

Why Culture Matters

This *Culture in Evaluation* series explores ideas and topics related to conducting tobacco control program evaluation with priority populations in California.

In August 2007, the Tobacco Control Evaluation Center launched an initiative to promote culturally competent evaluation strategies among tobacco control programs in California by hosting its first workshop on the topic. Discussions in breakout sessions on various priority populations led to the development of a series of culturally specific evaluation guides. These tools are meant to be starting points to help TCP-funded projects overcome evaluation challenges in communities where generic strategies are not always effective.



Why all this emphasis on culture in evaluation? Because culture affects how well we are able to achieve results in our programs. The fact that "priority populations" still have higher smoking and related disease rates than the general California populace is an indication that a one-size-fits-all approach to communicating norm change messages around tobacco use just might not be enough. It hints that not everyone receives the message in the same way. Evaluation activities are critical in this endeavor because they can tell us how well our message is reaching specific populations.

One-size-fits-all approach is not enough

If we conduct evaluation activities without understanding the cultural nuances of the groups we are targeting, the data is likely to yield inadequate results. For example, if your project wanted to survey people of low socioeconomic status about their exposure to secondhand smoke, there are a number of cultural factors to be aware of.

First off, some segments of the low SES population may have difficulty reading a self-administered survey, so asking them to fill out a survey could mean that many will decide not to participate. Even with face-to-face surveys, respondents with low literacy levels may have trouble understanding percentages, scales or even multiple choice questions.



Think carefully, too, about the wording of questions. The policy lingo we so commonly use may be obscure to certain population groups. Ask yourself if the individuals you are interviewing ever use the term "tobacco use." Chances are they only hear and use the terms "smoking" or "chewing." Instead of "multi-unit housing," use the term "apartments." Addressing small but crucial cultural considerations like this will help ensure that your data collection efforts will produce valid and useful evaluation results.

For ideas about conducting evaluation activities with one of the priority populations in California, you can download culture-specific guidelines for working with LGBT, rural, Native American, African American, Hispanic, low SES, and Asian/Pacific Islander populations from the [TCEC website](#). Each publication provides practical suggestions for gaining access to a community, developing data collection instruments and collecting evaluation data.

If you have suggestions, comments or questions about one of the documents, please email us. We'd like to update the guides periodically with knowledge from the field about evaluation challenges as well as effective solutions you've experienced in your tobacco control work with priority populations.

TCEC will continue the effort to develop useful tools and processes for building cultural competency in evaluation by hosting teleconferences and trainings on the topic. Keep an eye on PARTNERS for related postings.