



Questions and Answers on Health Insurance Focus Groups With Latino Populations

Proceedings from conference call with Lisa Duchon and Michael Perry

Introduction:

The State Health Access Data Assistance Center (SHADAC) sponsored a conference call about use of focus groups to collect data on insurance status among Latino populations. The conference call took place on July 23, 2001.

Lisa Duchon of the Commonwealth Fund and Michael Perry from Lakesnell Perry and Associates led a discussion of their experiences with Latino focus groups.

Lisa and Michael collaborated on the Commonwealth Report “Barriers to Health Coverage for Hispanic Workers: Focus Group Findings,” released in December 2000.

Several states participated in the call. While some states had conducted several focus groups and had questions about how to analyze and write up the results, many of the state participants had questions about the basics of focus group (e.g. when they are appropriate to use with immigrant audiences, when they are not, what are some of the “tricks of the trade,” etc).

The following is a compilation of the discussion and questions from the conference call.

Answering Questions about Latino Focus Groups

Q: What was the focus of the Commonwealth Report “Barriers to Health Coverage for Hispanic Workers: Focus Group Findings”?

A: The focus was the lack of job-based coverage prevalent among Hispanic workers. Previous research showed that most uninsured Hispanics are tied to the work force, but they are much more likely to not have job-based coverage compared to others, even those in the same income group. Focus groups gave us the opportunity to ask questions and

gain information that a survey would not allow. It allowed qualification rather than quantification and helps policy makers hear the thoughts and feelings of “real people.” Ultimately, we expected that the report would help decision-makers think more creatively about ways that health care coverage could be made more affordable and available.

Q: What characteristics did you look for when screening focus group participants?

A: It is important to have homogeneity in focus groups, so we created a matrix of characteristics beyond low income, working Hispanics. These included region of the country, Latino ethnicity and insurance status and language. This resulted in eight focus groups, two each in four parts of the country with a mix of these characteristics.

Q: What are the key steps to follow when creating a final questionnaire for the focus groups?

A: Community involvement and a willingness to write many drafts. Community involvement was essential, especially in our case where our research team was mainly comprised of non-Hispanic whites. Involvement from the community brings out concerns and interests of Hispanic leaders, in addition to generating awareness about the project.

When writing out the questionnaire, start out with a general outline of the main topics and try to narrow that down. Also, try to anticipate possible answers so you can have some follow-up questions in mind. This helps alleviate “surface” answers -- answers where no new information is really gained. We developed discussion guides listing a question with probes underneath it and a list of things to listen for in the discussion. This helped us gather pertinent information. Finally, remember to ask non-leading questions.

Q: Were you able to gather most demographic information through the questions asked?

A: No, those involved filled out a participant profile in advance. This allowed us to gather descriptive information of the groups without spending focus group time. Ultimately, having participants fill out such forms in advance allows more time for people to talk about their attitudes and experiences.

Q: How concerned should we be with trying to obtain a representative mix of Latino cultures in the focus group?

A: This is an important issue that needs to be looked at in terms of the geographic community you are examining. For example, if you are looking at statewide populations, you may need to consider many different groups (Mexican, Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, etc). Each group has clear distinctions that may affect attitudes and behaviors. You may want to break out the groups into country of origin, or to mix the

groups up to get a broader representation. This is largely dependent on the concentration of specific groups in a particular area of interest, as well as your goals in information gathering.

Another concern is the moderators' culture and dialect. While ideally you try to match the country of origin with the predominant culture of the participants, many times this is not possible. In these situations, it is important to ask whether or not something may have been missed by not having the exact match.

Q: What about varying levels of assimilation? Is this of concern when setting up the focus group?

A: Assimilation is a factor that should be taken note of during the screening process. We sometimes use the phrase “in the country for less than five years” or not as our division line. We don't ask any questions about legal status because of its affect on recruitment and trust. In the screening part of the interview process, we make it clear that we are not with any immigration service, that this will not affect their status or citizenship. Although we never ask questions about immigration status in the recruitment process, we do ask it once they are in the focus group. Generally it is saved for the end after trust is gained and sometimes on written documents translated into Spanish.

Q: What process should be used for participant recruitment? How long should we allow for this step to be completed?

A: Recruitment is a big issue and a mixture of methods is generally most successful. In the past, we've tried buying consumer lists and overlay the information based on census tract. We could say we wanted census tracts where the majority of individuals have a specific income level and where there are high Latino concentrations. But we only came up with one or two people from these lists for each group, and only after doing a lot of calling.

Although they have the potential to generate numerous participants, we try not to rely solely on community-based organization, even though it is often the easiest route, particularly when recruiting newer immigrant populations. One issue to really consider is if your route of recruitment leads you mainly to individuals who are already “connected.” In other words, we want to talk with people who haven't hooked up with a health clinic, aren't getting the services they need and are faced with hurdles in the health care system. These are the individuals who will be able to show us where gaps are, and how to better connect them with services.

We tend to allow 2-3 weeks for the recruitment step and have three main sources that we mix together for recruitment:

- 1) Profession focus group facilities: Even if we don't hold a focus group in a professional facility, we use their recruiters to recruit the groups for us. They

- have a lot of experiences and resources that we don't have. We also ask about their databases. However, please remember that even if there are individuals who are in groups considered low income or Latino, if they are in the database of a focus group facility they tend to be more "connected."
- 2) Snowball recruiting: In some cases, we limit the number of people who can come from a focus group facility or community group database. From there we do snowball recruiting; we call the individual but rather than invite that individual, we ask them to give a few names of friends who might be interested. Then we would use the original person's name to establish trust when calling the friend.
 - 3) Intersect method: The intersect methods allows for more randomness. You need Spanish speaking staff who are willing to go out into the community and intersect with people in public places – the grocery store or wherever seems appropriate. They just stop people and say, "would you be interested in coming to a focus group? Let me ask some questions to see if you fit the criteria. You'll be paid to attend."

Q: Could you give details about the incentives you provide to attract participants?

A: The main incentives include payment, babysitting and transportation. We give a minimum of fifty dollars. If we have limits based on our source of funding, we sometimes supplement with a gift certificate, bringing the price up to about sixty or sixty-five dollars per person. The main reason that we've raised the payment level up to this amount is to compensate for babysitting and transportation issues. When setting up a babysitting arrangement in the focus group location is difficult, it is often easier to have the individuals set up their own child-care and reimburse through the incentive payment. The same can be said about transportation. If we need to add cab fare on top of the payment, we will do that or we'll try to hook someone up with a ride. When there is a concentration of people in one area, we may elect to get a van. We always try to hold our focus groups on public transportation routes, if possible. Finally, we provide food. Food is key.

Q: What are the ideal logistical scenarios, or what methods have you found work best in terms of length of sessions, number of participants, etc.?

A: For the most part, we tried to limit the sessions to two hours with eight to ten participants. This varied, depending on the community and our travel arrangements. For example, if we were at a location for only a day or two, we tried to arrange two focus groups in one night – one from five to seven o'clock and one from 7:15 to 9:15. If you aren't on a limited time frame, you may not want to do more than one in a night.

Also, to make sure we had enough participants, we would recruit fourteen to sixteen participants because some might not show. Although this is anecdotal, the Latino "show" rates tend to be very high for focus groups. If they say they are coming, they are more likely to come than other groups we've done. After everyone has shown up, we pay the

extras and send them home – they don't waste time, they earn their money and they enable us to be assured that we have enough participants.

Q: What about observers? Do you have people who are not moderators observe the group?

A: We had a number of observers present during the actual focus group session. In a professional focus group facility, our ability to have simultaneous translation allowed us to have some non-Spanish speaking clients in the background. So we could all learn while the session was taking place without interfering with the group dynamics.

In rural locations or in situations where we couldn't use the professional focus group facility, we have set a camera set up and put the observers in another room. Or, if they are in the same room with the focus group participants, make sure that everyone is introduced or give the observers jobs such as handing out things, greeting people so that they see that everyone is working together and there isn't suspicion.

We also took questions and message out to the moderators during the session. This is your laboratory, your shot to hear what is going on with these people. We would run notes out that said, "ask about this" or "ask about that" and it wasn't disruptive if handled right. These observers were also helpful in the analysis portion of the focus groups.

Q: How expensive is it to contract with a professional facility group?

A: On our own, we tend to average out at about \$7500 per focus groups. So if you do four focus groups, that's a \$20,000 study. If you hire a professional facility to conduct the groups, you may be paying upwards of \$28,000 for four groups. Keep in mind that this includes all of the focus group facility charges (including recruiting, paying the incentive, food, audio-taping, videotaping and transcription fees).

Q: How do you go about conducting the analysis once the groups are completed?

A: Debriefing is a key point in analysis, as is the audiotape from the session. We debriefed immediately after the groups were completed. We talked about what we learned and helped us with the next group. When all of the groups were over, we had the audiotapes transcribed and then shared them with the whole project team. The interpretation portion is the most difficult part. We looked for recurring themes, similarities and differences as well as compelling quotes. We talked as a group about what the "story" should be – what we heard the participants saying. There were many disagreements, but it was a very healthy process.