

Focus group guidelines

The Committee suggests the following guidelines be followed when conducting focus groups with very sensitive populations. These guidelines have been designed for use in populations by whom information regarding criminal activities, confidential or other sensitive issues may be divulged.

To ensure maximum confidentiality, participants' real names should not be used and appropriate procedures should be adopted to ensure this practice. Participants should be instructed in the Participant Information and Consent Form not to use identifying names or places or time and should indicate that they accept responsibility for observing these requirements. The Committee recommends that focus groups proceed with each participant offering a pseudonym, present on a label, and that these be strictly used when any personal references to other people present are made. At the commencement of each group, the facilitator should provide clear guidance about these practices and warn that if another person in the group knows the identity of any person, then they must not reveal that identity in the focus group discussion or to any individual persons involved in the focus group. Should any participant have any difficulty about these matters they should immediately withdraw and discuss this with either the facilitator or a person nominated by the facilitator.

At the conclusion of each focus group, the facilitator should again remind participants why pseudonyms were used and appropriately acknowledge their co-operation in this regard. Participants may also be encouraged to reconfirm their commitment to the confidentiality of any information shared within this group.

Facilitators should intervene if any group member does not maintain these standards, including during termination of the group discussion, after appropriate debriefing of the process, if necessary. The Committee seeks reassurance that facilitators will be selected in such a way - and have adequate role induction to ensure - that they understand the use of pseudonyms is a necessary part of the requirement to maintain privacy and confidentiality, given the potentially sensitive nature of the focus group discussions.

The above procedure is not required for focus group discussions of a benign nature. However, if it is thought desirable to use pseudonyms in such research, researchers may adopt these guidelines and justify the need for these measures.

Researchers should provide a clear statement regarding data collection, use, storage and security arrangements to be adopted in the research and they must ensure that all handling of data is in accordance with relevant privacy legislation.