

Understanding the social world through qualitative research

Qualitative research draws on a range of philosophical positions, theoretical lenses, and disciplinary traditions. These different orientations shape the methods that researchers use to collect, analyse, and interpret qualitative data. Across the different methods used, qualitative researchers share the objective of creating interpretivist, evidence-centred accounts of the social world.

At its core, qualitative research explores human beliefs, experiences, motivations, and behaviours in their social context. It does so by obtaining evidence through a rigorous process of data collection which draws out the views of those who participate in order to understand the social world in which they live. The resulting analysis is a subtle and nuanced understanding of the multifaceted nature of human experience. This depth of understanding produces rich narrative accounts that are not easily transported into summary key findings.

Qualitative approaches are particularly valuable where little is known or understood about the social phenomenon or group under investigation, or where the topic of investigation covers sensitive or complex issues.

Qualitative research does not seek statistical representation of a population. Instead it relies on purposive sampling to reach ‘saturation’. This refers to the point where no new themes are being generated in the data collected, suggesting that the range of everyday experiences has been captured.

Across this research programme we have created spaces for participants to talk about their experiences and views in their own words through one-on-one interviews and focus groups.

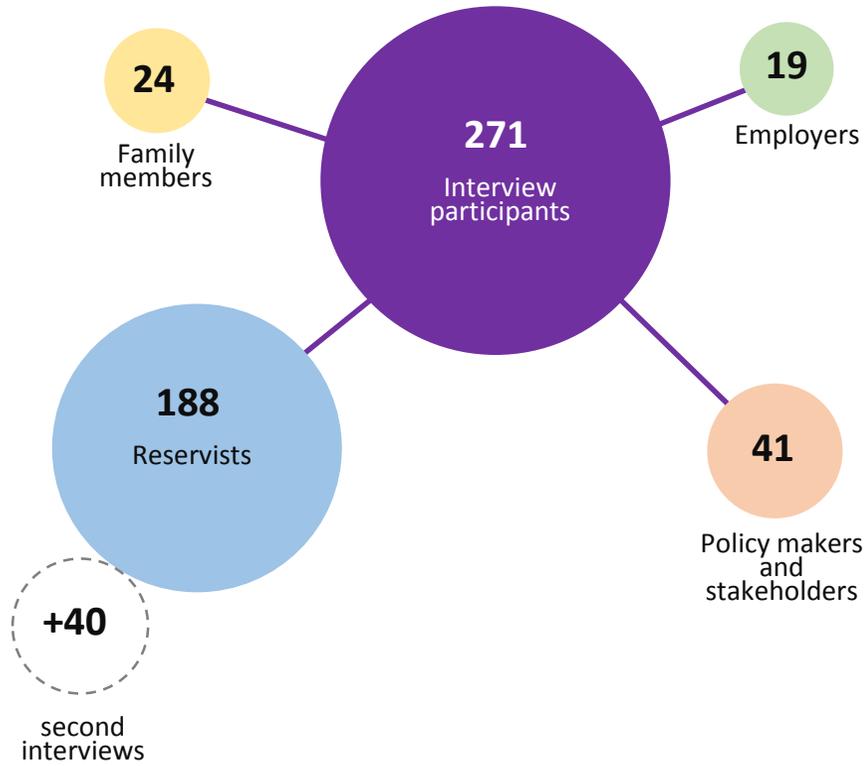
One-on-one, semi-structured interviews consist of key questions that broadly define the topic being explored, but allow the interviewer and respondent to explore in detail issues which may be relevant or important. The privacy and flexibility of this approach allows for elaboration of views through new lines of questioning, and thus the discovery of new information which may be pertinent in answering the research questions more fully.

Focus groups are group discussions on a particular topic which are facilitated by the researcher. Such an approach is excellent for generating collective views by allowing participants to build on each other’s contributions. One of the most important considerations of this method is the composition of the group, as power dynamics will be replicated within a focus group environment.

Researchers are trained in the use of a range of skills and techniques for eliciting and engaging with the views of their respondents so that they may recount their experiences as fully as possible. The individual accounts of participants are brought together into a collective body of evidence. This body of evidence is then analysed and interpreted by the researchers through a rigorous and reiterative methodologically- and theoretically-informed process.

Future Reserves Research Programme – breakdown of participants

Interview participants



Focus group participants

