



BRIEF 2

WHO: UNDERSTAND YOUR AUDIENCE

Inclusive communication starts with a strong understanding of your local community—especially the languages people use and the contexts they navigate each day. U.S. Census data is a great place to start, supplemented with data and knowledge from local sources. This brief describes how to access data on residents’ country of origin and language preferences. You’ll also get tips on how to connect directly with your intended audiences to understand their communications needs.

Note: A foundational first step in any successful communications campaign is understanding your audience. While the tips in this section (and throughout this toolkit) focus on developing inclusive communications for newcomer communities, many of the strategies also apply to crafting accessible, resonant outreach to other groups. [See the Appendix](#) for tips and resources on inclusive communication with other audiences ranging from people with disabilities, older adults, youth, low-income communities, rural communities, and LGBTQ+ communities.



ACCESS U.S. CENSUS DATA

The American Community Survey (ACS), an annual survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, is a rich source of information that can help inform your inclusive communications strategies. Questions on the ACS cover these topics:

- Country of origin
- Date of arrival in the U.S.
- Education background
- Languages other than English spoken at home
- English proficiency

Find local data at data.census.gov. You can search by county, community name, or zip code.

SUPPLEMENT WITH LOCAL DATA

While the U.S. Census Bureau provides surveys and support in a [variety of languages](#), the data can still be incomplete—often missing hard-to-count populations like adult English learners. Forward-looking communities are increasingly supplementing Census data with information and statistics from community partners to build a more accurate, complete picture of newcomers in their area.

School districts, for example, often keep information on students' racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. Government agencies tasked with planning, neighborhood relations, or language access may have helpful demographic data. Immigrant- and refugee- serving organizations also have data on newcomer populations and demographic trends and can provide your office with information about new arrivals.



CONNECT WITH YOUR COMMUNITY

Successful communities go beyond data to build authentic connections with newcomer communities, gaining deeper insights into their needs, preferences, and experiences. If your office or organization has not worked with newcomer communities in the past, it's important to understand that building trust and connections with newcomers takes time.

Start the work by taking stock of any existing relationships between your office or organization and newcomer communities. If none exist, meet with local nonprofits, faith institutions, or community centers to ask for introductions to individuals recognized as immigrant and refugee community leaders. Look for opportunities to connect with other invested stakeholders too: Your city, county, or town may already have networks working on refugee resettlement, for example. Schools and health clinics often have caseworkers and liaisons with strong community connections.

Approach community groups with the intention to build trusting and long-term relationships to foster collaboration. Design opportunities for in-person meetings that are accessible to newcomers: provide translation and interpretation services, schedule around work and childcare needs, and choose convenient locations like faith institutions or community centers.

UNDERSTAND COMMUNICATIONS NEEDS

What information does your audience want—or need—to know? Effective communication with residents, including newcomers, involves prioritizing access to basic information, from ensuring awareness of local government offices and the availability of services like applications for a license or permit, street sweeping schedules, or programming at the library. In other cases, the work involves building proactive plans to ensure that your office is ready to communicate potentially lifesaving information in a public health or emergency management campaign.

In all cases, involve local residents in developing your communications—and as early and often as possible. Offer multiple options for stakeholders to engage, in multiple languages and formats, and according to audience needs.

- **Co-Design Workshops:** Invite members of your community to gather for brainstorming sessions about a communications challenge or opportunity. You can use findings to develop specific campaigns and build your organizations' broader outreach strategies. Remember to keep an open mind in co-design: The people you invite will have a better understanding of their community than you do.
- **Surveys:** Surveys can help gather input from a broad and representative group of people in your community. You can use free platforms, like [Google Forms](#) or [SurveyMonkey](#), to create simple surveys. Understand users' language preferences and prioritize multilingual outreach and survey translation accordingly. Connect with local nonprofits, faith institutions, or community centers to distribute the survey to their members and constituents.
- **Focus Groups and Interviews:** Focused, in-person conversations with your intended audience are a great way to build connections and trust—and to test messages and refine your content. If you don't have time or budget for a full focus group, conducting even a handful of strategic interviews can provide important insights.

No matter how you connect with community members, the [Resource Box](#) below offers questions to get you started in building conversations.

Engaging community members early in your communications planning sets the stage for robust, bidirectional feedback throughout your content creation and dissemination processes. You can use the community feedback techniques listed above for creating and testing content, along with community outreach, as described in [Brief 3](#) and [Brief 4](#).

Directly engaging community members is a great way to get input on information priorities and gaps to shape messages and outreach efforts. You can also confirm your audiences' preferred languages, media platforms, and outreach methods. Use these questions to get you started. NOTE: Questions have been written to reflect the principles of "plain language" discussed in [Brief 3](#).

- What language do you want us to use when we send you information?
- Where do you get information about community help or services?
- What news or information sources do you trust?
- Do you know about our program, service, or campaign?
- What do you think about our program?
- What do you still want to learn about our program?
- Does our current message feel right to you?
- Are our messages easy for you to understand?
- What would make our message better or more interesting?
- How likely are you to do something after you see or hear our message?

Asking these questions can help you better understand your audience, and potentially identify subgroups within that audience, allowing you to design more tailored messaging as described in other sections of this guide.

SEGMENT YOUR AUDIENCE

Newcomer communities are rich in diversity. Beyond language and country of origin, residents' unique experiences, perspectives, and worldviews shape how they understand and receive information. As is the case in communicating with any population, recognizing different audience segments—demographic, geographic, behavioral, and psychographic subgroups—helps build more effective and inclusive communications strategies.

For example, some residents may choose spoken or broadcast formats that match their communication styles, while others navigate multiple languages at home and engage with both English and native-language media. This diversity in preferences creates opportunities to connect in ways that truly resonate with each group.

PUTTING STRATEGY INTO PRACTICE

As the U.S. Census provides foundational information about a community's population, background, and language preferences, it's essential that all residents—including newcomer communities—are fully counted. In Philadelphia, a grassroots campaign grounded in building trust and engagement turned Census 2020 outreach into a powerful community-building effort. [Learn how](#) the effort not only boosted local participation in the 2020 Census, but also laid the groundwork for a stronger city-wide communications infrastructure.



Read Case Study:
Philadelphia, PA



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APPENDIX

While this toolkit focuses on creating inclusive communications with newcomer communities, many of the strategies and insights shared are also valuable for crafting accessible, relevant outreach to other residents in your community. The following tips and resources will help inform your communication practices to ensure they resonate with a diverse range of audiences across your community.

People with Disabilities

- Offer content in multiple formats (audio, visual, digital, printed) when possible
- Use people-first language
- Use high-contrast colors and screen-reader compatible formats
- Additional resource: [ADA Requirements: Effective Communication](#) (U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division)

Older Adults

- Use clear, simple language and visuals
- Provide information in multiple formats
- Engage older adults through familiar, trusted channels
- Additional resource: [Age-Friendly Communication Style Guide](#) (Monroe County Aging Alliance)

Youth & Families

- Use age-appropriate language; keep content concise and engaging
- View families as assets and resources; recognize and respect varying family structures
- Meet youth where they are, particularly on social media platforms
- Consider mobile-first design
- Additional resource: [Family Engagement Circles of Support Toolkit](#) (NYC Department of Youth and Community Development)

Low-Income Communities

- Utilize trusted community-based channels for communication
- Conduct digital access assessments
- Offer low-cost connectivity solutions
- Additional resource: [Digital Inclusion 101](#) (National Digital Inclusion Alliance)

Rural Populations

- Leverage trusted local institutions for outreach
- Understand that communities may lack reliable internet access
- Incorporate radio and printed materials in communications strategies
- Additional resource: [Toolkit for Rural Communities in CA](#) (California Library Association)

LGBTQ+ Community

- Messages should consider safety and privacy concerns.
- Use affirming and accurate language
- Normalize pronoun sharing
- Additional resources: [GLAAD Media Reference Guide](#) and [Spectrum Center LGBTQ+ Communication Best Practices](#)



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