UCLA CENTER FOR HEALTH POLICY RESEARCH

Section 4: Key Informant Interviews

Purpose

Key informant interviews are qualitative in-depth interviews with people who know what is going on in the community. The purpose of key informant interviews is to collect information from a wide range of people—including community leaders, professionals, or residents—who have first hand knowledge about the community. These community experts, with their particular knowledge and understanding, can provide insight on the nature of problems and give recommendations for solutions.

The following are two common techniques used to conduct key informant interviews:

- Telephone Interviews
- Face-to-Face Interviews

When to conduct key informant interviews

- To get information about a pressing issue or problem in the community from a limited number of well-connected and informed community experts.
- To understand the motivation and beliefs of community residents on a particular issue.
- To get information from people with diverse backgrounds and opinions and be able to ask in-depth and probing questions.
- To discuss sensitive topics, get respondents' candid discussion of the topic, or to get the depth of information you need. Individual or small group discussions (two to three people maximum) create a comfortable environment where individuals can have a frank and open in-depth discussion.
- To get more candid or in-depth answers. The focus group dynamic may prohibit you from candidly discussing sensitive topics or getting the depth of information you need. Sometimes the group dynamic can prevent some participants from voicing their opinions about sensitive topics.

Planning the key informant interviews

There are several key steps involved in planning and implementing key informant interviews as a means for data collection. Review the following activities and prepare accordingly with your community partnership members.

4.1 Gather and review existing data
4.2 Determine what information is needed
4.3 Determine target population and brainstorm about possible key informants
4.4 Choose key informants
4.5 Choose type of interview
4.6 Develop an interview tool
4.7 Determine documentation method
4.8 Select designated interviewer(s)
4.9 Conduct key informant interviews
4.10 Compile and organize key informant interview data

4.1 Gather and review existing data

Collect and review existing research data and reports before determining what additional information needs to be collected from key informants, as the information you are looking for may already exist. You can piece together a great deal of information about a community or a health issue from different sources.

4.2 Determine what information is needed

The first step in preparing for your key informant interviews is to identify the information you want to gather. *Step 3: Identify the Information (Data) You Need* in the "Performing a Community Assessment" curriculum (page 4-17) guides you through this process and provides information on how to best prepare and formulate the primary questions you would like to answer. Once you have drafted your primary questions, next determine what type of data is needed. For example, do you want to collect data on community practice, community opinions, or existing services and service utilization? The type of data needed helps you identify the best people to interview.

4.3 Determine target population and brainstorm possible key informants

Before selecting key informants it is important to map out your population of interest, or target population. This target population could include all community residents living in a particular city or zip code, or could be a particular portion or group within that geographical region (such as a racial/ethnic minority, adolescents, or women). Once you are clear about the target population you can better brainstorm possible key informants who are knowledgeable and closely linked to your population of interest.

4.4 Choose key informants

Carefully select the key informants. Remember key informants must have first-hand knowledge about your community, its residents, and issues or problems you are trying to investigate. Key informants can be a wide range of people, including agency representatives, community residents, community leaders, or local business owners.

The first step in the selection process is to identify and create a list of potential key informants—individuals or groups you want to interview to gather information about your target population. In creating this list try to get a diverse set of representatives with different backgrounds and from different groups or sectors. This diversity provides a broad range of perspectives. For example, your list could include people from different sectors, such as health service administrators, religious leaders, city government officials, young mothers, minority populations, or youth advocates.

Second, you need to narrow down your list. Review your list and identify one or two persons from the same sector who you believe can provide needed information. However, keep in mind that your final group should have a diverse mix of key informants in order to ensure a variety of perspectives. For example, if investigating gang activity in a community, you could approach and solicit the input of a wide range of experts who are knowledgeable about the problem, such as church leaders, local store owners, neighborhood-watch-association representatives, parks and recreation staff, parents, youth advocates, police, and teachers.

Key informant diversity is important. If you only interview people of a particular background or sector you may end up with results that are one-sided or biased. Interviewing key informants from a wide range of sectors allows you to look at varying perspectives and underlying issues or problems.

The number of people you interview largely depends on your data needs, available time, and resources. Typically, 15-25 interviews are the most you need.

4.5 Choose type of interview

The next step is to select a technique to obtain information from each of the key informants—either by telephone or face-to-face. The technique you use largely depends on your key informant's availability and preferred choice, as well as your available time, resources and overall logistical feasibility. However, these techniques are not mutually exclusive; both options may be used effectively.

The following is a description of each:

A. *Telephone Interviews:*

Telephone interviews may be the most convenient and least time-intensive way to interview busy key informants. The major shortcoming of this approach is not having the personalized interaction that is otherwise possible through a face-to-face interview. However, if you develop a structured telephone key informant interview tool to address your primary questions, the telephone interview may provide all the valuable information you are looking for.

Arranging Telephone Interviews:

Once you have compiled your list of key informants, distribute this list to your partnership members and ask them to identify those individuals they know. If appropriate, the partnership members can help access key informants by personally contacting them, providing a brief explanation of the community needs assessment project, encouraging them to participate in the interview, and facilitating communication between them and the interviewer. The designated key informant interviewer would then contact them to schedule a convenient time to conduct the interview.

When contacting key informants, stress the importance of their input and let them know ahead of time about the time commitment. Telephone interviews should last no more than 15-25 minutes, as it is difficult to schedule longer periods with busy people. However, once engaged, informants may be willing to speak longer. So it is a good idea to schedule at least an hour of your time to allow for interviews that run longer.

B. *Face-to-Face Interviews:*

Face-to-Face interviews are the most frequently used format. This format is more time intensive because it requires additional scheduling and logistical planning. The advantages to this technique are that it provides a free-exchange of ideas, and lends itself to asking more complex questions and getting more detailed responses.

Arranging Face-to-Face Interviews:

Again, ask your partnership members if they know any of the identified key informants, and allow them to make the first contact. The designated key informant interviewer would then schedule a convenient time and place for the interview. As a general rule it is important not to schedule too many interviews in one single day. After each interview the interviewer should take some time to make additional notes and organize initial findings or impressions, so time should be allotted for this after each interview. Face-to-face interviews typically last 20-30 minutes. Again, once engaged, informants may be willing to speak longer.

Persistence is key. Making it into someone's busy schedule is not easy. Anticipate this challenge and don't give up! This is true for both telephone and face-to-face interviews. Continue calling until the pre-designated cut-off date.

4.6 Develop an interview tool

Prepare an interview tool to guide the discussion and make sure your questions are answered. The interview tool typically contains an outlined script and a list of open-ended questions relevant to the topic you would like to discuss. Begin with the most factual and easy-to-answer questions first, then follow with those questions that ask informant's opinions and beliefs. End with questions that ask for general recommendations. Don't be afraid to ask probing questions during your interview, as these help to clarify informant's comments and get detailed information.

The following are the main components of the interview tool:

- **Introduction:** Before beginning the interview introduce yourself and your project. As a general rule the introduction you write should do the following: 1) help establish the purpose for the interview; 2) explain who is involved in the process (community partnership members); 3) establish credibility for the interview and yourself as the interviewer; 4) explain why their cooperation is important in collecting the information you need; and 5) explain what will happen with the collected information and how the community will benefit.
- **Key questions:** Draft five to ten questions important to getting the information you have set out to collect. The key questions should be designed in order to elicit more revealing information about your community issue or problem. Ask questions that draw upon the informant's expertise and unique viewpoint.
- **Probing questions:** Probing questions encourage participants to reflect more deeply on the meaning of their comments. These questions are also useful at getting people to think about the cause or root of the problem you are investigating.
- **Closing question:** Provide an opportunity for the key informant to give any additional information or comments. Also ask the key informants for their recommendations or solutions in addressing the problem.
- **Summary:** If time permits, quickly summarize the major comments heard throughout the interview and ask informants if you covered all the major points. Ask them if there is anything else they would like to tell you that you have not asked them. Finally, thank them for their time.

After completing the interviews it is a good idea to send follow-up “thank you” notes to the interviewees.

4.7 Determine documentation method

Compile interview information to ensure data collection efficiency, quality, and consistency across interviews. You want to make sure all the information you have set out to collect is captured.

There are two methods you can use to record the interview responses:

- **Note-taking:** Interviewers should plan to take notes during the interview as well as directly after. It is wise to type up and print the key questions you have drafted (approximately five to ten) leaving enough space between each question to manually write the key informant's comments while conducting the interview.

  However, taking notes while interviewing someone could be quite a balancing act. Interviewers may find themselves engaged in the conversation and not taking notes. The best advice is to plan to take notes during the interview but not allow note-taking to disrupt the flow of the conversation. Immediately after each interview the interviewer should take some time to review their notes and fill in any details, expand on their note-taking short-hand, or add important comments or points made. It is a good idea to do this immediately after the interview when things are still fresh in their mind. Waiting several hours or a day may mean losing a lot of valuable interview information.

- **Tape recording:** Interviewers can also use a tape recorder to document what key informants say. This approach allows the interviewer to freely engage in the conversation without worrying about note-taking. The interviewer may take brief notes during the interview, write down and organize notes at the end of the interview and use the tape recording to fill in information gaps or details. It is necessary to get informed consent from the key informant to audiotape the interview. So it is a good idea to discuss the possibility of audio taping before scheduling the interview. In this scenario, it is important to emphasize that: 1) the interview will be recorded so that none of their important insights and discussions are missed; 2) the interview will not be recorded if they do not prefer it to be; and 3) the audiotape will not have their name on it and will be kept in a secure location.

4.8 Select designated interviewer(s)

Determine who in your partnership has the skills or background to conduct the interviews. Interviewers should be good listeners, have strong communication skills, be able to take detailed notes, be detail oriented, and comfortable meeting and talking to new people. For consistency it is wise to only have one or two designated interviewers.

4.9 Conduct key informant interviews

The interview tool your partnership develops will help structure the discussion and carefully sequence the various key questions. Interviewers can practice and familiarize themselves with the script and questions before meeting the key informants.

Starting the Interview:
The interviewer should begin by thanking the respondent and stressing the importance of the meeting. At this time the interviewer can make any clarifications and answer any questions about the community assessment and the purpose of the interview. However, careful considerations should be taken in order not to influence or bias respondents' answers.

Interviewers should listen carefully for recurring and new opinions or beliefs. They should take notes highlighting important points made. Throughout the interview it is important that interviewers pace themselves. In order to compare data collected and identify themes it is important to get answers to certain key questions from *every* person interviewed.

At the end of the interview ask the key informant if they have any questions or final comments. Let them know what will happen with the information and conclude the interview by thanking them for their time.

4.10 Compile and organize key informant interview data

As soon as your partnership starts the process of collecting the key informant interview data, you will suddenly have a lot of data to manage. It is important to think about this while in the planning phase. Specifically, you want to discuss the following with your partnership and note your decisions:

A. *What will the key informant data look like once it is collected?*

   - This depends on what the key informant interview instrument looks like and what types of questions you asked. You may have a broad range of key informant responses.

B. *How will the key informant data be compiled?* (Please see *Appendix B: Computer Software to Compile and Analyze Data* on page 5-63 for more details about computer software programs and computer resources that may help you compile your survey data.)

   The key informant interviews you collect will be qualitative. After finishing a key informant interview, the interviewer should make notes and write down any additional comments or impressions. Within the next couple of days the interviewer or designated person should type up the interview notes, using the audiotapes (if applicable) to fill in any gaps. All of the interview notes, anecdotes, and discussion points need to be typed into one word processing document. However, this has the potential of being a really long document, depending on how many interviews were conducted and how long they were. Really long documents are not very helpful, as there is no easy way to see relationships across different focus group discussions. So the interviewer may want to consider organizing qualitative data right from the data entry stage into major categories. These categories are most commonly the interview questions that were asked. This way, you end up with a document of all of the interviewees' discussions organized under each question.

- One individual or agency should take responsibility for creating the master file, developing the categories, and cutting and pasting the notes into the corresponding categories.
- One individual or agency should take responsibility for keeping track of the audiotapes.

C. *Where will the key informant data be processed and compiled?*

- Plan where the data is at all times during the data collection process. This eliminates any confusion that may arise when multiple partnership members and agencies take on the survey data collection and compilation activities. It also clarifies ahead of time what specific steps need to be undertaken to collect, enter, compile, and analyze the different data pieces.
- Once your partnership has thought through the above points, then you should have a clear idea of where (when?) the interview data will start being collected and where the data will end up.

D. *What about informant confidentiality/anonymity?*

- Ensuring confidentiality/anonymity is very important. Depending on the nature of the topic, let key informants know that you will not use their names or any other potentially identifying information (such as title and organization) in your final report or publications. Assure them that their responses will be kept confidential—results will focus on the content of the discussion rather than identifying who said what. This may help encourage them to participate and make them more comfortable and willing to openly share their opinions about your topic of interest.

- After collecting data from individuals—referred to as human subjects, there are a few important rules to consider when handling their responses:
  - Keep any identifying information in a locked place (such as name, organization, title, phone number, or address). This can be simply a locked filing cabinet drawer or password protected computer, which ensures that no one has access to the confidential responses.

- Keep identifying information in one place. This ensures that fewer people have access to private information. (repetitive?)
- Once the data is compiled, remove any identifying information that is associated with it. When typing up your tape recorded key informant interviews, assign each respondent in your word document a unique number. You can start with "1" and just assign a different number to each key informant you enter. Keep your interview notes and any printed documents in the same locked drawer.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Key Informant Interviews

Advantages	Disadvantages
• Detailed and rich data can be gathered in a relatively easy and inexpensive way • Allows interviewer to establish rapport with the respondent and clarify questions • Provides an opportunity to build or strengthen relationships with important community informants and stakeholders • Can raise awareness, interest, and enthusiasm around an issue • Can contact informants to clarify issues as needed	• Selecting the "right" key informants may be difficult so they represent diverse backgrounds and viewpoints • May be challenging to reach and schedule interviews with busy and/or hard-to-reach respondents • Difficult to generalize results to the larger population unless interviewing many key informants

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