

# Sampling in Social Work Research — Meaning, Types and Utility

## Introduction

Social work research deals with understanding complex human problems — poverty, domestic violence, child welfare, addiction, and more. It is rarely possible for a researcher to study every single person in a large population. This is where **sampling** becomes essential.

Sampling is the **scientific process of selecting a small, representative group** (called a sample) from a larger group (called the population or universe), so that conclusions drawn from the sample can be applied to the whole population.

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## Meaning of Sampling

Sampling in social work research is the systematic process of selecting a subset of individuals, documents, or cases from a larger population to study. It enables researchers to gain insights about a large, inaccessible group by studying a smaller, manageable, and representative group, making research feasible, cost-effective, and efficient.

The sample population should accurately reflect the views, opinions, or other aspects of the population from which it is drawn.

For example, if a social work researcher wants to study the problems faced by migrant workers in Uttar Pradesh, it is impossible to interview all millions of migrants. Instead, a representative sample of, say, 500 migrants can be studied, and findings can be generalised for the whole group.

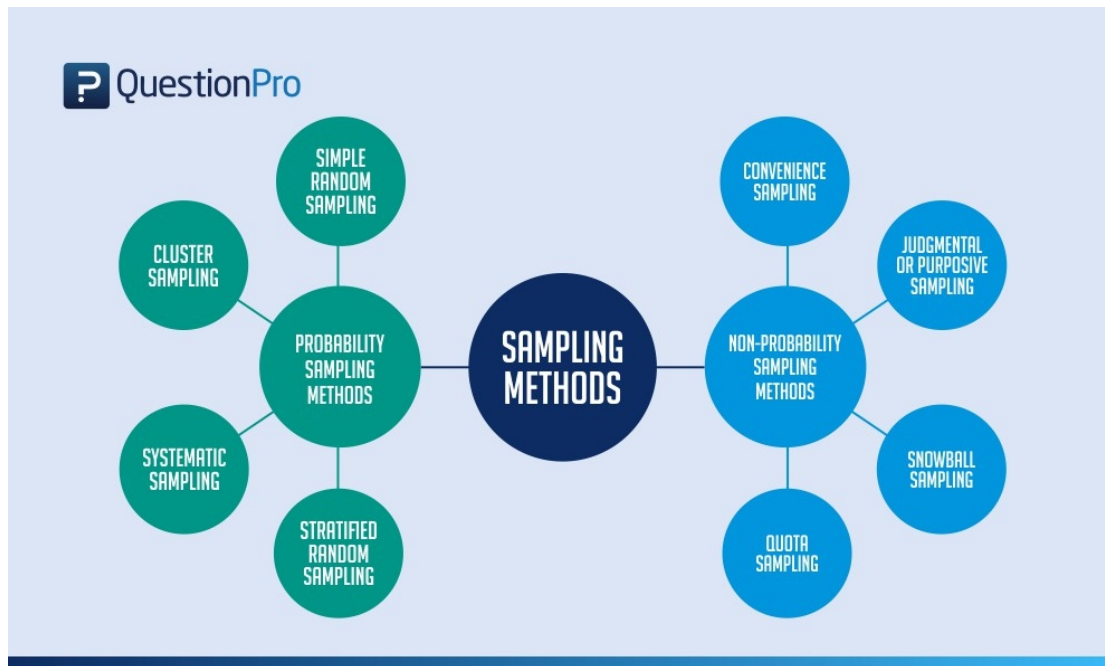
Two important factors determine sample size:

- The **degree of accuracy** required
  - The **extent of tolerance of sampling error** in the study
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## Types of Sampling

Sampling is broadly divided into two categories: **Probability Sampling** and **Non-Probability Sampling**.

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## A) Probability Sampling (Simple, Stratified, Systematic, Cluster) (4 TYPES Si St Sy C)

In probability sampling, every unit of the population (universe) has an **equal chance or probability** of being selected. This type is preferred in social science research because it provides a more representative sample and allows errors to be calculated using the standard error statistic.

### 1. Simple Random Sampling

This is the most basic form, similar to a lottery method. Each person in the population has an equal chance of being selected, and the selection is not deliberate but random.

*Social Work Example:* A researcher studying welfare scheme beneficiaries in a block writes the name of all 1,000 registered families on separate slips, puts them in a box, and randomly draws 100 slips. Each family had an equal chance of being selected.

### 2. Stratified Random Sampling

Also called proportional or quota random sampling. The population is first divided into subgroups or strata (e.g., gender, age, caste), and then a random sample is taken from each stratum. This ensures better representation of all sections.

*Social Work Example:* In a study on the impact of MGNREGA (a rural employment scheme), a researcher divides the population into three strata — SC families, OBC families, and general category families — and randomly selects from each stratum to ensure all groups are represented fairly.

### 3. Systematic Random Sampling

In this technique, the total population is divided by the desired sample size to get a sampling interval. Then every  $n$ th person is selected from the list.

*Social Work Example:* A researcher has a list of 1,000 children enrolled in an anganwadi program and wants a sample of 100. The sampling interval is  $1000 \div 100 = 10$ . A random starting number (say, 6) is chosen, and then every 10th child (6, 16, 26, 36...) is selected.

### 4. Cluster (Area) Random Sampling

The population is broken into clusters (usually natural geographic groupings like villages, blocks, or districts), and a random sample of clusters is selected. Cases are then drawn only from those selected clusters.

*Social Work Example:* To study the condition of orphan children in Uttar Pradesh, a researcher randomly selects 5 districts (clusters) out of 75, and then studies all orphan children in those 5 districts, rather than covering the whole state. This saves time, cost, and travel.

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## B) Non-Probability Sampling (4 TYPES C P S Q)

Non-probability sampling is used when it is **not possible to follow probability sampling techniques** — for instance, when the complete list of the population (sampling frame) is not available. In such samples, the probability of each member being included is not known, so there is no way to calculate the extent of error.

### 1. Convenience Sampling

Also called availability, haphazard, or accidental sampling. The researcher simply selects persons who are most easily available or accessible.

*Social Work Example:* A social work student wants to study stress among college students. She distributes questionnaires to students in her own classroom and in the college canteen — whoever is available and willing to participate. This is easy, quick, and inexpensive, but not very representative.

### 2. Purposive (Judgemental) Sampling

The researcher deliberately selects the sample based on specific characteristics needed for the study. The sample serves a specific purpose even if it does not fully represent the population.

*Social Work Example:* A researcher studying the psychological impact of acid attacks interviews only acid attack survivors — not the general population. This purposive

selection ensures the study focuses on those who have the specific lived experience relevant to the research question.

### 3. Snowball Sampling

Inspired by the analogy of a snowball rolling down a hill and growing larger. The researcher identifies a few individuals with the required characteristics, and these individuals then refer or connect the researcher to others with similar characteristics, gradually expanding the sample.

*Social Work Example:* Researching drug abuse in a community is difficult because addicts are a hidden population. A researcher begins by identifying 5 known drug users, interviews them, and then asks each to refer to others — thus "snowballing" to reach 50 participants. This method is especially useful in community-based social work studies.

### 4. Quota (Fixed Number) Sampling

The population is divided into categories (e.g., male/female, young/old, rich/poor), and a fixed quota of respondents is set for each category in proportion to the group's representation in the population. Unlike stratified sampling, no formal sampling frame is used.

*Social Work Example:* A social worker studying the needs of elderly persons decides to interview 30 men and 30 women above 60 years of age from a particular ward. She fulfils this quota by approaching whoever is available and fits the description, without using a formal list.

**Difference between Quota and Stratified Sampling:** Both methods divide the population into groups and take samples from each. However, in quota sampling, no formal sampling frame is used — the researcher finds individuals anywhere who fit the required category, whereas stratified sampling uses a formal list and random selection from each stratum.

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## Utility of Sampling in Social Work Research

Sampling is extremely useful and necessary in social work research for the following reasons:

**1. Saves Time and Resources:** It is impractical and expensive to study an entire population. A well-chosen sample gives reliable results in less time and at lower cost. For example, a social welfare department cannot interview all beneficiaries of a scheme across a state, but sampling makes it feasible.

**2. Enables Generalisation:** When a sample is truly representative, findings can be applied to the entire population. This is essential in social work research for making policy recommendations.

**3. Facilitates In-depth Study:** By focusing on a smaller group, researchers can study issues in greater depth. For instance, instead of superficially covering thousands of domestic violence survivors, a purposive sample of 50 can be studied deeply through interviews and case histories.

**4. Useful for Hidden Populations:** Non-probability methods like snowball sampling help reach populations that are difficult to access — such as homeless persons, sex workers, or substance abusers — which are important groups in social work practice.

**5. Reduces Sampling Error:** Scientific methods like stratified sampling ensure that minority groups are not missed, reducing the risk of biased or unrepresentative findings.

**6. Practical for Social Surveys:** Social work often involves large-scale field surveys for needs assessment or programme evaluation. Sampling makes such surveys manageable and scientifically valid.

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## Conclusion

Sampling is the backbone of social work research. It allows researchers to draw meaningful, valid, and generalizable conclusions from manageable data collection. The choice of sampling method depends on the nature of the research, the available resources, the accessibility of the population, and the level of accuracy required. While probability sampling offers greater scientific rigour and representativeness, non-probability methods are invaluable when studying hard-to-reach or vulnerable populations — which are often at the very heart of social work practice. A good researcher selects the most appropriate sampling method to ensure that the voices of the people are accurately captured and their needs are faithfully represented.

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This answer covers meaning, all 8 types with social work examples, and utility — structured for maximum marks in a 20-mark question.