

DEVELOPING PARTNERSHIPS WITH SOCIALLY VULNERABLE POPULATIONS**Carson MacPherson-Krutsky**, University of Colorado Boulder**Mary Angelica Painter**, University of Colorado Boulder**Melissa Villarreal**, University of Colorado Boulder

This check sheet is for researchers who are considering ways to ethically develop partnerships with socially vulnerable populations. It includes evidence-based steps for engaging with these populations to meet research and community goals. It also summarizes key considerations to address at the outset of a new collaboration, such as positionality, budget availability, and expected time commitments.

CONSIDERATIONS BEFORE OUTREACH

Populations are made vulnerable through explicit or implicit policies and practices that result in lack of access to rights, resources, and opportunities. During disasters, these circumstances increase potential for harm (Painter et al., 2024). Vulnerability is multifaceted but can arise as a result of biases and inequities associated with education level, race, gender, spoken language, income, ability status, age, sexuality, housing status, among other social characteristics. Researchers may be interested in creating partnerships with populations with one or more of these characteristics to discover more about a specific issue affecting them, identify possible solutions, or record lived experiences around disasters.

Before seeking out partnerships with socially vulnerable populations or organizations that serve them, it is important to examine the project goals and the population of interest:

» **Reflect on power dynamics with a specific population.**

- Explore power dynamics between the researcher(s) and the study population before considering a potential project (For virtual training, see Evans et al., 2023). Reflecting on these dynamics and potential biases will help you clarify how you can engage with a study population without causing harm. It may also help you identify which local organizations you could partner with to guide your interactions with these populations.

» **Educate yourself.**

- Learn about the history of marginalization of the population(s) you intend to study, their disaster experiences, and how that history fits into your research or project goal. This will prepare you to consider local needs and increase awareness of power dynamics that may shape your research. It will also help ensure communications are culturally sensitive and acknowledge historical issues or injustices. Training resources are available (Natural Hazards Center, 2024).
- * *For example, after Hurricane Katrina, some believed that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) intentionally breached the levees to inundate poor communities. This misconception led to distrust of USACE that persists today and could affect whether communities want to engage with USACE or researchers working with them in the future. Learning about local histories and experiences will help you identify how to approach engagement and which dynamics you need to be aware of.*

» **Engage in ethical practices and reciprocity.**

- To avoid repeating the mistakes of historic extractive research or damaging interactions with socially vulnerable populations, researchers should apply ethical research principles of respect for persons, beneficence/non-maleficence, and justice.

* For example, studying disaster impacts on children—a protected class—requires researchers to adjust data collection and recruitment strategies and research questions to minimize risk to participants.

Reciprocity is the “ongoing practice of reflection, relationship-building, and exchange where researchers are obligated to work to produce mutual benefits for the people involved with or affected by the hazards and disaster research process” (West et al., 2022). To practice reciprocity, researchers should explore a community’s core values, perspectives, and interests and consider how the research can elevate them. Ask yourself, is collaborating with a particular population going to benefit that population? If not, consider how you can adjust the project goals and methods to ensure that the population benefits from the research.

* For example, going into a community to conduct focus groups to learn about disaster experiences is unlikely to benefit the community directly. Speak to participants about what might be helpful to them. Perhaps it would be helpful to develop and distribute an information sheet about steps to prepare for disasters or to apply for FEMA funding following a disaster.

» **Budget for engagement.**

People are experts in their lived experience and deserve compensation for their time and perspectives. Allocate project funds to encourage community involvement. Before starting a project or applying for a grant, consult guidance on how much and what to budget for (Harvard Catalyst, n.d.; Raquejo and Schott, 2019).

* For example, in Puerto Rico researchers provided stipends for community leaders as experts who collaborated on building a public health and disasters community survey (Roque et al., 2023).

CONSIDERATIONS WHEN REACHING OUT

Careful preparation and planning for outreach will ensure researchers have the best chance to make connections with the people, communities, and organizations needed for successful research.

» **Work through existing channels to identify trusted partners.**

Identify individuals and organizations that have already built trust with specific populations (e.g., church leaders or community organizations). You may have colleagues who have worked with populations of interest who can connect you with possible collaborators and participants. Be sure to identify and communicate what you can bring to the table.

If this is your first time doing research with community partners, you may want to look toward your own communities and established relationships as a place to start.

Often, community-based organizations—those that work directly with communities on a variety of efforts—are a good place to begin.

* For example, Brewer et al., (2020) wanted to better understand how to reach African Americans to reduce COVID-19 risks. They conducted a study with African American churches and asked them what resources they needed to reach partitioners. Brewer et al. collected data while also providing resources to the churches who then disseminated public health information to over 12,000 church members.

» **Learn about and follow established engagement practices.**

Using established engagement practices—informal or formal practices that communities have in place for researchers to connect with them—will help build trust in communities.

* For example, certain Tribal Nations have guidance (Straits et al., 2012) and research review board protocols that researchers must go through to gain approval for research with their communities. Research will not be considered without submitting materials through established channels.

» **Develop shared expectations and rules of engagement.**

Transparency is key. If you are partnering with community-based organizations to carry out research, be sure to outline anticipated roles and responsibilities of the researchers and partners, the research phases, timelines, and expected deliverables. Consider how much time you are asking partners to contribute to the research effort and ensure that it is agreeable for them. Create opportunities for regular check-ins and feedback opportunities with community partners to ensure their concerns and ideas about the research are heard.

PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST

This check sheet provides guidance for making initial contact with socially vulnerable populations, but additional considerations are needed to build and sustain these relationships. People come first in all interactions. If your research is not a good fit for a certain population, or community members are not receptive to partnering with you or your research team, it is important to respect their wishes.

To learn more about next steps, we encourage you to review Part II of this check sheet series titled, “Sustaining Partnerships with Socially Vulnerable Populations.”

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