

Primary Data Collection Methods

Introduction

When existing data are not available for a particular population, it may be necessary to collect primary data. Primary data collection methods include, but are not limited to, surveys, interviews, focus groups, and observations. Many communities choose to utilize a mix of methods. This handout provides a broad overview of primary data collection methods.

Consider participatory approaches, collecting data *with* communities rather than *on* them. Include input from members of priority populations when developing data collection tools and questions, and when making decisions about methodology. Get feedback on what to collect, and from whom. As possible, involve members of priority population in actual collection of data. Establish data sharing agreements that explicitly state how the data will be used, and who will have access to it, to avoid data trust issues. Share findings with the community, and involve them in the process of interpreting the findings and making recommendations.

Interviews

Interviews can be conducted face-to-face or via telephone. While phone interviews may be easier to schedule and more feasible for covering a larger geographic area, they make it a bit more challenging to build a rapport with the interviewee. Key informant interviews tend to be more formal, and are great for getting perspective on political will and community readiness. For pros and cons of key informant interviews, see the table on page 2.

Another type of interview is one-on-one community interviews; these involve less formal face-to-face interviews with community members, often conducted by coalition members. One-on-one interviews involve a less-rigid protocol, and provide a great way to inform community members about your coalition, build relationships, and raise awareness.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are structured interviews with small groups of like individuals using standardized questions, follow-up questions, and exploration of other topics that arise to better understand participants. One unique benefit of focus groups is that one person's response may inspire another participant to share their perspective. On that same note, some participants may be reluctant to share their thoughts and opinions in front of their peers.

Surveys

Surveys are beneficial when a large geographic area needs to be covered, you want to hear from as many people as possible, and there is a need for consistency in response options. Survey modes of administration can include phone, paper/mailed, and online surveys. Phone and mailed surveys can be expensive, and time-consuming to implement. On the other hand, it's easier to ask sensitive questions such as questions about individual's use of substances. Online surveys are less expensive to administer, but make it difficult to calculate response rates. Surveys have also shown an increasingly lower response rate.

Data Collection Method	Pros	Cons
Key Informant Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lower cost (assuming relatively few) • Respondents define what is important • Relatively short turn-around time • Possible to explore issues in-depth • Opportunity to clarify responses through probes • Can be source of leads to other data sources and other key informants • Generally lower refusal rates • Can build partnerships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It can be time consuming to set up interviews with busy informants • Requires skilled and/or trained interviewers • Limited generalizability • Produces limited quantitative data • Potential for interviewer bias • May not be good for sensitive information • May be more difficult to summarize and analyze findings
Focus Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relatively low cost • Relatively short turn-around time • Participants define what is important • Some opportunity to explore issues in depth • Opportunity to clarify responses through probes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be time consuming to assemble groups • Produces limited quantitative data • Requires trained facilitators • Less control over the process as compared to key informant interviews • Difficult to collect sensitive information • Limited generalizability • May be more difficult to summarize and analyze findings
Surveys	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be highly accurate • Can be highly reliable and valid • Allows for comparisons with other/larger populations when items come from existing instruments • Easily generates quantitative data • Easy to summarize and analyze finding • Possible to add more sensitive questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relatively high-cost • Relatively slow to design, implement, clean and analyze • Accuracy depends on who and how many people sampled • Accuracy limited to willing and reachable respondents • May have low response rates • Little opportunity to explore issues in depth • Cannot clarify questions • No rapport built with respondents

Observations

Another method of primary data collection involves observations. Observations can include community and/ or environmental scans, media scans, journals/logs, and photographs.

Examples can include:

- Assessing pricing and promotion: Are certain neighborhoods, communities, or populations subject to increased promotion of specific alcoholic products?
- Observing community festivals: Are safeguards in place at community festivals to restrict access to alcohol for underage individuals and/or to restrict over-service?
- Assessing access to and use of prescription drug drop boxes: Where are drop boxes located, and are there differences in which populations drop medications at which locations (i.e., pharmacies vs. law enforcement agencies).
- Promotion of pharmaceutical drugs: Are certain types of over-the-counter and prescription drugs more heavily advertised in drug stores?

Existing CAPT Resources on Primary Data Collection

Tips for Conducting Key Informant Interviews: <http://www.samhsa.gov/capt/tools-learning-resources/conducting-key-informant-interviews>

Strategies for Conducting Effective Focus Groups: <http://www.samhsa.gov/capt/tools-learning-resources/effective-focus-groups>

Shining a Light on "Hidden" and "Hard-to-Reach" Populations: <http://www.samhsa.gov/capt/tools-learning-resources/reaching-hidden-populations>

Needs Assessment and Cultural Competence: Questions to Ask: <http://www.samhsa.gov/capt/tools-learning-resources/needs-assessment-cultural-competence-questions>