There are few crimes that command more criminal justice resources and that have a greater impact on families and communities than those associated with illicit drugs. Drug misuse is a global problem, leaving no nation untouched. In the United States, more people are arrested for drug violations than for any other type of crime, and, as a result, more people are in prison for drug violations than for any other type of crime. As these are illicit activities, understanding the nature and extent of the problem is a challenge. Drug users and dealers have good reasons to remain hidden from public view. At the same time, the problem begs answers to some important questions: Who are the drug users and the drug dealers? What factors influence their initiation, continued use, and desistance from illicit drug use and/or drug dealing? How do they obtain access to illicit drugs? What is the impact of their activities on their lives, their families, and their community? Qualitative research is an important tool for answering these questions.

Knowing about drugs

Methods for gaining knowledge about illicit drug use are sometimes divided into two camps—qualitative and quantitative—although there is a growing appreciation for mixed methods, in which elements of the two approaches are combined (Brent & Kraska, 2010), and some have argued that a qualitative–quantitative distinction is often blurred in practice (Maruna, 2010). Qualitative research uses numbers to reveal broad patterns, but is less useful for understanding the context in which those patterns emerge. At its simplest, qualitative research is based on the analysis of numbers that represent characteristics of those under study. Quantitative research can provide information about broad patterns, but what it gains in breadth it loses in depth. For example, the National Survey on Drug Use and Health conducts an annual national survey of about 70,000 adults in the United States. This survey reveals basic information about such things as which drugs are used most frequently, the age at which drug use began, and the employment status of drug users. Such information is useful. It can indicate if a particular illicit drug is gaining or declining in popularity. However, it cannot tell why more people are using a particular drug, nor can it tell the story of why they began using a particular drug, or whether they are regular users or full-blown addicts. It is quite possible for a strictly quantitative drug
researcher to create an impressive body of scholarship on drug abuse, without ever talking to
an illicit-drug user.

Qualitative research is more likely than quantitative research to put a human face on drug use
and to reveal dimensions of the issue that had not been previously considered. In particular,
qualitative research generally involves what Geertz (1973) has called “thick description.” With
thick description, the researcher goes beyond merely documenting behaviors to gaining an
understanding of the larger cultural and individual context in which those behaviors occur—
that is, thick description provides an in-depth meaning, a context in which verbal and nonverbal
behaviors can be understood. In the simplest terms, qualitative research seeks understanding of
the world from the perspective of the individuals being studied.

The particular methods included under the umbrella of qualitative research are broad, and
there is not always agreement among qualitative researchers as to which methods are “truly
qualitative.” At a minimum, qualitative research on drug crime includes ethnography, participant
observation, life histories, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups. Some of these interviews
are conducted in the field, providing the researcher with a context in which to better understand
the subject’s point of view, and others are conducted in prisons, jails, treatment facilities, or
other areas away from where the behavior under study typically occurs. Although qualitative
researchers sometimes lament the disproportionate representation of quantitative research (e.g.,
Tewksbury, Dabney, & Copes, 2010; Tewksbury, DeMichele, & Miller, 2005), within the subject
of drugs and crime, there is a relatively impressive body of qualitative research. It is not possible
to describe every such study, and so I provide a series of illustrative examples.

Ethnography of drug crime

Although a number of early researchers used qualitative methods to study drugs and crime (e.g.,
Finestone, 1957; Lindesmith, 1947; Preble & Casey, 1969), one of the first to systematically
detail an ethnographic approach to the study of illicit drugs was Michael Agar. His 1973 book,
Ripping and Running: A Formal Ethnography of Urban Heroin Addicts, provided a detailed description
of the language and culture of inner-city drug dealing. In addition, Agar published a series of
articles advocating for an ethnographic approach (Agar, 1976, 1997) and books detailing the
process of conducting ethnographic research (Agar, 1974, 1980, 1985). His approach encouraged
others to look beyond police counts of arrests or records of admissions to treatment facilities
and focused on firsthand accounts of the world of dealing heroin on the streets.

As he is a champion of the ethnographic approach, it is no small irony that Agar’s influential
ethnography on urban heroin dealers has been criticized by some as not being “real ethnography”
(Agar, 2006). This is because, in general, it is assumed that, in a “real” ethnography, the researcher
observes natural behavior, in the participant’s environment. However, in Agar’s study of urban
drug dealing, neither of these conditions was true. For his participants, Agar used heroin addicts
incarcerated in a federal prison for drug offenders, located in Lexington, Kentucky. His method-
ology involved three formal procedures and one informal one. The formal procedures included
a simulated situation, frame elicitation, and a hypothetical situation. The informal procedure drew
from his 2-year stay at the prison, “interacting with addict patients in formal and informal settings”
(Agar, 1973, p. 41). By informal, Agar appears to have meant unsystematic, and Agar himself
stated that the formal methods played the primary role in his analysis of street-junkie culture.

The three formal methodologies all emphasized the language used by addicts, viewing language
as a window into the larger drug-dealing culture. First, in the simulated situation, Agar approached
a patient with whom he had rapport and asked if the patient and some friends would act out
situations of street dealing and drug using. These reenactments were recorded and analyzed.
The second method, called *frame elicitation*, involved providing these institutionalized addicts with index cards upon which a sentence or two described a using or dealing situation. The addict was asked to fill in a blank in this description with a word or phrase completing the idea. For example, a statement might read: “You can always go somewhere else and get better stuff, too. But look at the changes (‘difficulties’). Taking a chance of . . .” (Agar, 1973, p. 30).

The last formal method presented addicts with hypothetical situations and asked what choices they would make in the given situation. “The ethnographer can vary factors such as amount of police pressure, financial need, and so forth to see how these variations affect the preferences in the hypothetical situation” (Agar, 1973, p. 40).

These three formal methods combined enabled Agar to create a description of the daily life of urban street heroin users—all from the confines of an institution in Kentucky. The term ethnography is applied to a wide range of qualitative methods, depending on who is using the term. Agar’s application of the term is by no means conventional. Perhaps the ideal methodology to which the term is applied is participant observation.

**Participant observation**

Participant observation is perhaps the most difficult type of research on drug crime. In this type of research, the researcher immerses himself or herself in the daily life of those under study, often over an extended period. Access is an issue, because those engaged in illegal activities are understandably reluctant to trust outsiders with direct knowledge of their behavior. The researcher is likely to be present during illegal activities that would include drug use and drug dealing, in addition to witnessing any ancillary crimes that may be committed. The researcher may also be under social pressure to use drugs with the research subjects (Sandberg & Copes, 2012). Thus, the researcher must consider possible legal and social consequences of their actions, for themselves and for those under study. Those wishing to undertake a participant observation study of illicit drug use and/or trafficking must also deal with the difficulty (impossibility, in some cases) of obtaining human-subjects approval for the research.

One of the best examples of participant observation concerning illicit drugs is reported in Adler’s (1985) book *Wheeling and Dealing*. In this study of suburban cocaine users, the author spent 6 years as a daily participant observer of 65 members of an upper-level drug dealing and smuggling community. As the author reports (Adler, 1985, pp. 1, 5):

> Although I did not deal, myself, I participated in many of their activities, partying with them, attending social gatherings, traveling with them, and watching them plan and execute their business activities. […] In addition, I observed and interacted with numerous other drug world members, including dealers’ “old ladies” (girl friends and wives), friends, and family members, who constituted the dealers’ and smugglers’ social group.

Adler and her husband had moved into the area to attend school and began socializing with their neighbors, one of whom, named Dave, turned out to be an upper-level drug dealer, with whom they consumed both marijuana and cocaine. Over time, they met and became friends with some of his friends and business associates and learned that Dave was part of an organization importing a ton of marijuana a week and 40 kilograms of cocaine every few months. Eventually, Dave and some of his friends agreed to be part of the study. In addition to observation of the daily lives of these dealers, direct observation was supplemented with in-depth interviews with 24 members of that social world. Those taped interviews were conducted numerous times for each subject and totaled 10–30 hours for each subject.
Having established a personal friendship with Dave and some of his associates, Adler and her husband did more than just observe and record (Adler, 1985, pp. 16–17):

We offered everything that friendship could entail. We did routine favors for them in the course of our everyday lives . . . wrote letters on their behalf to the authorities when they got in trouble, testified as character witnesses at their non-drug-related trials, and loaned them money when they were down and out . . . . We worked in their legitimate businesses, vacationed together, attended their weddings, and cared for their children.

Dave was eventually arrested and sent to prison. When he was released, he was broke and had nowhere to stay, and so the Adlers let him stay with them for 7 months, until he could get back on his feet.

Adler describes the process of developing the trust of those under study and the practical problems of interviewing people who were obviously high on marijuana or cocaine. She also notes the risks involved in the research. These included hostile or potentially violent reactions from those under study, maintaining the security of the audio tapes, worries about police subpoena-ing their research materials to use against their subjects, and worries about their own risk of arrest. Finally, Adler notes the ethical issues in this type of research. In particular, she was concerned about the need to deceive some subjects and the feeling that, in using these subjects’ life experiences to promote her own career, she might be “whoring for data.” Ultimately, Adler’s work shows the challenges of conducting a thorough participant observation. Not just anyone can undertake a participant observation of just any subject. It is often a matter of the right person, at the right time, being in the right place and having the right research subjects.

More recent works have followed Adler’s general approach, studying their subjects over a lengthy period, though without the intense interweaving of the personal lives of the researcher and the researched. In his book, In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio, Philippe Bourgois (1995) provides another compelling example of participant observation research. As was true for Adler, Bourgois stumbled upon his research topic. He had moved into an apartment in New York’s East Harlem, wanting to study poverty and ethnic segregation. What he found was a community rife with drug dealing and drug using.

The street in front of my tenement was not atypical, and within a two-block radius I could—and still can, as of this final draft—obtain heroin, crack, powder cocaine, hypodermic needles, methadone, Valium, angel dust, marijuana, mescaline, bootleg alcohol, and tobacco. Within one hundred yards of my stoop there were three competing crack houses selling vials at two, three, and five dollars. Just a few blocks farther [he continues detailing multi-million-dollar illicit sales of prescription drugs].

(Bourgois, 1995, pp. 3–4)

As was true for Adler, this was a long-term project in which he spent three and one half years living in the barrio under study. And, like Adler, Bourgois didn’t just step back and observe his participants, but immersed himself in their daily lives. This included both their illicit activities and their day-to-day routines, becoming a friend, as well as a researcher, to his subjects.

I spent hundreds of nights on the street and in crackhouses observing dealers and addicts. I regularly tape-recorded their conversations and life histories. Perhaps more important, I also visited their families, attending parties and intimate reunions—from Thanksgiving dinners...
to New Year’s Eve celebrations. I interviewed, and in many cases befriended, the spouses, lovers, siblings, mothers, grandmothers, and—where possible—the fathers and stepfathers of the crack dealers featured in these pages. I also spent time in the larger community interviewing local politicians and attending institutional meetings.

(Bourgois, 1995, p. 13)

Much like Adler, Bourgois’s research placed him in a precarious position regarding the law, the safety of his subjects, his own safety, and ethics. One of the most powerful dealers in the neighborhood, who was feared by many, trusted Bourgois and served as an important source of information and as someone who could provide him with access to other research subjects. Near the end of the study, he repeatedly asked Bourgois to help him launder his drug money—requests that Bourgois had to dodge creatively. Further, Bourgois’s white skin made him stand out, and, as a result, “I was repeatedly stopped, searched, cursed, and humiliated by New York City police” (p. 30). He was also mugged on one occasion.

Bourgois and Schonberg’s book, Righteous Dopefiend (2009), illustrates another way of conducting participant observation. Over the course of 12 years, they:

Became part of the daily lives of several dozen homeless heroin injectors who sought shelter in the dead-end alleyways, storage lots, vacant factories, broken-down cars, and overgrown highway embankments surrounding . . . the main thoroughfare serving San Francisco’s sprawling, semi-derelict warehouse and shipyard district.

(Bourgois & Schonberg, 2009, p. 4)

One of the unique aspects of the study was the extensive use of black and white photographs of the individuals under study. These photographs not only illustrated the physical environment in which these addicts lived and their own physical condition, but graphically showed them preparing drugs and injecting. Subjects in the study agreed to being photographed and to having the researchers use their real names. However, the researchers were still concerned that they should not further diminish the dignity of these addicts or in any way exploit them. In the end, they received written consent from the addicts to include their faces in photographs and to use their names. However, it was decided that, although the faces would be shown, to make clear the misery they felt, there was no benefit to using the addicts’ real names. Having photographs that provided proof of illegal drug behavior also raised concerns about possible legal consequences, should the authorities demand to see the research materials. This never happened, but Bourgois and Schonberg had decided that, if such a threat seemed imminent, they would immediately end the study.

In addition to field notes and photographs, there were field recordings that yielded thousands of pages of transcripts. There were also field notes on more than 200 individuals around those central to the study. The researchers also made every effort to fact check the information they received, when possible, by checking official records of such things as births and deaths, and by examining newspaper accounts.

For many people, the subjects of this study are not particularly sympathetic characters. Bourgois and Schonberg remind the reader, however, of an important characteristic of any participant observation, or, for that matter, of any carefully done qualitative research. That characteristic is the ability to suspend moral judgment of behaviors and beliefs that might otherwise evoke righteous indignation.

Other participant observation studies demonstrate the power of this approach to illuminate the lives of drug dealers and users. Venkatesh (2008) spent about 9 years observing and taking
part in the daily lives of drug dealers in some of Chicago’s most notorious housing projects. He had no direct personal connections to provide access to the dealers, but relied on persistence to enter and remain in their world. As is true for studies of this sort, he found himself confronting issues of his physical safety, possible legal entanglements for himself and his subjects, and a host of ethical dilemmas (Sandberg & Copes, 2012).

Mohamed and Fritsvold (2010) spent 6 years interviewing more than 50 middle-class drug dealers who, as former and current students, supplied drugs to several colleges in Southern California. As was true in Adler’s research, access to research subjects was gained first through existing personal relationships. They avoided some legal and ethical issues by interviewing their participants, without directly observing drug use or drug transactions.

I have devoted an exceptional amount of time to these illustrations of participant observation. This is because participant observation is considered the “gold standard” of qualitative research, providing a remarkable depth of understanding of the world as seen by drug dealers and drug users. The approach illuminates the lived experiences of its participants, through their words and through direct observation of their behavior. It is an approach in which the researcher can repeatedly reassess his or her understanding, by listening, asking questions, and observing over an extended period.

Although the approach is powerful and persuasive, these selected examples demonstrate the challenges of conducting participant observation: Access to the groups under study will not be available to all; it takes a great deal of time, often years; the researcher and those being researched may be exposed to physical and legal harm; and challenging ethical issues arise while this research is conducted. In addition, there is a broad, often unspoken, criticism of the research that deserves mention. The essence of the scientific method is replication: the ability to repeat an experiment or study and achieve similar results. This is the method by which the accuracy of scientific research is gauged. However, considering the challenges to participant observation of illicit activities, replication is often impossible. Further, it is reasonable to ask whether a researcher can be so thoroughly immersed in the lives of a group and remain truly objective. The authors of the examples provided here have included thorough and persuasive arguments for the accuracy of their observations, and there is no reason to doubt their honesty, but it is not possible independently to verify their findings. This is a challenge for most qualitative research designs, but is a particular issue for participant observation.

Life histories

A great deal can be learned from studying the life history of a single drug user or dealer. For the most part, these studies are atheoretical, relying solely on a rich and detailed description of the individual’s life. In many ways, these accounts blur the distinction between journalism and social science. However, when well done, the reader who is equipped with an understanding of various theoretical models can often find illustrations of those theoretical principles in life histories. The experience of becoming a drug user and maintaining that lifestyle is presented with a level of rich detail that cannot be duplicated with other research methods (e.g., Burroughs, 1977; Moore, 2006; Sheff, 2007; Stahl, 1995). In a few cases, the emphasis is not just on the addict’s lifestyle, but also on the criminality that is associated with that lifestyle (e.g., Hills & Santiago, 1992; Rettig, Torres, & Garrett, 1977).

Although some are capable of writing their life histories unassisted, it is often the case that their stories are told with the assistance of another. One illustration of how this process unfolds can be found in the story of Ron Santiago (Hills & Santiago, 1992). Santiago’s story was told with the assistance of a university professor, Stuart Hills. Throughout his life, Santiago,
a drug addict, had committed hundreds of crimes, fueled by his drug habit. These crimes included robberies, burglaries, illegal gambling, and drug dealing. Hills and Santiago came together through a series of chance meetings. Santiago had just been released from a halfway house and was invited to speak to a counseling class about his life experiences with drugs. The instructor suggested to Hills, a colleague, that, as a sociologist, he should meet Santiago. They met, and that led to Santiago speaking to Hills’s criminology class. Santiago’s stories fascinated Hills, who suggested those stories were worthy of a book. Santiago agreed, and, for 9 months, Hills recorded lengthy interviews with Santiago. The interviews included rich details about his early life, his later involvement in drugs and crime, and his experiences in the criminal justice system. Hills then used Santiago’s own words and ideas to craft the book *Tragic Magic: The Life and Crimes of a Heroin Addict*.

Life stories put a human face on drug use and the crimes of addicts. The stories can be compelling, to the point that fictionalized versions can make their way into film, as in the movie *Drugstore Cowboy*. The approach is appealing, but does have its limitations. First, not every drug user/dealer has an interesting story to tell, is eloquent enough to tell it in an interesting way, and is willing to share that story with the world. Second, even when the story is interesting and the teller willing, there may not be an awareness of how to turn that story into a book. Third, because these accounts are primarily based on the recollections of the subject, they are always subject to errors in memory, selective memory, or outright distortion. Finally, every individual is unique, and every story is a bit different, and so the wider implications of the story for policy are not always clear. Despite these limitations, the approach has provided a valuable window into the lives of its subjects.

**Semi-structured interviews**

Ethnographies, participant observation, and life histories are valuable tools, but, as illustrated in the examples above, they are time consuming and difficult to carry out. One of the most frequently used approaches is to conduct semi-structured interviews with active drug users/dealers, often in the communities where they live. What distinguishes semi-structured interviews from ordinary surveys is the use, and sometimes extensive use, of open-ended questions that give the research subjects the opportunity to present the world as they see it, and to allow them to raise issues the researcher may not have considered. There are hundreds of such studies, and they have provided valuable insights into the world of drug using and drug dealing. One of the most prolific researchers to use this approach was James Inciardi, who published more than 50 books and 400 articles, many of which concern illicit drug use. Inciardi began as a probation officer and noticed that many of his clients were drug users, but were arrested for other things. As part of his doctoral research, he began interviewing individuals about their drug use and then asked them to suggest the names of others he might interview. His initial work focused on adults, but he later expanded his research to include serious juvenile offenders (Inciardi, Horowitz, & Pottieger, 1993). The result was a window into the world of drug use that would have never been opened had he relied only on official arrest records as indicators of drug use. A sampling of his work is referenced in his book *The War on Drugs IV* (Inciardi, 2008).

Within this approach, there are three primary strategies for identifying research subjects: availability sampling (also known as convenience sampling), snowball sampling, and respondent-driven sampling. Most studies based on semi-structured interviews begin with an *availability sample*. In this case, participants are individuals already known to the researcher, or are recruited through one or more approaches that might include placing posters in locations that users/dealers
are known to frequent, posting ads in underground newspapers, leaving solicitations in probation/parole offices, or through treatment centers. For example, Singer and Schensul’s (2011) study of sexually active ecstasy users was based on semi-structured interviews. “Participants were recruited using flyer advertisements, face-to-face street and event recruitment, and network referral intended to reach hidden networks of users” (p. 1677). Potential subjects called the researchers and were then screened for eligibility. The 118 eligible participants were scheduled for face-to-face interviews, prior to which they were again screened for eligibility. Those who were interviewed completed “a two-part semi-structured qualitative interview typically lasting between two and three hours in total” (p. 1677). Interviewers and subjects were matched as much as possible on age, ethnicity, and language, and subjects were given the option of being interviewed by a male or female. Because the interviews asked about both illicit drug use and about sexual activity, interviewers were instructed to note signs of distress in subjects and, if necessary, refer them for counseling.

A second approach is to begin with an availability sample and, from that starting point, use snowball sampling. With snowball sampling, also known as chain referral sampling, individuals in the original sample are asked to identify others who might be interviewed. Those additional subjects are contacted and interviewed and then asked if they know of still others who might be interviewed. This process continues until the researcher achieves an adequate sample size or until no new subjects are identified. An example of this approach is Bruce Jacobs’ book Dealing Crack: The Social World of Streetcorner Selling (1999). Jacobs spent a considerable amount of time in neighborhoods known for crack distribution. The streetcorner dealers at first assumed he was working with the police. Persistence and financial incentives for participation were important for gaining their trust, but it was the actions of the police that ultimately proved key to his gaining access to these dealers. He had not told the police about his research. Seeing him with these dealers led the police to believe he was involved in the drug business. As a result, he was repeatedly stopped, questioned, and often searched. These actions provided him with a level of credibility he would not otherwise have had. Jacobs’ description of how his subjects were recruited provides a good illustration of snowball sampling in practice:

The first five respondents were recruited directly from the dealers I initially approached. Four of these five became contacts and provided six additional referrals. Three of these six then referred nine additional respondents. This chain referral method was carried out to secure a forty-person sample.

(Jacobs, 1999, p. 19–20)

Although snowball sampling is an important tool for locating hard-to-reach populations, the approach is not without its critics (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). The concern is that the final list of research subjects depends greatly on the individuals who begin the referral process. For example, a researcher who begins with a university student is not likely to include the homeless in the final list of those identified through snowball sampling. A variation on the snowball approach, known as respondent-driven sampling, is designed to address this criticism.

Respondent-driven sampling is a form of snowball sampling in which initial participants are limited in the number of referrals they make (Heckathorn, 1997). In effect, there are multiple individuals who serve as starting points, and the approach imposes a limit on the effects of any one starting point. This leads to subjects being drawn from a wider range of backgrounds and reduces the influence of having a small number of starting points. This process is described by Draus, Siegal, Carlson, Falck, & Wang (2005), in their study of rural stimulant users in Ohio. Their study used multiple methods, all built on a foundation of participants recruited through
respondent-driven sampling. They began by spending an extensive amount of time in the three communities under study.

They attended county fairs, rock concerts, and demolition derbys, met with employees at regional hospitals and detox centers, and sat in on sentencing hearings in county courthouses and jails. By reading the police reports in the local paper, they became familiar with the neighborhoods and places associated with much of the illegal activity in town. As silent observers in court hearings, they quickly discovered that drugs were an underlying factor in many petty crime cases.

(Draus et al., 2005, p. 171)

In their study, initially identified subjects were paid $50 for the initial structured interview and $35 for each follow-up structured interview. These formal interviews were analyzed, and, from them, a subset of subjects was selected for less-structured qualitative interviews, or for participation in focus groups, for which subjects were paid $20. To create the full sample of subjects, each of the initially interviewed subjects was given three referral coupons to give to others who might be eligible for inclusion in the study. When these individuals were interviewed, the subject making the referral was paid an additional $10. Although the financial reimbursements were greater for the formal interviews, the researchers found the more qualitative interviews added layers of information not possible to obtain from the more structured sources:

Qualitative interviews provided a more flexible exploratory tool than the actual survey instrument. They enabled the researchers to learn more about the community, while also allowing participants to learn more about the project. The interviews could also be used to obtain more in-depth and nuanced information from selected individuals. . . . In addition to rich contextual information, specific details gleaned from the qualitative interviews could be used to verify data that were gathered from structured interviews and triangulated with other sources, such as prison records and newspaper stories.

(Draus et al., 2005, p. 175)

In the three counties under study, they began with 5, 7, and 10 “seeds,” respectively. These seeds were the initial subjects who referred the researchers to other research subjects and who led to an eventual sample of 249 subjects. Not every seed led to a referral, but, on average, each seed led to between 9 and 15 referrals, a very successful outcome for a hard-to-reach subject group.

**Focus groups and multiple methods**

Focus groups are a useful qualitative technique. With this approach, the researcher brings together a small group (usually 6–10 people) for a group interview guided by the researcher. Unlike one-on-one interviews, focus groups add the dynamics of interactions among subjects. This can bring out ideas that may not emerge from other techniques. Morgan (1988) suggests that focus groups are useful in a variety of ways, including teaching the researcher about a new field, generating hypotheses for later testing, developing questionnaires or interview instruments, and getting the thoughts of participants about earlier research. Although focus groups can be used on their own, they more often are used in conjunction with other research techniques.

In their study of prescription drug abuse and diversion, Inciardi and his colleagues (Inciardi, Surratt, Cicero, & Beard, 2009) provide an excellent example of utilizing focus groups in
combination with other qualitative methods. They created six focus groups, made up of prescription drug abusers in residential treatment. The discussion within these groups centered around: “general perceptions of the prescription drug problem in Delaware, sources and mechanisms of access to prescription drugs, popularity and prices of prescription medications on the street, as well as the initiation and progression of prescription- and illicit-drug abuse” (Inciardi et al., 2009, p. 540).

In addition to the information gathered from the focus groups, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with three prescription-drug dealers and two pill brokers. At the same time, they drew information from in-depth interviews with law enforcement officers, the Attorney General’s Office, and the state Department of Professional Regulation. Combining these various sources allowed them to “obtain a snapshot of the prescription-drug abuse and diversion scene in Delaware from the varied perspectives of users, dealers, health professionals, and law enforcement officials” (Inciardi et al., 2009, p. 540).

Focus groups can also be used to make adjustments to ongoing research projects. In the Draus et al. (2005) study of rural stimulant users discussed in the previous section, focus groups were used to address three ongoing issues in the research. Those three issues were: the problem of people faking their way into the project, hoping to take advantage of the cash payments; determining emerging drug tends in the communities; and determining how to speed the referral process.

Although focus groups are often used in conjunction with other methodologies, they can be valuable when used alone. Momper, Delva, and Reed (2011) used eight focus groups to study the misuse of Oxycontin on an American Indian reservation. Sensitive to the local culture of the reservation, they first approached tribal leaders for their support for the study. This, in turn, built trust among tribal members and facilitated recruitment into the study. Further recognizing the importance of local culture, they did not present the project as one utilizing focus groups. Instead, they described the groups as “talking circles,” because such circles were part of a traditional method of group communication. The researchers also deferred to tribal culture by minimizing their role as moderators and, instead, deferring to tribal leaders. They also recognized that tribal members have sometimes had bad experiences with outside researchers.

In order to allay fears, this study was conducted in a collaborative manner, leaving ample time for tribal members to be full participants. This approach allowed tribal elders to have input into the composition of the groups, the content of the questions, and the appropriate moderating style for the subsequent sessions (Momper et al., 2011).

This study also illustrates that it is important for the qualitative researcher to be sensitive to the cultural climate in which the research is conducted.

Thus, focus groups can be used in a variety ways, both as a stand-alone technique and in conjunction with other methodologies. Morgan (1988) has described focus groups as occupying a middle ground between participant observation and individual interviews. Focus groups allow for multiple interviews to be conducted, in a limited amount of time and in a way that allows the researcher to observe interaction among the participants. Given the strengths of this approach, and its relative ease of use, it is surprising that focus groups are not used more frequently.

**Conclusion**

Although some have lamented the relative lack of qualitative research in the field of criminal justice, drugs and crime form an area in which qualitative approaches have frequently been applied. There are so many instances in which they have been used that this review has been compelled to draw on just a few illustrative examples. Illicit drug use and dealing are not simply
criminal offenses, they are criminal offenses to which police and prosecutors have assigned a high priority and for which lawmakers have enacted harsh penalties. Consequently, these populations have strong reasons for remaining hidden, and, as a result, the qualitative methods described in this chapter may be particularly useful.

Although there is much to be said for qualitative research on drug use and drug trafficking, those wishing to undertake such research must be aware of potential complications. These potential complications include possible legal entanglements, questions about human subjects’ protections, and moral issues.

Qualitative researchers may find themselves directly observing drug use and/or drug transactions. They may also be told about such illegal activity. Unlike a priest or lawyer, researchers who study illicit drug use generally have no legal protections when police wish to see their research notes or when they are asked to testify in court. It is possible to obtain a federal certificate of confidentiality that provides such protections. Although such certificates are not limited to federally funded research, in practice that is the situation under which they are usually granted. Further, to obtain one, the researcher must make a compelling argument for the certificate. Many small qualitative studies are conducted without external funding, limiting access to these certificates. Researchers are well advised to consider in advance how they will respond to police requests and how far they are willing to go to protect their sources.

A related legal issue is the requirement in most state laws that the occupants of some occupations are mandated reporters. Which occupations fall into this category vary from state to state, but it often includes researchers who are university personnel, schoolteachers, or people who are affiliated with drug treatment programs. Mandated reporters are individuals who are required to report instances of child abuse or neglect to authorities, whether this abuse/neglect was directly observed or was credibly told to the researcher. Ordinary promises of confidentiality do not apply to these situations, and the researcher can face serious legal and civil consequences for failing to duly report suspected or observed abuse or neglect.

A second issue concerns institutional review boards (IRBs), which require research to be conducted in such a way as to protect human research subjects from any possible harm. This protection applies to a wide range of risks, including: arrest, harm to one’s reputation, job loss, loss of social standing, and emotional trauma. In short, just about any negative outcome for a research subject is included. These IRBs vary widely one from another in their interpretation of risk and in the extent to which they require risk to be minimized. This applies, not only to research conducted in the United States, but to that conducted in a growing number of countries around the world.

Some qualitative researchers have admitted to making promises to the IRB that they then violated when in the field (see Sandberg & Copes, 2012). Such a course of action is tempting, particularly when dealing with an IRB that adopts a restrictive interpretation of what constitutes human-subjects protection. However, the researcher should be aware that violating human-subjects rules may have consequences for the institution for which they work and for themselves.

Finally, working with drug-using and/or drug-dealing subjects can raise a host of moral issues. It is a common practice to pay such subjects for their time and cooperation, but moral questions are raised if the researcher believes the money will be spent on illegal drugs. Some believe these concerns have been overblown, whereas others respond by providing gift cards that can be used in legitimate stores (though these cards are sometimes traded for cash). Further, if the addict is hungry and homeless, does the researcher have a moral obligation to direct them to social services, or to provide assistance more directly?

Moral issues are also raised if the researcher is told about the subject’s involvement in unsolved burglaries or armed robberies. Does the researcher have some moral obligation to act, and does
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the seriousness of the crime justify overriding promises of confidentiality? None of these legal, IRB, and moral issues are easily resolved. It is important, however, that the researcher enter the research with his or her eyes wide open. This means anticipating these issues and deciding in advance how they will be handled.

For the researcher willing to address the practical, legal, and moral issues associated with qualitative research on illicit drugs, the rewards are considerable. The approach offers a window into the lives of drug users and drug dealers not matched by other research strategies. The qualitative researcher cannot help but see his or her research subjects as human beings, with complex motivations, rather than as disembodied objects. For many qualitative researchers, that perspective is tremendously satisfying, providing a level of intrinsic reward unmatched by other approaches.

References


Researching drug crime