

Multilingual Communities Require Multilingual Surveys: A Language Justice-Informed Approach to the New York City Housing and Vacancy Survey

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Abstract

Nearly half of the residents of New York City speak a language other than English at home, and almost a quarter have limited English proficiency. For surveys fielded in diverse areas, language access is an issue not only of equality, but also data quality. Common approaches, such as relying on interpreters or deferring to household members who speak English, can lead to the mis-phrasing of questions, discomfort of the respondent, or the collection of incomplete information. To address this issue, sponsors of the New York City Housing and Vacancy Survey (NYCHVS) worked with experts to develop and implement a language justice approach to data collection. Language justice aims to decenter English in an effort to enable all involved to equally participate fully, regardless of the language they speak. A holistic approach to language justice, considering all aspects of the survey and every potential interaction with respondents, is essential for an equitable approach to surveys, especially in diverse areas.

Key words: Language Justice, Data Collection, Multilingual, Translation

1. Introduction

Of the 8.8 million people living in New York City, 22 percent have limited English proficiency and 48% speak a language other than English at home. Around 3.1 million of the city's residents were born outside of the United States¹. No survey conducted in New York City could purport to accurately represent the city's residents if it was only conducted in English. A multilingual city requires a multilingual survey approach.

Language access presents a challenge in survey administration because of the resources it takes to produce translations, hire bilingual field staff, and produce multiple sets of materials. The work is necessary though, especially in contexts like New York City. Respondents who speak a language other than English must be able to ask questions and participate fully in the survey. This complete understanding is also what fosters valid answers and reduces item non-response. It also ensures adequate coverage of the population. Ultimately, these efforts lead to more accurate representation of multilingual cities like New York City in survey data, and more effective policies based on the use of such data.

* The views expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Housing Preservation and Development or the City of New York.

¹ 2020 American Community Survey 5-year estimates

A holistic approach towards multilingual survey administration ensures that language is considered not only in instrument translation, but each aspect of survey design, data collection, and data use.² For the 2021 New York City Housing and Vacancy Survey (NYCHVS), the sponsor team at the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) pursued this holistic approach in partnership with the US Census Bureau, carefully considering how language should be incorporated into all aspects of the survey. In this paper, we discuss the multilingual aspects of the NYCHVS 2021 redesign, and the lessons learned by the research team.

2. Survey Context

2.1 The New York City Housing and Vacancy Survey

The NYCHVS has been conducted since 1965 in accordance with New York City's state and local laws and is representative of both New York City's housing stock and population. It is a triennial survey conducted by the US Census Bureau on behalf of the City of New York, with HPD serving as the survey sponsor. The address-based sample frame is drawn at the beginning of every decade and updated for subsequent cycles within the decade to account for interim changes in the frame. Recruitment is done via mail, phone, and face-to-face. Interviews are conducted in person with a knowledgeable adult in the household.³

For the 2021 NYCHVS, the research team at HPD worked with the US Census Bureau to complete a major redesign that impacted multiple aspects of the survey.⁴ The 2021 cycle was in the field from February to July of 2021 with a sample of about 12,000 housing units. Data collection during the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated adaptations in the field and introduced new challenges in reaching more vulnerable New Yorkers and those who spoke languages other than English.

2.2 Framework for the 2021 NYCHVS Redesign

The research team at HPD's commitment to conducting the 2021 NYCHVS in multiple languages and utilizing a holistic and rigorous approach was based on redesign commitments to equity, inclusion, and data quality.

One key strategy for achieving these goals was reconceptualizing the NYCHVS as a multilingual survey. The research team at HPD, as sponsors of the NYCHVS, drew upon the framework of Language Justice during the redesign, which centers around the rights of individuals and communities to communicate in the language(s) in which they are most fully able to express themselves and strategies to disrupt language dominance that marginalizes speakers of non-dominant languages.⁵ According to the framework of Language Justice, full participation of speakers of nondominant languages in communities

² Integration of languages is a core component of the ethical conduct of research and in particular Human Subjects, but are not addressed in this paper.

³ While designed primarily as an in-person survey, a limited number of NYCHVS surveys are conducted by phone.

⁴ Prior to the redesign, language access was minimal and relied on ad hoc translation by field representatives or the use of interpretation by friends, family members, or neighbors of respondents. In 2017, the survey was translated into Spanish.

⁵ This framework was originally developed at the Highlander Center for Research and Education by Alice R. Johnson and Roberto Tijerina. It has been further developed and articulated by language practitioners, such as Antena Aire, a collaborative that has published various writings on the topic.

and institutions cannot be achieved by just “adding on” supports or provisions for speakers of non-dominant language speakers to a survey process designed in English (Corbett 2022; Lee et al. 2019). A survey must be designed around the understanding that respondents speak many languages other than English.

A holistic approach that considers the needs of multilingual respondents in the design of survey questions, fieldwork procedures, collateral materials, etc. ensures that potential respondents are not excluded from being represented in the survey based on proficiency in English. Throughout this paper, the terms language access and Language Justice appear together often, though the approach of HPD’s research team does not consider the two frameworks to be necessarily interchangeable. The framework of language justice which the research team used as a guiding principle in the 2021 NYCHVS encompasses a broader and more transformative approach than language access, that demands that institutions go beyond the provision of accommodations for nondominant language speakers and be willing to (re-)think and (re-)design their operations and practices with multilingual communities in mind.

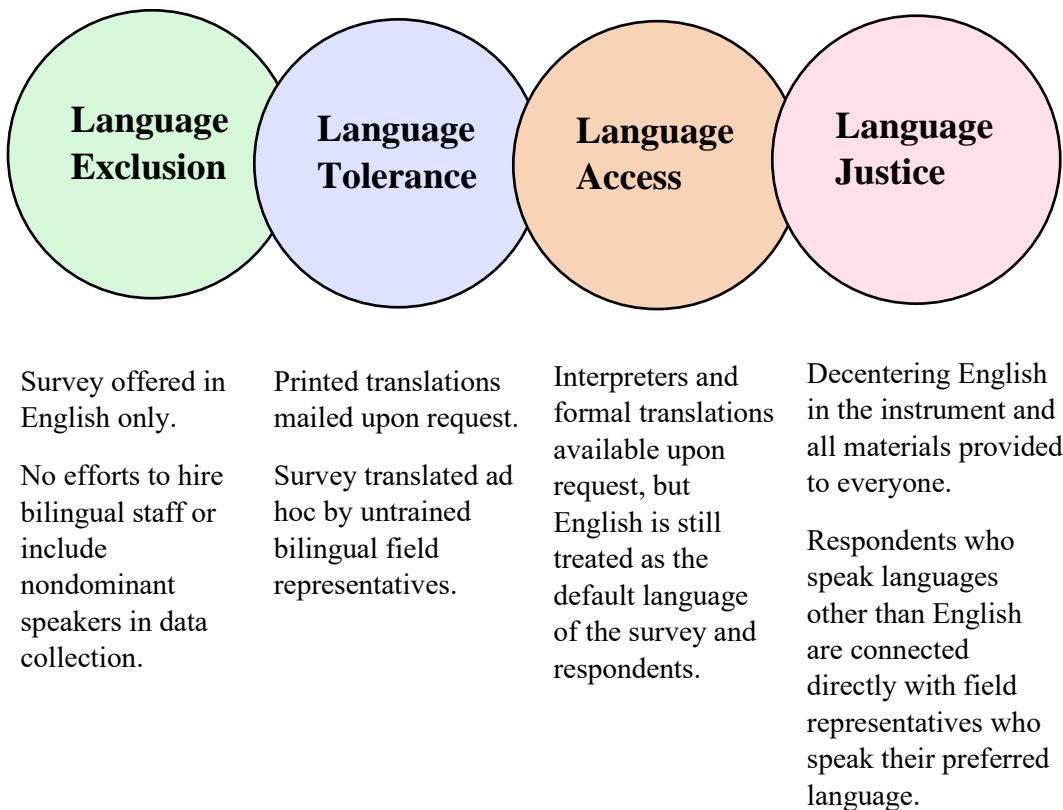


Figure 1. Examples of Provision and Access in Multiple Languages⁶

By expanding the survey’s capacity to document the experiences of New Yorkers with diverse linguistic profiles, the HPD research team ensures that these New Yorkers’ needs can be included and presented to the policymakers who rely on NYCHVS data.

⁶ Based on the framework from Lee et al. 2019.

3. Advance Translation for the 2021 NYCHVS Questionnaire

For the 2021 NYCHVS, the research team at HPD committed to work with the Center for Behavior Science Methods (CBSM) at the US Census Bureau to produce translations for the survey that were both accurate and culturally sensitive. The teams decided to pursue an Advance Translation approach to the instrument for Spanish, Russian, Simplified Chinese, Traditional Chinese, Haitian Creole, and Bengali.

Advance Translation (used by the European Social Survey (ESS) since 2010) utilizes committees made up of translators and survey methodologists to review initial translations and identify potential problems (Goerman et al. 2021). Problems can arise for many different reasons. The English source material may rely on terms, phrases, or concepts that do not translate directly into other languages or cultures. Source text may also be phrased in a way that is difficult to translate because of length the question, the combination of phrases, or the grammatical structure. To address these problems early on, Advance Translation utilizes consensus meetings and multiple rounds of review during the design phase, prior to finalizing the source questionnaire. This allows the source text to be edited for parity across languages (Dorer 2022).

The research team at HPD and CBSM modeled their Advance Translation process on the ESS, although the survey contexts differ in significant ways.⁷ Following initial translations of the source questionnaire, a team of language specialists on the research team at HPD reviewed the text for translation barriers.⁸ These language specialists not only were native speakers of the target language, but also spoke it regularly in New York City. This was important to the research team at HPD since word choices may be culturally specific in New York City, even in languages other than English.

Subsequent consensus meetings both within and across languages led to improvements of both the English source text and the questionnaire translations. The team completed three rounds of consensus meetings and questionnaire edits prior to finalizing the questionnaire in all seven languages for the 2021 NYCHVS. Final translations were also reviewed by a bilingual field representative from the US Census Bureau for each language.

The source questionnaire was rethought and restructured in many ways as a result of the Advance Translation process. Many terms that were used throughout the questionnaire could not be translated directly and were removed, such as “unit” and “household.” Likert-type scales were removed in favor of numerical scales. Consensus meetings also led to an overall simplification of question phrasing and focus on clarity. Ultimately these changes improved both the translations and the source text. Lessons learned during Advance Translation were applied not only to the questionnaire, but also to all materials produced as part of the NYCHVS. For details on the full translation process, including the collaboration between CBSM and the sponsor team, see Goerman et al. 2021.

⁷ Translation for the NYCHVS would need to happen for seven languages simultaneously, while translations for the ESS have been added in smaller sets. While ESS is translating primarily to administer surveys in a European country in its dominant language, the NYCHVS translations are targeted at immigrant populations, which means that there may be wide variety in dialects and word preferences depending on country of origin

⁸ Initial translations were conducted by teams of translators contracted through the US Census Bureau

4. Translated Materials in the 2021 NYCHVS

Advance translation was an important step for the NYCHVS but was not the entirety of the multilingual efforts of the redesign. To increase recognition and understanding of the survey, the research team at HPD also prioritized an update to the respondent-facing materials used throughout the field period. Prior cycles of the NYCHVS relied on Census Bureau branded materials primarily in English, with some items also provided in Spanish. While this may have provided legitimacy through the visible relation to the Census Bureau, they could possibly be confused with other surveys conducted by the Census Bureau. They were also not legible to the large number of New Yorkers who speak languages other than English. This delayed language identification and non-English interviews because it placed the primary burden on the field representative working individual cases.

A large body of research has demonstrated the effectiveness of advance mailings to increase response rates at limited costs, but outreach in New York City comes with the added complexity of a multicultural and multilingual context (Hembroff et al. 2005; Link and Mokdad 2005). The research team at HPD recognized that effective outreach materials (both in mailings, online, and in person) would be especially necessary in 2021, when concerns about COVID-19 could make it more difficult to reach residents of sampled units via in-person visits.

4.1 Identity for the 2021 NYCHVS

In an effort to produce effective, multilingual materials that would enable language access for the NYCHVS 2021 redesign, the research team at HPD hired an award-winning design firm, WSDIA, to develop a cohesive identity and design system for all survey materials. The priority of this design effort was to produce materials that would establish legitimacy and trust, while also offering pertinent information equally in English, Spanish, Russian, Simplified Chinese, Traditional Chinese, Haitian Creole, and Bengali (and additional languages when possible). Based on prior field experience and the conversations during the Advance Translation process, the research team at HPD knew that accessible materials required more than just translations. The design and layout of the materials themselves had to prioritize language flexibility and avoid centering English.

The identity redesign included developing a color template, multilingual logo, design layouts, and illustrations for the NYCHVS. The consistency of these elements across all materials ensured recognition of the survey's brand from outreach through the interview with the respondent. They also served as nonverbal indicators of legitimacy. Part of the design team was a local illustrator who produced custom artwork for the NYCHVS. These illustrations depicted various outdoor and indoor scenes around New York City. The illustrations were friendly and familiar, with signs of lived experience in the form of animals and plants and lights in apartment windows, but notably without any depictions of people. This enabled the NYCHVS materials to convey an openness and NYC-relevance without unintentionally targeting or excluding a specific cultural or sociodemographic group. The research team at HPD intends to continue contracting artists to create unique illustrations for future cycles of the NYCHVS.

4.2 Outreach Materials

Advance mailings provide a unique opportunity to inform residents of sampled units about the survey and give them the opportunity to reach out to the field team about any modifications or accommodations they would need to participate in the survey, including

a preferred language other than English. For the 2021 NYCHVS, all sampled units received an Advance Informational Packet with an invitation letter, a brochure, and a coloring book with the same NYCHVS illustrations used in other materials. The Informational Packet contained identical content in the seven main languages of the 2021 NYCHVS. All languages were displayed in equal sizes, design, and layout and provided in the same mailing that went to all sample units. Languages were displayed equally to provide information clearly, but also to convey the weight the survey team put on language access for New Yorkers. The coloring book did not include any text (other than a cover in the seven languages), but was a fun and friendly material for households, regardless of their preferred language or age of the residents. The brochure folded into about 6x8 inches, but unfolded to display two panels for each language, including information about how to participate and how the survey team prioritized health and safety. The brochure was also provided to field representatives for their use in the field.



FIGURE 2. 2021 NYCHVS Brochure
All materials © 2021 City of New York

The advance materials also directed recipients to the 2021 NYCHVS website. The homepage of the website displayed the word “Welcome” in 16 languages. This allowed visitors to navigate to the website in their preferred language, without having to search for a widget or navigate machine translation. English was displayed in the same way as all the other languages—with a welcome button. Once past the homepage, all content on the website displayed in the target language. The website informed visitors how to reach out to the field office if they would like to request an interview in a language other than English.

4.3 Field Materials

Field representatives were also equipped with multilingual materials for in-person recruitment. A language-identification card included 60 languages, carefully grouped by color and sorted in a way that was both intuitive and culturally sensitive. These cards were used by field representatives to identify preferred languages, while remaining socially distanced. The brochure allowed field representatives to also leave information with the

household, even if they were not able to personally convey the information in the appropriate language. Field representatives innovated new ways to use the brochure during their time in the field, folding and refolding the brochure to display the appropriate language to the household member and establish legitimacy and rapport.

Field representatives also used “Sorry I Missed You” (or SIMY) cards when they were unable to reach household members at the sampled unit. These cards are often used in survey efforts to leave contact information. The SIMY for the 2021 NYCHVS was blank on one side, with an illustration on the other. The card was intentionally left blank, allowing field representatives to write a custom note for each visit. This flexibility is useful for all households, but especially those who speak a language other than English and would not benefit from a pre-populated card. The empty space enabled bilingual field representatives to leave notes in any language—including notes written either horizontally or vertically. It also allowed them to customize their note based on past interactions, different recruitment techniques, or cultural appropriateness.



Figure 3. 2021 NYCHVS Coloring Book and “Sorry I Missed You” Card
All materials © 2021 City of New York

4.4 Interview Materials

The 2021 NYCHVS interview was also conducted in-person with the aid of physical interview materials. Materials were packaged into interview packets by language and included flashcards with response options, a resource guide with information about city and nonprofit services, and a thank you note signed by both the project lead on the HPD

team as well as leadership for the US Census Bureau's New York Regional Office. The packets allowed field representatives to give all necessary materials to the respondent for the duration of the interview, without requiring respondents to hand materials back, allowing them to maintain social distancing and reduce contact with the materials. The language-specific packets also allowed for an immersive language experience during the interview. The bilingual field representative read from a CAPI in the target language, while the respondent followed along with their flashcards and finished with useful materials in the appropriate language. The respondent could comfortably participate, knowing that they had all the same information and resources as English-speaking participants.

The 2021 NYCHVS field materials were developed with diversity of languages as a priority. The materials not only allowed for more successful outreach to respondents, but also empowered field representatives during their in-person work. They were equipped with the tools, resources, and training (discussed below) to successfully interact with household members who spoke a language other than English, leave useful information, and properly route the case for further recruitment. They were also supported through the mailing of advance packets in seven languages, which allowed residents of sampled units to proactively reach out to the field office to request their preferred language. Interviews were conducted in respondents' preferred languages, with the support of materials. All these elements (the translated instrument, bilingual field representatives, and multilingual materials) contributed to a fluid experience for respondents—regardless of their preferred language. It also allowed for an immersive language experience that provided a comfortable environment for respondents where they could refer to information, ask questions, and read further about the survey.

5. Language Access Training in the 2021 NYCHVS

For the multilingual expansion of NYCHVS in 2021 to be successful, the Advance Translation process and redesigned field materials needed to be bolstered by robust and comprehensive training and fieldwork protocols. The NYCHVS research team, as sponsors of the NYCHVS, worked with language access experts to develop a multi-pronged approach to field representative training to ensure that all field representatives, regardless of whether they were bilingual or not, understood that they played a crucial role in facilitating linguistic equity and inclusion in the administration of the NYCHVS.

As a result of the pandemic, HPD conducted all field representative training for the NYCHVS 2021 online. All live classroom training was delivered via Skype for Business using interactive lesson formats that accounted for many different learning styles and dedicated ample time for open question and answer with instructors. Each training module consisted of a two-hour session focused on a specific topic.

5.1 Language Access/Language Justice Training

To underline the importance of equity to the NYCHVS, the module on Language Access/Language Justice was included in the set of pre-requisites that all field representatives (both monolingual and multilingual) were required to take in their first week of training. This training provided practical orientation on the NYCHVS' approach to language in administering the survey, how to use the language card to identify a respondent's preferred language, and the routing of cases to field representatives that have been trained in the interviewing in the necessary language.

To contextualize these practical aspects, the training module spent considerable time building a case for equity, inclusion, and language justice as core to both the values of the survey and its ability to accurately collect data. The module featured data on the demographic realities of New York City, emphasizing that a multilingual city requires a multilingual survey approach. The module introduced the concepts of language justice and language access to connect linguistic diversity and equity in survey collection. The training also asked field representatives to consider scenarios from the field and practice the application of language justice principles and the survey's language protocols. The key message of the Language Access/Language Justice module was that language access is a shared responsibility and something that requires action from both monolingual English-speaking field representatives and bilingual/multilingual field representatives.

The HPD research team understood that while protocols and structures for handling interviews conducted in non-English languages were important, it was equally if not more important that field representatives had been persuaded of the importance of using these protocols. Without an understanding of the importance of language access and the value of an advanced translation process, a field representative may be tempted to rely on a respondent's family member or neighbor to provide an ad hoc translation of the survey, insist on conducting the interview in English even though the respondent cannot fully express themselves, or use insufficient language skills in the respondent's language to struggle through an interview. In this module, field representatives explored the ways that either the presence or absence of language access impacts the respondents experience, the integrity of the survey, and the quality of the data they collect in the field.

5.2 Language Access for Bilingual Field representatives

The HPD research team split additional trainings and practices for bilingual field representatives into a track for field representatives interviewing in languages that the survey had been translated into and a track for those who would be tasked with self-translating the survey. Field representatives were required to attend both a two-hour training to provide overall guidelines on how to administer the questionnaire in a language other than English and a two-hour practice session for non-English interviews. The goals of these modules were to provide support for bilingual field representatives, create space for them to ask questions and troubleshoot strategies for interviewing in their target languages, and increase understanding and buy-in for interviewing methodologies that would improve the quality and consistency of data collected through these interviews. For field representatives using the translated surveys, this meant honing their recruitment strategies in their target language and adhering to verbatim interviewing. For field representatives who would self-translate the survey, this meant using the guiding principles of accuracy and clarity, consistency, and neutrality in deciding how they would translate the questionnaire *prior* to administering the survey in their target languages.

Another key component in the training modules for bilingual field representatives was the discussion of how to counter ways that intracommunity bias may affect the way a field representative surveys a respondent. Even when an individual shares a home country and a language with another, there may be many other factors such as race, class, education, religion, gender, age at which they immigrated to the US, etc. that may result in different worldviews and life experiences. Oftentimes, bilingual individuals are asked to serve as both de facto cultural experts as well as interpreters and translators without much preparation for any of these roles. Drawing from frameworks on cultural humility, this module emphasized that even when interviewing respondents who speak their language,

that field representatives should be mindful of not making assumptions and bringing biases into their approach (Foronda 2019).⁹

Overall, the modules designed for bilingual field representatives were based on an understanding that providing access to translated questionnaires was not sufficient to ensure that they were adequately prepared to conduct interviews in languages other than English. While some bilingual field representatives would still have to self-translate the survey, in this cycle they would at least have some paid time to prepare themselves for what is quite a difficult task. They would also have access to peer support and guidelines that would result in increased consistency and equity in the data collected.

6. Conclusion

To effectively include and represent speakers of nondominant languages in the NYCHVS or similar surveys of multilingual communities, linguistic and cultural factors must be considered at every step of survey design and administration. The approach of the 2021 NYCHVS toward language represents a sizeable leap in linguistic expansion for the survey not just because of the languages into which the survey was translated, but also because of the holistic nature of expansion. To support the Advance Translation of the questionnaire, the HPD research team also invested in translated materials for potential respondents and field representatives, as well as a comprehensive approach in training to ensure that all field representatives understood their responsibility in administering a multilingual survey.

While these interventions required significant effort and resources on the part of HPD, the process was an investment in equitable representation and data quality. The data produced by the NYCHVS is used by policymakers and researchers to make decisions that directly affect the lives of New Yorkers, and as such, the survey must be able to fully represent the lives and experiences of New Yorkers—regardless of the language(s) they speak. As a result of the 2021 approach, all field representatives had clearer directives on how to handle languages cases, bilingual field representatives had greater access to support and information to administer the survey effectively, and the interactive process of Advance Translation improved both the quality of the source questionnaire and the resulting translations. Table 1 summarizes the activities undertaken in the 2021 NYCHVS and aligns these with the three key goals of the redesign: equity, inclusion, and data quality.

While the 2021 NYCHVS incorporated the values of language justice and accessibility into many layers of its approach, there is still more that could be done to improve the inclusion of speakers of nondominant languages in the survey. An effective approach that incorporates the principles of language justice requires the buy-in of all involved in the survey planning and administration, from design through close-out of the survey. Language justice must also be incorporated into all project plans, protocols, and implementation. De-centering English in surveys also means reconsidering the way we support data users and communicate findings. This step is often not included in discussions around language access but is necessary to ensure that non-English speakers can engage with all aspects of the survey. In future cycles of the NYCHVS, HPD plans to continue furthering this work with the goal of producing and sharing accurate and representative data in a way that reflects the diversity of New York City.

⁹ These issues are not unique to non-English interviewers; all NYCHVS field representatives also completed a training module on Implicit Bias to increase awareness within a survey context.

Table 1. Redesign Goals for the 2021 NYCHVS related to Language

	Equity	Inclusion	Data Quality
Questionnaire	Give all languages equal consideration in the final questionnaire framing through Advance Translation.	Ensure clarity of the questionnaire across language, region, and generation.	Obtain buy-in from bilingual field representatives to decrease the use of ad hoc translation.
Outreach Materials	Present multiple languages in equivalent format without prioritizing English for entire sample.	Provide an easy way to request a bilingual field representative proactively.	Identify language needs as early as possible in the process.
Field Materials	Customize notes or information that meets respondents' language preferences and needs.	Enable quick and accurate language identification with the language card for immediate routing.	Reach the most knowledgeable and informed household member, regardless of their preferred language.
Interview Materials	Provide an immersive interview experience in all target languages.	Ensure equal access to resources during and after the interview.	Collect accurate and complete responses. Foster buy-in for future survey cycles.
Training: All Interviewers	Shift the default approach of choosing English speakers as the "best respondent."	Decrease the use of friends, family, and neighbors as interpreters.	Decrease the frequency of using insufficient language skills to muddle through an interview.
Training: Bilingual Interviewers	Ensure all respondents are administered the full questionnaire in the preferred language.	Increase comfort of field staff in administering questionnaires in the target language.	Provide support for bilingual field representatives to improve consistency and comparability of data collected.

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