Guide to Organizing Focus Groups

[charting a course › to safe › living]
vol. 10

Québec

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Canada   Québec

The [charting a course › to safe living] collection

This document is part of a collection prepared to foster and support safety promotion in life settings. Volumes 4 to 13 are the main components of a safety diagnosis tool kit developed for local communities. To date, the following volumes have been compiled for this collection:

Volume 1

Levaque, Renée, Laurence Le Hénaff and Pierre Maurice. *Formation pour l'amélioration de la sécurité et la prévention de la criminalité à l'intention des collectivités locales*, Québec, Institut national de santé publique du Québec, 2006.

Volume 2

Alvarez, Josephina. *Réalisation d'un diagnostic de sécurité. Trousse à l'intention des collectivités locales – Les diagnostics locaux de sécurité : une étude comparée pour mieux comprendre et mieux agir*, Québec, Institut national de santé publique du Québec, 2006.

Volume 3

Laforest, Julie. *Indicateurs de vulnérabilité associés à la sécurité d'un territoire*, Québec, Institut national de santé publique du Québec, 2007.

Volume 4

Rainville, Monique, Louise Marie Bouchard and Pierre Maurice. *Safety Diagnosis Tool Kit for Local Communities. General Guide*, Québec, Institut national de santé publique du Québec, to be published in March 2010.

Volume 5

Lavertue, Robert, Louise Marie Bouchard and Louise Motard. *Safety Diagnosis Tool Kit for Local Communities. Guide to Preparing an Area's Sociodemographic and Economic Profile*, Québec, Institut national de santé publique du Québec, to be published in March 2010.

Volume 6

Motard, Louise. *Safety Diagnosis Tool Kit for Local Communities. Guide to Analyzing Crime Using Official Statistics*, Québec, Institut national de santé publique du Québec, to be published in March 2010.

Volume 7

Bouchard, Louise Marie. *Safety Diagnosis Tool Kit for Local Communities. Guide to Organizing Telephone Surveys on Public Safety and Victimization in Life Settings*, Québec, Institut national de santé publique du Québec, to be published in March 2010.

Volume 8

Ouellet, Michel and Louise Marie Bouchard. *Safety Diagnosis Tool Kit for Local Communities. Guide to Organizing Self-Administered Surveys on Public Safety and Victimization in Life Settings*, Québec, Institut national de santé publique du Québec, to be published in March 2010.

Volume 9

Ouellet, Michel and Louise Marie Bouchard. *Safety Diagnosis Tool Kit for Local Communities. Guide to Organizing Self-Administered Surveys on Public Safety and Victimization in Life Settings (Social Housing Version)*, Québec, Institut national de santé publique du Québec, to be published in March 2010.

Volume 10

Rainville, Monique. *Safety Diagnosis Tool Kit for Local Communities. Guide to Organizing Focus Groups*, Québec, Institut national de santé publique du Québec, 2009.

Volume 11

Laforest, Julie. *Safety Diagnosis Tool Kit for Local Communities. Guide to Organizing Semi-Structured Interviews With Key Informants*, Québec, Institut national de santé publique du Québec, 2009.

Volume 12

Ouellet, Michel, Monique Rainville, Louise Marie Bouchard and Catherine Belley, *Safety Diagnosis Tool Kit for Local Communities. Guide to Direct Observation of Community Safety*, Québec, Institut national de santé publique du Québec, 2009.

Note to readers

USE OF THIS GUIDE

This guide was prepared for people who wish to organize focus groups as a part of a safety diagnosis process. However, the procedure described here may also be used with focus groups on other issues, provided an appropriate discussion plan is designed.

SOURCES

The content of sections "Focus groups – A general overview" and "Focus groups – An in-depth look" was adapted from an electronic documents put out by the Walloon Region of Belgium. Since this document was housed on a site that has not been accessible since 2008, readers who wish to obtain a copy are invited to contact the authors (see the "Contact Us" page on the CRPSPC Web site):
http://www.crpspc.qc.ca/default_an.asp?fichier=joindre_an.asp

The content of the section "Organizing focus groups – Aide-mémoire" has been adapted from information provided on the following Web site:
http://www.integration-projects.org/tools/Methodologie_du_focus_group_FR.doc

Table of contents

Organization of the guide

The first two sections of this guide discuss focus groups

as a method for making safety diagnoses. The section

"Focus groups – *A general overview*"

provides a brief description of this approach,

its usefulness and its limits. The section

"Focus groups – *An in-depth look*"

describes the steps involved in organizing

focus groups and provides a short summary of how to analyze

the data gathered. The third and fourth sections contain,

respectively, an *aide-mémoire*

and *additional reference documents*.

At the end of the guide are plans

for facilitating *discussions* on various safety-related topics.

1 OVERVIEW

2 AN IN-DEPHT LOOK

3 AIDE-MÉMOIRE

4 REFERENCES

DISCUSSION PLANS

Focus groups – A general overview

A focus group is a group discussion led by a facilitator. Participants are asked to share their thoughts on a particular topic, based on their personal opinions and experience. They are also encouraged to react to the views expressed by other participants and to say where they stand in relation to those views.

In the model proposed in this guide, focus group participants are selected on the basis of community representativeness criteria. This ensures that the groups provide a wide range of viewpoints and perceptions, and can thus help to shed light on the different opinions and degree of consensus that exist on a given topic, such as the feeling of safety in a regional county municipality (RCM) or a municipality. In safety diagnoses, focus groups are used primarily to gather the opinions and perceptions of a population about the following safety-related topics: the safety of a particular life setting, the feeling of safety, and problems that cause concern, be they disorderly conduct, incivility, crime or victimization.[1] Safety diagnosis focus groups can also be used to discuss the quality of public services. Several focus group sessions may be needed to enable all potential participants to take part in the discussions. It may be a good idea to get in touch with them through community organizations.

WHEN SHOULD YOU USE FOCUS GROUPS?

- When you need to determine a population's opinion on specific topics like disorderly conduct and incivility in their area.

- When you need to take stock of the perceptions, opinions, desires and practices of several different types of stakeholders and gain a better grasp of possible differences or contradictions in the needs and expectations of or constraints on the various groups in a particular area.

- When you need to highlight viewpoints that are more explicit or meaningful than the out-of-context facts gathered through survey questionnaires.

- When you want to obtain fairly detailed descriptions of desires, needs, expectations or proposed solutions.

- When you want to get stakeholders involved in a safety diagnosis project fairly quickly. The fact that the focus group approach makes people feel valued can be used to advantage.

- When you wish to identify "allied" groups of stakeholders, who might be asked to play a role during the different phases of the process that follow the safety diagnosis per se, as well as "opposing or resistant" groups of stakeholders who must be taken into account throughout the project.

- When you want to assess the difference between the perception of problems expressed by participants and the picture that emerges from public or private databanks.

- When the population to be polled is too small to conduct a survey.

- When the cost of a survey outstrips available financial resources.

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1. In this guide, victimization is defined as a situation where a person is a victim of an action that adversely affects him/her or his/her property. This is the definition used by numerous experts interested in delinquency and insecurity, including Sébastien Roché (*Le sentiment d'insécurité*, Paris, PUF, 1993).

Focus groups – An in-depth look

Prior to setting up a focus group, your project team must give some thought to the kind of information they would like to obtain. They must try to answer the question: "What do we want to learn?" Therefore, team members must clearly establish the goals of the focus group and the questions that will be put to participants. They must also think about which groups will be invited to take part. Once again, your team must try to answer the following questions: "Which groups are more likely to provide us with information on the questions that are of interest to us?" "Which groups cannot be contacted with other data gathering methods?" In short, setting up a focus group involves careful planning and organization.

OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

The direction and scope of a focus group depend on the goals your project team wants to achieve. Therefore, time must be set aside to reflect on your objectives and put them in writing. Once your goals are defined, you have to prepare the list of questions that will be posed to focus group participants.

As mentioned earlier, focus groups are used in safety diagnoses mainly to document 1) people's perception of disorderly conduct and incivility in their community, 2) their feeling of safety and 3) their assessment of the services available to them. Sample lists of questions on different aspects of these topics are given at the end of this guide. The questions may be changed, however, to suit your needs. If a focus group is being set up to document a topic other than the ones mentioned in this guide, an additional activity must be planned to draw up the list of questions that will be asked during the focus group.

The projected length of a focus group session has an impact on the number of topics that can be discussed. Based on your objectives, you have to reflect on how the session should proceed. For example, you may decide to limit the amount of time devoted to each topic so as to cover more issues, or you may opt to define the priority of topics beforehand and discuss the main ones first, leaving those of lesser priority to be dealt with if time permits. Generally speaking, five or six major questions can be discussed in one session.

STAKEHOLDERS

Who should take part in focus groups?

A focus group requires:

• one or more facilitators, who also play a minor role before and after each session;

• participants representing the different groups of stakeholders who have an interest in the community's safety diagnosis (citizens, community groups, experts, local authorities, etc.). It is up to the project team to determine the most effective distribution of stakeholders among the different sessions (e.g. according to geographic sector, target clientele (young people, seniors, etc.)).

2 AN IN-DEPHT LOOK

The role of the facilitator is to:

- help define the objectives of the focus group;

- adopt a plan for the focus group session and set the priority of topics to be discussed (see discussion plans);

- further the information made available to the project team as the session progresses, by encouraging participants to expand on certain points, by raising new ideas, by refocusing the discussion if necessary, etc.;

- remain neutral throughout the discussion;

- foster constructive debate without preventing the spontaneous expression of opinions (adopting a warm tone of voice encourages participation);

- summarize the discussion.

How do you determine the composition of focus groups?

Depending on the subject, the needs of the project team and the aptitudes of the facilitator, focus groups should be made up of 8 to 15 people representing the different groups of stakeholders concerned by the topic to be discussed. A stakeholder table[2] may be useful for identifying these stakeholder groups. Different methods can be used to decide on the make-up of focus groups. The method selected will primarily take into account the number of people who have been asked to participate, as well as community dynamics (e.g. previous cooperation or conflict among representatives of the different stakeholder groups).

It is very important to adapt the composition of focus groups to the geographic sectors defined when the area under study was divided into meaningful sectors (if necessary, reread the section on this procedure in the *Guide to Preparing an Area's Sociodemographic and Economic Portrait*). The larger the area, the more important this process is for analysis purposes. Indeed, the information captured during focus groups can be expected to be much more consistent when all participants are well informed about the sector concerned. In addition, some people are not necessarily prepared to travel long distances to take part in a focus group session. Therefore, you have to consider holding sessions in several different locations and recruiting participants by municipality or sector, depending on your objectives.

The composition of groups may be heterogeneous or homogeneous in terms of socioeconomic profile or affiliation (e.g. members of youth centres, golden age clubs). Heterogeneous groups can curtail the spontaneity of discussions and make some participants less inclined to share personal experiences. Homogeneous groups, on the other hand, can generate findings that are more or less monolithic or even biased. In short, each option has its advantages and disadvantages. Nevertheless, it is worth trying to draw together a group of people with different profiles, for the results are often richer and more nuanced.

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2 The term "stakeholder table" is explained in the *Safety Diagnosis Tool Kit for Local Communities. General Guide*.

PREPARING AND CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS

What resources do you need to conduct focus groups?

If you decide to organize one or more focus group sessions yourself, you have to determine the amount of time, material resources and money required. Therefore, you must:

- estimate how much time is needed to prepare and hold the sessions and to analyze the data afterwards;

- determine how much time is needed to identify, recruit, assemble and host participants;

- make the necessary arrangements: in particular, reserve space for holding the sessions, hire a facilitator, send out invitations and obtain the materials and equipment needed to take notes, tape discussions, etc.;

- provide refreshments (beverages and perhaps snacks);

- look into the possibility of compensating participants, by refunding their travelling expenses, for example.

How do you recruit participants?

Recruiting participants is an essential part of the process of organizing focus groups. There are no infallible methods for identifying people that have an interest in a safety diagnosis for a given community, but here is some advice that may prove useful:

- if possible, use the stakeholder map prepared at the beginning of the diagnosis; or

- ask community partner organizations to recruit participants from their clientele;

- take already targeted geographic sectors into account when making up groups;

- opt for homogeneous or heterogeneous groups on a case-by-case basis;

- if you decide to hire subcontractors to organize the focus groups, remember that the partners you choose might be very helpful for identifying people who should be asked to participate;

- be sure to take advantage of your own experience, word of mouth and networking to complete your sample.

Some funding might be dedicated to providing participants with a small amount of financial compensation, particularly for their travel costs. Such compensation lets participants know their help is important and appreciated, and can only make their contribution more conscientious.

It is also important to bear in mind that some topics may not be of much interest to certain groups of stakeholders (especially highly solicited groups). Therefore, you must make an effort when contacting potential participants to present the focus group topic in an appealing and clear manner.

Lastly, when you are trying to decide where to conduct a focus group, it is important to choose a "neutral" location, or a place not associated with the topic to be discussed, with particular political options, with personal convictions, and so forth. This will reduce anxiety among the people who have been invited to the session and encourage them to actively participate.

2 AN IN-DEPHT LOOK

How do you invite people to take part?

Your project team or its partner organizations must identify the people they think might be willing to attend the focus group. They then have to contact these people in order to explain the process under way and determine if they would be interested in participating. Those who agree to take part are sent an invitation containing all the necessary information:

- the date, time and location of the focus group;

- the approximate length of the meeting;

- the context in which the focus group is being organized;

- the capacity in which the person is being invited (as a private citizen or as a representative of an organization);

- the topic to be discussed (presented in an appealing and clear manner);

- the anticipated results;

- the use to which the information obtained will be put;

- a statement to the effect that participants' prior agreement will be requested if audio- or video-taping is planned.

Providing all of this information is very positive for the people contacted and makes them feel valued. Moreover, it probably encourages them to reflect beforehand on the topics to be discussed during the focus group, to talk about them with friends and family and to think about how they will express their ideas, and so forth.

How do you prepare focus groups?

Plans for facilitating discussions on safety-related topics that might be dealt with during focus groups are presented in the section "Focus groups – Discussion plans". In cooperation with project teams or committees, facilitators must adopt an appropriate discussion plan based on the objectives defined. Such plans are designed to keep the discussion going and to provide facilitators with guidelines that they must try to follow throughout the session. Facilitators must also decide what topics will be given precedence, based on their knowledge of the community concerned.

For example, you might use the following plan for a focus group on disorderly conduct and incivility in a particular community:

- start by asking participants to describe the current situation, their real-life experiences, actual and perceived problems, expectations, etc.;

- encourage them to try and understand the problems identified and to suggest possible solutions;

- lastly, review the ideas expressed and attempt to group them based on common features. Facilitators usually ask each participant to identify the "x" main points that were highlighted by the discussion or that he/she feels are most important (e.g. the three main problems raised, the three most interesting solutions put forward for resolving each one, etc.).

How do you conduct focus groups?

Often, plans are made to have an observer assist the facilitator. This can be useful as long as the roles of each person are clearly defined. The facilitator and the observer must agree beforehand on their respective duties during the focus group. Usually, a pragmatic approach is adopted, with the facilitator leading the discussion and the observer looking after the logistics (taping the discussion, taking notes, etc.).

At the start of the focus group session, facilitators must strive to create a group atmosphere, by requesting, for instance, that participants arrange the tables in a circle or that they introduce themselves. Facilitators must also gain the trust of participants by explaining the goal of the focus group and why their participation is important, and by stressing the constructive and informal nature of the discussion; they must also remind participants that the data gathered will be used in complete anonymity. It is also at this stage that facilitators should obtain participants' written consent for taping or using what is said.

To encourage participants to express their views, it is useful to remind them of how important it is for the project team to gather everyone's opinions. It is also essential to remind them that the goal is not to judge or rank people's opinions.

Ideally, once the discussion is launched, the facilitator should structure it. At the same time, however, he/she must try to ensure participants feel the discussion is natural and informal. In fact, most of the facilitator's comments must not be perceived as questions, but as prompts. In addition, the facilitator must make sure that everyone has a chance to speak (but without forcing them to so) and must avoid expressing his/her opinions.

Facilitators must also keep the discussion on track, while allowing participants to express themselves freely. On the other hand, they must check the tendency of some people to systematically, although not necessarily consciously, support the opinions of brighter, more influential or more talkative participants.

Formulating questions

Even if the discussion does not always flow, the facilitator must not be seen as the person designated to take the floor between speakers or as a kind of authority. He/she must absolutely avoid asking leading or loaded questions or answering questions addressed to him/her by participants. In addition, facilitators must refrain from using gestures or words that show or even suggest approval or disapproval (e.g. if they say "yes, that's interesting" to one participant but not to anyone else, this could be seen as suggesting that other participants' comments are "uninteresting").

Facilitators must strive to keep the discussion open. From the outset, they must ask open-ended questions in order to get participants to interact. They must also choose their words carefully throughout the discussion so as to adapt to the reactions of people and encourage participation. For example, to elicit fairly specific answers, they must try to ask fairly specific questions such as "Do you think this place is safe?" However, they must be careful not to ask questions that are formulated in such a way as to elicit silence. For instance, they should avoid asking: "Does anyone want to add something?"

2 AN IN-DEPHT LOOK

Facilitators must also avoid asking questions that are too obvious or too direct. For example, people often want to know the reasons behind a particular opinion, attitude or need. However, it is not really ideal to ask this type of question directly for it tends to put the interlocutor on the defensive and often gives rise to answers that are not very satisfactory. This is because the answers are:

- OF NO USE – It is hard to get people to say exactly why they act, behave or think in a certain way: their reasons are often unconscious, complex and multi-faceted and vary over time. Moreover, it is not easy for people to verbalize something they may never have even thought about or to objectively analyze all the reasons why they think or do one thing rather than another, etc.

- TOO RATIONALIZED AND TOO BANAL, AND DO NOT REVEAL THE REASONS YOU ARE REALLY LOOKING FOR – For example, if you ask a doctor why he/she prescribes a certain medication, you can expect the doctor to say "Because it's the one that works the best", even though his/her real motivation is tied, at least in part, to conservatism, greater familiarity with the medication in question, etc.

- MADE-UP – People have all sorts of reasons for not revealing or even not being honest with themselves about why they act, think or behave in a particular way.

However, certain techniques can encourage participants to open up. One approach is to tell the group something that the previous group said on the topic under discussion. This can further analysis of aspects for which more data are needed or make it possible to validate specific pieces of information. However, facilitators who use this technique must be careful not to introduce a social desirability response bias among participants, i.e. a tendency for the latter to alter their personal opinions in an effort to please the facilitator or the other participants.

In short, facilitators must create a climate conducive to exchanging views, ensure that discussions are in keeping with the objectives set, encourage all participants to take part and, if necessary, keep the debate from getting too heated. At the same time, they must show respect for participants and try to maintain an attitude of benevolent neutrality.

How long should sessions last?

Sessions sometimes run as long as two to two and a half hours. If they are any longer, the attention and concentration of participants and facilitators starts to wane. So as not to interrupt the flow of discussions with breaks, it is recommended sessions last no longer than an hour and a half, without a break. The other possibility is to allow participants to take a break at an appropriate time, such as between two topics.

How should you conclude sessions?

It is useful to take some time at the end of each session for debriefing and analysis. To conclude the proceedings, the team that conducted the focus group should provide a summary of the opinions gathered and the discussions that took place. It is a good idea to inform participants of the preliminary results so that they can comment on them. Their comments should be written down and included in the data gathered.

Before ending a session, it is important to thank participants by stressing that their participation will be of help in preparing the safety diagnosis and to inform them of the next stages planned for the project.

How many sessions should you plan to hold?

It is not always possible to determine beforehand how many sessions will be necessary. The number varies according to the characteristics of the community concerned: the number of stakeholders to be met, the size of the area and its specific features. Furthermore, additional sessions may be needed because of the nature of the information being gathered. It may also be desirable to achieve a degree of information saturation, that is, to obtain the same information several times from different stakeholders. The repetition and redundancy of data provide a means of validating the importance of opinions expressed.

How should you structure the information gathered during focus groups and analyze the results?

An in-depth discussion of the processing and analysis of data gathered for safety diagnosis purposes can be found in the *General Guide*. The process as described below is merely a brief summary of the steps usually involved, particularly in analysing data from focus groups.

- Ideally, transcribe and reread the tape recordings and notes made during the sessions. Since transcribing the recordings in their entirety can be a fairly cumbersome task, a compromise solution is to simply identify and write down the main themes that emerge as you listen to the tapes.

- Classify the information gathered using an analytical framework based on the topics discussed during the focus groups. Answer the question "What?" Initially, use a different framework for each session.

  For example: What are the principal problems mentioned by participants?

- Identify the main ideas expressed for each topic: areas of consensus, divergent or controversial opinions, concerns voiced by specific groups, problems raised, solutions proposed, etc. Answer the questions: "Where?" "When?" "How?" and "Why?"

  For example: Which places in the borough under study are avoided by the local population and why?

- Prepare a summary of the ideas expressed, bearing in mind the safety-related topics that were to be explored.

  For example: Did participants voice differing opinions about the nature of the main problems?

- Devote part of the analysis to the climate of the focus groups, participants' attitudes and interaction, and any other information that might be of use for marshalling the necessary resources.

  For example: Did participants say why their organization decided to take part in the safety diagnosis?

  Did they mention any conflicts between organizations and, if so, are the conflicts likely to hamper efforts to marshal resources?

  Did certain positions become more sharply defined within the context of the safety diagnosis? Did any community leaders display animosity or scepticism toward the process?

  Who are your best allies?

- Validate the findings (main problems and solutions) among the members of your project team and with focus group participants or other designated authorities.

- Reflect as a team on the opinions of the different stakeholders.

- Try to reach a consensus on the main findings or observations using the information already available.

Should you hire subcontractors to conduct focus groups?

Organizing, running, facilitating and analyzing focus groups requires special skills and, above all, time. One or two weeks are needed to prepare the sessions and up to several weeks to hold them, depending on how easy it is to recruit participants, set up and assemble groups, and so forth. Also, the time required to summarize and analyze the results is proportional to the number of sessions organized.

Therefore, it is often a good idea for committees or teams that want to conduct focus groups to entrust the practical organization to a subcontractor. However, they can always play a role before and after the sessions (e.g. by helping to recruit participants or by taking part in analyzing the data collected). This approach enables committees or teams to benefit from the expertise of professionals for technical aspects while leaving themselves the latitude they need to supervise operations.

Organizing focus groups – Aide-mémoire

Activity	Content	Time frame
Learn about the situation in the target community.	Consult available data on the community's characteristics (sociodemographic statistics, crime data, etc.).	6 weeks before the focus group
Define the focus group's objectives.	Identify the safety-related topics and subtopics to be explored.	5 weeks beforehand
Decide on the composition of the focus group.	Identify organizations and people in the community that have an interest in the topics under investigation and target those mostly likely to bring a range of views to the focus group.	5 weeks beforehand
Recruit participants.	Recruit 8 to 15 participants for each session.	5 weeks beforehand
Choose a facilitator and an observer.	Facilitators are responsible for guiding the group discussion without taking sides. Their role is to keep the discussion going, ask questions and ensure each participant has a chance to take the floor. Observers do not take part in the discussion. Their role is to report what is said (by taking notes, audio-taping the session).	4 weeks beforehand
Choose a discussion plan from the options proposed in this guide or build your own plan if the focus group deals with other topics.	The plan should cover 3 to 4 major questions at the most.	4 weeks beforehand
Reserve a place for holding the focus group.	Choose a central, comfortable and neutral location.	4 weeks beforehand
Send invitations to participants.		4 weeks beforehand

3 AIDE-MÉMOIRE

Activity	Content	Time frame
Prepare a plan for how the focus group will proceed.	This will ensure that sessions are consistent when several have to be held.	▲ 2 weeks beforehand
Check (by phone or e-mail) if participants plan to attend.		▲ 2 weeks beforehand
Organize the logistics (equipment for the room, refreshments).	Flipchart, felt pens, list of participants, reservations, beverages, snacks, notebook, tape recorder and tapes, other equipment.	▲ 1 week beforehand
Remind participants.		▲ 2 days beforehand
CONDUCT THE FOCUS GROUP.	Suggested length: 2 hours and 15 minutes. Suggested plan: 1. Word of welcome and introduction: 15 mins. (remind participants of the context, objectives and organization of the session). 2. Ask the questions and facilitate the discussion: an hour and a half 3. Summarize what was said: 15 mins. 4. Conclude the session: 15 mins (thank participants, explain how the data gathered will be validated and used).	
Prepare a summary report on the session.	Write down the highlights of the meeting (observations on how it went, the climate, etc.).	▲ 1 day afterwards
Send a letter of thanks to participants.		▲ 2 days afterwards
Transcribe, if necessary, tapes and notes made during the session.		▲ 3 days afterwards
Analyze the data collected and write a report for validation purposes.	For a review of the steps involved, reread the section on how to analyze the data. If necessary, refer to the Guide to Processing and *Analyzing Information Gathered for the Purpose of Making Safety Diagnoses.*	▲ 2 weeks afterwards

To learn more about focus groups

Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada, *Evaluating Crime Prevention through Social Development Projects. Handbook for Community Groups*, 2006, Module 4, p. 77-79, at: http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/prg/cp/_fl/Evaluation_handbook-E.pdf

Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences (ICES), *Focus Groups in Health Services Research at the Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences*, 1999, at: http://www.ices.on.ca/file/Focus%20groups%20in%20health%20services%20research%20 at%20the%20Institue%20for%20Clinical%20Evaluative%20Sciences.pdf

REFERENCES

4

Focus groups – Discussion plans

Three discussion plans have been developed to help facilitate focus groups on the safety of a specific community or area. Each plan contains a detailed, but non-exhaustive list of topics that can be discussed in order to explore the issues of disorderly conduct and incivility, safety and the feeling of safety, and the perceived quality of public services. Sample questions are presented for each topic.

The plan selected will depend on the focus group's objectives. Note that each plan contains more questions than necessary. It is suggested that you give priority to three questions and reserve a fourth one for discussion if time permits.

Each discussion plan comprises two columns. The left-hand column contains the different questions. The right-hand column is not part of the plan per se, but is an aide-mémoire for aspects that might be talked about during the discussion and for familiarizing the facilitator with the various concepts. These aspects might also serve as categories for analyzing the data gathered during the focus group. To learn more about disorderly conduct, incivility, safety, the feeling of safety, and public services, consult the appropriate section of the *Safety Diagnosis Tool Kit for Local Communities. General Guide*.

These three discussion plans are available in MS Word format on the Web site of the Québec Safety Promotion and Crime Prevention / Centre québécois de ressources en promotion de la sécurité et en prévention de la criminalité (crpspc.qc.ca) at:
http://www.crpspc.qc.ca/default_an.asp?fichier=outils_diagnostic_an.htm
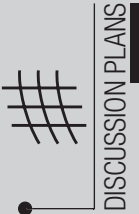
DISORDERLY CONDUCT AND INCIVILITY

TOPICS DISCUSSED	Aspects that might be considered

PERCEPTION OF PROBLEMS RELATED TO DISORDERLY CONDUCT

1. Is your sector/municipality/neighbourhood affected by acts of vandalism?

   a) If so, what kind of vandalism?

Manifestations of vandalism:

- broken or damaged public property (e.g. buildings, parks, play equipment, arenas)
  – benches, tables, trees, landscaping, telephone booths, bus shelters, streetlights, mailboxes
  – other public equipment
  – tags[3] and graffiti

- broken or damaged commercial property (e.g. shopping centres)
  – store windows, benches, tables, trees, landscaping, signs, streetlights
  – other commercial equipment
  – tags and graffiti

- broken or damaged private property
  – homes, flowerbeds, trees, cars, bicycles
  – other private property
  – tags and graffiti

   b) Is any particular group involved?

Groups:

- people with nothing to do

- reactive or aggressive people

- people with mental health problems

- young people

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3. According to the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, a tag is a graffito in the form of an identifying name or symbol (http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tag).

TOPICS DISCUSSED	Aspects that might be considered
DISORDERLY CONDUCT AND INCIVILITY	

c) Why do you consider this to be a problem?

Reasons given:

- it entails substantial material costs

- it affects the feeling of safety

- it changes the area's image

- it has an impact on people's habits or behaviour

- other reasons (specify)

2. Is your sector/municipality/neighbourhood affected by itinerancy or squatting problems?

a) If so, which areas are most affected?

Areas:
- public spaces
- commercial spaces
- private spaces (e.g. vacant lots)

b) Is any particular group involved?

Groups:
- people with nothing to do
- reactive or aggressive people
- people with mental health problems
- young people

TOPICS DISCUSSED

DISORDERLY CONDUCT AND INCIVILITY

Aspects that might be considered

DISCUSSION PLANS

c) Why is this considered to be a problem?

Reasons given:

- these people annoy, intimidate or insult others

- they affect the feeling of safety

- they bother people (e.g. noise)

- they have an impact on people's habits or behaviour

- they cause cleanliness and hygiene problems

- they increase the risk of violence or fire

- they affect the area's image

- other reasons (specify)

3. Is your sector/municipality/neighbourhood affected by problems of loitering or of groups of people gathering there on a regular basis?

a) If so, which areas are most affected?

Areas:
- public spaces
- commercial spaces
- private spaces (e.g. vacant lots)

b) Is any particular group involved?

Groups:
- people with nothing to do
- reactive or aggressive people
- noisy adolescents
- people with mental health problems
- criminal gangs
- people who are drunk

TOPICS DISCUSSED

DISORDERLY CONDUCT AND INCIVILITY

Aspects that might be considered

c) Why is this considered to be a problem?

Reasons given:

• these people annoy, intimidate or insult others

• they affect the feeling of safety

• they bother people (e.g. noise)

• they have an impact on people's habits or behaviour

• they cause cleanliness and hygiene problems

• they increase the risk of violence or fire

• they change the area's image

• other reasons (specify)

4. Is your sector/municipality/neighbourhood affected by problems related to motor vehicle races or speeding?

a) If so, which areas are most affected?

Areas:

• public spaces

• commercial spaces

• private spaces

b) Is any particular group involved?

Groups:

• people with nothing to do

• reactive or aggressive people

• noisy adolescents

• criminal gangs

• people who are drunk

TOPICS DISCUSSED

DISORDERLY CONDUCT AND INCIVILITY

Aspects that might be considered

c) Why is this considered to be a problem?

Reasons given:

- people fear for their safety or for that of family and friends
- it affects the feeling of safety
- it has an impact on people's habits or behaviour
- it bothers people (e.g. noise)
- it affects people's real safety
- it gives the area a more negative image
- other reasons (specify)

5. Is your sector/municipality/neighbourhood affected by problems related to drug dealing or prostitution?[4]

a) If so, which areas are most affected?

Areas:

- public spaces
- commercial spaces
- private spaces

b) Why is this considered to be a problem?

Reasons given:

- these people annoy, intimidate or insult others
- they affect the feeling of safety
- they bother people (e.g. noise)
- they have an impact on people's habits or behaviour
- they increase the risk of violence
- they change the area's image
- other reasons (specify)

DISCUSSION PLANS

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4. We could have classified drug and prostitution problems with those related to crime (see *Guide to Analyzing Crime Using Official Statistics*). However, we decided to group them with disorderly conduct problems in view of the fact that the various nuisances caused by these commercial activities have a greater impact on people's perceptions than their illegality does.

TOPICS DISCUSSED	Aspects that might be considered
DISORDERLY CONDUCT AND INCIVILITY	

PERCEPTION OF PROBLEMS RELATED TO THE PHYSICAL DETERIORATION OF BUILDINGS AND SITES

6. Have you noticed places in your sector/ municipality/neighbourhood where the cleanliness or maintenance of buildings and sites seems to be very lacking?

    a) If so, which places are most affected?

    - Unsafe, abandoned buildings
    - Buildings in need of numerous repairs (e.g. with broken windows or lights, damaged stairs, damaged or worn exteriors)

    b) Can you tell me more precisely what you have seen?

    Observations:
    - presence of a large amount of litter (e.g. used syringes and condoms, pieces of glass, bottles)
    - abandoned cars and broken windshields
    - run-down, not very safe play equipment

    c) Why is this considered to be a problem?

    Reasons given:
    - it affects the feeling of safety
    - it bothers people (e.g. noise)
    - it has an impact on people's habits or behaviour
    - it creates cleanliness and hygiene problems
    - it increases the risk of violence or fire
    - it changes the area's image
    - other reasons (specify)

TOPICS DISCUSSED	Aspects that might be considered
DISORDERLY CONDUCT AND INCIVILITY	

PERCEPTION OF OTHER SOURCES OF NUISANCE

7. Are there other sorts of problems in your sector/ municipality/neighbourhood that adversely affect your quality of life?

> Other nuisances:
> - noisy neighbours
> - unpleasant odours
> - loose or bothersome animals

    a) If so, which areas are most affected?

> - Unsafe, abandoned buildings
> - Buildings in need of numerous repairs (e.g. with broken windows or lights, damaged stairs, damaged or worn exteriors)

    b) Can you tell me more precisely why this bothers you?

> Reasons given:
> - it affects the feeling of safety
> - it bothers people (e.g. noise)
> - it has an impact on people's habits or behaviour
> - it makes people spend more time indoors
> - it causes cleanliness and hygiene problems
> - other reasons (specify)

IMPORTANCE OF PROBLEMS

8. Based on everything that was discussed during the focus group, what do you think are the three main causes of disorderly conduct and incivility in your community?

> Can the participants agree on the order of importance of these causes?

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

9. What could the municipality or citizens do to reduce disorderly conduct and incivility in your sector/ municipality/neighbourhood?

> - Municipal action
> - Citizen action
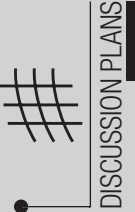
SAFETY AND THE FEELING OF SAFETY

TOPICS DISCUSSED	Aspects that might be considered

DISCUSSION PLANS

PERCEPTION OF SAFETY

1. I would like you to describe your sector/
    municipality/neighbourhood to me from a safety
    standpoint. Do you find it safe?

    a) If so, what are the main reasons you find it safe?

    b) If not, what are the main reasons you find it
       unsafe?

    c) In your opinion, what are the main safety
       problems in your sector/municipality/
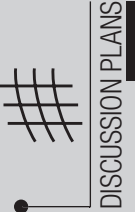   neighbourhood?

Safety is linked to the characteristics of:

- the physical environment
  – private spaces
  – public spaces

- the social environment
  – social disparities (itinerancy,
    prostitution, etc.)
  – incivility and disorderly conduct
  – informal control, strength of networks

- victimization
  – break-ins and property thefts
  – assaults
  – road injuries

- public services
  – maintenance
  – police services
  – other types of services (e.g. rapidity of
    ambulance and fire service response

MEANING GIVEN TO THE FEELING OF SAFETY

2. What do you mean when you say you feel safe in
    your sector/municipality/ neighbourhood?

The feeling of safety is linked to a person's
characteristics:

- physical or psychological make-up
  (e.g. gender, age, state of health,
  temperament, handicaps)

- experience (e.g. education, victimization)

- beliefs, perceptions and values (e.g. feels
  unsafe in public places, has racist attitudes)

- lifestyle (e.g. lives in the city, lives alone,
  goes to certain places, uses certain modes
  of transport)

- economic power (e.g. income)

TOPICS DISCUSSED	
SAFETY AND THE FEELING OF SAFETY	**Aspects that might be considered**

FEELING OF SAFETY

3. Do you feel safe in your sector/municipality/ neighbourhood?

   a) If so, what are the main reasons you feel safe?

   b) If not, what are the main reasons you feel unsafe?

   c) Are there places you avoid because you do not feel safe there?

In addition to personal characteristics, the feeling of safety is linked to:

- protective measures and behaviour that a person adopts

- his/her perception of the quality of public services, particularly:
  – maintenance and lighting of parks and public spaces
  – maintenance and lighting of shopping centres

- victimization
  – break-ins and property thefts
  – assaults
  – road injuries

- the physical environment
  – run-down, poorly lit neighbourhoods

- the social environment
  – social disparities

- incivility and disorderly conduct

PROBLEMS REPORTED

4. Can you give me any examples of situations in your sector/municipality/neighbourhood over the past year that have changed how safe you feel there?

   For example, were there any thefts in your neighbourhood? Did this affect your feeling of safety?

   Was there any vandalism? Did this affect your feeling of safety?

   Did any people or groups of people occupy certain places at night, make noise or frighten you?

   Were there any ethnic or religious tensions?

- Break-ins and property thefts

- Vandalism and other disorderly conduct and incivility

- Assaults

- Ethnic or religious tensions

- Intimidation or taxing

- Road injuries

- Deterioration of certain areas

TOPICS DISCUSSED	Aspects that might be considered
SAFETY AND THE FEELING OF SAFETY	

DISCUSSION PLANS

PERSONAL BEHAVIOUR AND ADOPTION OF PROTECTIVE MEASURES

5. Over the past year, have you adopted special behaviour in your everyday life in order to protect yourself?

Protective behaviour (e.g. locking doors, avoiding certain areas, not going out at night)

PROTECTIVE FACTORS: INFORMAL SOCIAL CONTROL

6. Do your neighbours affect your feeling of safety in your sector/municipality/neighbourhood? In what way?

Unofficial social control:

- surveillance by neighbours
- confidence in neighbours and a climate of mutual aid
- strength of contact networks

POLICE SERVICES

7. Does the current organization of police services in your area affect your feeling of safety in your sector/municipality/neighbourhood? In what way?

Perception of available police services

OTHER MUNICIPAL AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

8. Do the other services offered in your sector/municipality/neighbourhood affect your feeling of safety?

- Other services offered:
  – maintenance
  – fire service
  – ambulance service
  – other municipal and community services
- Presence or absence
- Perception of services offered

TOPICS DISCUSSED	Aspects that might be considered
SAFETY AND THE FEELING OF SAFETY	

IMPORTANCE OF PROBLEMS

9. Based on everything that was discussed during the focus group, what three factors do you think most affect your feeling of safety?

- Can the participants agree on the order of importance of these factors?

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

10. What could the municipality or citizens do to enhance your safety or your feeling of safety in your sector/municipality/neighbourhood?
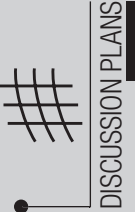
- Municipal action
- Citizen action

ASSESSMENT OF PUBLIC SERVICES

Introduction

Services delivered to a population can have an impact on people's safety and their feeling of safety. Therefore, the following questions deal with your perception of various public services.

TOPICS DISCUSSED	**Aspects that might be considered**

DISCUSSION PLANS

POLICE SERVICES

1.1 In general, are you **satisfied** with the work done by the police in your sector/ municipality/ neighbourhood?

- Confidence in police services
- Assessment of services offered
- Use of services

    1.1.1 What are the main reasons you are **satisfied** with these services?

    1.1.2 Do you have any reasons for being **dissatisfied** with these services?

Reasons for being satisfied or dissatisfied:
- presence
- efficiency and effectiveness
- visibility
- prevention work (e.g. in schools)

1.2 Have you ever called on the police services in your area? If so, in what circumstances?

    1.2.1 What are the main reasons you are **satisfied** with the services received?

    1.2.2 Do you have any reasons for being **dissatisfied** with the services received?

Reasons for being satisfied or dissatisfied with the services received:
- quality of the reception you received in filing a request or complaint
- quality of the response or follow-up you received regarding a request or complaint

TOPICS DISCUSSED	Aspects that might be considered
ASSESSMENT OF PUBLIC SERVICES	

RECREATION SERVICES

2.1 In general, are you satisfied with recreation services in your sector /municipality/neighbourhood?

- Assessment of services offered
- Use of services
- Safety of installations

    2.1.1 What are the main reasons you are **satisfied** with these services?

    2.1.2 Do you have any reasons for being **dissatisfied** with these services?

Reasons for being satisfied or dissatisfied with the services offered:

- presence
- availability
- maintenance
- supervision

LAYOUT AND MAINTENANCE OF ROADS, STREETS AND SIDEWALKS

3.1 In general, how would you assess the layout of roads, streets and sidewalks in your sector / municipality/neighbourhood?

General assessment of their layout

    3.1.1 What are the main reasons you are **satisfied** with their layout?

    3.1.2 What are the main reasons you are **dissatisfied** with their layout?

Reasons for being satisfied or dissatisfied with their layout:

- safety of intersections
- presence or absence of road signs and traffic lights
- adequate lighting

TOPICS DISCUSSED	**Aspects that might be considered**
ASSESSMENT OF PUBLIC SERVICES	

DISCUSSION PLANS

3.2 In general, how would you assess the maintenance of roads, streets and sidewalks in your sector/municipality/neighbourhood?

    3.2.1 What are the main reasons you are **satisfied** with their maintenance?

    3.2.2 What are the main reasons you are **dissatisfied** with snow and ice removal from streets and sidewalks?

> Reasons for being satisfied or dissatisfied with their maintenance:
>
> - cleanliness of streets and sidewalks: cleaning time and quality
> - state of roadways and sidewalks: repair time and quality
> - frequency and quality of snow removal
> - replacement of streetlights

LAYOUT AND MAINTENANCE OF PARKS, FACILITIES AND PUBLIC SPACES

4.1 In general, how would you assess the **layout** of parks, facilities and public spaces in your sector/municipality/neighbourhood?

> General assessment of their layout

    4.1.1 What are the main reasons you are **satisfied** with the layout of parks?

    4.1.2 What are the main reasons you are **dissatisfied** with the layout of public spaces

> Reasons for being satisfied or dissatisfied with their layout:
>
> - safety of parks
> - safety of play equipment
> - safety of other equipment
> - safety of public spaces
> - adequate lighting

TOPICS DISCUSSED	Aspects that might be considered
ASSESSMENT OF PUBLIC SERVICES	

4.2 In general, how would you assess the **maintenance** of parks and public spaces in your sector/ municipality/ neighbourhood?

    4.2.1 What are the main reasons you are **satisfied** with the maintenance of parks?

    4.2.2 What are the main reasons you are **dissatisfied** with the maintenance of public spaces

> Reasons for being satisfied or dissatisfied with their maintenance:
> - cleanliness of parks
> - cleanliness of facilities
> - cleanliness of public spaces

OTHER SERVICES

5. The previous questions may be used as models for formulating other questions aimed at measuring how satisfied the population is with other services linked to public safety:

- Other municipal services
- Front-line health network services (CSLCs, ambulance services, etc.);
- Community or non-governmental organizations
- Etc.

IMPORTANCE OF PROBLEMS

6. Based on everything that was discussed during the focus group, what three factors do you think most affect your feeling of safety?

> Can the participants agree on the order of importance of these factors?

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

7. What could be done to improve the services offered in your sector/municipality/ neighbourhood?

> - Municipal action
> - Action by non-governmental organizations
> - Citizen action