be given a tee shirt, movie pass, or entrance to a fun educational activity. Adults and children receive their gratuity immediately after the focus group. If children are in school, the gratuity should be given out at the end of the school day if possible. However, state government prohibits distributing gratuities. In the school safety and security focus groups discussed below, the moderators provided small food treats to the children.

## **8. Analyze and Write the Report**

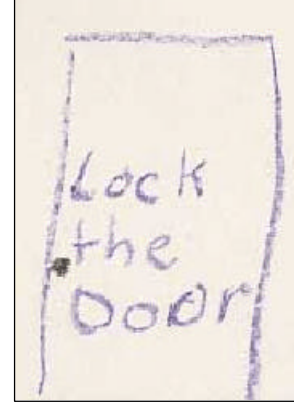
After the session, data analysis can be as simple as having the moderator write a short report summarizing the prevailing mood of the group, illustrated with a few colorful quotes. The pictures drawn or painted by young children can provide vivid examples. The moderator can also write a more detailed analysis, but the unstructured nature of the group may make this difficult and time-consuming.





## THE SCHOOL SAFETY AND SECURITY FOCUS GROUPS

As part of a larger project for the School Prevention Violence and Response Task Force, the California Research Bureau and the Office of Criminal Justice and Planning (OCJP) held 20 focus groups in Sacramento, San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Diego, and the “Inland Empire” over a month’s period. Students in second, sixth, eighth, and twelfth grades participated. Using the general guidelines presented above, this section will discuss how these focus groups were conducted and will report some interesting findings.



### 1. Define Research Objectives

The Task Force was interested in exploring the following questions:

- “Do students feel safe in their schools, and on the way to and from school?”
- “Does feeling unsafe in school make it harder to learn?”

### 2. Select a Sample

The focus groups were selected to represent urban and suburban school districts in various parts of the state. School administrators were asked to select average students to participate. The parameters for rejection included

- students in school leadership (academic, scholastic, or sports) positions
- students attending the equivalent of honors or advanced placement courses.

### 3. Choose an Experienced and Effective Moderator

CRB’s experienced moderator led some groups and trained two research staff to assist in conducting other focus groups. While this situation was not ideal, a full training program was not available due to the short time frame.

### 4. Choose a Suitable Site

The focus groups were conducted on school campuses to encourage the participants to feel at ease. The rooms where the focus groups were conducted included classrooms, band practice rooms, libraries, teachers’ lounges, and counseling rooms.

Almost all of the rooms used for the focus groups had conference tables. In one case, the students sat in sofas around a room. Close proximity was important as the focus groups were audiotaped<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Audio receiving microphones have a limited range. It is important to measure the distance of the participants from the microphones to assure adequate sound quality.

## 5. Prepare for the Session

CRB and OCJP staff composed a patterned opening conversation and substantive questions for the focus groups. The opening discussion included topics on school and after-school interests, hobbies and sports. The questions for second graders were:

- What is your school day like?
- What is it like getting to and from school?
- What do you like/dislike about your school?
- Do you have any worries or concerns about school – before, during or after?
- “How do you see your school? Please draw a picture.”

The questions for sixth, eighth and twelfth graders were:

- What do you like/dislike about your school?
- If you could change some things about your school, what would they be?
- What do you worry about concerning school – before, during and after?
- Are there places in the school that you avoid? If so, why?
- Which of your concerns about school makes it harder to learn?
- Does feeling unsafe in your school day make it harder to learn?

## 6. The Meeting

Prior to beginning the opening conversation, participants were asked to write their first names on a folded paper. This provided an “icebreaker” activity and permitted the moderators to address the participants by name during the discussion.<sup>5</sup> The lead moderator introduced the other moderators, discussed the purpose of the focus group, and thanked the children for participating.

Once the participants were comfortable, the moderator initiated the opening conversation and then moved to the prepared questions. Participants were asked questions in either a clockwise or counter-clockwise pattern around the table, to ensure that everyone in the room joined in.

The focus groups drew memorable quotes. These particular statements were made by the students when asked, “What do you dislike about school?”

- “Knowing every morning that I will be harassed at school...because of my skin color.”
- “When you try to answer a question in a classroom [but answer incorrectly] your classmates will laugh at you, you don’t know it but try”
- “Bullies...”
- “Some teachers don’t like to teach.”
- “They never take the time to notice the good students—always the bad students... they should have an assembly to [acknowledge] the good students.”

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<sup>5</sup> Participants appreciate the familiarity.

- “The administration...is on a power trip...the rules at this school are useless.”

The students were asked, “What do you worry about concerning school—before, during and after?” This question elicited the following responses:

- “I’m in a foster home, they say my mother smokes crack and that hurts my feelings...people say not to believe me because I am not telling the truth.”
- “On my way home from school, I pass homes that have pit bulls. These homes have low fences and they leave their dogs out.”
- “...at school my cousin got bit by a dog because he was helping a teacher ... a guy let his dog loose, and the dog attacked my cousin.”
- “The security guards make their own rules...”
- “Last week a teacher cut my hair...for no reason.”
- “I would go to my friends first if I had a safety problem...the security guards would stop them and then me ...it is screwed up.”
- “Off campus police are roaming like flies...like cockroaches...they have nothing better to do than give tickets to jaywalkers and skateboarders.”

Finally, the students were asked, “Are there places that you avoid?” They gave the following answers:

- “I don’t go to the bathroom because there was a boy waiting for me ... he was trying to choke me, I punched him in the nose, he was bleeding, ... I got scared of that.”
- “A lot of girls say things about you and in the bathroom they will chase you.”
- “The girls’ shower room...I was in the girls’ locker room, and I was changing, and a male janitor was there... then I stood up and looked and saw him... he was looking and I thought oh my god...I felt so violated.”



## 8. Analysis and Report

Analysis of the students’ responses raises several main themes. For example, second and sixth graders discussed concerns about fighting and bullying. Twelfth graders discussed conflicts with security personnel. Sixth and eighth graders discussed graffiti in the bathrooms. These themes can be the basis for policy recommendations.

## **SELECTED ISSUES AND POLICIES SUITABLE FOR FOCUS GROUPS**

As demonstrated above, focus groups can contribute to better understanding of a variety of public policy issues. In fact, there are few arenas in which a focus group would not help illumine an underlying issue. The following issues are particularly relevant to current policy concerns. To explore these options please contact the author.

### **Human Services**

- Discuss with teenage mothers what services they need to stay in high school
- Discuss with homeless families the types of services they need to thrive and become stable
- Discuss with foster care children what they need to improve their lives
- Discuss with employers whether additional training is necessary to integrate welfare recipients into the workforce

### **Innovation in Government**

- Discuss with Department of Motor Vehicle clerks how to improve productivity and eliminate redundant activities
- Discuss with Department of General Services repair staff how to keep building interiors in better condition
- Discuss with small business owners the issues and obstacles they believe relate to business regulations and tax policy

### **Education**

- Conduct focus groups with students prior to a curriculum being adopted
- Discuss with children what services or activities might be provided to increase physical fitness and health
- Discuss with low-income parents who live in low performing school districts educational options for their children

### **Environment and Recreation**

- Discuss the need for recreational equipment and activities targeted at teenage girls or boys
- Obtain feedback on municipal recycling programs
- Discuss rodent control issues with farmers