

GUIDE FOR CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS WITH REENTERING PRISONERS

Below is a collection of documents that may be helpful in conducting focus groups with persons who have returned to the community after being incarcerated, as well as service providers who work with formerly incarcerated people. These documents were taken from a variety of Urban Institute studies. They are intended only as examples and will need modification for your specific circumstances. Nonetheless, they may help guide your work, and you are free to copy any of the language directly into your own documents.

The documents come primarily from a study that involved two focus groups – one with persons who were “recently released” from prison, i.e. were released less than 6 months ago and had not been under DOC/parole supervision, and one with “successfully reintegrated” former prisoners, meaning people who were released from prison over three years ago, had been on the outside without being under any kind of parole or DOC supervision for over three years, and had remained crime free during the time since their release from prison.

We hope the information contained in this packet is helpful to you as you move forward in your own work on reentry. If you have further questions, please contact us.

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FOCUS GROUP TELEPHONE RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

Hello, my name is [name] and I'm calling from [organization name]. We are an independent research organization located here in [city]. I was given your name by _____ because we are working on a project to learn about the challenges prisoners face when they return home and _____ suggested that you would be a good person to talk to. We are going to be holding a focus group discussion on [date] at [location] to talk about how former prisoners overcome obstacles they face when they return home and to hear any advice they would give to prisoners who are about to return to their communities.

I am calling to ask if you would be willing to join us on [date] and tell us your experiences. We will pay you \$25 for your time and we'll also be serving a light dinner. Would you be interested in participating?

Yes

Great. I just have a few questions to ask to make sure you meet our study criteria:

[screening questions for recently released inmates]: I understand that you were recently released from prison, is that right? When did that take place? *[if more than 6 months ago, politely explain that they do not meet your study criteria]* Are you under parole or other DOC supervision? *[if yes, politely explain that they do not meet your study criteria].*

[screening questions for successfully reintegrated individuals]: I understand that you were released from prison over three years ago, is that right? When were you released from prison? How long have you been on the outside and not under any kind of parole or DOC supervision? *[if released or under supervision less than three years ago, politely explain that they do not meet your study criteria].* Have you remained crime-free in that time? *[if no, politely explain that they do not meet your study criteria].*

[if passed screening questions]

What I need to do now is get your mailing address. I will be sending you a confirmation letter in the next couple of days that gives you all of the details about the meeting including the date and time and a map to [location]. The letter will also give a phone number you can call if you have any questions about the meeting or if you need to cancel for any reason.

[Get mailing address]

Thanks so much for agreeing to participate. Do you have any questions before we hang up?

[Answer any questions they might have]

Okay. I'll be sending you the confirmation letter tomorrow and I look forward to meeting you at [time] on the [date]!

Borderline

[Prod a little bit and then...] Okay. I understand that you aren't sure whether you want to be part of the discussion. *[repeat screening questions above].* Would you mind if I put your name down as an alternate?

NO

[*Prod a little bit and then...*] Okay. Thank you for your time. Take care.

Q: What time is the session?

[Time]

Q: Do you work for the police, court, etc.?

No, we are independent non-profit organization. We are not connected with the police, court, probation or parole department, or any other agency here in [city].

Q: What will you do with the information I tell you?

We will be using the information to write a report that we will share with service providers in the [city] community. Our goal is to help agencies in the area find out what kinds of services former prisoners need when they return home so that the agencies are better able to provide them.

Q: Will you tell anyone else the information I tell you?

All of the information you tell us will be kept completely confidential. The only exception to this is if you tell us about a specific plan to commit a crime or harm yourself in the future, in which case we are required by law to report it. Otherwise, everything will be kept in the strictest confidence. We will not share anything you tell us with the police, prosecutor, court, probation or parole department, any other agency, or anyone else.

We will be tape-recording the session so that we can keep an accurate record of what was said. However, we will destroy the tape as soon as we have made complete notes of the meeting and we will not use your real name in preparing the notes. Also, we will not use your real name in preparing our report.

Q: I have a friend who is also a former prisoner. Can s/he come to the meeting, too?

We have enough people at the moment, but if you like I can take down your friend's name and keep him/ her in mind as an alternate.

Other questions?

FOCUS GROUP CONFIRMATION LETTER

Dear [Participant's name],

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the focus group that [organization] is holding on **[date] at [time] at [location]**. Enclosed with this letter is a map and directions that show you how to get to [location]. We will be meeting in [room at location].

As we explained in our telephone call, the purpose of this focus group is to learn about the experiences you have had since you have been out of prison and to hear any advice you would give to prisoners who are about to return to their communities. You will be part of a group of seven or eight people from the _____ community who are all former prisoners. We know that people have many different experiences after they return home from prison, and we are very interested in hearing your thoughts on the subject.

The focus group will begin at [time] and end at [time] on [date]. We know how valuable your time is and we will respect everyone's schedules by starting and ending on time. Please allow yourself enough time to reach [location] by [time]. If you arrive after the discussion has started we may not be able to include you.

We will provide a light supper and pay you \$25 for attending the meeting, whether or not you decide to participate in the discussion. We will be tape recording the discussion so that we can keep a careful record of what people say. However, we will destroy the tape as soon as we have made complete notes of the meeting, and we will not use your real names in preparing the notes. All of the information you tell us will be kept confidential.

We are glad you have agreed to participate in this group, and we are eager to hear from you about your experiences. **If you have any questions or cannot attend the meeting for any reason, please call us at [phone number] as soon as possible.**

We look forward to meeting you on [date]!

Sincerely,

[name and title]

FOCUS GROUP OVERVIEW

As part of a series of efforts by [organization] to understand prisoner reentry issues in [location], staff from [organization] will be conducting focus groups with recently released and successfully reintegrated former prisoners in [city/county name] on [date]. The purpose of the focus groups is to gain specific and reliable information on the risks and needs of the returning prisoners in the [community name] community. The focus group discussions will address barriers that former prisoners face upon reentry as well as elements that contributed to their successful reintegration. Details about the logistics, recruitment, and discussion guide for the focus groups are provided below.

Focus Group Background and Preparation

Type and number of groups

[organization name] will be holding two focus groups. Two sets of participants will be drawn for the groups. One of the groups will be with persons recently released from prison (released less than six months ago) who are not under parole or DOC supervision. The second group will be with former prisoners who have successfully reintegrated into society. Criteria for participation in the second group include having been released from prison over three years ago, having been on the outside without being under any kind of parole or DOC supervision for over three years, and having remained crime free during the time since their release from prison.

Date	Location	Time	Moderator	Center Staff	UI Staff

Schedule for focus groups

5:30 Arrive at location
5:30 – 6:00 Set up
6:00 – 6:30 Meet and greet/ Dinner
6:30 – 8:00 Hold session

Incentives

Each person who attends the focus group will be given [\$ amount] cash if they show up, whether or not they agree to participate.

Refreshments and snacks

[organization] will provide a light dinner for the participants.

Audio recording

Focus group participants will be informed that the session will be audiotaped. [organization] will bring the tape recorder and microphone for the two sessions.

Lap top

[organization] will bring a lap top computer for note-taking during the two sessions.

Other equipment and supplies

[organization] will bring name tents and markers for participants to use during the sessions. We will ask participants to write the name (first name only) that they would like to be referred to during the session on the name tent. Participants should be reminded that their names will not be used in the written reports. See Focus Group Checklist for full list of supplies that will be brought to the groups.

Dress code

Moderator/ observers should dress business casual.

Recruitment

Recruitment is being conducted by [organization name] staff. They are starting with 15 names per session with the hope of achieving a group of 8 to 10 people for each session. [organization name] will follow up initial recruitment with confirmation letters to participants and will confirm participation with telephone calls the night before each session. If someone backs out at the last minute, [organization name] will call any alternates to see if they would be willing to participate.

SUPPLY CHECKLIST

- Laptop for notetaking
- Floppy disks
- Notepads for participants
- Pens or pencils for participants
- Blank name tents (20 per group)
- Introductory scripts
- Background information sheet (15 per group)
- Consent forms (15 per group)
- Tape recorder (uses two AA batteries)
- Microphone w/ stand (uses one AA battery)
- Cassette tapes (if one tape = 90 min, bring 4 tapes per group)
- AA Batteries, for microphone and recorder (6 total — 3 in use, 3 extra)
- Extension cords (one for laptop)
- Large flipchart for note-taking
- Markers
- Stipends (\$25 cash for each participant)
- Food for 15 people
- Soft drinks/ water for 15 people
- Napkins
- Paper cups
- Paper plates
- Plastic utensils
- Garbage bags

FOCUS GROUP PROCEDURES

- Arrival of staff
- Setup of equipment
- Arrange room

- Arrival of group participants
- Registration of participants
- Casual talk / “small talk”

- Focus Group introduction – moderator use “introduction script”

- Opening question (short, factual – quick question for everyone to answer)
 - Tell us what you are doing now.

- Introductory question – to begin topic discussion

- Transition question(s) – to move conversation into the key questions

- Key questions – body questions
 - main topics of the study
 - may require 10-15 minutes per question, depending on question and group
 - can't have too many questions; look for 4-7 main questions that we want answers for

- Ending question(s) – to close the discussion
- “all-things-considered” question – allow participant to reflect on discussion
- summary question – after moderator quickly summarizes discussion, participants invited to make sure summary is correct
- final question – ensure that nothing has been missed, or for the moderator to get feedback

TIPS ON RUNNING THE FOCUS GROUPS

Introductions and consent

After all of the members of the group have arrived, the moderator will begin the session by introducing [organization] staff, describing the purpose of the focus group, and explaining moderator and participant roles during the session. The moderator will then distribute the consent form and the background information sheet. Moderator will review the consent form with participants and ask them to sign it and complete the background sheet. The second moderator will collect the consent forms and the background sheets. Those who decline to participate will be dismissed before beginning the actual group discussion.

Roles of two moderators

For each group, one person will be designated the lead moderator and will guide the discussion for the session. The second moderator will assist with distributing and collecting forms and supplies and participating in the discussion as necessary.

Tips on moderating

See copied chapters from "Moderating Focus Groups."

OUTLINE OF FOCUS GROUP INTRODUCTION

- Who We Are
- Why We're Here – Want to learn what are the most pressing issues faced by returning prisoners and what kinds of services would be helpful
- Thank You and Purpose - Thanks for being here, we would like to talk to you the experts about the challenges of reentry, (how you have overcome them), what people and organizations have been helpful to you and what would be helpful for you.
- Role of Moderator - My role is really to ask questions and to listen.
- Some Guidelines - Will go about 90 minutes, set of questions for the group, try not to interrupt one another, would like to hear from everyone so I may call on you if you haven't spoken very much, may ask you to let others talk, nothing personal leaves the room.
- Paperwork - We need to do some paperwork before we get started. If you haven't already, please complete a name tent. Next we have a consent form for you to sign. Three things you need to know: information will be kept confidential, participation is voluntary, contact info for more information about the study or to receive a copy of the report. Any questions about the informed consent form? Finally, please help us learn more by filling out a background information sheet.

SAMPLE FOCUS GROUP INTRODUCTION SCRIPT
(Focus group with persons recently released from prison)

Hello, my name is [name]. I am part of the research team from [organization] that is conducting a [describe study]. [organization name] is an independent nonprofit organization located in [city name]. It is not connected to the police, court, the probation or parole department, or any other agency here in the State of [state name]. We are conducting this study in order to [describe study objective].

We would like to thank you for taking the time to participate in this group session. The group discussions are intended to get your opinions about the challenges faced by former prisoners when they return home and about the kinds of services that would be useful for them. If you decide to participate, we will ask you to take part in a focus group discussion today. The focus group discussion will include questions about the problems you've encountered since returning to the community, what people or organizations have helped you or could help you, and your suggestions for helping other former prisoners as they return to the community. We will use the information we learn from you today to [purpose of study]. As you know, your participation is voluntary and we appreciate your willingness to come today. You will receive a [\$ amount] payment to thank you for coming to this meeting, even if you decide not to participate in the meeting.

The information you give us will be kept in the strictest confidence. The only exception is that we may be required to report it if you tell us you plan to commit a crime or harm yourself in the future. We want to assure you that the staff of local agencies such as the police, the courts, the Department of Corrections, or other service agencies will not be told who was invited to participate or who participated, and that the information you provide will not affect your case or the services you receive in any way.

We also ask that you respect the others in the group and not repeat anything you hear in this discussion. [organization name] cannot be responsible if other participants repeat something you said during the group. If, for example, you mention taking part in drug sales, we cannot stop someone in the group from telling the police or a judge. However, we are asking each of you to agree to not repeat what you hear in this discussion.

This session will be audiotaped and [name] will be taking notes. However, we will destroy the tapes as soon as we have made complete notes of this meeting, and will not use your real names in preparing the notes. Also, we will not use your names in preparing any reports and will disguise your comments so that no one can identify who made specific remarks. After the report is written, we will destroy all notes from this meeting.

As the moderator, my role here is to ask questions and listen. I won't be participating in the conversation, but I want you to feel free to talk with one another. Everyone's participation today is important to us and we will ensure that everyone has an opportunity to speak. So, if one of you is sharing a lot, I may ask you to let others talk. And if you aren't saying much, I may ask for your opinion. We've placed name cards on the table in front of you to help us remember

each other's names. Let's begin. Let's find out some more about each other by going around the table...(move into intro question).

SAMPLE FOCUS GROUP INTRODUCTION SCRIPT

(Focus group with service providers)

Hello, my name is [name]. I am part of the research team from [organization] that is conducting a [describe study]. [organization name] is an independent nonprofit organization located in [city name]. It is not connected to the police, court, the probation or parole department, or any other agency here in the State of [state name]. We are conducting this study in order to [describe study objective].

We would like to thank you for taking the time to participate in this group session. The group discussions are intended to get your opinions about your experiences as a provider of services to reentering prisoners and your perception of the needs of former prisoners in the area and the services available to meet these needs. As you know, your participation is voluntary and we appreciate your willingness to come today. You will receive a [\$ amount] payment to thank you for coming to this meeting, even if you decide not to participate in the meeting.

The information you give us will be kept in the strictest confidence. We also ask that you respect the others in the group and not repeat anything you hear in this discussion.

This session will be audiotaped and [name] will be taking notes. However, we will destroy the tapes as soon as we have made complete notes of this meeting, and will not use your real names in preparing the notes. Also, we will not use your names or your organizations' names in preparing any reports and will disguise your comments so that no one can identify who made specific remarks. After the report is written, we will destroy all notes from this meeting.

As the moderator, my role here is to ask questions and listen. I won't be participating in the conversation, but I want you to feel free to talk with one another. Everyone's participation today is important to us and we will ensure that everyone has an opportunity to speak. So, if one of you is sharing a lot, I may ask you to let others talk. And if you aren't saying much, I may ask for your opinion. We've placed name cards on the table in front of you to help us remember each other's names. Let's begin. Let's find out some more about each other by going around the table...(to intro question).

SAMPLE QUESTIONS / TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION
(Focus group with persons recently released from prison)

DISCUSSION TOPICS

Four major topics will be discussed:

1. Challenges encountered upon reentry
2. Barriers to reintegration
3. What has been helpful: Positive contributions that individuals, community, city government or other organizations have made to assist reentry
4. What would be helpful: How efforts can be improved

Intro Question

Please tell us your name and briefly tell us the biggest challenge you have encountered since your release from prison.

Specific Questions

In your view, what are the most pressing issues for returning prisoners?

- Describe the “typical” problems you’ve encountered.
- Which do you think are the most difficult issues you have confronted since your return to the community?

How has your status as a former prisoner affected your life since your return?

Who or what has helped you since you returned to the community? If you could pinpoint just one person, organization, or thing that has helped you who/what would it be?

- How did you find out about services?
- Location of services—easy to get there?

What kinds of help have you needed, but haven’t received? Why not?

What are some possible ways the community, organizations or the government can help to assist prisoners on their return? Brainstorm possible solutions. Prioritize.

What advice would you give to other returning prisoners?

SAMPLE QUESTIONS / TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION
*(Focus group with persons who have been out of prison at least 3 years
and have been “successfully reintegrated”)*

DISCUSSION TOPICS

Four major topics will be discussed:

1. Challenges encountered upon reentry
2. Barriers to reintegration
3. What was helpful: Positive contributions that individuals, community, city government or other organizations have made to assist reentry
4. What would have been helpful: How efforts can be improved

Intro Question

Please tell us your name and how long you have been out of prison and crime- and drug-free.

Specific Questions

What are the top two things that have been important for you to stay out of prison and off of DOC supervision?

In your opinion, what are the most pressing issues for returning prisoners?

- What were the most difficult issues you confronted on your return to the community?

What, if any, problems do you experience now as a result of your status as a former prisoner?

- Describe the “typical” problems you’ve encountered.

What or who helped you when you returned to the community? If you could pinpoint just one person, organization or thing that helped you who/what would it be?

- How did you find out about services?
- Location of services—easy to get there?

What kinds of help did you need, but didn’t receive? Why not?

What are some possible ways the community, organizations or the government can help to assist prisoners on their return? Brainstorm possible solutions. Prioritize.

What advice would you give to other returning prisoners?

INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

(Focus group with persons recently released from prison)

You have been invited to participate in a project about the challenges faced by former prisoners when they return home and about the kinds of services would be useful for them. This project is being conducted by [organization name]. If you decide to participate, we will ask you to take part in a focus group discussion today. The focus group discussion will include questions about the problems you've encountered since returning to the community, what people or organizations have helped you or could help you, and your suggestions for helping other former prisoners as they return to the community. We will use the information we learn from you today to write a report and make recommendations to service providers and policy-makers.

Your participation today is completely voluntary. You will receive a [\$ amount] payment for coming to this meeting, whether or not you decide to participate. If you decide to participate in the discussion today, we promise you the following things:

1. **Confidentiality.** Everything you tell us will be kept in strictest confidence. The discussion today will be audiotaped and we will be taking notes. However, we will destroy the tapes as soon as we have made complete notes of this meeting and will not use your name in preparing the notes. Also, we will not use your name in preparing any reports and will disguise your comments so that no one can identify who made specific remarks. After the report is written, we will destroy all the notes from this meeting. Everyone who works on this study has signed a Pledge of Confidentiality requiring them not to tell anyone outside the research staff any information identifying you. The only exception to our pledge of confidentiality is if you tell us about your intention to harm yourself or commit a specific crime against someone else. We are also obligated by law to report any suspected acts of child abuse and neglect.

We will not reveal anything you tell us during the discussion group to the police corrections officers, the parole department, or anyone else.

2. **Voluntary Participation.** You do not have to participate. Your decision whether or not to participate in this discussion will not affect any services you receive. You may stop participating in the discussion at any time. You can also refuse to answer any question at any time.
3. **Additional Information.** If you have any questions about the project, or wish to receive a copy of the report when it is completed, you may contact [organization name] at [contact information].

Please keep this page for your records. Please turn to Page 2 to sign the consent form and give the completed form to the moderator.



Focus Group Consent Form

Please print your name, sign your name, and write in the date below to show that you have read and understand this information and that you agree to participate in the study.

I agree to participate in this focus group discussion. I understand that my participation is voluntary and will not affect any services I receive. I understand that I can stop participating or refuse to answer questions at any time.

Name _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Signature _____ Date _____

INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

*(Focus group with persons who have been out of prison at least 3 years
and have been “successfully reintegrated”)*

You have been invited to participate in a project about the challenges faced by former prisoners when they return home and about how some former prisoners are able to overcome these obstacles. The project is being conducted by the [organization name]. If you decide to participate, we will ask you to take part in a focus group discussion today. The focus group discussion will include questions about challenges you faced when you were first released from prison, organizations, people, and personal choices that helped you to overcome those challenges, and advice you would give to soon-to-be released prisoners. We will use the information we learn from you today to write a report and make recommendations to service providers and policy-makers.

Your participation today is completely voluntary. You will receive a [\$ amount] payment for coming to this meeting, whether or not you decide to participate. If you decide to participate in the discussion today, we promise you the following things:

- 1. Confidentiality.** Everything you tell us will be kept in strictest confidence. The discussion today will be audiotaped and we will be taking notes. However, we will destroy the tapes as soon as we have made complete notes of this meeting and will not use your name in preparing the notes. Also, we will not use your name in preparing any reports and will disguise your comments so that no one can identify who made specific remarks. After the report is written, we will destroy all the notes from this meeting. Everyone who works on this study has signed a Pledge of Confidentiality requiring them not to tell anyone outside the research staff any information identifying you. The only exception to our pledge of confidentiality is if you tell us about your intention to harm yourself or commit a specific crime against someone else. We are also obligated by law to report any suspected acts of child abuse and neglect.

We will not reveal anything you tell us during the discussion group to the police corrections officers, the parole department, or anyone else.

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- 3. Additional Information.** If you have any questions about the project, or wish to receive a copy of the report when it is completed, you can contact [organization name] at [contact information].

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Focus Group Consent Form

Please print your name, sign your name, and write in the date below to show that you have read and understand this information and that you agree to participate in the study.

I agree to participate in this focus group discussion. I understand that my participation is voluntary and will not affect any services I receive. I understand that I can stop participating or refuse to answer questions at any time.

Name _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Signature _____ Date _____