



30x30 Focus Group Toolkit Summary Report:

A How-To Guide for Conducting Focus Groups for Police Practitioners

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What's in the 30x30 Focus Group Toolkit?

The toolkit is designed to assist police officers and agencies with carrying out their own in-house focus group research, either for the purposes of the 30x30 initiative, or to more broadly investigate questions, problems, and topics pertinent to their organizations. The toolkit provides a background and how-to guide for conducting focus groups, complete with example materials and PDF copies to referenced sources. At the end of the toolkit, there is also a list of pros and cons that may assist agencies in deciding whether to partner with a trained academic researcher instead of conducting focus groups in-house.

What's included in the toolkit?

- An introduction to the focus group research method
- Definitions of main concepts relevant to focus group research
- A discussion of the principles of carrying out ethical research with human subjects, with specific references to focus group research as well as research in police agencies
- A how-to guide for carrying out focus groups in your agency, including a list of tools you will need
- A discussion of the pros and cons of partnering with an academic researcher to conduct focus groups
- Example materials and resources for learning more about focus groups and qualitative research (forthcoming)

What's not included?

- A how-to guide for qualitatively analyzing the data generated from the focus group
- Guidance on how to implement changes based on the findings of your focus group

Introduction to Focus Groups

The focus group is a method of data collection in which a small group of people is interviewed together by a moderator. Focus groups have a long history in social science and particularly in consumer marketing research. Focus groups are a form of qualitative research.

The data generated in a focus group include participants' responses to the moderator's questions and the verbal interactions between participants.

The most common way to collect these data is to audio record and transcribe the focus group, although data can also be recorded through detailed notetaking on a notepad or computer. Detailed notetaking is preferred by some participants who do not feel comfortable having their responses audio recorded. If the detailed notetaking method is used, it is ideal to have a second researcher who's assigned to taking notes while the other researcher moderates. After the focus group, transcripts are read and analyzed for patterns and themes, and these **themes** become your study findings.

A good focus group will involve a lot of conversation among participants and not just Q&A between the moderator and individual participants. Moderators can encourage more detailed responses by prompting participants to explain themselves or react to other participants' comments. Some common prompts include: "How so?," "Can you tell me more about that?," and "Do you agree or disagree with that statement?"

The Benefits of Focus Groups

How can focus groups help you increase the representation of women in your agency? By creating a dedicated space and time for employees to share their experiences, you can generate a wealth of information to help you brainstorm ideas and identify areas for improvement. Recording and transcribing their input on paper helps you recognize patterns and nuances that you may not otherwise notice in everyday conversations.

Keep in mind, focus group participants will offer more useful and accurate information when they believe the organization sincerely plans to work on the problem, will responsibly listen and respond to their input, and will not disclose the things they say in the focus group outside the room (this is a violation of the beneficence principle; see Research Ethics on page 6). Selecting a moderator that endorses the goals of the 30x30 initiative, and designing a concrete plan for securing participants' data, may go a long way towards gaining participants' trust.

A few additional benefits of focus group research are:

- **Versatility:** You can design your questionnaire to investigate ANY topic. All you need is a group of people who have knowledge of the issue and a willingness to talk about it.
- **Time and resource saving:** Interviewing multiple people together can allow you to gather diverse perspectives all at once.
- **Prompting:** Hearing other participants' ideas and stories can spark things that a participant wouldn't have thought of in a one-on-one interview.
- **Participant-directed conversation:** When conducting exploratory research in which you have few prior expectations about what the outcomes will be, qualitative research, including focus groups, can be especially useful because it allows participants to dictate the direction of the conversations.

There are, of course, some limitations to the focus group method. One excellent discussion of limitations and effective moderator corrections is provided by Smithson (2000).

What Topics Should You Cover in the Focus Group?

The 30x30 initiative recommends police agencies conduct focus groups to investigate the following topics.

- The overall culture(s) within the agency, with a focus on problem areas that negatively impact employees and the community
- How culture, organizational structures, and policies impact women at all career stages (from recruitment through promotion, exiting, and retirement) and how these compare to similarly situated men
- Barriers to career advancement specific to women, and how these compare to men
- Ideas for improvement on all points of concern identified in focus groups

If you choose to focus on these four topics, they will serve as your **organizing categories** when you go to read and analyze your focus group data. This means that when you are reading through the transcripts, you can look specifically for points in the conversation where participants are addressing one of the four categories. You will then single out that specific section of the transcript and give it a closer look.

The usefulness of focus groups goes beyond the goals of the 30x30 initiative, however. Focus groups can be used to answer an infinite number of questions relevant to your organization. For example, you could hold focus groups to gather input from stakeholders before making a change, to investigate how officers are liking a new change, or to brainstorm ideas for solving a problem.

Main Concepts

- **Qualitative research:** Collecting and analyzing non-numerical data to understand concepts, opinions, or experiences. Examples of qualitative data collection methods include observing or recording social environments, interviewing, and doing focus groups. **Quantitative research**, on the other hand, involves numerical data collected through surveys or official data sources (like, for example, a police agency's dispatch system). Generally speaking, quantitative research seeks to understand the big picture questions (what's going on; how big is the problem) while qualitative research digs into the why, how, and in what circumstances.
- **Confidential:** Confidential research occurs when the researcher knows the identities of the research subjects but takes steps to protect them from being discovered by others. Alternatively, **anonymous** research occurs when the researcher never knows the identity of the participants. Anonymous research is often used in online surveys when they are designed to capture only the participants' responses and no identifying information, including location and IP address. In focus group research, the researcher almost always knows the identities of participants and so this research is usually confidential.
- **Population:** The entire set of units (people, events, agencies, interactions) we are interested in knowing something about through our research
- **Sample:** The actual units that you collect data about in a single study
- **Sampling:** The process by which you decide who you want to include in your study and how you are going to select them. Based on the questions or topics you plan to investigate in your focus group, you should be able to decide who in your organization will be needed to gather that information. Say, for example, you're interested in understanding the experiences of women supervisors in your organization. Perhaps all women sergeants are your population of interest. You would then seek to sample a representative group of them to participate.
- **Representativeness:** The extent to which your sample accurately reflects the features, opinions, and behaviors of the whole population. A good researcher aims to gather a sample that is as representative to the population as possible. For example, if you are conducting a focus group of a few women sergeants from your organization, then you would ideally sample individuals who represent the full range of shifts, experience levels, and personal characteristics to ensure that all women sergeants in the organization are represented.
- **Generalizability:** The extent to which the findings from your research can be attributed (i.e., generalized) to the whole population
- **Sampling bias:** Occurs when a specific trait, opinion, or experience is not well represented in your sample or is completely absent. If, for example, your focus group only includes women who have 5 years of police experience or less, then you may be systematically excluding the experiences of more senior women in your research. In this situation, we would say the sample is biased towards less experienced or younger officers.

- **Recruiting:** The process by which you identify participants who qualify to participate in your study, approach them, inform them about the research, and ask them to participate. From this process onwards in your research, your actions should be guided by the principles of ethical research with human subjects. (See Research Ethics on page 6)

As a side note, all studies have **limitations**, and the most common in social science research is a lack of generalizability due to sampling bias. In qualitative research in particular, a lack of generalizability is nearly always assumed given the small sample sizes involved. This is why replication is important so that we can assess patterns in findings over the course of numerous iterations, contexts, and samples. This is also why transparency is important – when you relay the findings of research to others, it is vital to explain the limitations of the study, including the level of representativeness of the sample, to ensure the findings are understood in their appropriate context.

Research Ethics

Why are ethics important? Unfortunately, history reminds us of the horrors of irresponsible research involving human subjects, the most famous of which are the inhumane Holocaust “experiments,” the Tuskegee Syphilis “study,” and the Stanford Prison “Experiment.” The harm inflicted on these “participants” highlighted the critical need for federal laws dictating the rules of responsible research.

There are, however, infinite examples of researchers who failed to do their due diligence when designing research, which led them to inflict unanticipated harm on participants. See, for example, the story of a Columbia business professor who wrote letters to restaurant owners claiming to have acquired food poisoning from them, temporarily sparking chaos throughout the New York food industry (Kifner, 2001).

Today, the Belmont Report, adopted in 1991 as the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, establishes three principles of ethical research to prevent harm, protect participant rights, and ensure the design and conduct of research are done in socially responsible and just ways.

- **Respect for Persons:** Researchers must treat human subjects as autonomous agents who are able to make uncoerced decisions on their own behalf and take actions in pursuit of their own goals. Thus, subjects must enter into research voluntarily, with all the necessary information, and must be allowed to withdraw consent at any time. In the case of persons with diminished autonomy, researchers must establish added protections to ensure their safety and wellbeing are protected. There are legally identified protected categories (such as children, patients, prisoners, and the mentally ill) but researchers should always consider how other dynamics could diminish a participant’s autonomy (such as in a case where a supervisor is asking an employee to participate in a study).
- **Beneficence:** Researchers have an obligation to do no harm to participants and to maximize the benefits of participation where possible. Doing no harm involves protecting participants physical health, psychological wellbeing, and social relationships and reputations, to name a few. Beneficence may be likened to the “campsite” rule in which participants (like campsites) should be left no worse off from having participated in the research than they were before they agreed to participate. A critical component of the beneficence principle involves learning and brainstorming the possible ways in which the research could inadvertently harm participants before any participants are recruited or data is collected.

- **Justice:** The justice principle requires that the burdens and benefits of research be equally distributed across members and groups in society. It also states that one group should not be unduly denied a benefit or exposed to a burden more so than others. Within this principle is the implication that certain groups cannot be specifically recruited because they are easy to access or cheap to compensate, such as prisoners, while the findings from the research are enjoyed by those who are not incarcerated.

As a police agency seeking to collect data from your employees, there are two considerations that you should keep in mind before embarking on your study.

- When your employees are the research participants, voluntariness can be easily compromised if they perceive participation is a requirement for your approval or to receive benefits. In policing, the possibility that voluntariness could be compromised is even greater. Within the militaristic structure of law enforcement, the importance of rank and obedience to superiors are strongly engrained in officers. Indeed, a common joke among cops is being “volun-told” to accept assignments and perform certain tasks. That’s not what we want if we are seeking to conduct serious, rigorous research. Voluntariness should be clearly emphasized throughout all phases of the project. It may also help to avoid situations where supervisors are requesting participation from their immediate employees.
- Research shows that women in policing are at especially high risk of being labeled as troublemakers or complainers if they don’t conform to the culture of the organization. For this reason, it is crucial that both the moderator and participants of the focus group agree to keep everything in the focus group confidential (the Vegas rule - what happens in the focus group, stays in the focus group). Sharing the complaint of one police officer with others could result in an officer being ridiculed, ostracized, or worse, while at the same time diminishing the impact of the broader goal – to improve the experiences and representation of women in policing. Further, no one will want to participate in a future focus group if it becomes known that the responses are being widely shared across the agency. All transcripts, reports, and quotations should be stripped of identifying information before they are sent along to others outside of the immediate research group, and moderators and participants should refrain from sharing what happened to anyone outside the group.

In the interest of protecting the safety and wellbeing of your employees, here is a quick list of what NOT to do when conducting focus groups. However, you should always keep an eye out for any other potential ways your project could violate the ethical principles as you move forward with your own focus groups.

- **Coerce participation:** When employees are the participants, it is crucial that participation be truly voluntary and that leadership and focus group organizers take “no” for an answer without trying to coerce a “yes.” You’re not a telemarketer. You’re a researcher. When you get the “no,” back off and find someone else.
- **Create a paper trail.** Do not write down participant names on any materials. There is no need to keep track of WHO was in the room – only what they said.
- **Break the Vegas rule.** Don’t share the conversations of the focus group outside the room. The only thing the agency should receive at the end of the study is the number of participants and focus groups held and the findings. They do not need to know anything else.

Designing and Carrying Out the Focus Group

Now that you have identified your topics and population of interest, it's time to gather your tools and prepare the focus group or focus groups (depending on the size of your organization, you may want to hold more than one).

The list of **tools** you will need is short: A private room to hold the focus group (best if away from foot traffic to preserve confidentiality), an audio recorder (two is better than one for when technology fails), a computer or notepad to take notes (again, for when technology fails), and a private computer to store the audio files and conduct your analysis.

You should consider making two copies of each audio file and keep originals on the recorder until the study is complete. Of course, you should keep the recorder in a safe place where others cannot access it. Accidentally deleting the audio of a 3-hour focus group that you spent weeks organizing is heartbreaking, trust me. Note: You CAN skip the audio recording if that's what's best for your organization. In this case, it helps to have a designated notetaker who can type the data as best and as fast as possible in real time.

The next step is to develop a **questionnaire** that will guide the conversation in the focus group. Focus group questionnaires are often semi-structured, meaning they are meant to guide the direction of the conversation while allowing space for participants to pull it in the direction they see fit. As a moderator, you do not want to force participants to follow the points on the questionnaire in the exact order they are written. Rather, check off topics as they are covered, dig deeper into subjects as they come up, and circle back to things that were missed.

The list of questions should be short and designed to encourage conversation rather than yes or no answers. Here are some example questions you could ask in your 30x30 focus group, but keep in mind your questions may be different depending on who you sample and what your topics of interest are.

- How would you describe the culture in this agency?
- What kind of officers are respected in this agency?
- Do you think women are respected in this agency?
- What do you like or dislike about the promotions process?
- Do you feel that the process is generally fair?
- Do you feel that you've had positive experiences as a leader in this department?
- Have you faced any specific challenges in your leadership position?
- Do you think there are spaces in the organization where women are underrepresented? Why?

As noted earlier, you can encourage participants to explain themselves further by asking **prompts** such as "Can you tell me more about that?" and "Why do you think that is?" Ultimately, your goal is to generate as detailed and rich data as possible, so you should never settle for a one sentence response unless the participant expresses an unwillingness to engage the question.

Another critical part of the design stage is picking the right **moderator**. If you have ever been to any kind of training, then you are likely aware of the importance of the trainer for relaying information accurately and ensuring material is learned and internalized by attendees. A trainer who begins the day with "Ok, let's just get through this because we have to, alright?" isn't going to generate much enthusiasm from the group. The same is true for the moderator of a focus group, who plays an important role in explaining the purpose of the research to participants and gaining their trust. It's also sometimes better to enlist a moderator who knows less about the topic so there is a genuine interest in hearing what the participants have to say. A moderator with more knowledge of a subject

can be inclined to lead the participants towards their pre-existing views of a subject, while someone with less knowledge will ask more prompting questions and seek out more nuanced responses.

As noted, your sampling plan should be to gather a representative group of officers from your larger population. Thus, if you wish to sample women patrol officers, you may want to gather some from different shifts, or of different ages, races, or employment histories. Again, this will all depend on what your questions or topics of interest are and who's voices you want to capture in your study. The recommended number of participants is about 4-6, although I've done groups with anywhere from 3-8 before. You want to make sure you have good representation, but not so many people that some voices are not heard. If you think you will struggle with achieving representativeness with just one focus group, you should plan on doing a couple instead. This will be especially true for larger agencies.

Finally, it's time to schedule and hold the focus group. Bring food and water in case the focus group runs long. Provide a comfortable location to sit and talk, such as a circle of chairs or a conference table. Remind participants of the study goals and answer any questions they have. Turn on the recorder. And begin asking your questions. It is highly advised to start with ice breaker comments or questions so you don't "waste" your good questions at the beginning when participants aren't warmed up. Generally speaking, the more comfortable they feel sharing their views, the better and more influential your data will be for guiding change in the organization.

Should You Partner with a Researcher?

Police agencies have been partnering with academics since the 1950s, with many of these early collaborations forming the basis of seminal research discoveries that policing still follows today. There are four main forms these partnerships take: one off studies, intermittent partners, embedded criminologists, and data officers (internal officers who have the skill set to conduct in-house research).

There are many **benefits** to these partnerships, including:

- Diversification of skill sets, with researchers bringing expertise in research methods and analysis
- Minimizing perceived and actual bias in research evaluations
- Mutually beneficial relationships, with agencies receiving professional research assistance and academics having access to data and publication opportunities

The **downsides** to partnering with researchers include the following:

- The length of time it takes for many academics to conduct studies from start to finish is often long, especially when they have competing job responsibilities
- The needs, communication styles, timetables, goals, and philosophies of academics and police practitioners often do not line up and require ample communication and experience to overcome
- These partnerships are not always sustainable
- Not all academics are the same (and many are not adept at working with practitioners)

It is up to you whether you want to take on the job of collecting data in-house or whether you want to find a specialist to assist you. It is often smart to ask other local agencies who have experience partnering with researchers to recommend someone or to share their experiences with you. 30x30 may also be able to recommend someone in your area to collaborate with, as can the American Society of Evidence Based Policing and the National Institute of Justice's LEADS Program.

References

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Natalie Todak is an Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. She has a Ph.D. in criminology and criminal justice from Arizona State University. Dr. Todak studies topics in U.S. policing, with a focus on body-worn cameras, de-escalation tactics, diversity, and women, making use of qualitative and mixed research methods. She is also a National Institute of Justice LEADS Academic, a position given to early career policing researchers who have demonstrated successful collaborations with agencies.