



A Guide to Inclusive and Meaningful Research with Hamilton Newcomers

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Why and how this guide was created

In 2016, approximately 25% of Hamilton's population were immigrants, with almost one-third arriving after the year 2000¹. The Hamilton Immigration Partnership Council (HIPC) is a community table that brings together leaders from various sectors to help with newcomer settlement and integration. HIPC's goal is to enhance service delivery and create a welcoming community for Hamilton's newcomer population. Newcomers are defined as those who arrived in Canada less than five years ago.

HIPC and its members are regularly approached by researchers from local and regional post-secondary institutions to assist with recruiting newcomers for their studies. Research, when done well, can lead to policy changes, new programs or services, and other opportunities to improve settlement and integration for Hamilton's newcomer communities. However, when approached with limited cultural awareness, insensitivity to lived experiences, or unrealistic expectations, research with newcomers can unintentionally be harmful to or unpleasant for those involved. Many newcomers face barriers in their settlement experiences, often in the form of limited work experience, unrecognized job credentials and poor language proficiency. Therefore, it is important the research community works to remove these as opposed to reinforces them.

To help prepare prospective researchers for their interactions with the newcomer community and service providers, HIPC has collaborated with the McMaster Research Shop to create this guide. We draw inspiration from similar guides created for communities experiencing frequent researcher-newcomer interactions, such as Vancouver's "[Research 101: A Manifesto for Ethical Research in the Downtown Eastside](#)." Our goal was to gather local perspectives on how researchers can treat newcomer communities with the respect and decency they deserve, and how the research process be improved for those involved.

The content from the guide was informed by consultations with the newcomers and staff members of immigrant-serving organizations . These were held in the early months of 2021 and were comprised of:

- Three interviews with Hamilton newcomers who had experience participating in academic research.
- One interview with a key informant from the research community who works closely with newcomer community members.
- Two focus groups with staff from service-providing organizations who have experience brokering connections between researchers and newcomers.

Though no guide can truly represent newcomer communities in all their diversity, the individuals in these consultations brought varied perspectives to the consultations.

¹ HIPC (March 2019). *A Demographic Profile of Immigrants in Hamilton*. Retrieved from https://www.hamiltonimmigration.ca/sites/default/files/2021-02/immigration_profile_final_march2019.pdf

Structure of the guide

This guide proposes key concepts, processes, and practices for undertaking research with Hamilton's newcomers. The guide begins with a brief conceptual orientation to undertaking research with newcomers. Then, we break down and provide considerations for the research process across four sequential themes, or "steps":

1. Getting started
2. Inclusive study design
3. Recruitment and data collection
4. Communicating findings

At the end of this guide, we provide a checklist that summarizes key suggestions from each of the four steps that researchers can use to guide their research process. Additional resources for newcomer participants and researchers working with newcomer community members are listed at the end of this guide to help further support understanding of newcomer community research.

Inclusive and meaningful research

Developing this guide implies there are standards that define appropriate research practice involving newcomers. Rather than attempting to define these standards ourselves, we listened to local perspectives, identifying themes from our conversations with newcomers and service providers. Two themes that emerged were the need for research that includes Hamilton's newcomers and research that is meaningful to Hamilton's newcomers.

Inclusive research ensures that all members of the target population are considered and given equal opportunities to participate. In our consultations, interviewees and focus group participants agreed that the research should "[include] anyone and everyone, regardless of their language barriers, education level, their past history and their settlement experience." A key aspect of inclusive research means mechanisms are planned and put in place to support the full participation of individuals who might otherwise experience barriers.

Meaningful research focuses on issues or questions that are responsive to the priorities of the community, and research products have a high potential to positively impact newcomers. Staff of service providing organizations recognize that research can help identify "the needs of the newcomers and bring more attention to those needs," but that there's a tendency for researchers to "disappear" after studies are completed, undermining the potential to mobilize the knowledge. Overall, community participants emphasized a need for researchers to place benefits for newcomers at the centre of their research proposals or rationales.

The remainder of this guide breaks down the research process into steps and suggests how these concepts can be put into practice.

Step 1: Getting started

Conducting research with newcomer community members requires thoughtful consideration at the outset of a project. Results from our consultations suggest that “reciprocity” should be a core principle for conducting meaningful research with newcomers. Reciprocity was described as the mutualistic relationship between researchers and participants, where both groups can equally benefit from research outcomes.

In conversations with service providers who work with newcomers, one service provider critiqued how, oftentimes, researchers engage in studies that are redundant or do little to integrate the perspectives and needs of local collaborators (i.e., “parachute” research). Redundant and parachute research requires significant emotional and personal investment from newcomer community members with little or no return. As one focus group member noted, “I think that historically, there has been a lot of parachute research done... when those researchers suddenly disappear with their research and with all of those stories and narratives, there's sort of a loss of trust in the system ...”

“If you try to think about what’s needed without talking to the [newcomer] community, you will lose your way.”

To avoid redundant or parachute research, focus group and interview participants suggested that researchers should consult newcomer communities prior to developing their research proposal to ensure research questions are in line with their interests, needs, and priorities. One interviewee emphasized the need for adequate background research to be conducted on the local newcomer population (or sub-population) prior to proposal development, and that doing so would likely lead to increased buy-in: “To decide on the research question, you need to first check on the statistics for their lifestyle, what are their needs, and then decide on the research topic. You do that, then I’m sure you’ll get more responses, and they will feel more encouraged to participate.”

To facilitate the incorporation of newcomer community member perspectives into research proposal development, service providers suggested that researchers should engage newcomer service-providing organizations in the early stages of their projects. Focus group participants detailed how newcomer service-providing organizations are often aware of the most important needs of their beneficiaries and can help researchers scope high-impact projects. When engaging service-providing organizations, focus group participants proposed that researchers should be mindful of the time and resources required to respond to their ask, which will be discussed further in Step 3.

Suggestions for getting started

- Collaborate with newcomer service-providing organizations to identify high-impact research topics involving newcomer community members. Current relevant topics in Hamilton include housing and accessible mental health services.
- Investigate language, social and culture considerations for the population or newcomer community of interest. Gain cultural awareness and sensitivity by understanding their unique perspectives and life experiences.
- Review published journal articles and other research repositories for existing research with newcomer communities. This will ensure research novelty.
- Develop a research objective that will be meaningful and impactful to the research and newcomer communities.
- Have a good understanding of how research findings can translate to organizational, institutional, or even policy changes.

Step 2: Inclusive Study Design

Once a meaningful research question and objective have been established, it is important to design an inclusive study. Inclusive research enables eligible and interested individuals to participate regardless of their background or circumstances. Specific research may focus on an identified target group, but where possible researchers are encouraged to broaden these criteria to ensure they collect a diverse set of experiences and voices. Focus group participants noted that if researchers do not carefully consider their inclusion criteria, they may unintentionally exclude important voices and perspectives from their study. A common mishap, for instance, is to confuse the settlement process with community integration. Studies may list inclusion criteria referencing years since settlement when really, they mean to probe the experiences of newcomer integration, which can take years or even decades. More appropriate criteria should be used to assess the extent to which an individual is integrated with the host society.

An inclusive study design also ensures that key considerations, like the language of participation, are factored into study protocols. Focus group discussions highlighted that many newcomers are still learning English and may feel more comfortable participating in their mother tongue. Participants proposed that researchers develop their research instruments in multiple languages or otherwise reserve part of the research budget for translation services. In addition, all paperwork or materials to be read by participants should be clear and easy to follow. Research documents should avoid jargon (e.g., field-specific language) and ambiguous wording so that potential newcomer participants understand the rationale, objectives, and process of the research. One focus group participant expressed that the use of idioms and culturally specific language should be avoided as interpretation could vary depending on one's background.

Those we consulted further emphasized the importance of cultural sensitivity when researching certain topics. For instance, in some cultural groups, it is inappropriate to openly discuss mental health issues or concerns. Doing background research and consulting with key informants (e.g., newcomer community members or service-providing organizations) can facilitate an understanding of the cultural context ahead of time and help shape a culturally-appropriate study design.

A final consideration for a study design involves being attentive to the life circumstances of prospective participants. For instance, in both the focus groups and the interviews, participants discussed the importance of the timing of research activities. One focus group participant explained that researchers tend to operate on “their own kind of schedules” and fail to consider the time of day that prospective participants are typically available. Participants also discussed access to and knowledge of technology, noting that some newcomers may not have or be comfortable using computers or software to fill out surveys or complete interviews. Participants recommended that researchers be flexible with their research protocols (e.g., by allowing a participant to fill out a survey online or over the phone) and provide wide scheduling options.

Questions that should be asked

Researchers and research participants should be able to ask and receive answers to the following questions:

- What is the purpose of this research?
- Who can participate in this research? Who cannot?
- What will happen during the study? What will be required?
- Can participation stop at any time?
- How will this information be used?
- How will the information be kept private?
- How long will the information be stored?
- Is there compensation or payment for participating?
- How will the findings or results be communicated?

Suggestions for inclusive study design

- Review inclusion criteria and data collection tools with a critical eye. Are there any voices that will not be heard because of them?
- Translate all participant-facing materials into multiple languages and dialects. Ensure they are written in plain language.
- Budget for (and offer) translators and interpreters, if possible, during data collection.
- Understand participants' backgrounds and cultural sensitivities. Consider differences within social, economic, cultural, family, and employment contexts and design the study accordingly.
- Get feedback from service-providing organizations on data collection tools.
- Offer flexibility for the time, location, and form of data collection.
- Consider using multiple methods within the research (i.e., focus group and survey) to allow prospective participants the opportunity to participate in a way they are most comfortable.

Step 3: Recruitment & Data Collection

Inclusivity is especially important when recruiting and collecting data from newcomer research participants. Focus group participants suggested that researchers should attempt to recruit newcomers through pre-existing social networks. Rather than contacting prospective newcomer participants directly, newcomers may be more comfortable discussing a research opportunity with someone they already know, such as a friend, case worker, religious leader, or other community member. When attempting to recruit through other individuals or organizations, however, researchers should provide clear and detailed information about their study to make outreach simple and effective.

Researchers should also consider reaching out to a diversity of actors in a network to ensure as many eligible newcomers are informed about the research opportunity as is practical. Participants further added that, out of respect for people's schedules and commitments, requests for recruitment help should be made 2-3 months in advance of planned data-collection dates, especially when requests are made to service-providing organizations.

The rights of research participants

Research is often done to develop a greater understanding of a topic. Although participants are often requested to participate in research to help facilitate this understanding, they are not required to participate, no matter how important their perspective might be. In addition, research participants have the right to:

- Learn more about the research before agreeing to participate
- Know the risks and benefits of participating in the study
- Have any information be kept private (confidential or anonymous)
- Ask any questions and voice any concerns
- Stop participating at any time with no consequence
- Receive some form of compensation or honoraria
- Be informed of research findings and recommendations

When asking newcomers to participate in a study, researchers must ensure their informed consent throughout the process. When it comes to discussing consent and confidentiality with potential participants, focus group participants indicated that more clarity is often required. Informed consent requires researchers to break down and deconstruct information to ensure potential participants understand the risks, their rights, and that participation is always voluntary. Insufficient information, explanations involving jargon or other academic language, or verbal consent scripts that are read too quickly can leave participants with fear and confusion as they may lack clarity regarding the purpose of the data, their requirements and responsibilities, and whether their participation will affect their settlement experience.

Once participants have agreed to participate in the research, it is important to be mindful of their individual needs. Focus group participants and interviewees highlighted the importance of flexibility and accessibility in the research process. Some common issues raised in focus group discussions were researchers offering research visits only during their workday (i.e., 9 AM – 5 PM), or suggesting locations that are most convenient for them (i.e., university or college campus, or workplace). It was noted these rigid schedules and study locations that are far away from participants may be interpreted as a lack of respect for newcomers and their circumstances. By being better aware of newcomers' circumstances, researchers can make research participation easier and more convenient, such as locating data collection activities in newcomers' communities, providing multiple time options for interviews or other primary data collection activities, and allowing participants to participate remotely.

At the end of data collection, it is important to provide compensation or honoraria reflective of participants' contributions. Rather than offering a single form of compensation, focus group participants suggested researchers should allow participants to choose between options such as gift cards, a prepaid cash card, references, and/or letters of participation. These latter choices were viewed as tools that could help newcomers find employment or further their education, both of which may be more meaningful than monetary compensation. For instance, a reference could help

prospective employers understand newcomer's involvement in the community and speak to some of the desired employability characteristics (e.g., communication and punctuality). Finally, depending on the research topic, focus group participants suggested that researchers provide newcomers with additional information and resources at the end of the study, such as lists of available services that are suited to their needs.

Suggestions for recruitment and data collection

- Develop a strong relationship with service-providing organizations and non-profits before reaching out to request their support with recruitment.
- Provide agencies with reasonable and realistic deadlines. Ideally, communicate the research proposal, including all crucial information, 2-3 months prior.
- Recruiting from a wide variety of organizations that connect with newcomers (not just settlement agencies) can increase the diversity of perspectives and voices heard, preventing bias and increasing generalizability of the research findings.
- Clearly outline all aspects of the research process with each participant, including the purpose, applications of the data collection, and how they can learn about the results.
- Accommodate participants' needs by giving them the freedom to choose when and where data collection will occur. Remote or virtual participation should also be offered if it is preferred.
- Provide participants with meaningful compensation. Depending on the participant, preferences may vary; some may appreciate a gift card or bus pass. However, others may prefer a Letter of Participation, reference (if appropriate), or a connection to a service-providing organization.

Step 4: Communicating Findings

Once data collection has been completed and the results have been summarized, it is essential to communicate those findings to the research participants and the broader community. Both interviewees and focus group participants revealed that Hamilton newcomers receive little to no follow-up on study findings and results for their participation in research. They noted that failing to communicate findings can negatively impact the relationships between researchers and participants by being interpreted as a lack of reciprocity or respect. Eroding trust may make participants less likely to engage with research in the future.

Communicating research findings at the end of a study shows participants their time was valuable. In addition, researchers should consider the format of the findings. Focus group participants discussed that when researchers sent copies of the study to their participants, they often did so by sending a manuscript as opposed to a plain language document. Participants suggested providing participants with a plain language summary of the research findings, and potentially translating it to their native language, would increase comprehension. Service-providing organizations, or any other individuals or groups who collaborated on the study (e.g., to assist with recruitment), may similarly

appreciate receiving a copy of the study or findings when it is completed. Finally, beyond written documents, to further share their knowledge, focus group participants recommended researchers explore alternative formats for sharing information, such as through hosting community events, seminars, or workshops.

Conclusion

Researchers almost never intend to inconvenience or harm communities. Rather, unfamiliarity with the social realities of newcomers and the organizations that support them underscore most of the issues raised in this guide. Through consulting newcomers and service-providing organizations in Hamilton, our goal was to shed light on the experiences of newcomers so that researchers avoid common pitfalls when involving them in their studies.

To conduct meaningful and inclusive research with newcomers, researchers must carefully consider their practices from the moment research questions are raised through to the communication of findings. This guide was created to help researchers proactively design studies that accommodate the needs of research partners and participants, build trust between researchers and newcomer communities, and generate impactful results. While no single document can encompass the diversity of experiences inherent to newcomer communities, this guide constitutes perspectives of those who, regardless of any shortcomings, believe in the potential for research to spur positive social change. Indeed, focusing on the potential for research to positively impact newcomers' lives is a guiding principle to ensure benefits are maximized throughout the process.

Appendices

Appendix 1: A checklist for inclusive and meaningful research with newcomers

STEP 1: Getting Started

- ✓ Develop an impactful and novel research question by:
 - Reviewing published research and research repositories
 - Getting input from service-providing organizations that work with newcomer community members
- ✓ Take the appropriate steps to investigate, acknowledge, and respect the language, social, and cultural considerations of the newcomer community of interest.
- ✓ Investigate the needs, insights, and interests of newcomer community members to ensure reciprocity in the research relationship.

STEP 2: Inclusive Study Design

- ✓ Be aware of cultural differences when designing a study and consider avoiding topics that may be considered controversial.
- ✓ Make the study inclusive by:
 - Providing language translation options.
 - Using multiple methods to account for differing participation capacities and preferences (i.e., option to participate in interviews or focus groups, with convenient locations including local libraries).
- ✓ Incorporate different compensation options for participants, including:
 - Gift cards (grocery or drug store that are not specific to one store or location)
 - Letters of participation
 - Reference letters
- ✓ Make sure that the language used is clear and avoids jargon.
- ✓ Consider multiple language options for data collection tools.

STEP 3: Recruitment and Data Collection

- ✓ Consider leveraging existing social networks to advertise the study and recruit participants
- ✓ If recruiting through service-providing organizations and agencies, start communicating 2-3 months prior to data collection timelines
- ✓ Provide a clear and concise messaging on the project and participation requirements to prospective partners and participants. Include the following information:
 - Purpose of project and how the information will be used
 - Importance of the research

- Data collection method(s) and logistics
- Estimated project timeline with reasonable deadlines
- Resources for additional information
- Accommodations available to prospective participants

STEP 4: Communicating Findings

- ✓ Share the study findings with research participants in a plain language and translated document
- ✓ Share the findings and their impact with service-providing organizations and other groups who are in close contact with newcomer community members
- ✓ Consider a community-based seminar, session or workshop to share the findings with the broader newcomer community

Appendix 2: Additional resources

- [Research 101: A Manifesto for Ethical Research in the Downtown Eastside](#) provides insight to ethics that should be taken into consideration when doing research in the Downtown Eastside (Vancouver, British Columbia).

Boilevin, L., Chapman, J., Deane, L., Doerksen, C., Fresz, G., Joe, D. J., ... & Winter, P. (2019). *Research 101: A manifesto for ethical research in the Downtown Eastside*.

- The [Office for Human Research Protections](#) has helpful guidance for conducting research with human subjects, considerations for ethics applications and detailed information on informed consent.

U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. Office for Human Research Protections. HHS.Gov; HHS.gov. Retrieved May 31, 2021, from <https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/>.

- [Researchers, Miller et al., \(2021\)](#) discuss developing advisory boards in partnership with refugees and newcomer community members to further strengthen the relationship between the researcher and newcomer communities, and advocate for power sharing rather than power imbalances.

Miller, A. B., Issa, O. M., Hahn, E., Agalab, N. Y., & Abdi, S. M. (2021). Developing Advisory Boards within Community-based Participatory Approaches to Improve Mental Health among Refugee Communities. *Progress in Community Health Partnerships: Research, Education, and Action*, 15(1), 107-116.

- The [Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma](#) highlights the [H⁵ Model of Refugee Trauma and Recovery](#), which should be considered when researchers are approaching sensitive and possibly traumatic experiences and stories with newcomers to increase participant trust and reduce the risk of re-traumatization.

Mollica, R. F., Brooks, R. T., Ekblad, S., & McDonald, L. (2015). The new H 5 model of refugee trauma and recovery. In *Violence and mental health* (pp. 341-378). Springer, Dordrecht.