Which Method Should be Used to Gather Views on Justice and Accountability?

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Accountability efforts that do not attend to victims' needs, seek local buy-in, and prioritize perceived legitimacy risk limited impact and even unintended harms. Understanding what different stakeholders think about justice and accountability is therefore a prerequisite for effective program design and implementation. There is no single correct way to gather these views. The appropriate approach depends on goals, available resources, timelines, and contextual constraints.

This guide helps practitioners select fit-for-purpose ways to hear from survivors and other constituencies about justice and accountability. It complements existing practical resources (see list at the end) by focusing specifically on methodological considerations.

Who Are We Talking to and Why?

Organizations seeking "local stakeholders" attitudes toward justice should recognize that this is a broad category, and some data collection methods fit certain constituencies better than others. First, specify whose perspectives are being sought:

General population: Broad population data can provide context on prevailing attitudes and help identify gaps between public narratives and program assumptions. The general affected population, even in contexts of widespread conflict, will include individuals with vastly different experiences.

Victims, survivors, and their families (VSFs): We might only want to know what those directly and personally harmed think and what forms of remedy feel meaningful to them. Perspectives will not be monolithic, and might vary widely by geography, identity, and type of harm, so it is important to specify which types of VSF views should be included. Understandings of who is a VSF may be ambiguous or contested, especially when there are divergent understandings of history or resources available for VSFs. Defining VSF groups must be approached in contextually specific and conflict-sensitive ways.

Civil society organizations (CSOs): Organized civil society may be a consultation target. It can prove useful to capture priorities, capacities, and constraints of groups that often drive advocacy and implementation. CSO perspectives can also be used as a proxy for grassroots views, but representativeness might vary widely. We should not assume that all groups are equally represented by organized civil society. There is typically a sub-set of CSOs that are led by VSFs.

Methods at a Glance: Which for What?

After deciding who needs to be consulted, a few important questions guide the choice of method:
1. What kind of insight is needed? (how prevalent views are in a group vs how views are formed)
2. What constraints exist? (time, money, access, security)
3. What risks exist and what resources are available to mitigate them? (re-traumatization, exposure, reprisals)
4. What technical capacity is available? (design, sampling, data collection, analysis)

Representative Surveys

Representative surveys aim to mirror the composition of a defined population so that results can be generalized with known confidence. "Representative" means the sample tracks key characteristics of the target group (e.g., age, sex, geography, education), usually by probability sampling and/or quotas benchmarked to a census (a list of all known individuals in a particular population). If, for example, 25% of respondents agree that criminal trials are necessary for reconciliation, we can be confident that if we had asked the entire population, we would find a very similar result.

The population need not be national; a survey can be representative of a region, city, refugee camp, or diaspora community, so long as reliable information about the full population exists. Estimating the size of that population is essential for calculating the appropriate sample size, and each member must have a known chance of being included in the sample.

High-quality representative surveys are expensive and often require technical capacity for sampling and field management. Local capacity may be thin where many actors are competing for the same enumerators, or where security limits movement. To reduce costs and avoid duplication, organizations sometimes coordinate to field a shared questionnaire that includes a small number of questions from each. Representative online surveys, while they avoid logistical obstacles, generally drawn from a pre-recruited probability panel maintained by a vendor and this is often unavailable in displacement or conflict contexts.

Representative surveys are not necessarily superior to other methods. Their value depends on the question being asked and the type of finding needed. When the goal is to quantify prevalence, measure trends, or compare attitudes across identifiable subgroups, representative surveys are ideal. But when the objective is to explore meanings, uncover reasoning, or understand the language people use to talk about justice, other methods may provide richer and more actionable insight.

While a representative survey of the general population is a common approach, there are some unique considerations and constraints when attempting to gather data from a representative sample of VSFs and CSOs.

Victims, survivors, and their families

A truly representative survey of VSFs is rarely feasible. It is extremely difficult to identify a reliable sampling frame that captures the size and composition of this population, or to locate individuals safely and systematically. One notable exception is surveys conducted in refugee or internally displaced persons camps, where, at a minimum, the entire population can be assumed to have experienced displacement. Even in those cases, two caveats apply: first, other types of traumatic experiences remain unknown; and second, such a survey still reflects only those survivors who were displaced and who reside in that particular and not all victims or survivors. Because displacement and camp location are not random, understanding who ends up in which camp (by area of origin, ethnicity, or other characteristics) helps clarify whose views the survey is actually capturing.

One workaround is to identify victims or survivors within a general-population survey using victimization screeners. This approach can estimate the prevalence of victimization and allow comparisons between VSF and non-VSF respondents. However, screening for victimization in general surveys raises privacy and safety concerns (see this example from Mexico's attempt to conduct a census of disappearances) and respondents may be reluctant to disclose their experiences in door-to-door interviews. Online modes may reduce disclosure barriers but introduce their own coverage bias. Such an approach is most justifiable when the goal is also to understand broader societal attitudes, not only those of survivors themselves.

In some cases, it may be possible to conduct a representative survey of a smaller, well-defined population, As with a general population survey, this requires knowing the exact size of the population and second having a means to contact all members. This could be possible when there is access to institutional records, such as a registry of reparation recipients. Yet, something to consider is that the appeal of representativeness declines as populations shrink. For example, with a population of 100 individuals, achieving a 95% confidence level would require responses from 80 people; an 80% response rate which leaves little margin for nonresponse. By contrast, a population of one million requires only 385 respondents, or about 0.03%, to achieve the same confidence level.

Civil society organizations

The situation for CSOs is comparable to that of VSFs. A representative CSO survey is typically not possible because no comprehensive, unbiased registry exists. Organizations vary widely in visibility, capacity, and likelihood of responding, and these differences can introduce serious biases. If a complete listing of CSOs is available (for example, from a coalition, registry, or event roster) it is important to recognize what differentiates those that appear on that list from those that do not. A survey can then only speak to the former group. In other words, representativeness depends not only on who is included but also on who is systematically left out.

Examples:
- Transitional Justice Evaluation Tools, *Transitional Justice Perception Surveys*
- Backer, D. & Kulkarni, A. 2016. "Humanizing Transitional Justice: Reflections on the Role of Survey Research in Studying Violent Conflict and its Aftermath." *Transitional Justice Review* 1(4): Article 6.

Surveys of Non-Probability Samples

Surveys that use a non-probability sample gather structured responses from a defined set of people who were not randomly selected. Respondents may be selected by a simple convenience sampling (recruiting those readily available), through respondent driven sampling (where participants identify others to participate), or in other ways. Because participation is not random, it is not appropriate to claim that the results mirror a wider population. Nonetheless, findings from non-representative samples can be extremely valuable, particularly when reaching populations or contexts where probability sampling is infeasible.

Even when the goal is not to generalize, a disciplined and transparent approach to sampling greatly improves credibility. Researchers should clearly define inclusion criteria, document how contacts were identified, record the sources or search terms used, and track response rates by subgroup whenever possible.

Online administration requires reliable contact routes (email lists, messaging channels, or social media posts) while in-person surveys can be integrated into existing touchpoints like intake sessions, case management visits, or clinic days. Web-based forms, whether built on low-cost tools or commercial platforms, can lower costs and reduce disclosure barriers for sensitive topics. Conversely, in-person or assisted administration is preferable where literacy or connectivity is limited.

Overall costs are lower than representative surveys, though list-building and recruitment still requires substantial effort. Something to consider is that because surveys tend to trade depth for coverage, if access is limited to a small number of respondents, qualitative methods may yield more actionable insight than a long survey.

Victims, survivors, and their families

Non-probability sampling can efficiently capture the experiences and preferences of victims, survivors, and their families even when no reliable sampling frame exists. This approach is especially useful when researchers can access a sizable and relevant pool, for instance, through service providers, support groups, or refugee and asylum systems. However, results describe only those reached through these specific pathways (e.g., survivors who seek clinical services) rather than "all VSFs."

In some cases, a non-probability sample of VSFs can be more informative than a representative survey of the general population that merely screens for victimization status. Because the questionnaire can be tailored to the specific experiences, needs, and language of the target group, it often produces richer and more relevant data on survivor perspectives.

Civil society organizations

For CSOs, non-probability samples are often the only practical option. Systematic outreach (drawing from NGO directories, coalition membership lists, public registries, or web-based searches) can provide a broad, if not exhaustive, mapping of organizational priorities, practices, and capacity needs. While the results cannot claim statistical representativeness, they can still reveal important trends and areas of consensus or divergence within the sector.

> Examples:
> - Akhavan, P., Ashraph, S., Barzani, B., & Matyas, D. 2020. "What Justice for the Yazidi Genocide?: Voices from Below." *Human Rights Quarterly 42*(1):1-47.
> - Viasna and The International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus. 2024. *How Survivors of Torture and/or Cruel Treatment Perceive Justice*.

Focus Groups and Moderated Dialogues

Focus groups, or similar endeavors like moderated dialogues, bring small groups together to discuss a topic, revealing how views take shape in conversation; what resonates, what meets resistance, and how people respond to each other's ideas. Although often used for research, these group discussions can also serve a community-building purpose, offering participants a chance to engage with one another and to react collectively to the research process itself.

Findings from focus groups describe the participants and the context observed; they are not designed to be generalized to a wider population in the way survey results can be. This is not simply because participants are generally not randomly selected. Even if they were, it is because the kind of insight generated is different. For example, in one discussion about the meaning of reparation, a participant might introduce the idea of improved school access for children—an issue that then shapes the conversation. In another group, that topic may never arise, even if equally relevant to its members. Surveys allow researchers full control over which topics are covered, interviews offer moderate control, and focus groups provide the least. While moderators can steer discussion to ensure that certain topics are addressed, doing so forcefully can defeat the purpose of the exercise, which is to observe how ideas naturally emerge, evolve, and circulate within a group. Differences across discussions are therefore not a flaw, but a feature of this method.

Victims, survivors, and their families

Facilitated dialogues among victims, survivors, and their families can illuminate how people collectively reason about justice. These discussions can reveal community norms that one-on-one interviews might miss, though they can also suppress dissenting views if dominant voices prevail.

Access is the first constraint. Recruitment typically relies on trusted intermediaries, and meetings should occur in familiar, low-burden venues. Group composition matters: smaller, more homogeneous discussions (by gender, language, or type of harm) tend to feel safer and foster more open exchange. More heterogeneous groups can expose points of disagreement but may increase disclosure or safety risks. Trauma-informed facilitation, careful informed consent, and strict anonymity in reporting are essential. Online focus groups can extend reach when travel or security constraints make in-person sessions impractical. However, limited bandwidth, privacy concerns, and the absence of nonverbal cues may reduce the depth of interaction.

Another important consideration is how to document discussions for later analysis. In academic or formal research settings, recording and transcription are standard to ensure accuracy, but this may not be feasible or safe when working with survivors of trauma. Any record of these conversations should be stripped of identifying details, and data should be anonymized to the greatest extent possible.

Civil society organizations

Focus groups with CSOs can be valuable for mapping areas of consensus and tension among actors who collaborate or compete in accountability efforts. They are particularly useful for exploring how organizations perceive their own roles, priorities, and constraints. However, if the goal is to infer broader community attitudes through CSO representatives, focus groups may be a poor proxy. They capture the perspectives of organized actors, not the general public, and should be interpreted accordingly.

> Examples:
> - Bridges of Truth. 2025. *'Our Pain Turned into Policy': Advancing Peace and Justice Through Community Dialogue in Syria*.
> - Sokolić, I. 2016. *Investigating Narratives of War through Focus Groups*. Balkan Transitional Justice.

In-depth Interviews

In-depth interviews capture the nuance and texture that surveys and group discussions often miss. They are a flexible, conversational method that elicits rich "how" and "why" accounts behind people's preferences, attitudes, and experiences. This flexibility, however, comes at a cost: each interview requires substantial time and preparation, limiting the number of participants who can realistically be included.

It is important to consider what in-depth interviews can—and cannot—tell us about the larger populations from which interviewees are drawn. We cannot conclude, for instance, that *70% of survivors are dissatisfied with criminal trials* simply because 70% of interviewees expressed such dissatisfaction. That would impose a representative-survey logic on a method not designed for statistical inference.

Sociologist Mario Small offers a helpful alternative way to think about interviews: treating each participant as a case rather than a data point in a sample. In contrast to surveys, where the desired sample size is determined in advance, qualitative interviewing begins without knowing how many people will ultimately be interviewed. For example, after speaking with one participant who felt overwhelmed by the application process of a reparations program and thus developed negative views of transitional justice institutions, a researcher might imagine that bureaucratic experiences shape attitudes toward justice. They would then purposefully seek out

additional interviewees who have had both positive and negative experiences with reparations processes to refine and test that emerging insight.

Each subsequent interview would build on what has already been learned, with the interview guide evolving to probe newly identified themes and subtleties. Over time, interviews may grow longer and more detailed as the researcher develops a sharper understanding of the topic. Eventually, new interviews will begin to yield little new information, a point known as saturation. At that stage, the goal is not to measure prevalence but to understand processes and mechanisms. We cannot say that 80% of applicants distrust transitional justice institutions, but we can conclude that the quality of people's direct experience with institutions shapes their attitudes toward justice.

Victims, survivors, and their families

Interviews can uncover how victims and survivors define justice and, crucially, why they do so. They illuminate experiences rather than representing "the" survivor perspective: each account reflects an individual's specific circumstances and should not be generalized to all survivors.

As with other methods, interviewing VSFs depends heavily on access. Organizations already in contact with survivors are well positioned to invite participation at natural touchpoints either through brief add-ons to existing interactions or through scheduled follow-up interviews. Each approach trades reach for depth: short, same-day conversations can encourage participation but limit exploration, while return visits allow greater detail but risk higher attrition. Clear purpose, voluntary participation, and informed consent are essential, especially where research intersects with service delivery.

Trauma-informed practice is critical. This includes flexible pacing, the option to skip questions, incorporating grounding breaks, and ensuring referral pathways if distress surfaces. Matching interviewer and interviewee by language and cultural background can also strengthen rapport and improve data quality.

Civil society organizations

One-on-one interviews with CSOs are common and often highly informative, provided the purpose is clearly defined. These interviews can either document organizations' own priorities, capacities, and constraints, or capture what they have learned about survivors' experiences through their work; two distinct objectives requiring different lines of questioning.

CSO interviews are generally easy to arrange, as staff are often motivated and well-versed in the issues. However, responses may reflect advocacy priorities, funding incentives, or organizational positioning within the broader sector. When CSO perspectives are used as proxies for survivor views, they should be treated as informed observations rather than substitutes, and ideally triangulated with direct survivor accounts whenever possible.

Examples:
- Akhavan, P., Hamilton, R. J., & Mulvey, A. 2024. "'What Kind of Court Is This?': Perceptions of International Justice Among Rohingya Refugees."*Human Rights Quarterly* 46(2):173-206.
- Golden, S., Odokonyero, J. I., Jakisa, B., Amito, D. & Saleem, N. 2025. *Repairing the Wrongs in Northern Uganda: Survivor-Defined Justice for Mothers and their Children Born of War*.
- Armoudian, M., Lawler, T., & Payne, B. 2025. "Barriers to Justice for Survivors of Egregious Human Rights Violations: A Transdisciplinary Approach. *Journal of Human Rights* 24(5):530-550.

Cross-Cutting Ethical and Practical Considerations

Do no harm & trauma-informed: Prepare clear "stop rules," allow breaks and short sessions, and debrief participants when appropriate. Avoid unnecessary detail about traumatic events. Anticipate the possibility of distress and ensure that facilitators or interviewers are equipped to respond sensitively.

Informed consent (information-first): Use plain language to explain the purpose of the research, potential risks, how data will be used, and participants' right to withdraw at any time. Reconfirm consent at key moments (such as before recording or discussing sensitive topics) and clearly explain any limits to anonymity and how records will be handled.

Language & culture: Prioritize enumerators, facilitators, and interviewers who share participants' language and cultural reference points. Brief all staff on culturally appropriate conduct and terminology. Recognize that many of these field staff may themselves be members of the affected population and provide them with appropriate support and supervision.

Sampling transparency: Clearly state who was reached, who was not, and what those gaps imply for interpreting results. Transparency about limitations is essential to avoid overclaiming or misrepresentation.

Data protection: Collect only the minimum personal data needed for analysis. Encrypt all identifiable information, limit access to authorized personnel, and establish clear timelines for data retention and destruction.

Incentives & expenses: Compensate participants fairly for time and out-of-pocket costs (per diems, travel, childcare) without creating an inducement to disclose sensitive information. Publish and apply compensation rules consistently to ensure fairness and transparency.

Useful Resources

- Documentation Training Guide, The Syria Justice and Accountability Centre.
- Victim and Survivor Consultation Protocol: A Tool for Policy-makers, Center on National Security, Georgetown Law
- Toward a Trauma-informed Qualitative Research Approach: Guidelines for Ensuring the Safety and Promoting the Resilience of Research Participants, Edward J. Alessi & Sarilee Kahn