

## Data Collection Methods for Program Evaluation: Interviews

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This brief is about interviewing as a data collection method for evaluation. This brief includes a basic overview of the interview method; when to use it; how to plan and conduct it; and its advantages and disadvantages. This brief focuses on interviewing individuals. Brief 13 provides an overview of focus groups, a group interviewing method (see Resources).

### What is an interview?

An interview is a method of asking quantitative or qualitative questions orally of key participants. Quantitative questions are closed-ended, and have specific answers to choose among that can be categorized and numerically analyzed. Qualitative questions are open-ended, that is, the respondent provides a response in his or her own words. Interviews conducted for program evaluation are typically qualitative but may also include some quantitative questions.

There are three approaches to qualitative interviews that vary in their level of structure and can be combined.

- **Informal conversational interviews** are the least structured. The wording of the questions and topics to be discussed are not predetermined. These types of interviews often occur spontaneously.
- **Semi-structured interviews** include an outline of topics or issues to be covered, but the interviewer is free to vary the wording and order of the questions.
- **Standardized open-ended interviews** are the most structured and include a set protocol of questions and probes. The interviewer is not allowed flexibility in the wording or order.

### When should you use interviews for evaluation?

- **To get more in-depth information about perceptions, insights, attitudes, experiences, or beliefs.** Interviews are useful for gathering

subjective perspectives from respondents.

- **When you are evaluating individual differences between respondents' experiences and outcomes.** You can ask the same question of people individually to compare their responses and analyze how these individual differences may reflect on your program.
- **As a follow-up to other methods.** Interviewing is a useful way to follow-up with questions you may have after analyzing data from other evaluation methods such as observation, questionnaires, or record review.

### How do you plan for interviews?

Successful interviews start with thorough planning.

- **Determine your focus.** Think about the evaluation question(s) you want to answer and make sure that you include only interview questions that will answer your evaluation questions.
- **Develop an interview guide or questionnaire.** The specificity of written interview guidance will vary depending on the type of interview you are conducting. For an informal conversational interview you will probably not prepare any interview guidance. For a semi-structured interview your interview guidance might include specific topics to be covered in the interview and may also include some questions. For a standardized open-ended interview you will need to develop all your questions, the order of the questions, and probes. Probes are a way to clarify a response to a question by asking more detailed follow-up questions. Brief 14 provides an overview of how to develop questionnaires (see Resources).

- **Select the number and type of people to be interviewed.** Select the type of people you want to interview to answer your evaluation questions. You should also decide if you should include all possible participants or if a sample will suffice. This will depend on the number of possible participants and the resources you have available.
- **Train the interviewers.** If other people are interviewing your respondents they will need to be trained in how to conduct an interview and on your interview guide.
- **Ensure respondents' confidentiality.** Determine how you will maintain confidentiality of respondents and provide respondents with information about how you will do so.
- **Pilot test the interview guide or questionnaire.** Pilot testing allows you to identify questions that may be confusing to or misinterpreted by your respondents. Pilot testing typically involves conducting a few interviews and then determining if any changes are needed to the interview guide or questionnaire.

## How do you conduct interviews?

- **Build trust and establish rapport.** It is important that your respondent feels comfortable answering questions honestly. Providing the respondent with appropriate assurances of confidentiality will help you build trust. During the interview, show empathy, listen actively, and maintain eye contact. You may also want to start with less sensitive questions before asking more sensitive, controversial questions.
- **Keep a neutral demeanor.** Most respondents will not want to say things that they feel you disagree with so it is important that you not show strong reactions or emotions.
- **Stay in control of the interview.** Although it is important to allow for flexibility during the interview, you also need to set the direction for the interview and keep the respondent from straying from the topics you planned to discuss.

## What are the advantages of interviews?

- Useful for gaining insight and context into a topic.
- Allows the respondent to describe what is important to her or him.
- Useful for gathering quotes and stories.

## What are the disadvantages of interviews?

- Susceptible to interview bias.
- Time consuming and expensive compared to other data collection methods
- May seem intrusive to the respondent.

## Resources

*Brief 13: Data Collection Methods for Evaluation: Focus Groups.* Available at <http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/evaluation/resources.htm>

*Brief 14: Data Collection Methods for Evaluation: Questionnaires.* Available at <http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/evaluation/resources.htm>

*Evaluation and Civic Activism Curriculum. Module 3: Data Collection Methods and Evaluation Tools.* Social Policy Research Associates. Available at <http://www.evaluationtools.org/files/Guidelines%20for%20Interview.pdf>

McNamara C. *General Guidelines for Conducting Interviews.* Authenticity Consulting, LLC. Available at <http://www.managementhelp.org/evaluation/interview.htm>

Sewell M. *The Use of Qualitative Interviews in Evaluation.* The University of Arizona. Available at <http://ag.arizona.edu/fcs/cyfernet/cyfar/Intervu5.htm>

Whitman A. *Conducting Interviews with Key Participants to Analyze Critical Events.* Workgroup for Community Health and Development, University of Kansas.