Homelessness Vulnerabilities and Potential Mitigating Supports

Designing Online Focus Groups: Learnings from the Study

November 29th, 2020

KHRC

Kelowna Homelessness Research Collaborative

ABOUT THE REPORT

The Kelowna Homelessness Research Collaborative (KHRC) is an interdisciplinary team of investigators across UBC, Okanagan College, and Interior Health interested in conducting research in support of those experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

The purpose of this study was twofold. First, to start engaging with individuals with lived experience and service providers to gather community specific information about the factors they felt put people most at risk of homelessness and to understand what could be done locally to affect change. The second was to present this information to local groups (service providers, funders, policy makers and those with an interest in the area) to assist in their work and actions going forward.

The Kelowna Homelessness Research Collaborative (KHRC) would like to thank all those who participated in this study.

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Acknowledgements:
We would like to sincerely thank our Lived Experience Co-Researchers, Sherry W. Landry and Dorothy Goodeye.

This project was funded by a Convene grant issued by the Vancouver Foundation https://www.vancouverfoundation.ca/

Electronic copies of this report are available on our website: **khrc.ok.ubc.ca**

CONTENTS

WORKSHOP DESIGN

Originally, like so many research designs, this study had planned for an in-person mini-forum to bring together a variety of stakeholders[1]. The session would have used conventional focus group techniques; participants moving between tables, interaction, food and beverages. COVID-19 forced the research team to re-imagine community discussion and adapt to virtual participation. Moving to online group facilitation was new to many on the research team. It was felt that other researchers and community organizations may benefit from understanding the process and adaptations made to accommodate an online environment. The following report reflects our learnings.

To adapt, the focus groups were conducted remotely using online technology. The research team utilized Zoom, a platform that allowed people to come together virtually. Zoom was chosen specifically because of its built-in break out room functionality that allowed for small group discussion and document sharing. Zoom is also a commonly used platform at the time of the writing of this report and would not be new to many of the participants,

The session was designed in several parts, each with a distinct purpose. As online facilitation tends to take longer to conduct than in-person sessions, it is important that the whole session be carefully planned and the timing carefully considered. It is more difficult to change on-line session 'on the fly'. The session included:

- *An Introduction of the group, the findings of previous work done, and the process for the session.* This served to bring all participants to a common understanding of what had been done and reinforced the purpose of the session.
- *Two Breakout sessions, which split participants into 3 breakout rooms with pre-circulated topics so participants could quickly determine the room most suited to their interests.* Zoom allows for participants to self-select into different breakout rooms. Smaller groups of individuals create the space for greater engagement and more discussion.
- *Full group debriefs, both between breakout sessions and at the end.* Bringing the small discussion rooms back to a full group discussion helps to create a sense of community and allows for all participants to feel connected to the topics being discussed.
- *A break.* It is important to provide participants with the ability to take a short break during sessions that last for 2 hours or more.

Preparation

Unlike face-to-face focus groups, the preparation of materials, food, and physical environment was limited to what would be shared on screen. For online sessions, the focus of preparation is on the materials, the tools being used and readying the team to deal with operation challenges.

Social media, personal invitations, emails to past participants, and e-newsletters were used to alert potential participants of the session. Sign-up for the session was facilitated through EventBrite, an online registration tool. Registered participants were then directed to a google form to provide

[1] For more information on previous reports related to this study, please go the KHRC website

more information on their interests for the session. This information gathering allowed researchers to both determine numbers and to identify the interests in the group prior to the session to accommodate participants' preferences in the tailored breakout groups.

Prepping the Tool

Each online communication platform is unique, so research teams should review the different tools to choose the one with the right functionality to support the input they are hoping to gather. In preparation for the zoom session, breakout room categories were determined ahead of time. Maximum and minimum limits for rooms were determined to ensure ideal levels of participation. Smaller breakout groups allowed for better connection and more fulsome discussion.

The team also utilized other built in tools for the session. A "waiting room" was employed. This tool enables researchers to allow participants into the session when they are ready and prevent participants from joining the session early. Facilitators are able to keep participants informed of status updates through messaging tools while in the waiting room. Giving participants a five-minute warning prior to the start proved a useful tool.

To facilitate communication during the session and to minimize distraction, settings were set to mute participants upon entering the main room of the session. The chat tool was activated to facilitate communication between participants and the facilitators. This is an excellent tool that should be actively monitored during the session.

Online platforms also have the ability to share documents through a "Screen Share". All documents needed for the session should be loaded and ready prior to the start to ensure that the transitions from one element to the other are smooth. To prepare for the breakout sessions, facilitators can have blank documents ready to take group notes, similar to the physical use of flipchart paper. Using this tool allows participants to see what notes are being taken during the session.

A tool that is used in some situations, but not in these sessions is the ability to record and upload the recorded video for transcription. This is available with some platforms and not others. Due to the nature of the feedback and concern over participants feeling comfortable to speak freely, this was not utilized.

Prepping the Facilitators / Researchers

Facilitators will prepare differently for an online session. They should ensure that they are well versed in the online tools being used. To get facilitators ready, the research team held several practice sessions using the technology, practicing the flow of the session and testing for all of the potential issues that could occur. It is recommended that the leaders of the session should assign specific roles to ensure that all issues can be easily dealt with. In our session these roles were:

- Lead Technology - this person managed letting people in from the waiting room and handling technology concerns from the participants (i.e. video or audio issues).

- Lead Chat - this person monitored the chat and was able to assist the hosts of the session with questions/concerns from the main group of participants. This individual also took the lead on creating the breakout rooms and assigning individuals not already in a room, to a room.
- Lead Host(s) - this person(s) took responsibility for managing the introductory slides and moving through the materials. This person(s) essentially led the session for all participants and guided them through the session.
- Notetakers - each breakout room was also assigned a secondary notetaker who was responsible for capturing information contained in the chat discussion as well as supplementary notes not captured by the facilitator.

It is recommended that for this type of facilitation, those leading the sessions should have at a minimum two screens. During break out sessions, it is useful to have participants and the chat stream on one screen, and have a second screen for taking notes. We recommend sharing the notes on screen with the participants. In addition, facilitators may want to have headsets, microphones and proper lighting to ensure that they can be easily seen and heard by participants. Facilitators should work to make the backgrounds of their video feed as distraction free as possible.

Prepping the Participants

Participants should be aware ahead of time of any special software or hardware that they would need to access the online session. It is recommended for participants with low bandwidth to shut off their video (even though this minimizes connection to the session), otherwise they should be prepared to be seen on video. This increases the sense of being part of a session and enhances the feedback gathered during small group breakout sessions.

Due to COVID, it was anticipated that most participants would be familiar with the platform and have the required equipment. For lived experience participants, researchers may need to adapt or provide alternative ways to participate. For this session, there were individuals responsible for tech support as part of the research team at the session.

Should recording happen, participants should be notified that recording is taking place. If no recording is being used, participants should be reminded that recording of the session is not permitted. In our case, there was a commitment to sharing the results to the community at the end of the project.

Session Design

The session was designed in 4 parts. An Introduction, Breakout session 1, Breakout session 2, and Debrief/Wrap up. Each session was designed with a specific goal in mind.

Introduction

Participants were let into the main room 5 -10 minutes ahead of the start of the session. This allows for some general conversation and gives everyone the opportunity to test out their equipment and familiarize themselves with the tool being used. It is at this point that the tech support individuals watch the chat area for questions or concerns.

The Introduction section gave participants an understanding of how the session would be structured, identified ideal "zoom etiquette'' for the session and provided an overview of the project to date. The hosts of the session then provided instructions on how to access the breakout rooms and gave specific instruction on what was to be covered in the rooms.

In the case of this project, it was very important to set the stage for the interactions and feedback expected in each room. This included providing insight into the past work done by the group, results of previous consultations. Providing adequate background information provides the opportunity for participants to see those leading the session as credibly, knowledgeable and capable of conducting this kind of research.

Breakout Sessions

During the breakout sessions the facilitators in each room lead the participants through a series of prompts for discussion. They facilitated the conversation in a similar fashion to an in-person session. The key differences were that participants were not as free to talk over one another (as might happen in a face-to-face session), and they were able to use the chat feature to add to comments being said, make their own points, or to agree/disagree with the discussion. In this way, it could be argued that participants actually had more ability to provide their feedback in their own words.

Facilitators took notes on the screen and note takers pulled comments from the comment box as well as taking additional feedback not captured on the screen. This ensured that no discussion points were lost. Capturing both spoken comments and written comments may lead to more robust and complete notes for the session. Facilitators are able to encourage participants who might be reluctant to verbalize their ideas to write in the chat box. It also allows researchers to capture the exact wording of participants. There is a potential that more information is captured as well. In face-to-face, verbal only facilitated sessions, the feedback gathered is limited to what the facilitator is able to gather from spoken word.

Debrief / Wrap up

In this final part of the session, the facilitators provided some key learnings from each of the debrief groups. Participants were then reminded of how the ideas generated in the session would be used in the future and how they could continue to participate in ongoing work related to this study. Contact information for the research team was provided for follow-up.

CONCLUSION

The effects of Covid-19 will be felt for many years. It has led to innovations in many fields, including research. As more people begin using online tools to facilitate group discussion and conduct research, our ability to use online tools more effectively will grow.

It is the hope of the research team that the preparation, process, and design decisions behind our session will support other community facilitators and researchers to conduct their own online sessions.