

Focus Groups as Used by EPA for Economics Projects

SUPPORTING STATEMENT

OMB CONTROL NO. 2090-0028

EPA ICR No. 2205.23

Part B. Statistical Methods

1. Respondent Universe and Sampling Methods

Study participants will include members of the general public, relevant industry groups, and/or other stakeholders who are the subject of the specific project. Inclusion and exclusion criteria will vary depending on the research topic. To identify potential variation according to regional differences, information collections will be conducted at multiple sites in the U.S. when relevant and when possible.

Focus groups¹ will generate qualitative data and the results from them will not be used to make empirical statements representative of the universe of study, to produce statistical descriptions (careful, repeatable measurements), or to generalize the data beyond the scope of the sample.

Focus groups are a valuable tool for qualitative data collection and are necessary and important steps in survey design; they allow for the efficient collection of information, in-depth exploration of major themes and perspectives, and the development of new insights. The accuracy, reliability, and applicability of the results of these focus groups will be adequate for this purpose and as such, the samples associated with this collection are not subjected to the same scrutiny as scientifically drawn samples where estimates are published or otherwise released to the public. The specific sample planned for each individual collection and the method for soliciting participation will be described fully in each collection request.

Data collection will be consistent with general focus group interview strategies. In a focus group, a small group of people (typically 8-12 individuals) engage in a discussion of selected topics of interest typically guided by a moderator in order to obtain the group's opinions, particularly the why's and how's behind a behavior or attitude at question. Focus groups capture the collective insight of a group while preserving individual preferences. In this setting, participants can describe their experiences and preferences without the limitations of preset response categories. Furthermore, focus groups produce rich data complete with nuances that often may be obscured in quantitative data collection techniques. Focus groups are used to produce qualitative data to help develop, design, and interpret quantitative surveys or experiments.

Since focus groups are a qualitative research methodology, statistical methods will not be employed to analyze focus group data collected under this collection request. Typically, not every participant in a group will comment on every issue discussed, and the course of discussion will vary across groups, with some topics emerging in one group and not in another. Instead, simple counts of respondents answering a particular way, or descriptors such as "many," "several," and "few," will be used to describe the relative number of participants or groups who expressed a particular view.

¹ As in Section A, "focus groups" include one-on-one interviews used to test survey materials.

2. Procedures for the Information Collection

The typical steps for an information collection are as follows.

- a. Screen and recruit participants, using current and pertinent databases such as local telephone directories. Prior to group discussion, consent forms will be signed by all participants.
- b. Conduct focus group discussion, not to exceed two hours, under the direction of one or more moderators. Discussions are usually audio- and video-recorded to aid data analysis. When needed, discussions will also be streamed from a facility to other locations to allow remote observation. A verbatim transcript often will be compiled for each group when resources allow.

3. Methods to Maximize Response Rates and Deal with Non-response

Since a focus group is a qualitative research methodology, response rate is not a relevant issue. Most projects will likely have contractor support that provides access to commercial research facilities. Participants will be recruited by the research facility to meet the specifications required for the project and are typically offered an honorarium for their participation to entice them to enroll.

To minimize the possibility of having too few appropriate focus group participants (thereby forcing group cancellation), as many as 25% more participants are invited to each group than are needed. In the event that too many participants report, excess participants will receive the honorarium and will be dismissed.

4. Tests of Procedures or Methods to be Undertaken

Pretesting of focus group protocols may be done with internal staff, a limited number of external colleagues, and/or members of the public. If the number of pretest respondents exceeds nine members of the public, the Agency will submit the focus group protocol for review under this generic clearance.

5. Individuals Consulted on Statistical Aspects and Individuals Collecting and/or Analyzing Data

EPA staff will be responsible for developing the moderator guides with advice, if needed, from data collection contractors. EPA staff will analyze the data.