Focus Groups

An Important Tool for Strategic Planning

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T A B L E O F C O N T E N T S

ENDNOTES

Introduction

Focus groups techniques—also called “focused group discussions” or “user groups”—were developed after World War II to evaluate audience response to radio programs[1]. A focus group is a qualitative research process designed to elicit opinions, attitudes, beliefs and perceptions from individuals to gain insights and information about a specific topic.

In strategic planning, focus groups serve a variety of purposes, which are to:

- Identify crime victims’ most salient needs and concerns.

  While victims’ issues vary considerably, focus groups can elicit input from similar types of victims (i.e., domestic violence, sexual assault, etc.), a range of victims, and/or community- and system-based service providers, justice professionals, and allied professionals about the major needs of victims.

- Seek input from a variety of stakeholders about victims’ rights and services.

  The “range” of stakeholders—which is addressed later in this document—includes virtually *anyone* who is concerned about personal and community safety, and justice policy and practices, and should reflect the diversity of clients and communities served.

- Identify strengths and gaps in public policy, victim assistance programming, victim services, and collaborative efforts that seek to benefit victims.

  A good focus group discussion guide will provoke input and insights into how victims are best *identified* and *served* through policy, programs and practices.

- Provide a foundation for *quantitative research*.

  The design of focus groups can lead to findings that help create quantitative research instruments and processes, such as the development of victim-related surveys or needs assessment processes

- Contribute to the development of a strategic plan that identifies strengths in victims' rights and services and builds upon them; and identifies gaps in victims' rights and services and seeks to fill them.

  In a number of states, focus group findings have contributed significantly to strategic plan processes, as well as to the development of statewide and organizational strategic plans.

What Are Focus Groups?

A focus group could be defined as a group of interacting individuals having some common interest or characteristics, brought together by a moderator, who uses the group and its interactions as a way to gain information about a specific or focused issue[2].

Unlike the *one-way* flow of information in a one-on-one interview, focus groups generate data through the "give and take" of group discussion. Listening as people share and compare their different points of view provides a wealth of information—not just about *what they think*, but *why they think the way they do*.[3]

What Focus Groups *Can* Tell You

✓ Give information about how groups of people think or feel about a particular topic.

✓ Give greater insights into why certain opinions are held.

✓ Help improve the planning and design of new programs.

✓ Provide a means of evaluating existing programs.

✓ Produce insights for developing strategies for outreach.[4]

What Focus Groups *Cannot* Tell You

✓ Valid information about individuals.

✓ Valid "before and after" information (how things have changed over time).

✓ Information that you can apply generally to other groups of people.[5]

Characteristics of Focus Groups

Group Size

The research on focus groups generally recommends six to twelve participants as optimum for impact. Some statewide strategic planning initiatives for victim services have conducted focus groups with up to 20 participants; however, the larger the size of the group, the more difficult the group interactions are to manage.

Length of Group Discussion

Most focus groups encompass 90 minutes to three hours of discussion. If focus group sessions are longer, it is necessary to build in breaks to allow participants time to relax and refresh.

Group Participants

In traditional focus groups, participants are randomly chosen in a manner that seeks homogeneity among participants, in order to elicit opinions from a "like" representative group (for example, *all community-based victim service providers*). Depending upon the focus group goals, sponsors may wish to:

- Seek complete homogeneity in participants.

- Seek variety in participants based upon how their backgrounds, insights, perspectives and diversity by culture, gender and geography will contribute to goals and outcomes.

- Conduct simultaneous focus groups where two different groups of participants (each group's participants alike, but *different* from the other group, i.e., a group of crime victims and a group of judges) respond to the *same* discussion guide questions, then are brought together to share responses and provide further opportunities for a combined group discussion.

Focus group participants traditionally do *not* know each other while, for the purposes of victim services strategic planning, many participants *will* know each other. This adds a challenge for sponsors to prevent participants from coming with a preconceived agenda, and for the group facilitator to prevent participants from clustering together or trying to dominate group discussions.

A decision to participate in a focus group is sometimes dependent upon whether or not strict confidentiality is offered to *all* participants. Focus group sponsors should be clear about confidentiality guidelines and restrictions, and document such restrictions in writing.

When to Conduct a Focus Group

Consideration should be given to *maximizing participation*, while *minimizing inconvenience* for potential participants. For this reason, most focus groups are conducted between Monday and Thursday in evening hours (usually between 6:00 p.m. and 9:00 p.m.). For brief, community-level focus groups, the lunch hour can also be appropriate.

In addition, there may be excellent opportunities at scheduled conferences and other public forums to schedule and conduct focus groups. Coordination with the forum sponsors includes:

- Seeking participant lists.
- Scheduling the session to avoid competing with other conference activities.
- Securing a room site.
- Inviting participants.
- Additional logistics (highlighted later).

Planning for a Focus Group

Establish Focus Group Goals

The focus group process must include the development of clear and measurable goals. While these are useful tools for focus group sponsors, they are *also* essential for participants to understand why they are being asked to participate in a focus group session.

For example, focus group goals for a statewide strategic planning process might include the following:

- Identify strengths and gaps in services to crime victims in (state).
- Identify strengths and gaps in state laws and agency policies that guide the provision of victim services in (state).
- Document specific victim case examples of the implementation of victims' statutory and/or constitutional rights in accordance with law.
- Elicit participants' opinions about how to improve the implementation of victims' rights and provision of victim services in (state).
- Identify crime victims who are un-served or underserved.

Focus group goals should be provided to participants in advance of the actual session, and posted on the wall (or presented to participants as a handout) at the actual session.

It is helpful to allow participants the opportunity to *add to* the stated goals based upon their unique perspectives.

Select a Focus Group Facilitator

The focus group facilitator is critical to the success of the entire process. S/he must function as a neutral leader who can also serve as a "referee," if needed, during the group process.

- **Neutrality:** pragmatic and able to offer a detached look at the discussion, viewing each point on its merits; encourages feedback and discussion of key points raised by all members of the group; and remains neutral to the discussion, which frees the facilitator to concentrate on the group, rather than the content of the discussion. For these reasons, *the facilitator should not supervise or work directly with any participants*.

- **Leadership:** coordinates the establishment of clear ground rules; provides a focus for and direction to the group discussion; stimulates constructive discussions among members; brings out information from introverted members of the group, and allows new ideas to be submitted; provides gentle guidance to participants who may dominate the group; and addresses any concerns or issues participants raise that may affect the quality and flow of the group discussion.

- **Referee:** maintains order of the group discussion; discourages participants from talking at the same time, or dominating the discussion; protects members to ensure that all contributions to the discussion are treated equally and that nobody is criticized for his/her input; and deals with "problem participants" whose behavior may have a detrimental impact on the overall group process.[6]

Focus Group Facilitation: *Personal Skills and Qualities*

- ✓ **Knowledge of issues:** While the facilitator need not be "expert" in victim issues, s/he should be familiar with the dynamics of the field and of victimization in general (including victim trauma); and familiar with the goals of the overall strategic planning project.

- ✓ **Independence:** Able to separate him/herself from the topics at hand, maintain complete objectivity, and have no "hidden agendas" that will affect the outcomes.

- ✓ **Strong communication skills:** Clear, concise, honest, trustworthy, and able to relate to a variety of opinions without showing preferences.

- ✓ **Strong group dynamics skills**: Able to engage intense group discussions and encourage all members to participate, while maintaining a flow that keeps with the stated agenda.

- ✓ **Cultural competence**: Is skilled and comfortable facilitating individuals who represent diverse cultures (as well as gender, age, geography and dis/ability).

- ✓ **Flexibility:** Willing to freely follow group discussion and permit relevant diversions, if needed, to accommodate participants' input and ideas.

- ✓ **Perception:** Able to "read between the lines" of participants' comments, and offer probes to elicit further discussions.

- ✓ **Patience:** Capable of letting individuals complete their verbalizations without rushing them, and allowing time for reflection between questions.

- ✓ **Respect:** For the diversity of participants, as well as the diversity of their opinions and input.

Co-facilitation is a good idea for strategic planning focus groups:

- ■ One facilitator serves as the "lead" who guides the overall focus group process and discussions.
- ■ A co-facilitator maintains responsibility for recording participant feedback on tear sheets, and/or through audio or video recording; and responding to any participants' needs related to comfort (including possible emotional responses; need for breaks; room temperature, etc.)

Effective Interviewing Techniques

Effective focus group interview techniques require skill in *four key* areas:

- Listening.
- Paraphrasing.
- Probing.
- Note taking.

Sample "effective interviewing techniques" are included on page 22.

Managing Group Interactions

In contrast to individual interviews, people in groups start interacting with each other according to the different roles with which they are most comfortable. This more closely simulates what they do in the real world, where they rarely act in isolation. Focus group participants may become:

■ Leaders. ■ Innovators. ■ Late. ■ Submissives. ■ Explicators. ■ Complicators. ■ Questioners. ■ Speculators. ■ Fragmenters. ■ Persuaders. ■ "Assistant facilitators"	■ Dominators. ■ Early adopters. ■ Gadflies. ■ Supporters. ■ Simplifiers. ■ Investigators. ■ Integrators. ■ Distractors. ■ Emotionalists. ■ Adopters. ■ Laggards.[7]

The facilitator must be aware of the potential for participants to exhibit such behaviors, as well as prepared to respond to them in order to maximize the potential of group interactions.

What to Watch For in Focus Groups

■ Verbalizations: what they are saying. ■ Meanings: what they actually mean. ■ Language. ■ Vocabulary or jargon. ■ Level. ■ Emphatic quotes. ■ Classes, concepts, categories. ■ Degree of formality. ■ Non-verbals. ■ Omissions (what people are not saying). ■ Abstractions. ■ New concepts. ■ Examples or stories. ■ Contradictions (between thoughts and feelings, statements and examples). ■ Explanations (yours and theirs). ■ Hypotheses. ■ Implications.	■ Generalizations and principles. ■ Values. ■ Fundamental beliefs. ■ Relationships (interpersonal, conceptual, logical, emotional, cause and effect). ■ Emotional reactions (enthusiasm, joy, excitement, perking up of interest, low energy, anger, fear, curiosity, changes in emotional tone). ■ Patterns (intellectual, emotional, behavioral, inter-group, cause and effect, etc.). ■ Roles and what people do with them. ■ Degree of consensus and/or agreement. ■ Different points of view. ■ Evaluative criteria. ■ Influence patterns. ■ Opinion shifts. ■ Persuasion flow.[8]

Developing the Focus Group Agenda

A typical agenda will include the following:

- Introduction of focus group sponsors and facilitator(s).
- Introduction of participants.
- Overview of strategic planning project and focus group goals (with software presentation, tear sheets, and/or individual handouts), and allowing participants to contribute to these goals.
- Overview of group process (including discussion guide, any individual work sheets, etc.).
- Group establishment of ground rules (a sample is included in the Section II Tools).
- Questions and answers.

Develop the Focus Group Discussion Guide and Related Resources

The focus group discussion guide is highly dependent upon overall strategic planing goals, as well as the goals of the focus group (see "Establish Focus Group Goals" above). To the degree possible, any data that have been received relevant to the overall strategic planning goals should be incorporated in the development of the discussion guide.

"In a focus group of ten participants, it is helpful to plan for no more than three questions (including facilitator probes) for every one hour of the group process."

The guide can be developed in a variety of ways, including any or a combination of the following:

- Draft developed by hired consultants for review and revision by the project sponsors.
- Draft developed by project sponsors for review by a governing or advisory body.
- Draft developed by project sponsors for review and revision in conjunction with the focus group facilitator(s).
- Draft developed by project sponsors for specific review by designated persons (i.e., by researchers for efficacy of the questions, or by crime victims for the sensitivity or wording of the questions).

In a focus group of ten participants, it is helpful to plan for *no more than three questions* (*including facilitator probes)* for every *one hour* of the group process.

What Types of Questions Should Be Asked in a Focus Group?

Questions should be open-ended so that there are *many possible replies*. Short-answer questions, such as those that can be answered "yes" or "no," should be avoided. It is also important to avoid leading questions that suggest the facilitator's opinion or the answer that s/he hopes to receive. Questions should also be:

- Clearly formulated and easily understood.
- Neutral so that the formulation does *not* influence the answer.
- Carefully sequenced with easier, general questions preceding more difficult ones.
- Ordered so that less intimate topics precede the more personal questions.[9]

Questions can be developed to elicit responses related to participants':

- Personal experiences.
- Personal behaviors.
- Knowledge.
- Opinions.
- Values or mores.
- Diversity based upon their gender, culture, geography, and/or life experiences.
- Feelings or beliefs.
- Sensory perceptions.

"Probes" can (and should) also be incorporated for each question in the discussion guide. Typical probes attempt to elicit further analytic thought, perceptions or facts from participants (such as "Tell me more about that;" "Does anyone else have a comment to offer?;" or "When you described the provision of victim assistance, which specific services are you talking about?"). Probes can be structured directly into the discussion guide, or offered by the facilitator in the actual course of discussion.

Individual Work Sheets

A non-traditional measure to collect as much data as possible from a focus group is the use of *individual work sheets*. Recognizing that some participants may speak too much, while others may refrain from joining in discussions, individual work sheets can be developed so that *every* participant can record his/her views prior to the full group discussion. This can be a useful technique for:

- *Participants*, who can take two-to-three minutes to collect their thoughts and record them for further reference.

- *The facilitator*, who can gain additional insights and input from allowing time for thoughtful reflection.

- *Project sponsors*, who can collect the individual work sheets and use them as helpful data for review when the focus group is completed.

Individual work sheets should be printed on colored paper for easy identification and access by participants.

A sample focus group discussion guide and participant work sheets are highlighted beginning on page 25.

Select Focus Group Participants

The goals and purpose of the focus group will determine whom to invite. In selecting focus group participants, the following considerations are helpful:

- Seek diversity by age, gender, culture, sexual orientation, geography, profession, and/or education level.

- Do *not* select participants who will tell you "what you *want* to hear," but rather those who will tell you "what they think you *need* to hear."

- Utilize professional networks to identify participants who are appropriate, who will be candid, and who have relevant information to contribute to the process.

- Do not share participant lists with focus group participants *in advance* of the session (to avoid opportunities for advance preparation that might skew results).

- For focus groups of victims and survivors:
  - Select a *totally homogeneous* group (i.e., all domestic violence victims, or all victims of juvenile offenders); or
  - Select a *random mix* of victims, taking caution to ensure that there is variety without a majority of the same category of victimization.
  - Ensure that the group facilitator or another on-site professional is skilled in victim trauma and related mental health issues to provide support, as needed and upon request.

Potential Focus Group Participants for Statewide Strategic Planning

■ Crime victims. ■ Community-based victim service ■ providers. ■ System-based victim service ■ providers. ■ Criminal and juvenile justice ■ professionals. ■ Law enforcement. ■ Prosecutors. ■ Court administrators. ■ Judges. ■ Defense attorneys. ■ Probation. ■ Parole. ■ Corrections. ■ Appellate level representatives. ■ Inter-faith community representatives. ■ Mental health professionals. ■ Medical professionals.	■ Representatives of organizations that meet the needs of culturally diverse populations. ■ School representatives. ■ Social services. ■ Housing services. ■ Employment services. ■ Transportation services. ■ Neighborhood associations and groups. ■ Academicians. ■ Civic leaders. ■ Public policy makers (local and state). ■ Executive branch representatives (state). ■ Funding sources (public and private). ■ Others?

Focus Group Logistics: Advance Preparation

Determine Location for Focus Group

The focus group site should be centrally located to participants, and preferably accessible by public transportation with adequate parking (including parking for participants with disabilities). If the session is to be held after work hours, efforts should be made to provide easy access to the room in which the focus group will be held.

The room should be large enough to accommodate all participants without “squeezing them in,” and should be accessible to participants with disabilities. The most effective room setup is tables set up in a “horseshoe” with the facilitator at the “open end” of the horseshoe, and chairs set up around the perimeter of the room for any observers (such as program sponsors).

Arrange for Audio/visual Equipment

Typical audio/visual equipment includes:

- Tear sheet pads and multiple colored felt pens.
- Overhead projector or LCD equipment and screen (for any presentation of goals, etc.).
- Audio or video recording equipment (including adequate number of tapes and batteries).
- Laptop computers to record notations from the discussion.

Arrange for Specific Needs of Participants

Some participants may need assistance in meeting specific needs, which can include:

- Accommodations for persons with mobility access needs.
- Sign language interpreters for participants who are deaf.
- Interpreters for participants who speak a language other than English.
- A non-participating support person (which should be allowed for *any* victim/survivor who requests it).

Arrange for Participant Resources

It is always helpful to provide funding to cover participants' costs for participating, such as mileage or parking fees.

On-site resources include, but are not limited to:

- Pads of paper.
- Pens or pencils.
- Name tags.
- Name plates on card stock.
- Boxes of tissues.
- Refreshments (water and coffee at a minimum; if the group is conducted during lunch or dinner hours, a light buffet or boxed meal prior to the session is a good idea).
- Individual work sheets (if applicable).

Invite and Confirm Focus Group Participants

Focus group participants should receive an invitation to participate by mail or electronic mail *at least one month prior to the session*. To secure 12 participants, a potential list of 20 participants should be developed.

The participant information/invitation should include the following:

- Information about the sponsors.
- Role of the focus group in the overall strategic planning process.
- Goals of the focus group.
- Any guidelines related to confidentiality.
- Projected size of the group.
- Projected length of the focus group.
- Information about the facilitator.
- Day/date/time/location of the group (including clear directions and instructions for parking).
- Any remuneration offered to participants.
- Any refreshments/meals that will be provided to participants.
- How to confirm participation and/or contact information for further information.

A sample letter of invitation to a focus group is included on page 29.

Conduct a "Pilot Test" of the Focus Group

If time and resources permit, it is a good idea to "pilot test" a focus group. This can help project sponsors adjust their goals, expectations, agenda and discussion guide, if needed.

A pilot test can include informal feedback from participants—either on-site or in a follow-on survey or telephone interview—to elicit feedback about the process and their participation. Then appropriate revisions, if needed, can be made prior to conducting further focus groups for strategic planning.

Focus Group Logistics: On-site Preparation

The focus group sponsors and facilitator(s) should arrive *at least ninety minutes* in advance of the scheduled beginning of the session. On-site preparation includes:

- Opening the room.
- Setting up the room (i.e., tables, chairs, agendas, participant resources, etc.).
- Setting up name plates to facilitate the most effective discussion.
- Setting up audiovisual aids.
- Checking room temperature.
- Setting up a registration table outside the room.
- Preparing any refreshments.
- Identifying location of restrooms and telephones.

In addition, it's a good idea for the project sponsors and facilitator(s) to review their respective expectations, as well as the discussion guide and related focus group resources, during this on-site preparation period.

The project sponsors and facilitator(s) should:

- Personally greet each participant and thank him/her for coming.
- Ask them to sign in.
- Provide them with a name tag and show them where their name plate is (and ask them to avoid moving name plates to another position).

The facilitator(s) should also record observations about participant demographics, including:

- Gender.
- Culture.
- Profession (if applicable).
- Type of victimization (if applicable).
- Geography.
- Disability.

Conducting the Focus Group

The focus group should attempt, at all costs, to *begin* and *end* on time. If any participants are late, it's a good idea to ask *all* participants for permission for any delay in the process.

The focus group agenda (see above) should be reviewed and precisely followed, including the *group development of shared ground rules*. Participants may have questions that need to be answered about:

- The overall strategic planning process.
- The context of the focus group within the overall process (including other focus groups that may be conducted).
- Whether or not focus group discussions are *confidential* (i.e., individuals will not be directly identified with their input).
- How focus group findings will be compiled.
- Whether or not (and how) focus group findings will be shared with the group participants.

Appropriate time should be allotted for agenda review and a question/answer period.

Focus group participants should also be aware of *how* the discussion will be documented, which can include either or a combination of the following:

- Recording on tear sheets (with co-facilitator confirmation of participant responses following each question).
- Audiotaping with written transcriptions.
- Videotaping with written transcriptions.
- Computer laptop summary of discussions.

The Project sponsors may wish to seek written authorization for audio or video taping of the focus group session from each participant.

Useful Facilitator Tips

1. The discussion guide is intended to be simply that: a *guide*. If participant discussions are lively and enlightening, feel free to diverge from the guide and follow their lead.

2. "Facilitator probes" are intended to prompt discussion. While it is not necessary to utilize *all* probes, they are helpful to the Project sponsors in obtaining specific information for the final report.

3. Try to involve all participants in discussions, and avoid letting any one participant dominate the discussion. Comments like "we haven't heard from ________ yet on this topic; do you have any ideas you'd like to share with the group" and "thanks for that insight; why don't we let others respond?" are helpful to accomplish this goal.

4. Carefully word each question and allow enough time for anyone who wants to respond to do so without feeling pressured.

5. The principal facilitator should reflect or summarize participant responses following each question, with confirmation of any responses that are recorded on tear sheets (see *Section II Tools*, "Interviewing Techniques").

6. For tear sheets:

- Ask participants to stop you at any time if what you have written does *not* accurately reflect their comments.
- Don't worry about using too much paper!
- Number each page on the *top right-hand corner*.
- Record the topic being discussed on the top of each page (you can fill these out in advance or at breaks if you so desire).
- Write on the charts in letters that are *at least two inches tall*.
- For each discussion topic, use *two* markers, alternating colors with each sentence that is recorded, i.e. brown and blue.
- When you switch topics, *switch your two marker colors* (this makes it easier to identify topics for reports-back, as well as for the report writer), i.e. black and purple for one topic, brown and blue for the next.
- Use red and orange markers *only for underlining or emphasis*!
- Have lots of masking tape torn into hanging-size pieces and, if possible, hang each sheet on the wall after it is completed.

7. If, at any time, participants appear to be tired, take a break!

Closing the Focus Group Session

If the focus group session appears to need more time, make sure that participants are given the opportunity to agree or disagree to extending their stay. Upon completion of the focus group discussion:

- Ask participants if they have any final thoughts or input.
- Thank each of them for participating.
- If agreed to in advance, confirm when and how participants will receive a summary of the focus group findings.
- Determine a monitor who can ensure that all participants make it safely to their cars or to public transportation.
- Follow-on with thank you notes to participants, and provide information about if/how they will receive findings from the focus group.

Developing the Focus Group Report

While a variety of data will comprise the focus group report, it is helpful for the facilitator(s) to immediately write down any observations s/he had about the group, such as:

- Nature of the participation of group members.
- Generalizations about group interactions.
- Any perceived consensus obtained among group members.
- Any surprises or unanticipated outcomes from the session.

With co-facilitators, the opportunity to share observations can be equated to a *debriefing*.

Data Analysis

The data can include: transcripts from audio or video tape recordings; summaries of participant discussions on tear sheets; information from individual participant work sheets; computer laptop summaries of the discussion; and facilitators' immediate recorded observations.

> *"The process of data analysis must be systematic... and verifiable..."*

Analysis should begin by going back to the intent of the project or study. The process of data analysis must be systematic (following a prescribed, sequential flow) and verifiable (another person would come to a similar conclusion using the available documents and the raw data). Ideally the facilitator(s) should also do the analysis. A sequence of analysis may incorporate the following format:

- The process begins immediately during pre-session small talk by observing levels of familiarity among participants.

- Immediately after the session, the facilitators should “spot check” the recording equipment to make sure it worked. If tape cannot be salvaged, the facilitators should reconstruct the discussion immediately, and tape record this debriefing (utilizing tear sheets and/or individual participant work sheets for guidance).

- The facilitators write down summary comments and listen to the complete tape to write a more complete summary of the discussion. The written summary should be prepared within hours after the session and before the next focus group. Facilitators should compare notes, share observations, and talk about participant responses to key questions.

- The facilitators should arrive at a short summary that is mutually agreeable. *Field notes* should capture information about:

– Any changes in the list of questions.
– Participant characteristics.
– Descriptive phrases or words used by participants as they discussed the key questions.
– Themes in the responses to the key questions.
– Sub-themes indicating a point of view held by participants with common characteristics.
– Description of participant enthusiasm.
– Consistency among participant comments and their reported behaviors.
– Body language.
– New avenues of questioning that should be considered in the future: Should questions be revised, eliminated, added, etc.?
– Overall mood of the discussion.

- The process then continues by gathering together brief summary reports, tape recordings, a list of questions or a copy of the discussion guide, demographic information and, if available, transcripts of the discussion.

- All summaries should be read at one sitting. Notes should be made of *potential trends and patterns*.

- Each transcript should be carefully read (if there are no transcripts, then the report writer should listen to the tapes of the discussions).

- During the second reading through the transcripts, sections that directly relate to each question in the discussion guide should be marked.

- When conducting data analysis, consideration should be given to five factors:
  - *Words:* Actual words and meanings of the words should be determined. One might make frequency counts of commonly-used words, and cluster similar concepts together.
  - *Context:* Examine the context of words by finding the triggering stimulus and then interpret the comment in light of that context.
  - *Internal consistency:* Trace a flow of conversation and note changes or even reverses of position after interactions with others.
  - *Specificity of responses:* Responses that are specific and based upon experiences should be given more weight than responses that are vague and impersonal.
  - Greater weight should be given to responses in first person rather than third person hypothetical answers.
  - *Find the big ideas:* Look for trends or ideas that cut across the entire discussion.[10]

Reporting

Data can be examined and reported at three levels, including:

- *The raw data* that present statements as they were said by respondents. These data might be ordered or categorized by natural levels or themes in the topic.

- *Descriptive statements* that summarize respondents' comments and provide illustrative examples using the raw data. Decisions must be made as to which quotations to include.

- *Interpretation*, which is the most complex. Interpretation builds on the descriptive process by providing or presenting meaning of the data, rather than simply summarizing the data. In giving meaning to the descriptions, one should be reflective about one's own biases in interpretation.[11]

Compiling the Report

The project sponsors and facilitators should have a clear understanding about the type of report that is to be produced, including data analysis, reporting procedures, and format. A typical focus group summary report includes:

- Cover page with title of the project and/or focus group, project sponsors, report authors, and date of submission.
- Table of contents with key sections referenced by page.
- Focus group methodology (including focus group goals; how and by whom the discussion guide and related participant resources were developed; participant selection, number of participants, and final demographic characteristics of participants; date, time, location and length of the focus group; and summary qualifications of the facilitators/authors).
- Summary report (which usually follows the focus group discussion guide questions sequentially).
- Appendices (such as a copy of the discussion guide, copies of individual work sheets, etc.).

If a summary report involves data from more than one focus group, the same information should be provided separately for each group.

Additional focus group resources follow, including:

- Effective interviewing techniques.
- Sample ground rules.
- Sample discussion guide.
- Sample individual work sheets.
- Sample invitation letter to focus group participants.

Effective Interviewing Techniques

Listening

- Sit or stand still where you are.
- Listen with your eyes as well as your ears—look at the speaker.
- Listen for basic facts and main ideas.
- Listen for attitudes, opinions, or beliefs.
- Do not interrupt the speaker.
- Use positive, non-verbal communication to prompt the speaker.
    - Be aware of the speaker's non-verbal communication.

Paraphrasing

- Repeat your understanding of their comments in your own words.
- Ask the speaker if that is correct, and for any clarifications.
- Make sure key points by each speaker are captured.
- Ask questions as a check to verify understanding.

Probing Questions

In order to gain additional insights into the process, use some of the following types of probing questions:

- *Open probe:* Questions that begin with "how, what, which, when, and who." These are effective to encourage responsiveness and reduce defensiveness.
- *Compare and contrast:* Questions that ask the other person to look for and discuss similarities or differences. These types of questions help the responder to develop and express ideas, while allowing the interviewer to steer the direction of the interview.
- *Extension:* A question that builds on information already provided.
- Clarification: Questions designed to get further explanation about something already said.
- *Laundry List:* Techniques where the interviewer provides a list of choice options to the interviewee. This encourages the other person to see beyond a single choice and to state a preference.
- *Supposing:* Any question that allows the individual to fantasize or explore an alternative reality by giving themselves a different viewpoint or perspective.

Note Taking

It is important to capture the information from the focus group interview as accurately as possible. The interviews should be conducted in pairs, with one person asking questions, and the other focused on taking accurate notes of the group discussion.

Sources: Basch, C.E. (1987). “Focus Group Interview: An Underutilized Research Technique for Improving Theory and Practice in Health Education.” *Health Education Quarterly*, (14(4):411-448.—and—Krueger, R.A. (1988). Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Sample Ground Rules for a Focus Group

Participants expect you to take care of them during your time as their facilitator. Although they may not admit it, most participants appreciate structure and rules, particularly to insure that you meet your commitments to them. Your discussion of rules and schedules can encourage harmonious working relationships, build enthusiasm, and build commitment.

These ground rules and schedules are a contract between you and the participants; don't establish any rules/procedures you aren't willing to follow yourself. Time frames are important—start on time, end on time, and always seek permission from participants when agreed-upon time schedules are not met).

Traditional ground rules might include:

- All ideas have value.
- It is important for everyone to participate, and it is helpful if individuals don't *over-participate* at the expense of others.
- Respect others' opinions, even if you do not share them!
- Participants will ask for clarification if instructions for activities are not clear.
- Participants will inform facilitators when they need a break.
- Please turn cell phones off for the duration of the session or put on vibrate.
- Participants' comfort needs (such as room temperature, need for refreshments, etc.) should be identified to the facilitator(s).
- If the agreed-upon schedule needs to be adapted, participants will be asked for their input.
- Others from the participants?

It is important to allow participants the opportunity to revise and/or add to the ground rules to ensure their “buy-in” as well as compliance.

Adapted from: Seymour, A. (1999). The Ultimate Educator. Washington, D.C.: Victims' Assistance Legal Organization and Office for Victims of Crime, U.S. Department of Justice.

Sample Focus Group Discussion Guide*

1. To the best of your knowledge, what are the core rights that victims are entitled to by *statutory* or *constitutional* laws in our state?

   PROVIDE INDIVIDUAL WORK SHEET #1 AND ALLOW PARTICIPANTS 2-3 MINUTES TO RECORD THEIR RESPONSES; LATER, COLLECT INDIVIDUAL WORK SHEETS.

2. If a person was victimized by a violent crime in (our state), how easy would it be for him or her to receive information about their rights as a victim?

   PROBES:

- What are the core rights victims should be aware of *(FOR FACILITATOR REFERENCE ONLY: notification, restitution, participation, protection, compensation, information and referrals, etc.)*?
- Who *would currently* provide information about their rights?
- Who *should* provide information about their rights?

1. If a person was victimized by a violent crime in (our state), how easy would it be for him or her to identify and access available services to help them?

   PROBES:

- Who *would* provide information about available services?
- Who *should* provide information about available services?

   PROVIDE INDIVIDUAL WORK SHEET # 2 AND ALLOW PARTICIPANTS 2-3 MINUTES TO RECORD THEIR RESPONSES; LATER, COLLECT INDIVIDUAL WORK SHEETS.

- What are the most critical services victims might need:
    - In the immediate aftermath of the crime?
    - Throughout the criminal or juvenile justice process?
    - Beyond the immediate crime or justice processes?

2. What are some of the barriers to implementing victims' rights? How about to accessing victim services?

3. Now that you've identified barriers to implementing victims' rights and accessing victim services, do you have any suggestions to overcome these barriers?

PROBES:

- Can you tell me about any of your personal experiences related to overcoming these barriers?
- Are there any “promising practices” you know of to address these barriers?

1. What are some of the most important “unmet needs” of victims that we should be aware of as we develop our strategic plan?

PROBES:

- Do you have any ideas on how these needs can be addressed in the most effective—and cost-effective—manner?

7. Is there anything else you would like to add to this discussion before we end?

* *With 12 participants, this focus group would last approximately three hours.*

Sample Focus Group Individual Work Sheet # 1

Core Victims' Statutory and/or Constitutional Rights in (State)	
Statutory Rights	**Constitutional Rights**

Sample Focus Group Individual Work Sheet # 2

The Most Critical Victim Services:
In the Immediate Aftermath of the Crime?
Throughout the Criminal or Juvenile Justice Process?
Beyond the Immediate Crime or Justice Processes?

Sample Letter Inviting Focus Group Participants

Name/Title (if applicable)
Agency (if applicable)
Mailing Address
City/State/Zip Code

Dear (   ):

(*Agencies*) are developing a statewide strategic planning to improve the implementation of victims' rights and provision of victim services in (*state*). A key component of this process is obtaining important input from (*type of focus group participants*), and tapping into your experience and expertise. We are sponsoring a series of focus groups next month around the state to hear from a wide range of constituencies who are interested in victim issues.

The goals of each focus group are to:

1. Identify strengths and gaps in services to crime victims in (*state*).
2. Identify strengths and gaps in state laws and agency policies that guide the provision of victim services in (*state*).
3. Document specific victim case examples of the implementation of victims' statutory and/or constitutional rights in accordance with law.
4. Elicit participants' opinions about how to improve the implementation of victims' rights and provision of victim services in (*state*).

We would like to invite you to attend a focus group of (*type of focus group participants*) on: (*day*), (*date*) from (*start time*) to (*End time*); at (*location and address*).

The three-hour focus group will include 12 participants, and will be co-facilitated by (*names*), who are helping guide our strategic planning process. The focus group will be audio-taped; however, no participants will be publicly identified in the focus group report.

A light supper will be provided at (*one hour before focus group starts*), and we will reimburse you for your travel expenses, including mileage and parking. I have enclosed a map to (*the location*), along with information about parking. If you have any specific needs related to your participation, please let me know so we can accommodate them.

You can call (*contact*) at (*area code/telephone number*) to confirm your participation, or to request additional information. We appreciate your consideration of our request, and look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

ENDNOTES

1. Stewart, D.W. and Shamdasani, P.N. (1990). Focus Groups: Theory and Practice. Applied Social Research Methods Services, Volume 20. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
2. Marczak, M. and Sewell, M. (nd). "Using Focus Grous for Evaluation." Cybernet Evaluation. Tuscon, AZ: The University of Arizona.
3. American Statistical Association. (1997). "What Are Focus Groups?" Alexandria, VA: American Statistical Association, Section on Survey Research Methods.
4. Marczak, M. and Sewell, M. (nd). "Using Focus Groups for Evaluation." Cybernet Evaluation. Tuscon, AZ: The University of Arizona.
5. Ibid.
6. *Adapted/revised from*: Blaid, G. (1996). "Group Facilitation." Scotland, UK: University of Edinburgh.
7. Silverman, G. and Zukergood, E. (2000). "Client Guide to the Focus Group." Orangeburg, NY: Market Navigation, Inc. *Copyright; reprinted with permission.*
8. Silverman, G. and Zukergood, E. (2000). "Client Guide to the Focus Group." Orangeburg, NY: Market Navigation, Inc. *Copyright; reprinted with permission.*
9. American Statistical Association. (1997). "What Are Focus Groups?" Alexandria, VA: American Statistical Association, Section on Survey Research Methods.
10. Marczak, M. and Sewell, M. (nd). "Using Focus Groups for Evaluation." Cybernet Evaluation. Tuscon, AZ: The University of Arizona.
11. Krueger, R.A. (1988). Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.