



PROBLEM
GAMBLING
PREVENTION

MASSACHUSETTS CENTER OF EXCELLENCE

CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS

A Toolkit for Communities Working
to Prevent Problem Gambling



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Massachusetts Department
of Public Health



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Consider these examples:

You've conducted a community survey to better understand the scope of problem gambling in your community, but discover that several demographic groups didn't participate.

You're planning a new problem gambling prevention program and want to learn more about how to design it in ways that resonate with the community.

Survey results tell you that underage gambling is high among high school students, but you want to better understand the factors that are contributing to the problem.

These are challenges that many community planners face, and they represent just some of the areas where focus groups can help.

Focus groups are small, structured group discussions that examine the perceptions and perspectives of a particular group. They offer problem gambling prevention (PGP) practitioners an important way to gather valuable perspectives from diverse community members—perspectives that are often missing from surveys. They also provide a unique opportunity for participants to engage in open dialogue, share experiences, and contribute to the development of effective PGP strategies.

By harnessing the collective wisdom of community members, focus groups can help PGP practitioners better understand the root causes of problem gambling in a community and develop interventions



tailored to specific community needs. Focus groups can also help to foster community engagement, build trust, and co-create sustainable solutions.

Specifically, focus groups allow PGP practitioners to:

- Ask questions that might be hard for people to answer in writing.
- Clarify participants' responses through probes and follow-up questions.
- Create rich dialogue as participants build on one another's comments.
- Generate narrative information that is compelling and easy to understand.

Conducting Focus Groups: A Toolkit for Communities Working to Prevent Problem Gambling offers PGP planners a step-by-step guide to conducting effective focus groups—from clarifying your purpose and developing questions to facilitating discussions and analyzing results. Each step is outlined to ensure that planners can leverage the full potential of focus groups in their PGP efforts.

More Than a Discussion Group

PGP planners often bring groups together to share ideas and troubleshoot problems. A focus group is more structured than a typical drop-in discussion group, more directed toward answering a specific question, and more specific about who is included.

Specifically, all focus groups include these key elements:

- **Small group size:** Focus groups are usually composed of 6 to 12 participants. Groups with fewer participants can make it difficult to sustain a lively and interesting discussion. Groups that are too large provide less opportunity for members to participate (which can lead to disruptive side conversations).
- **Representative participants:** Participants are chosen to represent a larger group of people from whom you want information.
- **Shared characteristics:** Focus group participants are similar in one or more ways (e.g., age, role/profession).
- **Set time frame:** Focus groups typically run between 60 and 90 minutes—60 for the main discussion plus 30 for introductions, laying out ground rules, and a debrief at the end.
- **Skilled facilitator:** Focus groups are led by someone with knowledge of the topic and group moderation skills.
- **Structured Discussion:** Focus groups explore participants' responses to a set of predetermined questions on a specific topic.
- **Documentation:** Focus groups require a strategy for capturing the data generated through group discussion for later analysis and application.

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The information you get out of a focus group is only as good as the effort you put into the planning process. A clear protocol can help define what you want to learn from your focus groups and help ensure that you get the information you're looking for. To develop a protocol, consider the steps presented below.

Clarify your purpose

Consider what it is you hope to learn. Is it the types of gambling teens engage in? If teens who are White and teens of color go to the same online sites? How parents talk to their teens about gambling? If educators encounter gambling in their classrooms? Each of these topics will require its own set of questions to be best answered by a different group of people.

When thinking about your purpose, start broad, then zero in on what you really need your groups to help you understand. A carefully focused topic will allow you to make the best possible use of the limited time you have for each focus group session.

Create a discussion guide

A discussion guide will help ensure that each focus group you convene produces the data you need. It should include **approximately 5–10 questions**. That may not seem like a lot, but if each participant responds to every question (which is what you want), and you have 8–10 participants, the time can add up quickly! Even simple questions take time.



Your guide should include three types of questions:

1. **Warm-up questions** help participants settle in, get comfortable, and start talking (e.g., What are some things you like to do in your spare time?) These questions will help get everyone talking and give you a sense of different people's communication styles.
2. **Key questions** explore your topic of interest. These questions can ask about feelings, beliefs, opinions, values, experiences, behaviors, and knowledge. It's helpful to begin with relatively easy questions that everyone should be able to answer and that don't require much disclosure (e.g., How often do you talk to your teen about gambling?), then work your way up to more challenging or sensitive questions (e.g., What are some things that might prevent you from talking to your teen about gambling?)
3. **Wrap-up questions** offer participants the opportunity to share final thoughts and help them feel a positive sense of closure when the focus group ends (e.g., Is there anything else you'd like us to know about why talking to your teen about problem gambling might be hard?) These "final" questions can sometimes generate some incredibly interesting—and surprising—insights and information.

Your key questions are the heart of your discussion—your reason for convening focus groups in the first place—so plan on devoting most of each session to these questions.

Include probes

Probes are follow-up comments or questions that facilitators can use to get more information from participants in response to key questions. In general, facilitators use probes to:

- **Explore key questions** in greater depth (e.g., We've talked about the look of our agency's brochure. What do you think about the language we used?)
- **Clarify the meaning** of participants' responses to key questions (e.g., When you say that the brochure's description of programs and activities are "hard to follow," what do you mean by that?)
- **Elicit responses** to key questions from quieter participants (e.g., How about from the other end of the table . . . do any of you have suggestions for improving our brochure?)

What Makes a Good Focus Group Question?

Good focus group questions sound natural and conversational. They should be:

- **Short and clear** so participants can understand them easily.
- **Neutral** so participants feel comfortable answering them honestly.
- **Open-ended** to allow for a range of responses, encourage discussion, and explore why people think or feel the way they do.



[SEE APPENDIX 1: Sample Questions for Youth Focus Groups on Problem Gambling](#)

[SEE APPENDIX 2: Sample Questions for Parent Focus Groups on Problem Gambling](#)

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In a focus group, discussion equals data. The quality of these data depends largely on the people responsible for the discussion. These are the group facilitator and the note-taker/recorder.

The group facilitator is the person in charge. They are responsible for creating an environment that encourages participants to express different viewpoints without feeling the need to come to consensus. To do this, the facilitator needs to be a confident leader, a clear speaker, a keen listener, and an impartial referee. When choosing a facilitator, ask yourself: *Who will my focus group participants feel most comfortable opening up to?* The answer may be a member of your focus population (e.g., a parent leading a focus group with fellow parents) or someone who is quite different from, but experienced in communicating and working effectively with your focus population.

The note-taker/recorder is responsible for capturing the details and dynamics of the focus group discussion. This can be done by recording the session and/or taking notes. They should also be responsible for managing latecomers and addressing any housekeeping issues that arise.



The Importance of Cultural Humility

When choosing a facilitator, consider their level of **cultural humility**—that is, their capacity for self-reflection, learning, and openness to different perspectives. A facilitator with cultural humility not only acknowledges the diversity within the group but also actively seeks to understand and respect the unique cultural backgrounds, values, and experiences of each participant.

Cultural humility involves more than just surface-level awareness of diversity; it requires a deep appreciation of the complexities and nuances inherent in cross-cultural interactions. This includes recognizing power dynamics, historical contexts, and systemic inequalities that may impact the dynamics of the focus group.

Furthermore, a culturally humble facilitator demonstrates a willingness to adapt facilitation techniques to best suit the needs of the group. This may involve modifying communication styles, incorporating culturally relevant examples and metaphors, and creating a safe space where participants feel comfortable expressing themselves authentically.

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Once you're clear on what you want to find out, consider which individuals or groups can provide you with the most credible information. These are the people you want in your focus groups. Keep in mind that it is best, whenever possible, to ask people directly about their perspectives and experiences.

For example:

- If you want to find out which sources of information about gambling that local high school students trust, you will want to conduct focus groups with local high school students.
- If you want to find out which barriers parents face when trying to discuss problem gambling with their teens, you will want to conduct focus groups with parents of local high school students. High school students will not be able to give you this information.

Here are some other things to think about when composing groups:

Participants should be similar to one another (although not in their opinions about the topics being investigated). The rule for selecting focus group participants is commonality, not diversity. You don't want to combine dissimilar people in focus groups—for example, don't put together people with high levels of education



and people with low levels of education. People are more likely to reveal their opinions and beliefs and to talk about sensitive issues when they are with people they perceive to be like themselves, rather than those whom they perceive to be different, such as people more knowledgeable, wealthier, or more influential than they are.

Participants should be unfamiliar with one another. This helps to ensure the validity of the data by encouraging participants to state their real opinions and views. When participants know one another, they:

- Are often less likely to reveal highly personal or sensitive information.
- Are more likely to express views that conform to those of others in the group (especially others whom they perceive as having some power or influence outside the group).
- May respond to questions based on their past experiences with one another, which can confound the data.

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To make your focus group a gathering that people will want to attend, it's important to: remove barriers to participation and establish incentives, as appropriate, to encourage participation.

Removing Barriers

When planning a focus group, make it as easy as possible for participants to attend. Scheduling a session at an impractical time of day or in a hard-to-reach location can severely limit your pool of potential participants. Similarly, hosting a remote session may present challenges for individuals who are not comfortable using technology or who lack access to it. To reduce barriers to participation, involve members of your focus population in deciding your choice of time, place, and setting.

With advance planning, it's easy to remove potential barriers to participation. For example:

- Choose a setting that is easy to locate, accessible, and inviting (e.g., a place where people might typically gather).
- Select a convenient day of the week and time of day (e.g., after school/work hours, times that are free from major conflicts).
- Make sure there is ample and easy parking; provide transportation support as needed (e.g., bus or subway passes, a van service).



- Arrange quality childcare, as needed.
- Find a room that is spacious and comfortable (e.g., good air flow and temperature controls).
- Provide an online option for participants who are not able or not willing to attend in person, accommodating individuals with scheduling conflicts, transportation limitations, or health concerns.

Providing Incentives

People participate in focus groups for a variety of reasons. Some welcome the opportunity to express themselves, meet interesting people, learn something new, or contribute to the greater good. Others may require a more tangible incentive to step away from their busy lives. Incentives serve to motivate people who may have competing interests and demands as well as communicate to participants that the focus group—and their time and input—are important and valued.

When choosing an incentive, think carefully about what your participants are most likely to value. Options include:

- **Money:** Amounts will vary by group. For example, youth group members may be excited about \$20, but a larger sum may be required to entice busy professionals. Consider reimbursing any transportation costs to and from the focus group.
- **Gifts or gift cards:** These might include Amazon gift cards for youth and pre-packaged family meals for working parents.
- **Food and drink:** This option should be more than just light refreshments (which should be a mainstay for all focus groups).
- **Charitable contribution:** Consider offering participants the option to make contributions to a local charity or cause that aligns with the focus group's purpose or the interests of the participants. This option can foster community engagement and social impact while incentivizing participation.

In some cases, it will make sense to offer a combination of these options (e.g., serve a meal during the focus group *and* send participants home with small gifts). It is also important to recognize that different cultures may have varying attitudes toward money, gifts, and food. For example, in some cultures, offering cash incentives may be perceived as inappropriate or even offensive.

If your budget (or funding restrictions) prevent you from offering individual incentives, consider alternatives such as these:

- **Participation rewards:** Offer a small token of appreciation to all participants, such as a branded item like a pen, notebook, or tote bag, as a reminder of their contribution.
- **Recognition and acknowledgment:** Acknowledge participants' contributions publicly, whether through a thank-you letter, social media post, or mention in a newsletter. Recognizing their involvement can serve as a meaningful form of validation for their efforts. To respect their privacy and confidentiality preferences, make sure to ask for participants' consent before acknowledging contributions publicly.

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Now that you've thought through the logistics of your focus groups, it's time to fill the groups! Below are strategies for successful recruitment:

Define the group as precisely as possible. For example, it usually makes sense to consider gender, age, occupation, geographic location, ethnicity, and language. Consider the following:

1. What do you want?
2. How might you identify potential participants who match your needs?
3. Are potential participants so diverse that you need to eliminate some of these members or put some in a separate group?

Use multiple outreach strategies. One way to reach potential focus group participants is to go where they are. For example, to recruit people who have access to fewer economic resources, you might post flyers in affordable housing unit bulletin boards. You could also put announcements in local newspapers and on public access cable stations, or post notices in public places such as libraries, supermarkets, and community health centers.

Another way is to work with partners to identify individuals or institutions who know about, have credibility with, and/or can put you in touch with people who match your screening criteria—such as well-connected individuals, a neighborhood association, or a trusted service provider.



You can also ask people you've already invited to identify others who, like themselves, meet your screening criteria (see next bullet point). Keep in mind, though, that this approach tends to produce candidates who know one another, so do your best to separate these individuals when assembling your final groups.

Finally, consider piggybacking onto other gatherings. This technique capitalizes on situations where potential recruits are already assembled. For example, if you want to talk to school principals from around the state, consider arranging focus groups during their statewide or regional meetings. Be sure to schedule your focus groups carefully so as to not disturb or interfere with participation in the original gathering.

Establish clear screening criteria. Screening criteria will help to ensure that the people you end up talking to are the ones you really want to hear from. Identify the specific characteristics you are looking for in a focus group participant *before* you begin searching for candidates (e.g., men between 18 and 25 years of age, young adults not attending college). Then, develop a short set of screening questions that recruiters can use when reaching out to potential participants.

Make a strong pitch. People will be more likely to participate if they believe that the project will benefit their community. Remind them that participating in the group gives them a chance to share their opinions and experiences with the project. Be upbeat; emphasize the benefits of participation; personalize your message, making sure each candidate feels needed; and include all relevant details so candidates can make an informed decision about whether to participate (see box below).

Recruit more people than you need. It's always a good idea to over-recruit, as no-shows are likely. So, if you're hoping that 10 people will show, recruit 12 or 13.

Send a personalized follow-up email to each recruited participant, and telephone them the day before the meeting. People may be enthusiastic about participating when you first reach out to them, but life can sometimes get in the way. It may feel like nagging, but sending follow-up information is an important way to keep your focus group on their radar.

Important Information to Share at Time of Recruitment

- Who is conducting the focus group and why
- Why their participation is important
- How they were selected to participate
- When and where the focus group will take place
- What participation will entail
- How their confidentiality will be protected and how they will be expected to respect the confidentiality of the other participants
- How they will be thanked (i.e., incentives)
- Your name and telephone number so they can call you if they have additional questions or discover they are unable to attend the group

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This section explores what to do on the day of your focus group, including details to consider and tasks to complete during each of the following periods:

- Before the session begins
- During the focus group discussion
- After the session ends

Before the Session: Getting Ready

Arrive on-site approximately 90 minutes before the start of the session. This leaves enough time for you to prepare the meeting space and address any last-minute emergencies. Make sure that setup is complete in time to welcome your participants as they arrive.

Setup includes the following tasks:

- Arrange the room (e.g., place chairs in a circle)
- Set up and test audio/video recording equipment
- Set up a registration table outside the room with name tags and other participant materials
- Prepare refreshments
- Identify the location of the restrooms



The Optimal Meeting Space

The optimal focus group meeting space is quiet and out of the way. Try to avoid high-traffic areas.

Surroundings should be comfortable and private, such as a private conference room. This setting will help to ensure that participants feel free to speak openly.

Give participants your name and telephone number so they can call you if they have additional questions or discover they are unable to attend the group.

As people arrive, be sure to do the following:

- Personally greet participants and thank them for coming.
- Have participants sign in.
- Provide participants with a nametag or nameplate, with the option to include their gender pronouns (use first names only to protect confidentiality).
- Have participants complete consent forms (if needed). Generally, informed consent is not necessary if the group comprises adults, the topic is not sensitive, and the questions do not focus on members' illegal or potentially embarrassing behavior. With minors, however, informed consent from a parent or guardian is always needed.



[SEE APPENDIX 3: Sample Consent Form](#)

It's also important to determine how to deal with late arrivals. Generally, it's best to dismiss people who arrive late, because it can be difficult to integrate them successfully into a group discussion that has already started. Explain to the latecomers that the group has already started but that you will contact them about any future focus group opportunities.

During the Session: Leading the Discussion

The focus group discussion includes three phases: (1) introductions and warm-up questions, (2) exploration of key questions, and (3) wrap-up questions and closing remarks. These are reviewed below.

Introductions and Warm-Up Questions

The facilitator's opening remarks should include the following:

- Welcome comments and thanks for participation.
- Introductions of focus group staff (i.e., facilitator and note-taker).

- Brief review of the nature and purpose of the focus group.
- Expectations for participants (e.g., that everyone participate).
- Assurance of confidentiality (e.g., “We will record the group because we want to capture everything you have to say, but we won’t identify anyone by name in our report.”).
- Opportunity for participants to ask any questions before beginning the discussion.
- Ground rules for discussion.

What Do We Mean by Ground Rules?

Ground rules establish how participants will be expected to interact during the focus group. They are most effective when generated at the start of the session, by the group members, themselves. Here are some examples:

- Let’s hear from everyone!
- One person at a time.
- There are no right or wrong answers.
- Everyone’s ideas and experiences are valuable.
- We will not always agree, but we must always show respect for one another.
- What is shared in this room stays in this room.

Exploration of Key Questions

Key questions are designed to generate a rich discussion among participants and produce the information and insights you need to answer your research question. To support this discussion, the facilitator needs to:

- **Follow the focus group protocol.** Ask the questions in the order specified in your protocol. Not following your plan can get confusing for both you and the participants.
- **Invite and promote participation by all members.** At times, it may be necessary to ask participants who have not spoken to contribute. Use prompts, such as, “John, we haven’t heard your opinions about this issue yet. What do you think?” But don’t put people on the spot if they simply don’t have anything to say.
- **Listen actively** so participants know they are being heard and want to share more (e.g., make direct eye contact, let participants complete their thoughts without interruption, attend to nonverbal cues).
- **Clarify responses using neutral probes. For example:**
 - Can you explain further?
 - Can you give us an example of what you mean?

- Is there anything you would like to add?
- Can you say more about that?
- I'm not sure I understand, can you help me out?

Avoid body language that reflects how you feel—especially nodding or shaking your head. Avoid approving or disapproving comments after people speak, such as saying “Good” or “Correct” or “Really?”

Capturing the Discussion

Note-taking and recording are both excellent ways to capture your focus group discussion. Doing both is even better! Notes can provide important context for a recording. For example, notes may indicate that several participants had questioning looks—even if only one participant answered question. By relying on a recording alone, you may lose critical information if someone is inaudible, the Internet connection is weak, or other technical issues prevent some conversations from being captured. Here are tips for both approaches.

Taking Notes

- **Use a note-taking form that aligns with the protocol or discussion guide.** Take notes for each question, and call the facilitator's attention to any missed questions.
- **Document all details,** including who says what, how many participants hold different viewpoints, and verbatim comments, when possible.
- **Don't overlook facilitator comments.** The facilitator will often summarize key discussion points before moving on to new questions.
- **Document nonverbal communication.** Were there questioning looks? Heads nodding in approval or shaking in disagreement?

Recording

- **Choose the right tools.** Many modern smartphones offer excellent audio and video recording capabilities, making them a convenient and cost-effective option. For virtual focus groups, ensure that your chosen video conferencing platform supports recording features and offers clear audio and video quality.
- **Be prepared for technical issues.** With any technology, there is a chance of equipment failure. Take preemptive measures by having backup recording equipment available, such as a second recorder or a spare microphone.
- **Transcription and translation.** Recording sessions allow for full transcription and later translation if needed. Many video conferencing platforms offer transcription services, but keep in mind that automated transcriptions may not always be accurate, particularly in capturing nuanced discussions or multiple speakers.

Remember, you must have participants' permission to record a focus group!

- **Elicit and protect minority opinion.** Focus groups should help you understand the full range of perspectives and experiences present in the group, not just the perspectives and beliefs of those who are most vocal.
- **Maintain order.** Many groups have at least one challenging participant—the expert, the endless rambler, or the dominant talker. It is better to intervene with them a bit earlier than to let things go.
- **Manage the time.** This will help to ensure that each question receives sufficient attention, and the session meets participant expectations (e.g., start and end on time, gently redirect participants as needed to stay on track).

Wrap-Up Questions and Closing Remarks

When wrapping up or closing the focus group discussion, the facilitator should make sure to:

- Ask participants if they have anything else to share about the topic.
- Let participants know how they can contribute additional ideas following the session.
- Explain next steps (e.g., plans to share a summary report with participants).
- Thank participants for being part of the focus group.

Debriefing

Once the focus group session ends and participants leave, it is helpful to:

- Draw a diagram of the seating arrangement.
- Check to ensure the recording was successful and files are accessible.
- Organize and digitally store notes, recordings, and any other relevant materials.
- Create a backup of the recording, using both online and offline versions, and store it securely in a designated location.

The facilitator and note-taker should also spend some time reviewing their notes, sharing their observations and initial impressions of the discussion, discussing any questions or concerns, and noting preliminary themes that emerged. Debriefing immediately after a focus group can reveal ways to improve future sessions (e.g., changes to questions or setting) and provide valuable insights for later data analysis.

Consider the following issues:

- Were there any major departures from the protocol?
- Were there any unusual events? If so, how were they handled?
- Was there sufficient time to complete the protocol comfortably? If not, why not? What issues were cut short?

- Was the group fairly unified in its views, or was there a diversity of opinion? If there was diversity, did it seem associated with particular types of participants, such as males vs. females?
- Were there any major disagreements in the group? If so, what were they?
- What was the group process like—were people bored, restless, excited, angry, silent, confused?
- What, if anything, should be changed for the next group?



SEE APPENDIX 4: Sample Outline for Debriefing Notes

Inclusivity in Data Collection: Recognizing Neurodiversity

Focus groups offer a unique opportunity to learn, in real time, how selected groups of community members understand and think about a given issue. Their effectiveness depends on participants' willingness to share their experiences openly and to respond to the comments of those around them.

This approach can work well for neurotypical participants—that is, individuals who think, perceive, and/or behave in ways that are considered the norm by the general population. But traditional focus group settings fail to capture the insights of those participants who are neurodiverse. For these individuals, challenges may arise due to differences in processing information, comfort levels with group interactions, or sensory sensitivities. While these challenges are not inherent or explicit to neurodiverse individuals, they stem from the structure of traditional focus groups, which may expect quick responses and extensive verbal contributions.

To improve the inclusivity of focus groups, consider providing clear communication about the format and topics beforehand and offering flexible participation options, such as virtual attendance or alternative communication methods. Creating a comfortable environment with minimal sensory distractions and facilitating structured discussions with opportunities for diverse contributions can also enhance inclusivity and accessibility. Additionally, actively seeking feedback from participants about their experience and adjusting the format or accommodations based on their input can further improve the inclusivity of focus groups.

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Focus groups have the potential to produce mountains of data. Here are some tips for transforming your raw data into something more manageable and meaningful.¹

Transcribe the recording. After each focus group, transcribe the tape and insert notes, as needed. Clean up transcripts by stripping off nonessential words. Assign each participant comment a separate line on the page. Label each line with a participant ID number (e.g., 1, 2, 3 . . .).

Compile your results. Use differently colored highlighters (ideally, five or six different colors) to identify recurrent themes, which will make compilation and analysis easier. Create an Excel database, or use a table format (if no one is proficient in Excel). Here are some guidelines:

- Use a separate spreadsheet or table for each focus group.
- Within each spreadsheet, use one sheet per question.
- Make three columns and label them *Coding*, *Participant ID*, and *Responses*.
- Fill in Participant ID and Responses for each question (coding will be done in analysis).

¹ Adapted from: Rhode Island State Epidemiology and Outcomes Workgroup, Buka, S., & Rosenthal, S. (2015, January 7). *Rhode Island Partnership for Success: A Guide to the Community Needs Assessment*.



Analyze your results. Once all the comments have been entered, look for common categories or themes across responses for each question. It is ideal to have several people participate in this process. Do any specific groups of people or other factors stand out? Are there any issues that seem to keep coming up? Once consensus has been achieved regarding the best categories for organizing the data, assign a number or letter to each category. (See Table 1 for an example.) Repeat this process for each question in each focus group.

Synthesize your key findings. Write a short paragraph summarizing the findings for each category, possibly noting similarities and differences across groups. Note any questions that remain unanswered. Add powerful quotes to bolster your analysis.

Table 1. Sample Analysis Table

Focus Group 1: Youth		
Question 3: What are the main reasons, do you think, that high school students gamble?		
Category Code	Participant ID	Responses
B	4	"Some teens are just bored."
A	3	"Usually they are just trying to be cool."
B	1	"They might feel sad or depressed."
A	4	"Everyone does it."
B	2	"It's fun."
C	6	"Need money."
C	5	"They think they'll get rich."
D	4	"Their parents are okay with it."
B	2	"They're good at it."

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Focus groups can be interesting and fun, but their main purpose is to produce change. What will you do with your findings now that you have them?

For example:

- If your focus groups revealed challenges or opportunities for your programs and services, then use your findings to *improve current prevention practices*.
- If your focus groups raised new questions, then use your findings to *plan additional data collection efforts*.
- If your focus groups opened your eyes to emerging prevention needs, then use your findings to *raise awareness, build partnerships, and establish new prevention practices*.



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APPENDIX 1

Sample Questions for Youth Focus Groups on Problem Gambling

Definitions

People define gambling or betting in lots of different ways. Here's the definition I'd like to use today, so we're all on the same page:

Risking something of value on the outcome of an event when the probability of winning is less than certain.

Social Norms

- Is this how you think about gambling or betting?
 - Probe:** In what situations would you use the term gambling?
 - Probe:** In what situations would you use the term betting?
 - Probe:** Are there any other terms you use?
- Do a lot of young people gamble/bet at (name of their school)?
 - Probe:** [If yes] How do you know?
 - Probe:** What percentage of young people at your school do you think gamble/bet?
- What types of gambling/betting do young people at your school do?
 - Probe:** Lottery tickets? Electronic games? Sports betting? Others?
- On average, how often do you think young people gamble/bet?
 - Probe:** Weekly? Daily? Twice a day? Hourly?
- What are the main reasons young people gamble/bet?
 - Probe:** Beyond wanting to win, are there other things that teens might get out of gambling/betting? What are some reasons they do it?
- Do you think there are certain groups or types of young people at your school who are more likely to gamble/bet?
 - Probe:** What's different about the ones who gamble/bet and the ones who don't?
- How old are most young people when they start gambling/betting?
- Do young people tend to gamble/bet when they're alone or when they're in groups?
- Do you think substance use affects how often young people gamble/bet?
- How often do you talk to your friends about gambling/betting?

Perception of Harm

- Do you think gambling/betting is harmful?
 - Probe:** [If yes] How or why? [If no] Why not?

- Do you think winning is the result of chance or “skill”?
- How often do you think people win when they gamble/bet?
- Should there be any consequences for students who are found to be gambling/betting at school?
Probe: [If yes] What should these consequences be?
Probe: What about when they’re gambling/betting outside of school?
- Do members of your family gamble/bet ?
Probe: Do you think that affects your attitudes toward gambling/betting?

Parental Monitoring

- When young people at your school gamble/bet, how likely are other people to find out?
Probe: Why or why not?
- Do you know of parents or adults who look the other way or don’t seem to care when their kids gamble/bet?
- Do you know of parents or adults who talk to their kids about gambling/betting?
- How would you feel if your parent talked to you about gambling/betting?
- What are some steps parents can take to help their teens understand the risks of gambling and they should avoid it?

Access

- Where do young people go to gamble/bet?
Probe: How do they access sites/methods that aren’t legal for them?
- Which online gamble/bet sites do they use most frequently?
- How easy is it for young people to access these sites?

Outreach/Programming

- Does your school have a no gambling/betting policy?
- Does your school offer any education about gambling/betting?
- What programs or services are available at your school or in your community to prevent students from gambling/betting?
- Are you aware of local resources that can help students who are struggling with gambling/betting?
- Do you have any idea how effective our community has been at enforcing laws against underage gambling/betting?
- Do you think any of the following solutions would be effective at preventing underage gambling/betting in your community? (Provide examples: math and statistics lessons, learning about the risks of gambling, better enforcement of underage gambling laws, reducing advertising for sports betting, afterschool programs, parents telling you that you shouldn’t be gambling)



DOWNLOAD [Sample Questions for Youth Focus Groups in Word \(.docx\)](#)

APPENDIX 2

Sample Questions for Parent Focus Groups on Problem Gambling

Social Norms

- People define gambling in lots of different ways. Here's the definition I'd like to use today, so we're all on the same page: Risking something of value on the outcome of an event when the probability of winning is less than certain.
- What terms do you use to describe what we're calling "gambling" (for example, betting or gaming)?
Probe: Is this how you think about gambling?
Probe: In what situations would you use these other terms?

For the remainder of this focus group, we'll use the term "gambling" to include all types of gambling and betting. However, please let us know if your response is specific to different types of activities.

- Do you think underage gambling is a serious problem in (name of the community)?
Probe: [If yes] Why? [If no] Why not?
- In your opinion, do many young people gamble, or is it just a few?
Probe: What percentage of students at your child's school do you think gamble?
- Do you know any young people who gamble?
- At what age do you think young people who gamble get started?
- In your opinion, how often do young people gamble?
- In your opinion, what are the main reasons that young people gamble?
- Are there certain groups or types of young people who you think are more likely to gamble in this community?

Perception of Harm

- Do you think underage gambling is harmful?
Probe: [If yes] How or why? If not, why not?
- What are some potential consequences of underage gambling?
- Do you think winning is the result of chance or "skill"?
- How might gambling affect a young person differently than an adult?
- What do you think should happen to a young person who is found gambling?
- Are playing games that involve chance an accepted part of your culture or heritage?
Probe: Do you think that affects your child's attitude toward gambling?

Parental Monitoring

- Do parents in your community talk to their children about gambling?
- How do parents feel about their children gambling?
- When young people in your community gamble, how likely are other people to find out?
Probe: Who do you think would find out? Parents? Family members? Teachers?
- Do you know of parents or adults who allow their children to gamble?
- How much do you feel like you know about your child's gambling habits?
- Do you know of parents or adults who talk to their children about gambling?
- Would you feel comfortable broaching the topic of gambling with your child?
- If you were going to talk to your child about gambling, what would you say?
Probe: Have you tried to say any of this? If so, how has the conversation gone?
- What are some steps parents can take to prevent their children from gambling?

Outreach/Programming

- Are you aware of local resources that can help young people with gambling-related problems?
- Are you aware of programs in the community to educate parents about underage gambling?
- How effective do you think our community is at preventing underage gambling?



DOWNLOAD [Sample Questions for Parent Focus Groups in Word \(.docx\)](#)

APPENDIX 3

Sample Consent Form

We appreciate the opportunity to meet with you today. The purpose of this meeting is to find out why some young people gamble, and talk about some possible ways to prevent problem gambling in youth. This is one of four groups we are conducting on this topic—two with teens, one with parents, and one with high school teachers.

This focus group will last about 45 minutes. My role is to guide the conversation, so I will be asking you questions and listening to your answers. If you have any questions on the topics that we discuss, please feel free to ask them at any time.

We are taking notes and recording the meeting today so that we can accurately report on what you tell us. In order for the recording to work well, it is important that only one person talks at a time so that we can hear everything that is said. Once a written report is completed, we will delete the audio tape.

The written report will help us identify the risk and protective factors associated with youth gambling. This and other information will help us develop strategies to reduce youth gambling in the community.

The information gathered today will be shared in a general way that does not let people know who came to the meeting, or who said what.

There are no right or wrong answers. We ask that you please answer the questions honestly.

And, finally, we encourage everyone to participate, though you may choose how much you want to speak during the meeting. You may also choose to excuse yourself from the room at any time.

PLEASE PRINT YOUR NAME

DATE

PLEASE SIGN YOUR NAME

WITNESS SIGNATURE

DATE



DOWNLOAD [Sample Consent Form in Word \(.docx\)](#)

APPENDIX 4

Sample Outline for Debriefing Notes^{2,3}

A comprehensive debriefing process can help facilitators capture key insights and reflections from the focus group session. The following sample outline provides a structured format for documenting important details, participant responses, and areas for improvement.

1. Date of focus group:
2. Location of focus group:
3. Name of facilitator:
4. Name of note-taker (person or AI):
5. Number of participants:
6. Participants' characteristics (e.g., demographics):
7. Participants' level of engagement:
8. Any departures from the protocol/discussion guide:
9. Any problems encountered during session (e.g., fire alarm):
10. Summary of responses to key questions:
 - a. Descriptive words, phrases, and/or quotes:
 - b. Overall patterns and themes:
 - c. Sub-themes (e.g., views shared by small groups):
 - d. Relevant group dynamics or nonverbal cues (e.g., inconsistencies between comments and body language)
11. Suggested modifications for next session (e.g., to key questions, setting):



DOWNLOAD [Sample Outline for Debriefing Notes in Word \(.docx\)](#)

² Seymour, A. (2004). Focus groups: An important tool for strategic planning. http://www.justicesolutions.org/art_pub_focus_groups.pdf

³ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for the Application of Prevention Technologies. (n.d.). *Outline for a focus group summary report [Unpublished document]*.



