The following is offered to inform auditors/evaluators about the different types of purposeful sampling available to them as project tools. It is also intended to help auditors/evaluators know when purposeful sampling is occurring so that they may adjust project strategies and data analysis accordingly.

As you look through the examples below, remember that purposeful sampling is different from random (statistical/probability) sampling. As such, purposeful sampling is rife with trade-offs and ambiguities, even though people who seek to manipulate data often do purposeful sampling but report results as though based on random sampling.

The most notable trade-off is that the more narrowly you define your population, sample, or respondent, the less likely you are to produce information that really represents any population at all. This contradiction points up the fact that you must often have a high tolerance for ambiguity when using purposeful sampling.

Note, too, that there are no statistical rules for this type of sampling. The rules for random sampling do not really apply. In purposeful sampling, sample size depends on what you want to know, what is at stake, and what can be done within existing resource constraints. Samples must be judged on the purpose of each study, and samples should be pulled for that purpose. In this sense, purposeful sampling can be quite valuable, especially as a device for identifying or initially exploring potential issues or characteristics of interest. Just be aware that we should not confuse such exploration with representation of a population or confirmation of a finding.

The various types of purposeful sampling follow below:

1. Extreme or Deviant Case: Here you look at the best or the worst case to shed light on problems in more typical situations. The idea is that lessons can be learned in these extreme cases that are relevant to improving more typical processes, operations, programs, or effects.

2. Intensity: These samples are similar to extreme cases but look at less radical instances or respondents. For example, you would not interview a murderer to learn about the value of human life. Rather, you seek cases that manifest a given characteristic in an intense, but not extreme, fashion.

3. Maximum Variation: Here you choose a sample of cases that cuts across a great deal of program, participant, or respondent variation to get at central themes or principal outcomes. This would occur if you compared the educational opportunities of children in an upper income area with those in a low income area. This approach can be useful in dealing with the heterogeneity of small samples since it catches the common features of a wide range of cases. It can also define patterns in the variation of processes, operations, programs, or effects.

4. Homogeneous: The objective here is to describe a sub-group in great detail, as with girls between the ages of 5 and 8 years in Alamo Heights with IQs above 130. The focus group is a commonly used homogeneous sampling strategy.

5. Typical Case: This technique is used when you want to describe what is most characteristic about a process, operation, program, or effect to persons with little prior knowledge of them.

6. Stratified Purposeful: This method captures major variations rather than common features. This would occur if you polled employees in your agency about the kind of CPE training they wanted and then stratified the sample along educational, age, income, or gender lines. Sample sizes are usually smaller than those produced by stratified random sampling.

7.   Critical Case: Critical cases facilitate making dramatic observations to the effect that "if they can do it, anybody can," as would occur when observing very high SAT scores achieved by a child from the very poorest school district. The media often use critical case sampling to draw attention to an issue or to encourage viewers and readers to make general statements about a population.

8.   Snowball or Chain: This approach helps locate information-rich respondents and is based on the question, "Who knows a lot about _____?" Repeat this process a few times (roll the snowball) and you could easily find a subject matter expert.

9.   Criterion or Quota: Here you review and study all cases that meet some predetermined criterion or criteria of importance, as would occur in auditing all accounts with balances over $1,000,000. This approach is often used in quality assurance when exploring systems that do not perform at benchmark specifications.

10.   Confirming or Disconfirming Case: This refers to finding cases that either confirm or disprove a given theory.

11.   Purposeful Random: Here you select samples randomly, but the samples are not large enough to truly assess how well they represent the population. The objective is to enhance the credibility of an observation or statement, not to characterize a larger group.

12.   Judgment: This is a sample chosen simply by the judgment of the researcher as to which persons would represent the population. It should not be used to draw statistical conclusions. An example is standing outside a service site and surveying only college students between ages 18 and 24 who are seeking services. Such persons may represent neither all college students nor the entire population of the service site's clientele.

13.   Convenience or Intercept Sampling: This technique is commonly used in market research conducted at points of sale or consumption, such as at malls, retail outlets, health clinics, etc. Unfortunately, pursuit of convenience may undermine usefulness of data. Just because respondents are easy to find doesn't mean they represent any population. However, this strategy is commonly used.