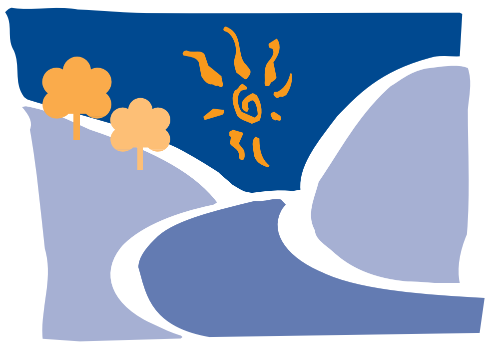
A GUIDEBOOK FOR CONDUCTING RURAL RESEARCH

Utilizing Focus Groups and Key Informant Services

The Rural Great Plains Collaborative Project
A Rural Road:
Exploring Economic Opportunity, Social Networks, Services and Supports that Affect Rural Families



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The Rural Great Plains Collaborative is comprised of the KIDS COUNT projects in Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota. KIDS COUNT, a project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, is a national and state-by-state effort to track the status of children in the United States. By providing policymakers and citizens with benchmarks of child well-being, KIDS COUNT seeks to enrich local, state, and national discussions concerning ways to secure brighter futures for all children. At the national level, KIDS COUNT publishes a yearly **KIDS COUNT Data Book** and related publications addressing concerns that affect child outcomes nationally. The Foundation also funds a nationwide network of state-level KIDS COUNT projects that provide a community-by-community picture of the condition of children in individual states.

Making Connections

In 2000, the Annie E. Casey Foundation embarked on a decade-long effort to help neighborhoods become places where children and their families can flourish. This effort is called the Neighborhood Transformation/Family Development Initiative and is an innovative approach to promote family integrity. The basic premise behind the work is that children do well when their families do well, and families do better when they live in supportive communities. The centerpiece of Neighborhood Transformation/Family Development is *Making Connections*. It is focused on strengthening families by connecting them to the opportunities, resources, and supports they need to rear happy, healthy, confident, and successful children.

The three kinds of connections the Foundation identified as most critical are:

1) **Economic Opportunity** - connecting young people and adults to information and networks that increase their pathways to local and regional labor markets, their access to affordable goods and services, and the likelihood that they will secure adequate and predictable incomes and meaningful opportunities to accumulate savings and assets.

2) **Social Networks** - connecting families to networks of friends, neighbors, kin, community organizations, role models, mentors, faith-based institutions, and other positive social relationships that encourage and provide neighbor-to-neighbor support and mutual aid and make people feel less isolated and alone.

3) **Services and Supports** - connecting people in need to accessible, affordable, family-centered, and culturally appropriate forms of help that provide preventive and ongoing support.

Making Connections has established 22 program sites. They are located in urban areas where families face significant challenges raising their children because of fragmented or ineffective economic opportunity, social networks, and services and supports.

Making Connections in the Rural Great Plains

The Great Plains Rural Collaborative was born out of a shared concern among the KIDS COUNT Projects in Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota; concern that low income children and families living in rural areas face similar challenges as their urban counterparts in *Making Connections* to economic opportunities, social networks, and services and supports essential to their long-term success.

Background and Introduction

The three project directors recognized that low-income rural children and their families are often outside of the national attention spotlight. As a consequence, their needs have been less frequently studied than those of children living in poor urban areas, and there is not a body of research nor common language documenting the circumstances which impact the ability of these families to ensure their children's successful journey through childhood and adolescence. This observation was confirmed by a large number of KIDS COUNT Network members when asked to identify topics for further Network attention. With the interest of the larger Network as a backdrop, the Casey Foundation encouraged the Great Plains Rural Collaborative to design a research format to study the impact of economic opportunity, social networks, and services and supports on the well-being of low income children and their families in rural areas of Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota.

Why Do the Rural Collaborative Study?

Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota undertook this project because of the unique "rurality" of the three-state region. The three-state region seemed to reflect more issues of isolation and disconnectedness than other areas of the country deemed "rural". This factor was further illuminated by the fact that our three states together contain eighteen of the fifty poorest counties in the country.

The three states house the largest percentage of "rural agricultural" counties in the Great Plains region, while close neighbors such as Iowa, Minnesota, and Kansas have larger percentages of "urban non-agricultural" counties. The land base of the region is large, yet the population is small by comparison to other rural as well as urban areas. Population growth has been meager over the past decade, with losses overcoming gains in the majority of rural counties, particularly in rural farm counties. Per capita income has been lagging behind the rest of the nation for two decades, making the problems of rural families chronic and unaffected by economic upswings. In addition, all three states have significant distance between service centers and about the same number of American Indian Reservations within respective borders.

When looking at the indicators currently available within the three states and nationally, the typical measurements used to predict child and family well-being do not reflect significant challenges in the region.

- Unemployment rates are relatively low
- Minority populations are small
- Poverty is not concentrated in readily visible areas

These factors would seem to suggest a healthy image but the project recognized them as inaccurate.

Thus the Rural Collaborative sought to explore how closely available indicators reflect the reality of life for families in the region. The project also sought to identify the extent to which current indicators actually report the well being of children and families in the context of the *Making Connections* interest areas. In undertaking this task, it was hoped that information gathered would create a context for better understanding the extent to which national and state indicators presently used measure the needs of children and families in the Rural Collaborative states. Through a careful examination of data gathered from focus group participants, themes emerged that provided guideposts to identify how commonly used indicators fall short in their ability to illustrate the challenges faced by low income rural families as they seek to access connections to economic opportunity, social networks, and service and supports. While the uniqueness of the Nebraska, North and South Dakota region was compelling, equally compelling was the belief that there would be implications in this work for all states. The Rural Collaborative wanted to capture the experiences of rural children and their families to determine how current indicators could be tailored to more effectively document their needs. This led to a bigger question for every state: Do commonly used indicators of child and family well-being capture the essence of challenges experienced in all types of rural areas, or does available data miss them?

What this Study Revealed

Results of the Great Plains Collaborative study reveal that available data miss the mark in describing the circumstances impacting the ability of rural families to access the connections they need.

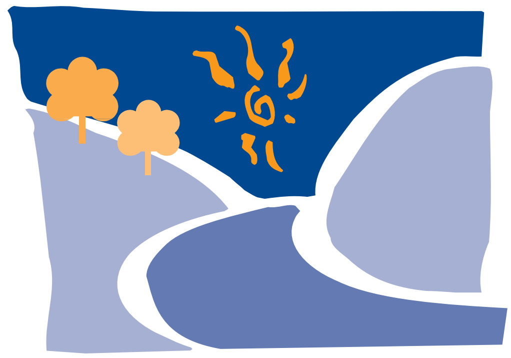
- While unemployment rates are seemingly low across the region, feedback from focus group participants reveals that families in rural counties are holding multiple jobs, many of which are low wage and part time, in order to generate sufficient income to stay slightly above the poverty level. The income earned often makes them ineligible for existing services and income support programs.
- Wage levels and the number of jobs being held by parents is a more telling indication of the economic condition for these rural families than unemployment rates or program participant numbers.
- A graphic example of how unemployment data have missed the mark is evident in the ineligibility of the majority of rural counties across the region for Federal Enterprise Zone funding, based on unemployment rates alone. This funding could have brought new industries and jobs to an area in desperate need of economic development. Low unemployment rates masked the underlying circumstances.
- Childcare and health care provide additional examples of family challenges missed in available data. With increased labor force participation by rural parents, the need for childcare resources is critical. Yet families relate their struggles to find providers eligible to provide subsidized or unsubsidized care. Related to availability of care is the need to travel long distances to access any type of care, and a high demand for care during non-traditional hours to accommodate the hours required by parents with more than one job.

The number of uninsured families provides additional evidence of data inadequacies. Families fortunate enough to have any level of medical benefits for their children relate that very few communities have access to a clinic and even fewer have access to a physician. Because access to medical care is so compromised for these rural children and their families, the question of access to care becomes as important as eligibility for health benefits.

Next Steps

It is hoped that the experience of the Rural Collaborative states will encourage additional states to look more carefully at the national and state indicators routinely used to measure the well-being of children and families in the rural areas of their states. Based on the outcomes of this study, it is evident that families in small agricultural counties in the Great Plains grapple with similar challenges as urban families in connecting with the economic opportunity, social networks, and services and supports critical to their success, yet their struggles are not documented in the indicators widely used to measure their well-being. In essence, the rural experience is lost because their numbers are too small to reach the radar screen of current indicators. It is important for every state to determine the effectiveness of their efforts to document the well-being of rural children and families and it is imperative that together we learn to ask the questions that can inform better policy decisions on their behalf.

Shaping The Research



Shaping The Research

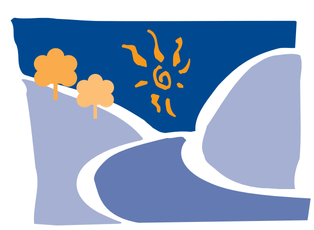
As the Rural Collaborative team began identifying the research process which would best accomplish the goals of the project, it became apparent that there would not be enough rich sources of quantitative data available to sufficiently answer research questions about the well-being of poor families in very rural counties. State-level data are often not uniformly or consistently captured among all three states. National data sources with pertinent data are often not broken down by county. Quantitative data sources explored for this project are described in Appendices 17 and 18.

As planning progressed, the Rural Collaborative team decided that a combination of quantitative and qualitative data would be most effective for examining the issue of rural poverty. Quantitative data provides an important demographic framework for conditions faced by rural families, while the gathering of qualitative data can more effectively ferret out missing information and put a human face on the numbers. Qualitative data typically consists of words while quantitative data consists of numbers. Because different people have different learning styles, the use of qualitative and quantitative data together maximizes the potential for reaching and capturing the interest of a wider audience. Photographs provide an additional medium to further support this goal.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The Professionalism Committee of the Qualitative Research Consultant's Association reminds us that qualitative research projects generally provide information obtained through open-ended questions.

- The questions are asked for the purpose of obtaining people's feelings, attitudes, and opinions regarding a topic with which they are familiar and have personal experience.[1]
- Responses are obtained for the purpose of developing a "collective view" of the topic or circumstance, rather than comparing one person's view to another's or developing a statistical scale of responses.
- Qualitative research probes the depth of a topic rather than the breadth of a topic.
- Analysis of qualitative research is a more subjective process of listening and interpreting responses, rather than charting and developing percentages.
- It does not provide the number or percentage of people experiencing a circumstance but instead probes the feelings,



[1] Professionalism Committee of the Qualitative Research Consultant's Association, Frequently asked Questions from www.qrea.org/faq.htm

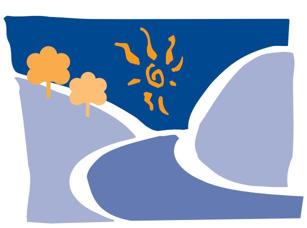
emotions, perceptions, opinions, and values of those experiencing the circumstance.

Qualitative research can be used prior to gathering quantitative data to develop a hypothesis or survey questions, or following quantitative data collection to further explore or flesh out respective findings. Focus groups and key informant interviews are commonly used forms of qualitative research. These methods were chosen for the Rural Collaborative project. It was a goal of this project to explore the motivations, perceptions, and opinions of people who are in rural counties – specifically families with children. As the following sections will demonstrate, the voices of rural families are vital to putting all of the other information in a context that gives it life and meaning.

Another important consideration for the Rural Collaborative project was the selection of the most appropriate definition of rural. It is important to examine the various definitions available and select the one best suited to the geographic area being studied. The Rural Collaborative used three criteria when selecting the most appropriate definition. Those criteria were:

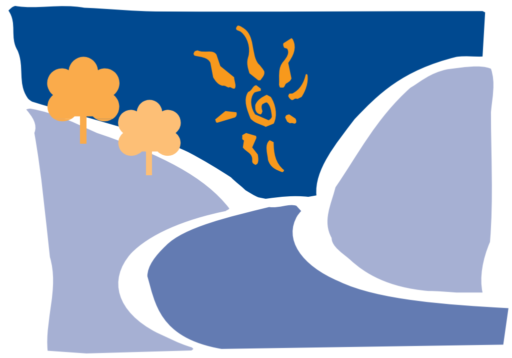
1. Simplicity of definition
2. Validity and universal acceptance of the definition
3. The definition best describing communities or states being studied

The basic unit of analysis chosen by the Rural Collaborative was county, using the U.S. Census breakdown of metropolitan, non-metropolitan urban, and non-metropolitan rural. Additionally, the measures developed by Dr. Charles Cleland incorporating the "degree of isolation from and inability to participate in programs of the larger society" became an important criteria when selecting focus group participants.[2]



[2] Cleland, Charles, (1994). Rurality Index for the U.S. by County. Knoxville, TN: Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology.

Focus Groups



FOCUS GROUPS

For this study, focus groups were intended to provide a contextual background for available quantitative data, and to supplement topic areas lacking quantitative data. Focus group questions were designed to direct discussion toward rural community benefits and challenges and identify ways that families make connections in the following three aspects of life:

- Economic Opportunity such as jobs, wages and cost of living
- Social Networks including churches, schools and recreation
- Services and Supports such as medical, childcare and shopping

Voices for Children in Nebraska had explored rural poverty in previous publications and utilized focus groups in those and other projects. Nebraska's expertise was used to frame the steps to be taken in developing a process for conducting focus groups in the three-state region. The Rural Collaborative contracted with Jan Losby, PhD, of the Institute for Social and Economic Development (ISED) in Coralville, Iowa to develop a training curriculum for the team. In developing that curriculum, Losby utilized resources provided in Focus Group Kits, a series produced by SAGE Publications, an International Educational and Professional Publisher located in Thousand Oaks, CA. Much of what follows comes from one or more of the SAGE publications.

As project needs were outlined, it was decided that sufficient perspectives and views on circumstances affecting rural children and their families could be obtained from four focus groups in each state. The summer months were determined to be best suited for the availability of participants. It was also determined that key informant interviews could complete the array of information being sought.

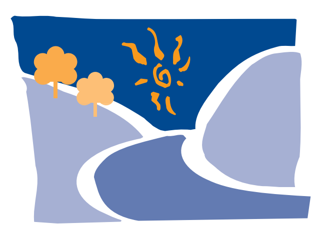
Toward the goal of gathering information about "rural poverty", the focus groups were planned in or near a variety of rural communities. Given the demographics of the three states, six of the twelve focus groups were scheduled on tribal reservations. Based on the income guidelines of various public assistance programs within the three states, it was determined that the participants should be recruited from families with children, whose incomes were at or below approximately 185% of the poverty level.

WHAT IS A FOCUS GROUP?

A focus group, as the name implies, is very focused. Focus group questions are intended to direct participants toward one topic of discussion with the group of participants gathered together because of a certain commonality they share. A focus group does

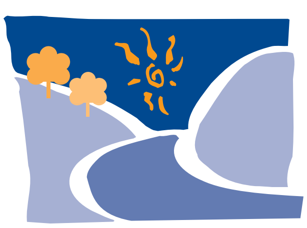
FOCUS GROUP ELEMENTS:

- Discussion Equals Data
- Thoughts, Opinions, Feelings
- A Collective View



FOCUS GROUP GUIDELINES:

- 7-10 Participants
- Common Interests With Diverse Demographics
- 60-90 Minutes in Length
- 4-10 Questions
- Test Questions for Ease of Understanding and Flow
- Stay Focused on The Research Question
- Flow from Getting Acquainted to Getting At the Heart of The Matter
- Test the Questions on Different Groups of People



not provide a natural, random view of observation, but it provides a large amount of data on a particular topic in a short period of time. It can be utilized to guide research toward a certain direction of inquiry or provide a significant amount of context for a research topic. The information brought forth in focus groups provides a wide range of opinions and views in a relatively short period of time. A focus group discussion gives each participant an opportunity to contribute thoughts, opinions, and feelings. Many diverse topics may be generated as one participant adds to or expands upon the comments of another. A focus group does not allow in-depth probing of one person's history or perspective, nor does it provide "the whole story" of any one participant. Instead, the collective view of many results from a focus group discussion.

It is important to remember that a focus group is only a focus group if it is being utilized for the purpose of research and that the discussions in the focus group are the data being sought.[3] It is the "collective response" being elicited, not a tally of individual responses. "By design, a focus group relies on the dynamic of the group interactions to stimulate the thinking and thus the verbal contributions of the participants, and to provide the researcher with rich, detailed perspectives that could not be obtained through other methodological strategies". [4] That is why a good set of focus group questions is used as a guide, offering probes to further delve into certain areas if they are not discussed fully. The focus group discussion needs to cover pertinent questions though the answers may not follow the exact order of chosen topics and discussion may actually proceed with very few moderator prompts.

Focus Group Composition and Process

Group Size. The ideal focus group consists of 7-10 people. The group should be small enough to give everyone a chance to be heard yet large enough to capture a diverse array of opinions and experiences. Be advised that it is essential to invite more than the desired 7 – 10 people. In fact, it is important to seek confirmations from fifteen to seventeen participants to allow for the numerous challenges and unexpected events in the day-to-day lives of the project's target population.

Group Composition. The group of participants needs to be:
- similar enough to share a common interest or circumstance, yet
- different enough to generate discussion and allow for contrasting opinions

[3] Morgan, D.L. (1998). *What focus groups are (and are not).* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE PUBLICATIONS
[4] Asbury, J. E. (1995). Overview of focus group research. *Quantitative Health Research, 5, 414-420.*

- diverse in such things as age, gender, occupation, and family size
- ethnically diverse, unless feedback from a specific population is being sought.

It is not good practice to use a group of people that already function as a group. An already formed group, such as a support group, may have a group dynamic that influences the discussion.

Number of Focus Groups Needed. The number of focus groups to be held depends upon the complexity of the topic. Enough groups to explore all facets of the topic are needed, but not so many that the responses become completely redundant. Three to four focus groups are sufficient as a general rule.[5]

Length of Focus Group. A typical length for a focus group is 60 to 90 minutes. If the session goes 90 minutes or longer, it is necessary to allow for a 10 to 15 minute break, although this can be disruptive to the flow of the discussion.

Developing and Testing Research Questions and Follow-up Probes

The following questions may be helpful in developing research questions:
- What is it you really need to know?
- If you are trying to expand upon or prepare for the development of a base of quantitative data, what data are available? What is best drawn from quantitative data and what is best gleaned from qualitative data?
- If you are relying solely on qualitative data, is a focus group truly the best strategy to use or do you need the more in-depth information provided by one-on-one interviews?

Written Background/Purpose Statement and Flow of Questions. To some, the term focus group discussion seems to be a contradiction of terms. The group is encouraged to discuss with each other what is important to the participants. But the researcher needs to focus that discussion to answer the questions the researcher brings to the table. It is equally important to have consistency from one focus group to the next and to stay true to the mission and purpose set forth. It is a good idea to put the purpose statement and overall research question in writing before developing the questions for the discussion guide. The purpose statement can be revisited while developing and testing questions to address the central issues. Therefore, a purpose statement

THE RURAL COLLABORATIVE EXPERIENCE

Four focus groups were scheduled in each state to ensure adequate diversity, with two of the four scheduled on tribal reservations.

The Rural Collaborative issued focus group invitations for a two to two and a half-hour time frame, including mealtime.

[5] Asbury, ibid

developed at the beginning of the process should be written in such a way that it can be utilized to open each focus group discussion, ensuring that each group is functioning from the same premise and toward the same goal.

Once it is clear that a focus group is the appropriate venue and the purpose statement or overall research question has been framed, the focus group questions or discussion guide can be developed. A small number of very short, simple questions work best, generally no more than 8 to 12 questions. It may be possible to limit the guide to 4 to 6 questions. Remember, the goal of the questions is not just to get answers, but also to prompt discussion among the participants. Therefore, the list of questions should be developed along with a list of lead-ins and another list of prompts if the initial question doesn't evoke enough discussion by itself. Utilizing open-ended questions is most effective while questions that require only a "Yes" or "No" answer should be avoided. As an example, a typical guiding question might be:

- "Describe what the job market is like in your community." If discussion was brief like, "jobs, what jobs?" or, "the only jobs here are at the meat packing plant", you might follow up with a probe such as,
- "Think about the last time you had to look for a job and describe what you experienced." If there is not enough discussion among the group, you can try adding a lead-in that directs the discussion elsewhere, such as, "Compare with each other the opportunities your children have to participate in after-school activities."

When finalizing the questions, put them in an order that flows logically from a broader view to a narrower or more specific view, clustering common topics and developing a graceful transition from one topic to the next. This order can be departed from, but it helps the moderator maintain consistency and a logical thought process and ensures that all topics are covered.

Question development and subsequent testing of those questions is a critical stage in the process. It is important to list all of the things you want to learn from the groups, frame questions that get at each of those items and then boil those questions down to their simplest, most concise form.[6] Remember, brevity is best, so keep reviewing the questions and ask yourself:

- Is this something I really need to know or just something I'm curious about?
- Is that really a separate topic or can it be probed in an existing question?

[6] Krueger, R. A. (1994). *Asking questions in a focus group.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications

THE RURAL COLLABORATIVE EXPERIENCE SAMPLE QUESTIONS...

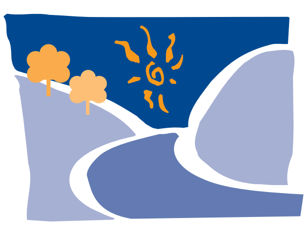
What's your child's favorite thing to do on Saturday morning?

If you had a friend with two small children who was thinking of moving to your community, what would you tell her to describe life here for a family?

Describe employment opportunities in your community.

Of all the benefits shared here today, which is the most important for your family?

Remember, we came here today to get your perspective on life in rural Nebraska for families on a very limited income. You have shared some important benefits like safety, a simpler lifestyle, and supportive friends and family. But you've also shared some significant challenges like few jobs that pay living wages, long distances that need to be traveled every day, and a school that doesn't always meet your child's needs. Are there other areas we haven't touched yet or any final thoughts you'd like to leave us with?



There are several types of questions that need to be developed. They include:

Getting Acquainted. The discussion should begin with an “opening” or “icebreaker” question. This should be a fun question and one that allows the group to get acquainted or identify common characteristics.

Getting Familiar With the Topic. The next question can be one that in general introduces the issue and promotes conversation.

Key Fact-Finding Questions. These are the questions that will get at the meat of your topic.

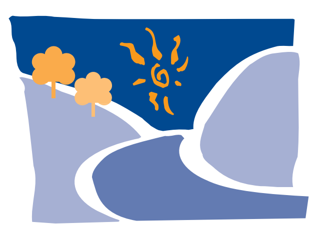
Prioritizing Questions. This gives the moderator an opportunity to review various perspectives that have been presented and identify the ones that are truly the most important. Remember, you are not building “group consensus”, you simply want to surface the most significant responses.

Final Question. It is important to let people add anything that may not have been asked or probed. This can be accomplished by summarizing the purpose of the discussion, highlighting some of what has been discussed and asking for additional information.

Testing Discussion Questions. As with other aspects of the focus group process, testing of focus group questions is difficult to do in a truly scientific, measurable way. The questions should, however, be pre-tested with two or three categories of people.

- First, ask another professional who has focus group experience to review the questions for redundancy, structural problems, etc.
- Then try them on staff, board members, and friends who do not know the target issue intimately to see if the questions are clear and understandable.
- Individuals from circumstances similar to your potential participants are the next logical test audience, again checking for their ability to understand the question and to see if any important areas have been missed.
- The first focus group can also be utilized as a testing ground. Minor adjustments can be made to questions after the initial focus group is held, but if major changes are necessary, discussion results should not be included in the final analysis and write-up.

A goal of the project was to incorporate all three of the Making Connections areas: Economic Opportunity, Social Networks, and Services and Supports. Questions were sorted by these categories, but the discussion often jumped from one category to another. Organizing the questions according to the three topics ensured

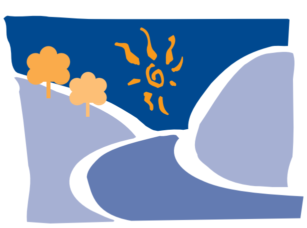


FOCUS GROUP CONSIDERATIONS:

- Recruitment of participants requires patience, perseverance and sensitivity
- Trusting relationships between host and participants are helpful
- Location and time must be comfortable for participants
- Other important accommodations include childcare, transportation and stipends
- Confidentiality is key

THE RURAL COLLABORATIVE EXPERIENCE

The Rural Collaborative Project sought participants who fell at or below 185% of poverty. No financial information was gathered to document their income. Among the three states, the majority of North and South Dakota focus groups were gathered by Head Start Centers. This insured the income guidelines for the majority of participants, leaving the possibility that someone of a slightly higher income could also be eligible due to the child's special circumstances. Nebraska utilized a broader range of professionals as coordinators. These included a Head Start director, a tribal social service director, a coordinator for a family support program serving children with disabilities, and the wife of a minister who was also a retired teacher. (Often a community has someone like this woman to whom the community informally turns to for support and assistance, providing a good alternative contact person, particularly in smaller, less formal community structures). The Head Start based groups tended to have more families with young children, while the group gathered by the minister's wife was probably the most diverse in terms of age of children and professions of the parents.



that all three areas were covered during each focus group (see Appendix 1 for sample questions & probes).

Logistics of Scheduling Focus Groups

Recruitment of Participants. Voices for Children in Nebraska has conducted focus groups for a number of projects during the last decade and has reaped rich benefits from the work. The formula developed over time provided insight to the development of focus groups for the Rural Collaborative. This formula has been found effective in gathering meaningful information while allowing participants to feel empowered and benefit from the process as well. Participant confidence is assured through careful choice of the person issuing the invitation and logistical arrangements tailored to accommodate their lifestyle, family needs, and day-to-day challenges. Voices for Children in Nebraska does not work directly with the families being sought for focus group participation, nor do the KIDS COUNT grantees in North and South Dakota. The Rural Collaborative, therefore, turned to direct service organizations and community representatives in each of the three states to assist with locating and inviting targeted families. Service organizations and individuals were chosen on the basis of their reputation in respective communities; their track record for treating families respectfully; and the likelihood that they would follow through with requested tasks. The success of focus group experiences can usually be attributed to the reliability and follow through of the agency or individual facilitating the logistics at the local level or their relationship with participants being recruited.

An organization which also has a membership base to draw from, such as Voices for Children in Nebraska, can start developing community contacts with phone calls to members in the geographic or programmatic area from which participants are being sought. Other types of projects such as the North and South Dakota projects located in University settings may call upon other types of community contacts with whom relationships have been developed. North Dakota KIDS COUNT utilized the help of data contributors in recruiting assistance from individuals or service organizations. It is important to outline what will be required of the person or organization relative to the focus group logistics and coordination. If the initial contact is unable to assist with coordination, soliciting other possible contacts is advisable. A one-page description of the project and the duties of the local coordinator should be ready to FAX, email or mail to respective contacts (see Appendix 2). It is often helpful to have two community people team up to make focus group arrangements. If funds are available for this purpose, it may be appropriate to give contact people, or their organization, a donation or stipend. A thank-you note or gift certificate can also acknowledge their effort.

The local person assisting with invitations and arrangements must know the issue and the community well enough to identify the appropriate population to draw from and must have the trust of that population. In some instances, these coordinators can also serve as key informants. The key informant interview could either occur in a phone call with this individual or in a personal interview before or after the focus group meeting. This is only appropriate when the key informant does not sit in on the focus group.

Invitation to Participants. The actual invitation to the participant can be issued differently from one community to another, depending on the preference of the local coordinator. It generally requires an extensive combination of written and verbal contact (see Appendices 3 & 4 for sample invitations and RSVP forms). Follow-up a day or two before the actual meeting is key to attendance.

Location. It is most important that the location is a place where the participants are comfortable and is easily accessible. Most communities have natural gathering places and it is helpful to ask local coordinators for help in identifying these locations. Food is generally served and childcare should always be provided or costs reimbursed. The space and facilities must accommodate both. A church known for hosting community-wide, non-secular meetings is often a good choice. Community centers or family resource centers are also good choices. Schools can intimidate certain populations, as can agencies that scrutinize or sanction individuals in some way.

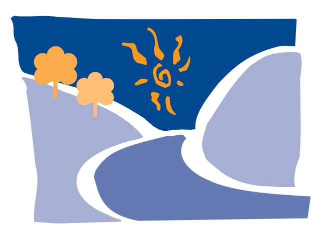
Scheduling. The coordinator can be helpful in identifying dates or days of the week to avoid. Focus groups with professionals generally work better during business hours. Focus groups with parents generally work best over the dinner hour, providing pizza (or a local favorite) and childcare. Learn the work schedule for local industries since it is important in deciding meeting times. The Rural Collaborative scheduled most focus groups for 5:00 – 7:00 or 6:00 – 8:00. One was held over the noon hour on the advice of the coordinator, but that was the meeting with the poorest turnout.

Room Arrangements. It is important that the room be as airy and comfortable as possible. Seating everyone around a table with a tape recorder in the middle is best. It is important to discuss the flow of the meeting ahead of time with the coordinator to ensure

THE RURAL COLLABORATIVE EXPERIENCE

Nebraska's previous focus group experience guided the Rural Collaborative decision to recruit about 1½ times the desired ten focus group participants. Addresses and phone numbers of participants were requested and assistance was offered with mailing invitations to participants and making follow-up phone calls. Invitations were provided to coordinators who preferred to send the invitations out themselves; some preferred to develop their own invitation. Substantial follow up is necessary with the local coordinator to be confident of their attention to detail. Trusting your instincts is important. [For example: concern about one coordinator's inability to provide a list of expected participants proved valid when only two participants arrived. Her initial recruitment effort was wonderful with production and posting of a creative, inviting flyer, but she failed to make any one-on-one follow-up contacts. In retrospect, a more tenacious approach may have been helpful in determining a closer head count sooner, rather than later, when additional recruitment was not possible.]

All of the coordinators were prepared for the possibility of families being unable to attend at the last minute and were very sensitive to the population of families being sought. The formula of having fifteen confirmed participants and ten actual participants held fairly true across all three states.



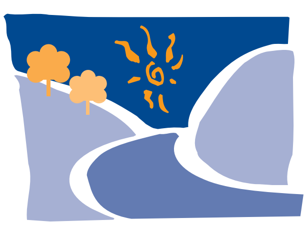
THE RURAL COLLABORATIVE EXPERIENCE

The Dakota experience: When contacting one of the sites to recruit participants, the site coordinator suggested that we reimburse for travel (per mile basis) since people had to travel great distances to come to the focus group. To be consistent across all the sites in North and South Dakota, travel reimbursement was offered to all sites.

In order to do this, the Project Director contacted the USD accounting office. It was explained to accounting that the Rural Collaborative grant needed funds to reimburse the participants on-site instead of sending out checks after the fact. University accounting needed a letter from the Annie E. Casey Foundation stating that it was an appropriate and allowable use of funds. The Casey Foundation was contacted and a letter was sent to USD accounting.

The next step was to set a budget for each site. The stipend, meal, and an estimation of mileage were set for each group. Mileage was reimbursed at state rates, which in some cases was less than the Head Start Agency reimbursed. Miles were rounded to next highest dollar amount to deal in whole dollars only. Reimbursement sheets were developed to track reimbursement amounts and for participants to sign for their reimbursements.

Before the focus groups began, one of the focus group staff asked each participant if they needed reimbursement for travel or childcare (some childcare was provided off-site). Mileage and childcare costs were recorded for each person or couple requesting reimbursement. During the focus groups the staff person went to a private area to calculate and prepare the reimbursements for those requesting this assistance. Once the staff person completed this task (15-20 minutes) she joined in taking notes at the focus group session.



the best possible arrangement for each location. It is also important to arrive early and be flexible about the planned arrangement because it will rarely be exactly as you anticipated.

The ideal space includes a(n):
- meeting room with a big square table around which participants and moderator can comfortably sit.
- adjacent kitchen space so people can easily flow from eating to meeting, getting refills during the meeting if needed.
- separate area for the children's care and food.
- separate restrooms for the children with separate access from the meeting room.
- outlets and extension cords for the tape recorder with separate microphone to accommodate larger meeting spaces.

Participant Accommodations. The specific accommodations depend somewhat on the characteristics of the participant population. A successful formula for working with parents includes:
- childcare reimbursement or onsite childcare that is sufficiently staffed and has toys to meet the age and developmental needs of the children needing care.
- a meal that is quick and easy. When ordering from an unfamiliar community, asking the coordinator for a local pizza business usually works the best. In very small towns, the pizza may come from a local gas station or may only be available on certain days of the week. Indian Reservations may have a local group that works for donations and can prepare Indian tacos or sloppy joes *[An interesting note: Sloppy Joes are known as Taverns in South Dakota]*. Consideration needs to be given to ordering food appropriate for all ages of children in quantities that allow the children to have their own portions in their play area.
- a gift certificate or small stipend for each participant or family is greatly appreciated. The Rural Collaborative team provided $10.00 stipends to each participant because some of the communities were not close to a Wal-mart or chain store from which gift certificates could be purchased ahead of time as thank-you's. The amount of $10.00 was arrived at based on approximately one-and-a-half hours of earnings.
- a copy of the final report should be provided to each participant who requests one and copies of photos taken may be provided as well.
- transportation or travel reimbursement can be offered, particularly if the coordinator feels that is necessary to get people to attend. None was provided in Nebraska but it was in the Dakotas.

Equipment and Supplies. A checklist is necessary in preparing for focus groups and it is critical that listed items and tasks are covered (see Appendix 5 for checklist).

As a checklist is prepared, it is important to think through each step of the process, listing needed items. Always take extra batteries, extension cords, a backup tape recorder, portable flip chart, markers, tape, etc.

Confidentiality and Releases for Participants. Formal releases should be provided for all participants and key informants. The release must give the participant a clear understanding of what will be discussed and how the information will be used. It is appropriate to describe the benefits of the focus group process in working toward certain improvements. The general release gives permission for use of the verbal information. Additional release areas can be designated and permission obtained from participants for use of photographs or other necessary provisions (see Appendix 6 for consent forms).

It is important to take time individually with each participant prior to the meeting to explain the process and the release form, giving them an opportunity to sign the release and decide if they are willing to have photos taken. At the beginning of the group discussion, explain the process and ask if everyone is comfortable with proceeding. Explanation of the tape recording process is also essential, indicating the need to insure accurate representation of statements made. This is the time to stress that focus group reports will present the collective statements of all of the focus groups, but that none of the statements would be attributed to any individual. Confidentiality and anonymity of the focus group participants are critical.

When obtaining the signed release it may also be useful to capture a brief biographical sketch of each participant: their age, gender, marital status, number of children, length of time living in the town, etc. If demographic information is not obtained during the registration process or on the release form, some can be captured during introductions, but it is not likely to be as uniform and possibly not as thorough (see Appendix 7 for personal information form).

THE RURAL COLLABORATIVE EXPERIENCE

The Rural Collaborative did several focus groups back to back, often traveling a total of 1,000 miles in three or four days. This did not allow much time for picking up forgotten items, which may not be available in small communities. All focus groups were tape-recorded. Problems did arise with equipment malfunctions and background noise, making the note-taking of focus group staff a critical element.

All teams had some coloring books, crayons, and markers for the children, though there had been assurances that supplies would be provided at each childcare location. These supplies were very necessary at one of the Nebraska sites, which had a very inadequate childcare arrangement. Again, the right combination of flexibility and meticulous preparation is key to the success of these events!

The consent form used by the Rural Collaborative has a general signature line for use of collected information in "published works or exhibits". Additional sections require participants to initial for release of photographs or providing the participant's name to the media. Photographs were taken in conjunction with most of the Nebraska focus groups and were taken of parents and children before and after the focus group meeting. It would not be advisable to take pictures during the meeting, which could be disruptive to the discussion process. Photos of individuals or families can be helpful in putting faces with the data and the stories being told. Everyone who came agreed to participate in the meeting and most of the people in Nebraska agreed to have photos taken. Everyone's identity was carefully protected and, to the extent possible, attribution of the state from which comments originated was avoided.

The Rural Collaborative team did capture biographical information on the release at sign-in. This information is very helpful in developing a composite of participants.

Focus Groups

STAFFING A FOCUS GROUP:

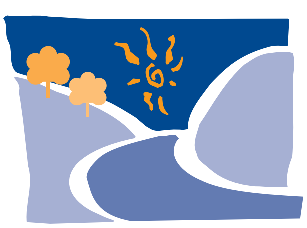
- Two or three staff required

- Roles include:
  - Releases and sign-in
  - Moderator
  - Recorder

THE RURAL COLLABORATIVE EXPERIENCE

In Nebraska, the staff person responsible for signing in participants also served as a floater to handle any difficult childcare situations, take photographs and do spontaneous key informant interviews with the coordinator or a community person. This person was very versatile. The Dakota experience was similar, also utilizing three people. One person was the facilitator while the other two signed people in, explained the process and release form, and generally made people feel comfortable. The roles were general in nature and not locked into one specific task.

Flip charts were not consistently used as recording tools by the Rural Collaborative and were not deemed necessary in most instances. Flip chart pages were posted identifying the three areas of discussion to serve as a reminder and tool for keeping the group on task.



Staffing a Focus Group

There are three key roles identified in the Rural Collaborative process. These are the roles of the moderator, recorder and the person who helps people sign in explaining the discussion process and the release form. The three functions are important. They may be performed independently by three separate staff or interchangeably among the staff. These positions evolved as the focus group process unfolded in respective locations.

Floater, Sign-In/Release Position. This person needs to be very familiar with the release form and able to succinctly explain the process that will be followed. If an organization has an example of how they have used family quotes in other reports, etc, it is helpful to have that available (see Appendices 8, 9, 10 & 11 for sample sign-in, reimbursement and thank you to accompany stipend). In addition to the responsibilities of signing people in, reviewing the release form, and obtaining signatures for releases, this position could include:

- verifying the quality of the childcare facility and staff and supplementing where necessary,
- verifying the clarity of the tape recording and adapting as necessary,
- taking photographs of children during childcare activities, and
- gathering key informant interviews or contact information for future interviews.

Moderator. One of the keys to being a good moderator is being a good listener. It is important to remember that this is a "focus group", not an "interview" and not a "survey". Not every question has to be answered. An issue that is very important to one focus group may be non-existent to another, so the moderator should not force comments. The flow of the discussion may depart from the order of questions in your guide. The goal is to go with the flow!

The moderator should be a person who is very familiar with the issue being researched, familiar with the discussion guide and a very capable facilitator. To the extent possible, this person needs to insure that each participant contributes to the discussion, that all of the questions on the guide are covered, and maintain the pre-established timeline. This all needs to be done in a very smooth, unobtrusive way, being sensitive to the flow of the discussion rather than insisting that participants follow the exact order of questioning.

The moderator may or may not choose to use a flip chart. It may be helpful for participants to see what points have been raised when thinking of other areas they may wish to cover. Flip charts can be useful in summarizing what has been covered for wrap-up, but can also get in the way of the relationship building within the group and may break the flow of conversation if people are waiting to see a point summarized. The usefulness of flip charts also depends on the setup of the room and may take the moderator further away from the microphone.

Recorder. The recorder needs to be equally familiar with the subject being discussed and with the survey instrument being used. This person needs to be able to be as flexible and spontaneous in their note taking as the moderator is in their facilitation. The recorder needs to capture the general sense of the discussion but also needs to capture quotes they anticipate will be particularly useful in validating survey results. An expanded version of the questions, allowing space for capturing comments under the appropriate section, is helpful (see Appendix 12).

It is also useful for the recorder to draw a diagram of the seating arrangement, naming each participant, and also indicating their status (i.e. farmer, mother of 3, student, etc.). This type of diagram is also useful during the debriefing to remember what comments came from what participant, and may also be helpful during analysis if it becomes necessary to identify comments made by a dominant or other type of participant.

The recorder's responsibilities are to:
- Identify each person in connection to statements they make.
- Describe the sense of what each participant says.
- Capture important quotes.
- Record the characteristic language expressed, unique phrases, non-verbal cues, or special ways of referring to something or someone.
- Describe/summarize the overall sense of what is put forth.

The Day of the Focus Group

Advanced preparation is critical to the success of the day. Setting up the focus group site and ensuring all food and childcare arrangements requires a minimum of 1½ hours.

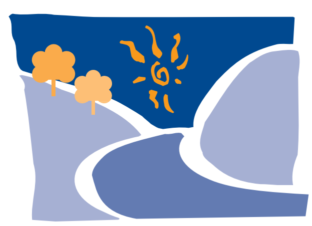
It is necessary to arrive at the location of the focus group discussion at least two hours before the focus group convenes. An earlier arrival is even better, for a couple of reasons:
- It provides an opportunity to check out the facility, rearrange the room, if necessary, establish backup plans, or compensate for any potential setbacks.
- It allows time to become familiar with the town and pertinent issues. It may afford the opportunity for completion of one or more key informant interviews.

TIPS FOR THE DAY:

- The success of the day often correlates to the level of advance preparation
- Spontaneity and flexibility on the day of the focus group are equally important
- Recording electronically and on paper is necessary
- Debriefing is key to accuracy and completeness of findings

THE RURAL COLLABORATIVE EXPERIENCE

It was very helpful during the focus group discussion to have an awareness of current events in the community. In one community there had been a very volatile issue with the school board. In another community, facts gleaned from a grocery store owner illustrated issues of importance to some of the participants. A wealth of information was provided on a drive surrounding one focus group community - spending two hours at a newly opened food co-op; comparing prices at two grocery stores with urban prices; visiting with the owner of the only restaurant in town; and just driving the beautiful countryside. These experiences provided additional context to understanding focus group discussion and enhanced linkages to focus group participants in some cases.



Focus Groups

As indicated, each focus group discussion lasts about ninety minutes. It is important to begin at the intended time, transitioning from the more informal dining, chatting atmosphere into the more formal discussion mode. This can be done either by physically moving the group from a dining area into another location for the meeting, or simply by asking them to gather for the discussion. Begin the meeting with a standardized welcome and a full explanation of rules then move into introductions and the opening exercise to set a more formal, yet still comfortable mode. Posting and reviewing a set of group discussion rules is an important way to set a serious, respectful tone for the meeting. Rules should include such things as giving everyone a chance to talk and respecting one another's views. Rules should again assure confidentiality on the part of the research team and solicit confidentiality from participants (see Appendices 13 & 14 for Welcome Statement and House Rules).

The discussion should flow easily from one predetermined set of questions to another, with minimal facilitation and the majority of the discussion occurring among participants. At the conclusion of the focus group, it is important to thank participants and give them their stipend or gift certificate. It may be difficult to get some participants to leave. Some participants may want to continue discussing areas of concern to them, gleaning any available assistance or expertise to help them solve a problem. Sometimes they just want to stay and visit. It is important to anticipate this possibility, being as direct as possible about time limitations or distances yet to travel, while leaving participants feeling satisfied and respected.

It is also important to prearrange with the coordinator for use of leftover food. Large amounts may be shared among participants, ensuring that everyone is included. The church or nonprofit organization in which you meet may be able to use surplus food for an upcoming activity. Otherwise, ask for the location of a nearby shelter or community organization to which the food can be taken.

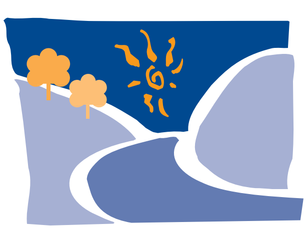
THE RURAL COLLABORATIVE EXPERIENCE

In one tribal community where there was a low turnout, there was an abundance of food prepared for more than the anticipated turnout. When it was evident the turnout was going to be low, the floater talked to the coordinator to make arrangements for distribution of leftover food. By the end of the meeting, the coordinator had gathered a group of teens working on a painting crew, and a number of tribal workers and leaders to share the remaining food. The focus group team was able to complete several key informant interviews "over lunch" and left with a very good sense of that community and with those involved feeling good about the goals of the Rural Collaborative.

Debriefing After the Focus Group

Immediately after the focus group it is important to:

- Determine the quality of the tape recording by rewinding and spot- checking portions of the tape. If it is of poor quality, the next step will need to be done in more detail.
- Have the team review the meeting notes and discussion for approximately thirty minutes (more if the tape is not going to be useful). This was often done in the car en-route to the next destination. This discussion can be tape recorded for



transcription later as well. The details seem so clear at the conclusion of a focus group, but fade within a few days. Doing several focus groups back-to-back makes the debriefing process all the more important, to prevent the details of each session from becoming blurred. The debriefing questions should be put into a form similar to the focus group questions (see Appendix 15). Questions should include:

- What were the most important themes or ideas?
- How did these differ from what occurred in earlier focus groups?
- What unique points need to be included in the report?
- What quotes should be remembered and possibly included in the report?
- Should anything be done differently for the next focus group?

Analyzing and Reporting Focus Group Results

There are differing views among researchers about how to analyze focus group data. The purpose of the focus group is, again, central to the type of analysis that will be done. "Also, there is controversy about whether the individual or the group is the unit of analysis in focus group interviews" (page 299)(Carey, 1995a; Carey & Smith, 1994; Morgan, 1995, 1996). Kidd and Parshall (2000) "suggest that neither one is *the unit* of analysis, whereas either or both might be a focus of analysis."[7] Kidd and Parshall recommend using the software application QSR-NUD*IST® (Qualitative Solutions & Research, 1997) for this process. Various researchers have different views on the reliability and effectiveness of software in analysis of focus groups. It is important to be able to factor in group dynamics or other influences on recorded responses given. As with every stage of the focus group process, it is important to take into account all forms of information captured. It is most advisable to use a combination of recorded transcripts and meeting notes. Discussing and noting group dynamics and other meeting influences in the debriefing gives the team the ability to identify factors such as a dominant member, a hostile member or a heated discussion. These factors can influence the group's responses and, therefore, need to be considered in the analyses.[8]

Use of the NUD*IST software does not eliminate the need for a significant amount of thought and analysis before entering the information into the program. Themes must be identified. Some of the more obvious themes can be identified prior to the focus

[7] Kidd, P.S., & Parshall, M. B. (2000). Getting the focus and the group; Enhancing analytical rigor in focus group research. *Qualitative Health Research, 10, 293-308.*

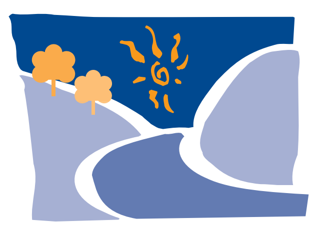
[8] Carey, M. A. (1995). Comment: Concerns in the analysis of focus group data. Qualitative Health Research, 5, 487-495.

ANALYZING FOCUS GROUP RESULTS:

- Consistency in transcription is important
- Software is helpful
- Quotations and photographs breathe life into reports

THE RURAL COLLABORATIVE EXPERIENCE

*The Rural Collaborative utilized version 5 of THE QSR-NUD*IST® software for the analysis of the focus groups. It was found to be very helpful in identifying relevant themes across focus groups.*



Focus Groups

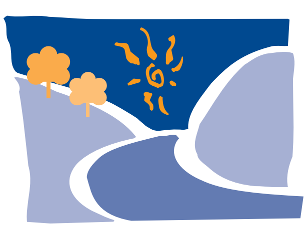
THE RURAL COLLABORATIVE EXPERIENCE

All focus group transcripts were transcribed by the Business Research Bureau personnel at The University of South Dakota. Transcribers were briefed about the project and the need for confidentiality was explained. The Business Research Bureau contracted with a research professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of South Dakota to code all of the transcripts and summarize the findings.

To provide consistency between each state, the analyses centered on each focus group as a unit of analysis, and was not analyzed question by question. A summary of themes for the Rural Collaborative was conducted. The analyses were reiterative in that the researcher continued with coding (and re-coding) transcripts until no NEW themes emerged.

For the analyses, each state did the following:

- *The entire transcript for each focus group, starting with the ice breaker until the last question was typed on a computer using word processing software.*
- *The transcript was checked for accuracy with notes taken during the focus group. For inaudible/unavailable information, notes were inserted from the focus groups. This was done by a person who did not type the transcripts. All identifying names in the transcripts were deleted.*
- *For each focus group, the transcript was labeled by state, location, and date.*
- *Each page was formatted according to the following criteria: left, top, and bottom margins set at 1 inch; for right margin set at 2 inches. Times New Roman, 12-point font was used.*



groups in anticipation of what will come. More can be done during debriefing. And still more needs to be teased out of the data once they are entered. The software then confirms the frequency with which the themes emerge. Kidd and Parshall found that it enabled them to "find more questions to ask, more issues to ponder, and more vantage points from which to explore the data."[9] While frequency counts of themes can be helpful in identifying a recurring theme, it is also important to consider less common/popular themes as being qualitatively significant in determining key results of focus group content.

NUD*IST has a significant amount of flexibility with no limit to the number or nature of themes which can be identified. It allows for identification of multiple themes in one paragraph and examination of associations between one theme and another. It also enables the assessment of similarities and differences between groups. Keep in mind that the purpose of focus groups is addressing salient questions posed by the researcher (i.e., available resources for children and families in rural settings). As such, thematic content needs to be linked and organized in meaningful ways so that the consumers of the research are able to understand the complexities and experiences of focus group members.

NUD*IST has capabilities that Kidd and Pashall describe as follows: "An important issue with focus groups is gauging whether an issue constitutes a theme for the group or merely a strongly held viewpoint of one or a few members. Assuming that reasonable steps have been taken to recompose who said what and that problems such as attempts to domineer have been identified in debriefing, appropriate adjustments may be taken during data analysis. Certain software features can be extremely useful in this regard, specifically, the ability to separate out all statements by any individual or subgroup and calculate how much of any coding category came from only one member or type of member. If necessary, cut-off points for the coding of redundant material can be determined (e.g., coding only the first mention of a topic by a domineering member) to avoid over-coding idiosyncratic or obsessional concerns that are not shared by other members."[10]

"Several other issues can be handled in similar fashion: (a) whether an issue only comes up in one or a few groups; (b) whether issues are raised, or returned to, in spontaneous discussion by group members or only come up in response to questions posed by moderators; and (c) whether group members

[8] Carey, M. A. (1995). Comment: Concerns in the analysis of focus group data. Qualitative Health Research, 5, 487-495.
[9] Kidd and Parshall, Ibid.
[10] Kidd and Parshall, Ibid.

find an issue both important and interesting, merely one but not the other, or neither" (Morgan, 1986, 1997a).

Different researchers use different strategies in analyzing data from multiple focus groups. Some prefer to begin analysis with one group and add to that. Others prefer to transcribe all groups and look for issues and themes across all groups. Whichever way it is done, a set of questions similar to those asked during the debriefing must be asked:

- What are people saying?
- What are people feeling?
- What is really important?
- What are the themes?
- How do the groups compare?
- Are there any gems or bits of wisdom that were said only once but deserve to be noted?
- Which quotes really give the essence of the conversation?[11]

Using Photographs

Photographs provide another medium in addition to the words (qualitative data) and numbers (quantitative data). The use of photographs in this type of report is highly recommended, if the capability exists. Photographs paint a visual picture and capture the attention of the reader, confirming that the information presented is truly representative of human conditions and relevant by geography or substance. Photographs can also bring pleasure to participants, enabling them to feel an even greater part of the project.

Cost Involved in Focus Group Work

The information gleaned from focus group work is rich and rewarding. It provides context to quantitative data and breathes life into faceless numbers. It is important to realize however, that there are costs involved and commitments of time and talent necessary to implement high quality, inclusive focus group discussions. The time commitment can be broken down into six segments:

- Project development
- Question Development
- Focus Group Execution
- Analysis of Findings
- Report Writing
- Release and Public Education

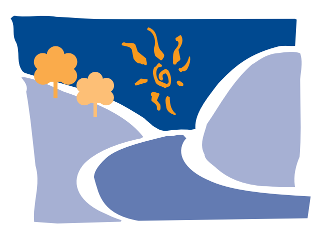
[11]Krueger, R. A. (1998). *Analyzing & reporting focus group results.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

The Rural Collaborative Experience

- *Each state transcript was verified by one or more members of the focus group team. This meant that the transcripts were reviewed for global themes that were present (i.e. child care, transportation, etc.). Notes were made on the transcript pages on the right side of the margin, hence the need for the 2-inch margins. This helped the researcher to make sure that state-specific interest areas were not overlooked in the overall analyses.*
- *The file was saved on disk and printed out and sent to the KIDS COUNT Project at South Dakota. It was then hand delivered to the researcher.*
- *In addition, there were two face-to-face meetings of collaborators to discuss and further refine the themes and findings.*
- *Another researcher who was not involved in the focus groups, but was familiar with the project, performed a review of the themes in relation to the report.*

Due to the timing of face-to-face meetings, the Rural Collaborative began discussing the themes which emerged from the first focus group, to guide how the report would be organized and to inform the choice of quantitative data be most relevant to our report.

Some photos were simply landscapes while others were of children and a parent. It is difficult to do justice to the vistas and distant horizons experienced in the Rural Collaborative states, but an attempt was made. Nebraska has made extensive use of photography in all KIDS COUNT reports and has found it to be an effective tool for the engagement of the participant as well as the reader. The KIDS COUNT research coordinator at Voices for Children in Nebraska has done the photography for the Nebraska KIDS COUNT report in recent years, enabling photographs to be taken at the Nebraska focus group meetings. The experience, again, was found to be enjoyable and rewarding for the participants and local citizens as photographs were taken of them at work and play.



Focus Groups

Of those activities, the community preparation phase can be the most time consuming. At that stage in the process, contacts are made with the community member helping coordinate activities at the local level. It can take a surprisingly long time to get phone calls, faxes or emails returned and firm up dates and locations. It is helpful to have one staff person who is readily accessible make all of those arrangements.

Three staff are ideal for the execution of the actual focus group discussions. Not all have to be employees of the same agency but using the same team for all focus groups ensures consistency.

A clerical professional usually performs the transcription function with analysis being performed by another professional with training in that area.

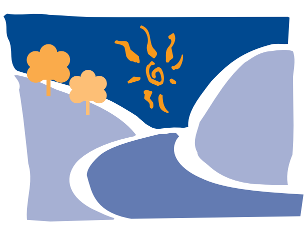
Other important considerations in establishing a focus group budget are (see Appendix 16):

- Travel distance to relevant communities and whether overnight lodging will be necessary
- Meeting space availability and costs (if any are required)
- Availability and cost of childcare, refreshments, and participant transportation
- Gifts or stipends for participants

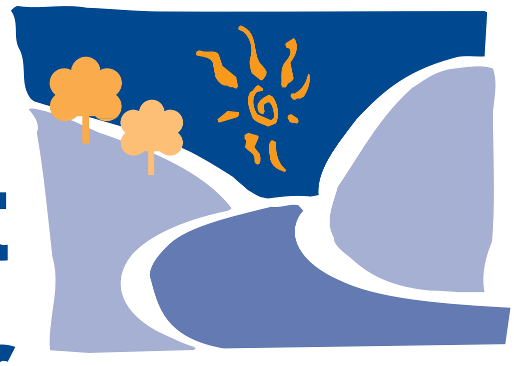
THE RURAL COLLABORATIVE EXPERIENCE

The Rural Collaborative team attempted to arrange the focus groups in the most efficient schedule possible, minimizing travel and time away from the office. Nebraska was able to get three of the meetings arranged in one week in locations which followed an efficient travel loop around the state for a round trip of approximately 1,100 miles. The fourth community required scheduling in a different week, creating a second 400-mile round trip to central Nebraska.

The seven Dakota meetings were staffed by a South Dakota team of three professionals. The meetings were scheduled to minimize travel. The North Dakota Focus groups were scheduled during one full week and covered over 1,500 travel miles. The South Dakota focus groups were held at different times requiring travel out and back to the office three separate times.



Key Informant Interviews



Key Informant Interviews

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

Key Informant interviews add background, historical information and context to focus group findings. These interviews may begin to offer ideas for correcting conditions identified by focus group discussion centering on community challenges or community problems.

Key Informant interviews are more apt to be a one-on-one interview but typically do not qualify as a survey because:

- the format will still be more like a discussion, digressing from specific questions enough to be spontaneous to accommodate the responses given by the key informant.
- open-ended questions are preferred.
- on occasion two people may be interviewed at one time.
- the number of interviews is not sufficient to be a statistically valid sample group.

Identifying Key Informants. Key Informants should be able to respond to areas of questioning similar to those toward which focus group participants are directed.

Developing Questions. A line of questioning is followed which is almost identical to the questions developed for the focus group participants (see Appendix 17). A solution development phase may require the addition of a question or two, more directed toward specific business and community issues related to the well being of children and families, but it is important in the first phase to keep the line of questioning parallel to that used in the focus groups. Key informants typically have valuable historical perspectives about respective communities, providing background and context for the focus group data as well as the quantitative data. It is also important to check for disconnects between the information provided by key informants and focus group participants.

Scheduling Interviews. Key informant interviews can be done by phone or in person. They can be done before, during or after the focus groups. In-person interviews enrich the experience for team leaders as well as participants and is the method recommended if time and staff allows.

The community contact, who coordinates the arrangements for the focus groups, will usually not sit in on your focus groups to ensure that the participants are able to speak freely. Rather, that person is generally someone who has a good grasp of the community and is an excellent source of information about the community, also helping to identify other key informants or make connections with people who can provide additional information.

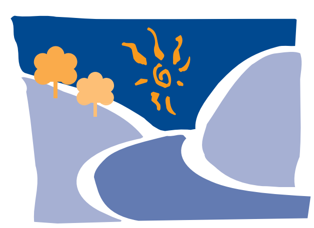
KEY INFORMANT CONSIDERATIONS:

- Selection of knowledgeable stakeholders is key
- Questions are similar to focus group questions
- Interviews may be done by phone or in person

THE RURAL COLLABORATIVE EXPERIENCE

The Rural Collaborative again highlighted economic opportunities, social networks and services and supports in participating communities. A cross section of key informants were sought who were involved in those areas of life in the local communities where focus groups were held. On the Reservations, informants included tribal elders, Head Start Directors, and social service directors, among others. Elsewhere, interviews were completed with school superintendents, providers of social services, educators, grocers, and community leaders.

For the Rural Collaborative project, the North and South Dakota interviews were primarily done by phone, some days or weeks after the focus groups. In Nebraska, one community was handled by telephone, with the other three communities' key informant interviews occurring primarily in person on the day of the focus group. In person interviews were felt to be a very effective way of handling the key informant interviews, adding perspective and feeling to the process as the interview is occurring.



Key Informant Interviews

It is important to have a clear process for identifying categories of people being sought for key informants, such as early childhood educators, business owners, vocational instructors, and social workers, among others. If individual contacts cannot be identified within the respective community, it is useful to call a statewide professional from a respective discipline to recommend local community contacts. When calling to schedule interviews, be prepared to provide the person with a one-page overview of the project, information about your organization and an array of choices for times the interview can be scheduled.

One of the keys to a successful key informant interview and focus group process is spontaneity and flexibility, while maintaining enough consistency to ensure the integrity of the research.

Location of Interview. Obviously, the interview location should be geared to the comfort level of the interviewee. Usually their office or home is most convenient for them. Some may want more privacy or even more anonymity than their work place can provide. It is usually best to do one interview at a time. Two interviewees may have divergent opinions on a question, making it more difficult to probe these differences in the interview format than in a focus group setting, (especially when one interviewee is in a position of higher status than the other).

Key Informant Confidentiality and Releases. The release of information is the same for key informants as it is for the focus group participants, giving permission for use of verbal information. This form also has the same option of having photographs taken or receiving contact from the media. Similarly, no quotes are to be attributed to the individual, state or community. The ethical issues are the same regarding the use of information gathered. Due to sample size, how these interview responses are reported is again an issue of confidentiality. It is important not to quantify answers by indicating that a certain percent of key informants responded in a certain way.

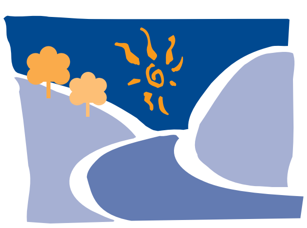
Analyzing Information from Key Informants. The analysis process for key informant interviews is similar to that used for the focus groups. Themes will emerge, allowing for frequency to be measured while still identifying significant quotes. Key informant interviews provide keen insights into community circumstances.

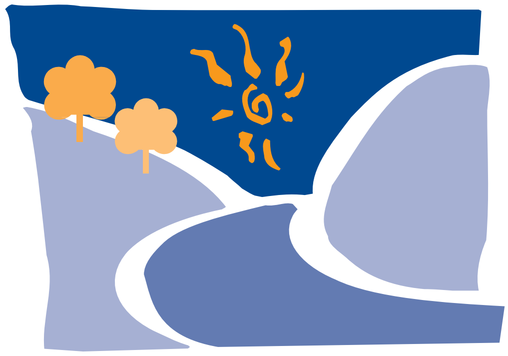
THE RURAL COLLABORATIVE EXPERIENCE

Nebraska found arriving in a community several hours prior to the scheduled focus group meeting allowed time for some pre-scheduled key informant interviews to be completed while enabling other interviews to be scheduled more spontaneously by the "floater". The floater was able to conduct key informant interviews once the focus group got started and other team members could do one or more following completion of the focus group. In another community, a key informant interview was observed by a youth employee of the agency who asked if he could be interviewed. This provided an opportunity for one of our few youth interviews conducted during the project and was very informative.

In one community, focus group participants related that there were no available jobs. A tribal elder in a key informant interview later that day described the factory closing that had occurred twenty years before and two subsequent business start-ups that had also failed in this community, adding history and context to the challenge of obtaining new jobs.

The one-on-one interview format used for key informants allows more in depth probing of individual questions. This was most apparent as one woman described the challenges of being a "newcomer" to the town. A deeper probe revealed that she had been in the community thirty-five years and still felt like a newcomer, adding additional perspectives to her comments.





Identifying and Selecting Appropriate Quantitative Data

IDENTIFYING AND SELECTING APPROPRIATE QUANTITATIVE DATA

The lack of timely and uniform quantitative data at the county level to some extent governed the emphasis on qualitative data for this project. The involvement of the State Data Centers in the Rural Collaborative states was sought and found to be very useful. The State Data Center network is a knowledgeable resource that should be utilized for the wealth of information available from the Census Bureau and other Federal and local statistical agencies. Equally important is their ability to assist in the interpretation of the data and to provide advice regarding data limitations and comparability.

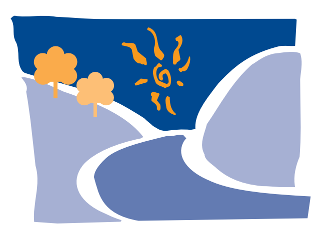
An initial assessment of available data showed statistical data describing a high concentration of rural counties and many counties in the three states as the poorest in the country. Examination of labor data showed a high percentage of parents and women in the workforce, and described wage distribution as well as per capita income. Population changes by county were also documented. Other social indicator data, such as child abuse, juvenile arrest and foster care data were not available at a county level or in formats that were comparable among participating states. Statistics showed many of the counties in the three-state region were losing population, but it was also evident that some people chose to stay in rural counties, while others chose to move into these areas.

The Rural Collaborative team next assessed the quantitative data by examining the relevant data that were collected from each of state's respective KIDS COUNT projects. To examine how comparable the data were across states, a simple spreadsheet was developed listing each data indicator (see Appendix 18). The indicators were organized into three sections which paralleled the major themes; 1) economic, 2) social, and 3) services and supports. The three Rural Collaborative states were listed in the columns, including the years for which the data were available and the corresponding level of geography (e.g. state or county).

The first challenge confronting the Rural Collaborative team was the fact that very few of the data were comparable across the states or available at the county level. This striking realization underscores the need for collaborative data collection efforts and highlights the value of regional or national data sets. Particularly striking was the fact of how difficult it is to assess children's well being, especially rural children, uniformly across state boundaries. The team realized it would be necessary to broaden the search for reliable indicators outside of our respective state databases. Subthemes revealed through the qualitative data were

QUANTITATIVE DATA CONSIDERATIONS:

- Relevant data at sub state levels is difficult to find for rural areas
- Volume and reliability of quantitative data may guide use of qualitative data



then assessed with subsequent brainstorming about possible data sources that could be tapped to measure targeted outcomes. A summary of possible measures was then brainstormed (see Appendix 19). Only a few of those measures were selected for inclusion in A Rural Road. The primary factor in deciding to leave measures out was the timing of anticipated Census data releases and the knowledge that some of the desired data would be outdated six months after the Rural Collaborative report was to be released. The Rurality Index developed by Charles Cleland was a most useful tool in analyzing how "rural" should be defined for this report. Selected sets of labor and population data proved equally useful.

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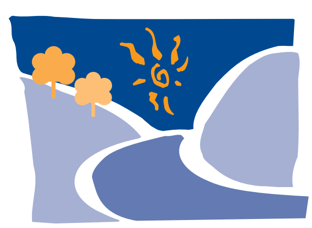

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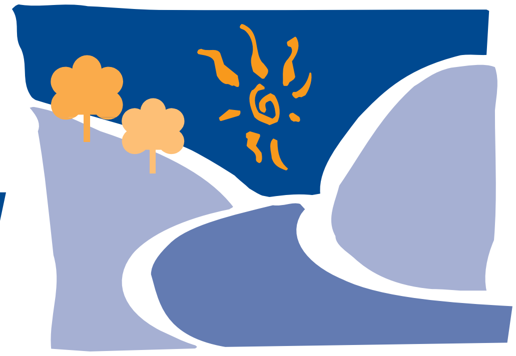

<u>RURAL</u>

Albrecht, D., Albrecht, C., & Albrecht, S. (2000). Poverty in non-metropolitan America: Impacts of industrial employment and family structure variables. <u>Rural Sociology, 65</u> (1) 87-103.

Poverty is more extensive and more severe in nonmetropolitan areas than in metropolitan areas. The authors maintain that the extensive industrial and economic transformations occurring in rural areas have resulted in patterns contributing to these high poverty levels.

Brown, D. & Hirschl, T. (1995). Household poverty in rural and metropolitan-core areas of the United States. <u>Rural Sociology, 60</u> (1), 44-60.

Modeling data from the 1985 wave of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, rural households have the highest probability of poverty followed by the metro core. Both household and contextual factors were important determinants of the chances of household poverty. However, controlling for these determinants failed to eliminate the greater likelihood of rural versus metro core poverty. Findings indicate the need for new directions in future poverty research and a reconsideration of the importance of space and sociological theory.

Brooks-Gunn, J., & Duncan, G. (1997). The effects of poverty on children. <u>Children and Poverty, 7</u> (2), 71.

The article focuses on a recent set of studies that explore the relationship between poverty and child outcomes in depth. By and large, this research supports the conclusion that family income has a selective, but in some instances, quite substantial effects on child and adolescent well-being.

Cavaye, J., Shaffer, R., & Wraith, S. (1997). <u>The use of community services by rural families in Wisconsin (</u>Staff Paper No. 97, 4). University of Wisconsin-Cooperative Extension: Center for Community Economic Development.

An analysis of rural families in Wisconsin. Discusses the economics, community services, public health, etc. of rural areas.

Jackson, J. (1999, June). <u>Turning the tide for children in Maryland: moving from "projectitis" to a coherent whole.</u> National Association of Child Advocates.

There is the vision of child advocates, but what about the reality? Discusses how to make efforts a reality.

Johnson, K. M. (1999). The rural rebound. <u>Reports on America, 1,</u> (3).

Why, after so many decades of rural population loss, has one of the country's most enduring demographic trends reversed itself? According to this article, a complex set of economic, social, and geographic forces has influenced this trend.

Kilborn, P. T. (2000, July 2). Boom in economy skips towns on the plains. <u>The New York Times.</u> [On-line], Available: http//:www.nytimes.com.

This is an article about ghost towns forming in the plains area because the nation's growth and prosperity has gone right past them. Many people and businesses leave the small towns because of poverty issues.

Meeting minutes rural welfare to work strategies. (2000, February 9-10). Washington, DC: US DHHS, Administration for Children and Families (ACF). Accessed on web, http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/opre/2-00mi~1.htm

The third meeting of grantees for the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) Rural Welfare to Work Strategies project was held on February 9-10, 2000, at the Humphrey Building, Washington, DC. Representatives from the following states attended: Illinois, Iowa, Louisiana, Maryland, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Vermont, and Washington. A closer examination of effective strategies in rural areas is needed. Unique obstacles exist in rural communities that are not found in urban communities. In rural areas, supports are needed in childcare, transportation, health care, and child support. An examination of current strategies is important now because reauthorization is on the horizon. During the reauthorization debate, rural issues need to be better explained to state legislators and to Congress. Innovative ideas are needed for rural America so that rural America is not "invisible" during debate surrounding reauthorization.

The National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information. [On-line], Available: http//:www.health.org/newsroom.

Alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs in rural communities.

National Rural Health Association. (2000, September 22). Kansas City, MO.

This new report looks at the mental health needs of rural women: NRHA and APA hosted congressional briefing to introduce results of the study. The new report from the APA "attempts to direct attention to this underrepresented group and presents a review of the literature related to the behavioral health care needs of rural women. With this knowledge, psychologists and other health professionals will be able to more effectively plan and deliver services to this population." The report concentrates on research published since 1975. It identifies depression as the most commonly studied psychological disorder in rural areas, and discusses the causes of depression that are unique to rural women.

Joint Center for Poverty Research Poverty research news. (2000, September/October). Vol. 4 #5
This issue of the newsletter considers the rural dimensions of welfare reform.

Princeton Survey Research Associates. (1999, August 6). A report on public opinion in Aberdeen, South Dakota. Washington DC: John S. and James L. Knight Foundation Community Indicators Project.

In order to better serve its local community grantees, Knight Foundation developed the Community Indicators project to document the social health of these communities. As an evaluative tool, the Community Indicators project will provide quality-of-life measures in the 26 communities that Knight Foundation seeks to affect through its local grant making. The indicators will establish baseline measurements of social health that can be used in the future years as evaluative benchmarks against which the progress of grantees' programmatic efforts can be measured. Once established, key indicators *will be tracked over time and used to help identify opportunities and needs within and across communities. The information gathered for the project will also be made available to community groups, non-profit organizations, and national leaders to aid them in efforts to bolster community health on the local level.*

The Rural School and Community Trust. (2000). [On-line], Available: http://www.ruralchallengepolicy.org.

Website document why rural matters.

Pulver, G. C. (1997). The future of the rural development profession. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Cooperative Extension, Center for Community Economic Development.

Discusses the issues concerning rural differences. Rural problems and solutions are different than those in larger urban areas.

Pulver, G. C. (1998). Issues in rural policy development. Madison, WI: Fellows Seminar University of Wisconsin Department of Agriculture and Applied Economics, University of Wisconsin-Cooperative Extension, Center for Community Economic Development.

Focus is on these issues which are critical in the formulation of contemporary rural policy.

Weber, B., & Duncan, G. (2000, June 21). Welfare reform and food assistance in rural America. Evanston, IL: Joint Center for Poverty Research.

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWORA) of 1996 introduced fundamental changes in our country's system for supporting low-income families. It ended cash assistance as a Federal entitlement, imposed time limits and work requirements, and gave states great flexibility in designing their welfare policies. How these reforms, plus changes in food assistance programs, are affecting the lives of low-income families living outside of our nation's metropolitan areas is the subject of this report.

Weber, B., & Duncan, G. 2001. Welfare reform reauthorization and rural America: implications of recent research. Evanston, IL: Joint Center for Poverty Research.

The 1996 welfare reform legislation ended cash assistance as a federal entitlement, and made receipt of public assistance conditional on working or preparing for work and subject to time limits. Given the more limited job opportunities in rural areas and the poorer access to work and family support services, there has been concern about how this legislation has affected the one-fifth of the nation's population living in nonmetropolitan areas.

DATA

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A report of South Dakota poverty data

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A National Academy of Sciences (NAS) panel commissioned by four Federal agencies recommended in May 1995 a major revision of the methodology for measuring poverty in the United States. If implemented, the new method would change the makeup of the population measured as poor. The effects of the changes would differ substantially between nonmetro and metro areas. Here, we describe the effects of the proposed revisions on the incidence of measuring poverty in non metro areas relative to metro areas, and among racial and regional subcategories of the nonmetro population.

Qualitative and Quantitative Methods

Joint Center for Poverty Research Poverty research news. (2000, January/February). Vol. 4 # 1.

This issue of the newsletter considers the challenges and opportunities of combining the two predominate, but often polarized, methods of research in the social sciences—qualitative and quantitative methods—in evaluating welfare reform.