# 9. Data-Collection Tools

Depending on the nature of the information to be gathered, different instruments are used to conduct the assessment: forms for gathering data from official sources such as police or school records; surveys/interviews to gather information from youth, community residents, and others; and focus groups to elicit free-flowing perspectives.

For purposes of the data-collection process, the following discussion provides information on the types of data-collection tools most commonly used.

## Self-Administered Surveys

Self-administered surveys have special strengths and weaknesses. They are useful in describing the characteristics of a large population and make large samples feasible. In one sense, these surveys are flexible, making it possible to ask many questions on a given topic. This also provides flexibility in the analysis of the responses. On the other hand, standardized questionnaire items often represent the least common denominator in assessing people's attitudes, orientations, circumstances, and experiences. By designing questions that will be appropriate for all respondents, it is possible to miss what is most appropriate to many of the respondents (Babbie, 1992).

Some advantages of the self-administered survey are:

- *Low cost.* Extensive training is not required to administer the survey. Processing and analysis are usually simpler and cheaper than for other methods.
- *Reduction in biasing error*. The questionnaire reduces the bias that might result from personal characteristics of interviewers and/or their interviewing skills.
- *Greater anonymity*. Absence of an interviewer provides greater anonymity for the respondent. This is especially helpful when the survey deals with sensitive issues such as questions about involvement in a gang, because respondents are more likely to respond to sensitive questions when they are not face to face with an interviewer.

Some of the disadvantages are:

- *Requires simple questions*. The questions must be straightforward enough to be comprehended solely on the basis of printed instructions and definitions.
- *No opportunity for probing*. The answers must be accepted as final. Researchers have no opportunity to clarify ambiguous answers.

## Personal Interviews

The interview is an alternative method of collecting survey data. Rather than asking respondents to fill out surveys, interviewers ask questions orally and record respondents' answers. This type of survey generally decreases the number of "do not know" and "no answer" responses, compared with self-administered surveys. Interviewers also provide a guard against confusing items. If a respondent has misunderstood a question, the interviewer can clarify, thereby obtaining relevant responses (Babbie, 1992). As noted previously, personal interviews are a good way to gather information from community leaders, particularly those who might be unwilling or too busy to complete a written survey.

Some of the advantages of the personal interview are:

- *Flexibility*. Allows flexibility in the questioning process and allows the interviewer to clarify terms that are unclear.
- *Control of the interview situation*. Can ensure that the interview is conducted in private, and respondents do not have the opportunity to consult one another before giving their answers.
- *High response rate.* Respondents who would not normally respond to a mail questionnaire will often respond to a request for a personal interview.

Some of the disadvantages are:

- *Higher cost*. Costs are involved in selecting, training, and supervising interviewers; perhaps in paying them; and in the travel and time required to conduct interviews.
- *Interviewer bias*. The advantage of flexibility leaves room for the interviewer's personal influence and bias, making an interview subject to interviewer bias.
- *Lack of anonymity*. Often the interviewer knows all or many of the respondents. Respondents may feel threatened or intimidated by the interviewer, especially if a respondent is sensitive to the topic or to some of the questions (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias, 1996).

## Focus Groups

Another method of collecting information is the focus group. Focus groups are useful in obtaining a particular kind of information that would be difficult to obtain using other methodologies. A focus group typically can be defined as a group of people who possess certain characteristics and provide information of a qualitative nature in a focused discussion.

Focus groups generally are composed of six to twelve people. Size is conditioned by two factors: the group must be small enough for everyone to participate, yet large enough to provide diversity. This group is special in terms of purpose, size, composition, and procedures. Participants are selected because they have certain characteristics in common that relate to the topic at hand, such as parents of gang members, and, generally, the participants are unfamiliar with each other. Typically, more than one focus group should be convened, since a group of seven to twelve people could be too atypical to offer any general insights on the gang problem.

A trained moderator probes for different perceptions and points of view, without pressure to reach consensus. Focus groups have been found helpful in assessing needs, developing plans, testing new ideas, or improving existing programs (Krueger, 1988; Babbie, 1992). **Exhibit 9.1** provides guidelines for conducting focus groups.

Focus groups offer several advantages:

- Flexibility allows the moderator to probe for more in-depth analysis and ask participants to elaborate on their responses.
- Outcomes are quickly known.
- They may cost less in terms of planning and conducting than large surveys and personal interviews.

Limitations include:

- A skilled moderator is essential.
- Differences between groups can be troublesome to analyze because of the qualitative nature of the data.
- Groups are difficult to assemble. People must take the time to come to a designated place at a particular time.
- Participants may be less candid in their responses in front of peers.

# Exhibit 9.1
## Guidelines for Conducting a Focus Group

Focus group discussions are a popular method of obtaining information and opinions. They can provide insight into issues that cannot be covered through surveys or interviews. Focus groups are a good method to get people involved in this assessment process by having them provide input on a topic.

The following discussion provides a general overview of the focus group process. It is recommended that a person with experience with focus groups (preparing the discussion guide, moderating, and preparing the report) be contacted to assist in the process.

When preparing for the focus group discussions, there are several considerations: What questions will be asked? Who will participate? Where will the discussions be held? Who will conduct the sessions? The first order of business is to develop a discussion guide.

**Develop the Discussion Guide**
The discussion guide contains the questions that will be posed to participants during the focus group sessions. A limited number of questions should be used for each discussion. Avoid spending too much time on background information and concentrate on the important issues. There are two elements that should be considered when drafting the guide: (1) the information you wish to obtain and (2) from whom it will be obtained.

When developing the questions, keep in mind that all groups should follow the same discussion format. Using a general format for each question allows an analyst to make comparisons among the responses of various groups.

**Reserve a Time and Place**
Reserving a time and place to conduct the discussion is something that should be done well in advance of the actual date of the discussion sessions. Finding a location quickly will allow time to contact potential participants with the necessary logistical information. Try to find the most convenient and accessible location for the participants.

**Provide an Incentive for Participation**
Individuals taking part in a focus group session should be compensated for their participation. When contacting potential participants, use an incentive to encourage or persuade them to take part in the discussion session. Various forms of compensation can be used, most commonly a cash payment, lunch, or dinner. Snacks and beverages also may be provided. This often eases the tension created by the focus group setting and makes participants more open to discussing the topic.

**Selection of Focus Group Participants**
It is necessary to identify each group that will participate in the discussion sessions; for example, parents, community residents, school personnel. This will provide an indication of the number of discussion groups that will be conducted. Time, money, and the number of potential participants available will determine the number of groups that are feasible for each community.

A good size for a focus group is between six and twelve participants per session (American Statistical Association, 1997). Size is conditioned by two factors: the group must be small enough for everyone to participate and large enough to provide diversity of perceptions. Group participants should be selected because of common characteristics that relate to the focus group topic. For example, to gauge parents' perceptions of gangs in school, a focus group might be conducted with parents who have school-aged children.

**Moderating the Discussion**

An experienced focus group moderator should conduct the sessions. Moderating the discussion is difficult, and effective leadership is essential if the group is to accomplish its purpose. The moderator must not only be in tune with the purpose of the group but also have the necessary skills to effectively guide the group process. If it is not possible to provide an experienced moderator, the following key points should be considered:

- <u>Keep the conversation flowing</u>. The moderator needs to keep control of the discussion session. If participants get off track, it is the role of the moderator to pull the group back together. The moderator should keep the discussion as informal as possible and should encourage all participants to say what is on their minds. The moderator is in charge of the discussion, and it is his or her duty to draw information from the participants.
- <u>Length of discussion</u>. Each session should last approximately 90 minutes. The amount of information participants have and their willingness to participate will most likely dictate the length of the session.
- <u>Be neutral</u>. One benefit of having an outside person moderate the discussion is that the person can be neutral. People may disagree during the discussion, and the moderator must give equal time to all viewpoints. The moderator should not provide information. It is not the moderator's place to offer or convince participants of any particular point of view.

**Analysis of the Results**

After each focus group, the moderator or a neutral observer should write a report describing the discussion for the Assessment Work Group. The written report should follow the questions contained in the discussion guide. The report can be broken down into the following sections:

- <u>Background and objectives</u>. This section provides basic information regarding the initiative, purpose, and objectives of the assessment.
- <u>Methodology</u>. This section should describe how, when, and where the focus groups were conducted. It should describe the characteristics of the focus group participants and why they were selected. It should inform readers that discussion results are the opinions of a small sample and should be viewed with that consideration in mind.
- <u>Summary</u>. The summary is approximately one or two pages in length and should provide the reader with the important findings. It is suggested that this section be in a bulleted or numbered format.
- <u>Highlights of findings</u>. This section provides the reader with an in-depth analysis of the questions contained in the discussion guide. This is the section in which quotes and comments should be used to support the research findings.