

Engaging Hard-to-Reach Populations in New Ways

Creative & Out-of-the-Box Strategies for Community Survey Outreach

Gathering representative and meaningful community data is one of the biggest challenges in the CHA and CHNA process. Traditional survey methods often fail to engage underrepresented populations, leading to gaps in insights that can impact health planning and policy decisions. During our last webinar, we polled attendees on their most successful strategies for reaching hard-to-engage groups. Their responses, along with real-world examples, highlight innovative approaches that improve survey participation, enhance data quality, and foster deeper community connections.

1. Leveraging Trusted Community Figures

- School nurses answering on behalf of students
- Community health workers and community partners leading outreach
- Partnering with trusted organizations and individuals already embedded in the community
- Training and employing community members as researchers to distribute surveys
- Contracting surveys to trusted Spanish- and Somali-speaking community partners

Example: In Pottawatomie County, Oklahoma, a We Care Bear mascot helped engage families in school pickup lines, creating an approachable, fun atmosphere for survey participation.

2. Meeting People Where They Are

- Door-to-door canvassing in underrepresented areas
- Going to community spaces, engaging respectfully, and asking for invitations to events
- Setting up booths at farmers markets
- Showing up at community events and other frequently visited places like food pantries, libraries, and businesses

Example: A community group in Madison County, New York, found success engaging men aged 18-24 through snowmobile clubs, using raffle distributions to encourage participation.

3. Distributing Surveys in High-Traffic Locations

- Public transit, laundromats, community fairs, Christmas craft shows
- Barber shops, shopping malls, local businesses
- Mobile food pantries
- Technical colleges, meal sites

Example: A Chick-fil-A in Oklahoma partnered with a local health department to distribute surveys by allowing staff to stand in the drive-thru line and engage customers. Similarly, a barber shop initiative helped reach underrepresented groups by making survey participation part of the customer experience.

4. Using Community-Based Organizations

- Partnering with organizations that serve specific populations
- Engaging local community-based groups to help distribute surveys

Example: In Louisiana, Christus Health worked closely with community partners to ensure that surveys reached populations who typically do not respond to traditional outreach methods.

5. Alternative Distribution Methods

- Providing self-addressed stamped envelopes for remote locations
- Printing and dropping off survey questions at gathering places
- Offering paper surveys and incentives

Example: Water bills were used as a survey distribution tool in Oklahoma, ensuring that households across the community received the survey.

6. Digital and Social Media Outreach

- Promoting surveys via social media
- Using geofencing to target specific populations

Example: Northwestern Medicine leveraged social media advertising with geofencing to target specific neighborhoods with survey outreach, ensuring responses from key demographic groups.

7. Incentivizing Participation

- Paying community partners to lead surveying efforts
- Offering incentives and raffle drawings to encourage participation

Example: A raffle distribution in a snowmobile club resulted in a significant increase in responses from young men, a traditionally underrepresented demographic.

8. Reducing Reliance on Surveys

- Exploring existing data sources to address questions before conducting new surveys

Key Takeaways:

- ✓ **Trust & Relationships Matter:** Engaging with community leaders and trusted organizations improves response rates.
- ✓ **Convenience is Key:** Meeting people where they are increases participation.
- ✓ **Multiple Channels Work Best:** A mix of in-person outreach, digital promotion, and traditional paper surveys helps reach diverse populations.
- ✓ **Compensation & Incentives Improve Participation:** Paying community members and offering incentives encourages engagement.

By combining these creative approaches, communities can enhance survey participation and obtain richer, more representative data.