



Field Note #1: Stratified Sampling

What Is It?

Dividing your population into meaningful subgroups (strata) before sampling, then sampling proportionally from each stratum.

Example: 2,000 program participants across urban, peri-urban, and rural areas. Instead of randomly selecting 350, you deliberately sample 120 from urban, 140 from peri-urban, and 90 from rural—matching the actual distribution.

Why It Matters

Random sampling can miss critical patterns.

If you have important subgroups, random chance might give you:

- 250 samples from accessible areas (easy to reach)
- 80 from moderate areas
- Only 20 from hard-to-reach areas

Your average hides what's happening in difficult contexts. You report "program working well" when you're only seeing the easy cases.

Stratified sampling guarantees you'll see all the patterns.

When to Use It

✔ Use stratified sampling when:

- Your population has distinct subgroups (geography, gender, income level, etc.)
- These subgroups likely face different realities
- You need to answer "what worked for whom?"
- Equity matters (ensuring marginalized groups aren't invisible)

✘ Don't use it when:

- Population is fairly homogeneous
- You don't know what strata matter yet (need exploratory work first)
- Budget/logistics make it impossible

How to Do It

Step 1: Identify meaningful strata

- What factors create different experiences? (Geography, gender, age, disability, etc.)
- Which differences matter for your evaluation questions?

Step 2: Determine sample size per stratum

- **Proportional:** Match the actual distribution (if 30% are urban, 30% of your sample is urban)
- **Equal:** Same number from each stratum (when you need statistical power to compare small groups)

Step 3: Sample randomly within each stratum

- Use random selection WITHIN each subgroup
- This combines stratification (guaranteeing representation) with randomization (avoiding bias)



Quick Checklist

Before finalizing your sampling:

- Have I identified subgroups that might have different experiences?
- Will random sampling risk missing some subgroups?
- Do I need to answer "what worked for whom?"
- Can I afford the logistics of sampling across all strata?
- Have I calculated required sample size per stratum?

Common Mistake

"I'll just oversample hard-to-reach areas."

If you sample 200 from accessible and 150 from remote (to "balance" them), your overall statistics are now biased. You need to either:

- Report disaggregated results separately, OR
- Weight your analysis to reflect true population proportions

Keep it simple: Sample proportionally, report disaggregated.