# 1.2 Tip Sheet on Identifying Vulnerable Populations

**Purpose:** This tip sheet provides a step-by-step process for identifying broad categories of vulnerable populations with communication and transportation barriers.

**Directions:** The first four steps require research and documentation. These steps will take time. The last step involves community engagement of agencies and organizations that serve, advocate for, or represent populations identified in the research.

## Research and Fact Finding

### Step 1:

Collect population information and demographics. Data sources include:

* United State Census Quick Facts[[1]](#footnote-1) (data developed specifically for states, counties, cities)
* Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Snap Shots of State Population Data[[2]](#footnote-2)
* Modern Language Association Language Map[[3]](#footnote-3)
* State, county, and local government agencies (departments of transportation, economic development, commerce, public health, human services, aging)
* Convention and visitors bureaus (visitors, seasonal changes, special events)
* Grassroots organizations (community-based and faith-based organizations, nonprofit organizations)
* Regional entities (metropolitan planning organizations, councils of government, U.S. Census
* Complete Count Committees)
* Academic institutions
* National advocacy organizations

To identify vulnerable populations with community and transportation needs, search for information on:

* Poverty
* Languages spoken at home
* Age (under the age of 18 and over the age of 65)
* Disability (mobility, mental, intellectual, sensory)
* Population density
* Vehicle ownership (including zero-vehicle households) in communities without easy access to frequent public transportation
* Country of origin
* Nighttime versus daytime populations

### Step 2:

Define the prevalent vulnerable populations in your community. Identify the population groups with the largest numbers. Group populations into broad categories that describe the communication barriers that make people vulnerable, such as:

* Poverty
* Limited English proficiency
* Disability (mobility, mental, intellectual, sensory)
* Very young or very old
* Cultural/geographic isolation
* Transit dependent/transportation disadvantaged

### Step 3:

Document research findings. Include estimates of the number of people in vulnerable populations who live in the community or jurisdiction. Record the information on paper or electronically.

### Step 4:

Select three to five broad population groups that will provide access to the largest number of people. This list can be expanded as time and resources permit. Selecting a few will let planning begin with a manageable body of information.

**Tip:** If staff, time, and budget permit you to address only one population group, start with poverty. Using poverty to identify vulnerable populations can help to locate and reach many people with functional needs and those without access to transportation. Poverty is a sweeping category because many vulnerable population groups live at or below the federal poverty level.

## Community Engagement

### Step 5:

Network members should include representatives of agencies and organizations that serve or advocate for populations with functional needs. The **Potential Network Partners** tool in Chapter 1 Tools can help identify the public, voluntary, and private sector agencies and organizations that can reach different vulnerable populations, including those with the following functional needs:

**Communication:** People who have limited ability to receive and act on information in order to function in daily activities. This includes people who are blind or have limited vision; deaf and hard of hearing; who cannot speak; who have limited cognitive abilities; limited English proficiency; and low literacy skills. This functional need also includes people who live in remote rural areas with few electronic communication channels.

**Transportation:** People who do not drive, do not own a vehicle, or do not have access to public transportation or a private vehicle. This includes carless populations (either by choice or economic disadvantage); people who are unable to drive due to age or disability; people who need accessible transportation (lift equipped) or specially equipped vehicles to transport individuals on oxygen or in an iron lung; and people who live in institutional facilities, such as nursing homes, group homes, or prisons. Populations with this need also consist of travelers who may be stranded at hotels or at airplane, train, bus, or ferry terminals.

**Maintaining independence:** People who need supplies, durable medical equipment, attendants, or caregivers in order to function in daily activities. This need includes people who use wheel chairs, walkers, scooters; people who depend on baby or adult formulas, nutrition, diapers, diabetic supplies, sterile bandages, and gloves; and people who need assistance with bathing, dressing, and feeding themselves.

**Supervision:** People who need assistance and support to cope and function in daily activities. This includes people who have psychiatric disorders (schizophrenia) and other mental illnesses (e.g., traumatic stress, depression, anxiety); people with developmental disabilities; people with Alzheimer’s disease and other forms of dementia; young children from birth through elementary school, including latchkey children; adults who are frail elderly; and prisoners.

**Medical care:** People who need assistance and support from trained medical professionals to manage their medical conditions. This includes people who are on dialysis; receive oxygen or intravenous therapy; need help caring for wounds; or depend on electricity to operate life-sustaining equipment.

This group also comprises hospital patients and nursing home and assisted living residents.

Identify key contacts at organizations and agencies with connections to the population groups you have selected. Collect phone numbers, e-mail and mail addresses, social media sites, and other information, such as:

* Populations they serve
* How key contacts receive emergency information
* Communication methods they use to reach their target population
* Whether they can provide emergency information to the populations they serve
* How many people they can reach in an emergency and in what time frame

Record this information in an existing contact list, on the **Preliminary Contact Form**, or in the sample **Network Contact Database** in the Chapter 1 Tools section.

Adapted from the *Public Health Workbook to Define, Locate, and Reach Special, Vulnerable, and At-Risk Populations in an Emergency*. U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; and Kailes, J. I. and Enders, A. “Moving Beyond Special Needs.” *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*. Vol. 17, No. 4. 2007.

1. United States Census Quick Facts [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. CDC Snap Shots of State Population Data [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Modern Language Association Language Map [↑](#footnote-ref-3)