



Community Forum Knowledge Brief

Number 2: Methods and Measures of Public Deliberation

Public deliberation—a method of public consultation in which members of the public come together to engage in informed dialogue about difficult or complex social issues—can be implemented via several different designs and methodologies. Although all deliberative methodologies share common characteristics and the defining features of public deliberation, there are many different formats and approaches in use among conveners of public deliberation. Likewise, evaluative measurements to determine the outcomes of public deliberation differ across formats as well.

Defining Features of Public Deliberation?

Public deliberation consists of four defining elements:

- (1) **Coming together:** A group of people convenes, either in person or using online technologies that connect people in remote locations.

AHRQ's Effective Health Care Program and the Community Forum

The Effective Health Care Program was initiated in 2005 to provide valid evidence about the comparative effectiveness of different medical interventions. The object is to help consumers, health care providers, and others make informed choices among treatment alternatives.

The purpose of the Community Forum project, funded initially under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), is to expand public and stakeholder engagement in health care research supported by AHRQ.

This *Community Forum Knowledge Brief* is the second in a two-part series based on an extensive review of the literature. Look for *Knowledge Brief: Public Deliberation on Health Topics* (No. 1), and for the full literature review, *Public Deliberation To Elicit Input on Health Topics: Findings From a Literature Review*, at www.effectivehealthcare.ahrq.gov.



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- (2) **Education:** Participants are informed about the relevant issue(s) through educational materials and/or the use of content experts.
- (3) **Discussion:** Participants give their reasons for stated preferences based on their opinions, values, and experiences. They are encouraged not only to provide reasons, but also to listen to the perspectives of others and learn how various issues or alternatives affect others.
- (4) **Documentation:** The dialogue is recorded and reported to help authorities incorporate public perspectives when making decisions.

Public deliberation is unique in that it involves a diverse group of citizens who learn about issues and options surrounding a social topic and share their own perspectives and reasoning with one another. The result is a record of underlying values and ethics, public reasoning, and options for consideration by decisionmakers.

Methods of Public Deliberation?

Deliberative methods include issues forums (which include “Community Forums,” “National Issues Forums,” and “Deliberative Forums”), study circles, consensus conferences, Deliberative Polling[®], among other methods. Deliberation can take place in person or online. Deliberative methods vary in terms of the following characteristics:

- Mode of discussion (in-person or online)
- Number of participants
- Number of sessions
- Length of time per session
- Use of “witnesses” or experts and their function (presentation and/or answering participant questions)
- Use of educational materials to create informed deliberation

Although there are established protocols for some of these methods, many applications of public deliberation in the literature represent hybrid approaches or variations rather than methods with an established protocol. Exhibit 1 summarizes the nine distinct deliberative methods found in the literature and their key characteristics.

Exhibit 1. Deliberative methods and their characteristics

	Mode (Online, in Person, or Hybrid)	Number of Participants	Number of Sessions	Length of Sessions	Use of Witnesses/Experts	Experts Answer Participants' Questions	Use of Educational Materials	Recruitment Method
Citizens' Juries	In Person	12–24	1	4–7 days	Yes	Yes	No	Randomly selected
Planning Cells	In Person	25	1	4–7 days	Yes	Yes	Yes	Purposively selected
Issues Forums	Both	2–100	1	1–14 days	No	N/A	Yes	Purposively selected
Consensus Conferences	Both	10–20	1	2–3 days	Yes	Yes	Yes	Randomly selected
Deliberative Polling®	Both	130–450	1	1–2 days	Yes	Yes	Yes	Randomly selected
Citizens' Panel	In Person	12	A few per year	90 minutes or more*	Varies	Varies	No	Purposively selected
Deliberative Focus Groups	In Person	6–12	1	2–3 hours	No	N/A	Yes	Purposively selected
Study Circles	In Person	3–300	3–5	2 hours	No	N/A	No	Purposively selected
21st Century Town Meeting®	Both	500–5000	1	1+	No	N/A	Yes	Purposely selected

*Participants are allowed to discuss the topic outside of sessions.

There are several reasons why one deliberative method might be more appropriate than another, including the identity of the target participant population and the nature of the deliberative topic. For example, sponsors of deliberation might want to select a method that involves either random or purposive sampling, depending on whether they are seeking a more representative sample or whether overrepresentation of particular subgroups is paramount. A representative sample is particularly important if sponsors want to be able to say something through a deliberative process about the broader public's views on an issue.

Just as the recruitment method will help determine who is involved in the process, so will the mode of deliberation. If the goal is to reach a geographically dispersed population, online modes of deliberation can connect individuals from across the country—or even around the world. Thus, selection of method will depend upon who the sponsor wants to hear from and how to best reach that group.

The appropriate deliberative method may also depend upon the nature of the deliberative topic. Some deliberative methods are better suited for certain deliberative topics than others, particularly if a method was designed to address specific types of issues. For example, consensus

conferences are intended to address complex issues generally involving scientific or technical information. They are structured in a way that allows for intensive exploration of the topic during a conference; participants then generate a report based on the conference. A cross-national comparison of three consensus conferences on food biotechnology was conducted in Canada, Australia, and Denmark to explore the role of context in consensus conferences and address an emerging policy issue (Einsiedel, Jelsøe et al., 2001). Consensus conferences take place in a public setting and so may be used to increase transparency or public awareness.

Citizens' juries are another approach that works well for specific types of issues, in this case for considering many sides of policy issues. They consist of a steering or advisory body and representative participants; they emphasize expert testimony and cross-examination by the participants and formal delivery of the participants' recommendations to relevant decisionmakers (Paul, Nicholls et al., 2008). A less structured method, study circles are typically used to "study" community or local issues and make recommendations for community action to address these issues; for example, reducing teenage pregnancy in Midvale City, Utah (Schwinn, Kessler et al., 2005).

Although the goals of deliberation may drive the selection of method, other considerations, such as costs, resource availability, and the outputs of the deliberative process, may affect which method is ultimately implemented.

Evaluation of Public Deliberation

Measuring the outcomes of public deliberation can be challenging. Outcomes of interest in the literature range from the effects of the public input on decisionmaking and public policy, to effects on the individual participant, such as changes in knowledge of and attitudes toward the deliberative topic. Evaluations in the literature often include process elements (e.g., whether participants had equal opportunities to contribute) to assess the quality of deliberation in addition to the impact on participants.

The impact of the deliberation on participants has been assessed through surveys or interviews before and after a deliberative event, measuring pre/post changes in:

- Respect for the opinions of others and awareness of different perspectives on the deliberative issues;
- Knowledge, attitudes, perspectives, values, beliefs, opinions, or policy preferences on the deliberative topics; and
- Civic-mindedness, capacity for civic engagement, engagement in the political process, sense of self-efficacy, sense of empowerment, political efficacy and solidarity, and anticipated post-meeting activity related to deliberation issues.

Post-event surveys or interviews may also capture participants' deliberative experience, including their perceptions of whether participating in the event was a valuable means of eliciting public input and whether their views were heard and respected, as well as their overall satisfaction with the process. This information can help sponsors and conveners better understand how effective the implementation was and can augment the quantitative and qualitative analyses, particularly if there are differences in outcomes among subgroups.

The content and outputs of the deliberations are of particular value to the sponsor. Qualitative review of the transcribed deliberations is used to summarize the ethical principles and values participants cited in deliberations and their ultimate conclusions or recommendations regarding the deliberative topic, if relevant.

The ultimate outcome of public deliberation is the use of public input in decisionmaking. However, it may be difficult to assess whether a specific deliberative event had a direct effect on the formation of policy, and little evidence exists regarding the extent to which the public's input derived through deliberation has affected formal decisionmaking or public policy to date.

There are several types of evaluations of deliberative methods in use:

- **Descriptive case studies** use both qualitative and quantitative methods to describe the deliberative activity and to assess the impact of the deliberations on the participant and policy outcomes.
- **Evaluative case studies** report on either single cases or multiple cases; they compare selected measures before and after the deliberation to determine whether the deliberation affected those outcomes. Where these studies summarize multiple cases, the studies pool the participants and report on the differences among subgroups. They employ a pre/post quasi-experimental comparison but not separate comparison or control groups.
- **Nonrandomized comparisons**, in contrast, make use of comparison groups to compare the effectiveness of alternative deliberative methods, to compare deliberation and no deliberation, or to test alternative features of a single deliberative method against each other.
- **Randomized experiments** allocate participants to alternative deliberative methods, to a non-deliberating comparison group, or to groups that receive alternative versions of a single deliberative method. For example, the Community Forum deliberative methods randomized controlled experiment, conducted in fall 2012, compares four deliberative methods and an education-only control group. Overall, few randomized studies are reported in the literature.

Conclusions

The literature on public deliberation features distinct deliberative methods that have unique characteristics and purposes, implemented across a range of settings and fields. The literature also includes examples of hybrid approaches or innovative methods, such as the use of photovoice in deliberation and the Choosing Healthplans Altogether resource allocation game. The range of methods observed in the literature indicates that this public consultation approach is dynamic and adaptable to a variety of contexts.

Questions remain regarding the relative strengths and weaknesses of different deliberative approaches, since few comparisons of the various methods have been conducted. Implementation of deliberative methods can be time-consuming and costly; therefore, studies comparing various deliberative methods have an important role in helping sponsors select appropriate methods.

Important questions also remain regarding the outcomes of deliberation. Outcomes measured in the literature include process measures as well as measures of the effect of deliberation on individual participants and on decisionmaking. Substantial literature demonstrates the effectiveness of public deliberation in terms of changes in participants' knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, perspectives, values, opinions, or policy preferences (as relevant). However, the effect of deliberative public input on public policy has not been thoroughly investigated.

For More Information

For more information on AHRQ's work in public deliberation, contact Joanna Siegel in the Center for Outcomes and Effectiveness at Joanna.Siegel@ahrq.hhs.gov. This Knowledge Brief series is based on *Public Deliberation To Elicit Input on Health Topics: Findings From a Literature Review* conducted by the American Institutes for Research under AHRQ Contract No. 290-2010-00005. Contact Kristin Carman at KCarman@air.org for further information.

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