

# NEWARK'S INFORMATION GAPS AND NEEDS



NEED RESOURCES OR INFO AS WE CONTINUE TO  
DEAL WITH COVID-19?

**TEXT "NEWARK" TO 73224**

Reporters and community leaders want to know your concerns so we can  
provide the resources and info you need to weather the pandemic.

**WE KNOW YOU HAVE  
QUESTIONS ABOUT**

**FOOD  
JOBS  
KIDS/SCHOOL  
HEALTH/SAFETY  
MENTAL HEALTH  
AND MORE**

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## Introduction

If people consistently cannot access the information and necessities they need to survive the problem is not only one of a lack of resources but also a lack of accountability.

Wendi Thomas at Memphis news organization MLK50 said something similar, “I believe poverty is a robbery. And if it is a robbery then there are thieves, and the thieves’ names can be known,” she said.

To help create more equitable and more accountable communities the process flow is simple: identify the information gaps people struggle with most, fill those gaps effectively, and use that process to identify systemic failures and abuses of power.

Individuals, community organizations, government, and news organizations all have essential roles to play in filling information and accountability gaps. The first step is to identify resource and information gaps in the community.

Outlier relies on an SMS based info needs survey and examination of public data to efficiently find the most critical information gaps across the city.

We looked at information needs both before and since COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the resources and information people in Newark need. In some cases, it has created new issues, like the need to navigate virtual schooling. Other concerns, like difficulty finding affordable housing, become even more difficult to navigate.

Newark is a city where we expected information and accountability gaps to be severe. Racism and a lack of substantial economic power for most people in Newark [allow institutions and individuals with more power to dismiss the concerns and struggles of many in Newark](#), and to assume they spring from an individual rather than a systemic failure. A lack of community-responsive news outlets helps these gaps persist.

We recommend using these findings to begin designing projects and products to get the information to people in Newark they say would help them meet their challenges. The process of chasing down and verifying this information will allow you to identify accountability gaps or abuses of power you can then address through reporting, organizing, or both.

## What kind of information gap are we looking for?

There are often many information gaps in low-income communities like Newark, in part because of news organizations' disproportionate interest in issues faced by more affluent communities. The median income in Newark is less than that of the country at large, and the cost of living is higher than average. Almost thirty percent of Newark's residents live in poverty and almost 80 percent do not own their own homes.

Organizations looking to help people in Newark meet information needs should have a way to target their efforts in order to give this work a higher likelihood of success. We recommend targeting information gaps that fall into one of the following categories:

1. Widespread: an info-gap experienced by the most low-income and underserved people in a given area. How to find safe and affordable housing might be an example of a widespread information gap.
2. Severe: an info-gap leading to a severe outcome — even if this outcome is exclusive to a small sub-population of the low-income community. An example of this might be reliable information about COVID-19.
3. Atypical: an info-gap that exists in one place at an unusual rate, relative to everywhere else. Issues with immigration enforcement along a geographic border is an example of this type of need.

## Data Sources

On August 17th through 24th, 2020 we sent a short SMS-based survey to a list of Newark phone numbers. The survey asked about challenges in the upcoming week, over the next few months and what kind of resources or info could help. We have done the same survey in Detroit, MI; Milwaukee, WI; Bibb County, GA; Memphis, TN; and Stockton, CA. We categorize the responses to the survey using a [taxonomy developed for 211 operators](#).

We sent 46,013 SMS messages. Of those, we had 1,072 responses. Half of those respondents said they didn't live in Newark, another 38% said they were not interested and another 12% said they could help. There were 56 people who ended up finishing the survey from 17 different zip codes in Newark. More responses came from zip code 07107 than any other zip code.

The questions to the survey [can be found here](#). The questions ask about challenges in the coming week, over the next few months, rumors the person is hearing, and how they prefer to get their information, amongst other things.

We also use data from the United Way 211 system. In New Jersey 211 is used by more people than in any other participating state. They receive the most calls, both by population and by raw count. For this reason, we relied on 211 data as a rich data source of the challenges lower-income residents are facing.

211 Counts offers a way for us to explore data by the school district and ZIP code, but not by city. For the purposes of exploring Newark info needs, we looked at inquiries from within the Newark City school district. It also appears that NJ does not accept 211 questions online, so internet access is not a barrier for us understanding the results of those data.

The citizen complaint data in the Newark Open Data portal was not robust enough for us to use in our analysis. The data was several years old, there were few records, and all of them are related to garbage and debris.

The one public data set that might be useful in identifying information gaps is the abandoned properties dataset. There are exactly 1,000 registered vacant properties in Newark, and they are largely clustered in the west and south.

We know from our housing reporting in Detroit that dense vacancy indicates housing instability and creates a disproportionate blight burden on neighboring residents. In Newark, we see vacancy as supporting evidence that there are widespread housing information needs amongst low-income residents.

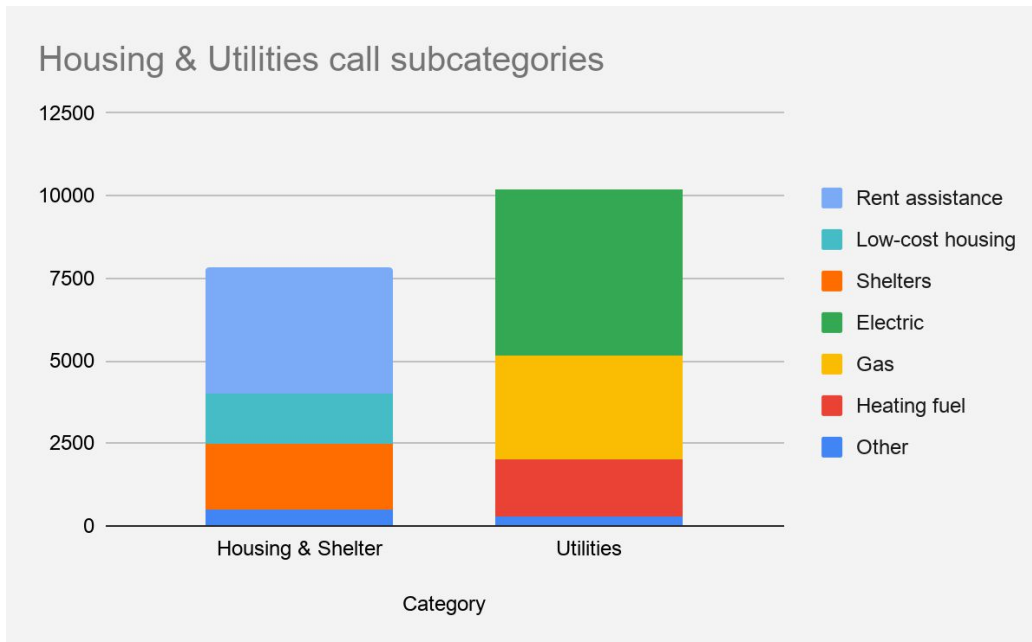
Outlier filed six Open Public Records Act requests in June — property ownership and tax records, emergency dispatch logs, general citizen complaints to the city, and complaints against law enforcement agents. These are the standard requests we file for an information needs assessment. No agency has provided responsive records, and only a few of these agencies asked to extend their timeline due to COVID.

The lack of high-quality public data and lack of responsiveness to public records requests is an accountability issue in and of itself.

## **Data analysis**

### Widespread info gaps

Utilities are a widespread info-gap, specifically for renters. Over a third of all Newark calls to 211 in the past year were for utility assistance, mostly gas and electric. If it is not well-known, information on [residential customers' rights in New Jersey](#) and how to exercise those rights could be actionable reporting that would help fill these gaps.



Over three-quarters of the occupied housing in Newark is renter-occupied, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Housing was the second-highest category of 211 calls; and of those, rent assistance, shelters, and low-cost housing were the specific categories of info needs, in that order.

New Jersey uses 211 as the official hotline for housing and utility assistance, so searches for these resources might be expected to come up more often than other issues in the 211 data. Still, the number of people requesting help with these issues still makes these information needs the most widespread.

For context, we can compare Newark’s call data to New Jersey’s. A third of Newark calls in the past year have been for utility assistance and a quarter for housing. In the state overall, less than 19 percent of calls were for utility help and 21 percent for housing.

To understand how COVID-19 has affected Newark’s information needs, we can look at the 211 data before the pandemic hit the U.S., at the onset of the pandemic, and now.

At the beginning of the pandemic, legitimate panic and uncertainty surrounding the novel coronavirus created a spike in some particular information needs. These needs have not changed existing accountability issues, they have only added to them.

In February, Newark residents made roughly 1,600 calls to 211. In the first 28 days of April (to compare an equal number of days), that number jumped to nearly 3,000; and in August, that total call number remained higher than the pre-pandemic, around 2,700.

In April, the spike was largely accounted for by an increase in calls for COVID-related healthcare info and assistance getting food, but there was also an increase in housing- and utility-related calls. In August, the food and COVID-related calls dropped dramatically, compared to those in April, but housing and utility info requests remained high.

What we understand from these data is that newsrooms should be responsive to sudden and acute information gaps, but long-standing information gaps lead to prevailing burdens — pandemic or no pandemic. People need a roof over their heads and the resources to keep it there, consistently.

In late August, the primary challenges identified by SMS survey participants all related to severe economic challenges. The most common need was money for food. That was followed by money for a variety of bills or more employment, for example, *“As a father of 2 I’ve been scrambling every since the Pandemic disrupted our lives: rent, food, job instability, kids going to school or not, I have kept my heads up but earning half of what you use to earn it really put a question mark on everything and live us expose to needing aid.”*

The third most commonly mentioned need was information or help around education during the pandemic. The need for economic help before concerns about health or public health is something that differs from info needs surveys conducted when there was more government economic support including stimulus money, enhanced unemployment benefits, and eviction moratoriums.

The responses to the question; “Are there rumors you are hearing you aren’t sure if you should believe? Tell us what they are and we can fact check them for you,” were also instructive of how pervasive information gaps are. This question is designed to help identify misinformation that might be spreading in a community. A few respondents did flag rumors by answering; “They tell me masks do nothing to protect us,” and “the democrats are using COVID to control the people,” for example.

The most common response to our rumor question, however, was about stimulus checks. Seven respondents, instead of flagging rumors, asked whether or not it was true if the federal government would be sending another stimulus check. This is a clear indication that the information people need to be able to plan for and meet challenges is missing from the local ecosystem.

### Severe gaps

Identifying a severe info-gap means drawing a relationship between resources and outcome — specifically when the outcome is untimely death or dramatic damage to

quality of life. Normally, we would want to look at emergency incident location response times, complaints against law enforcement, and any red flags in unusual causes or rates of death. We haven't yet been able to address the majority of these because we are waiting for public records.

In May, Focus-19, a research group that studies 211 data for COVID trends, identified that New Jersey had a notably high spike in calls for financial assistance with funerals and other burial services.<sup>1</sup> This info-gap is likely a product of many holes in accountability and resources; both those that cause untimely death and those that keep folks from being able to set aside resources in case of acute hardship.

As COVID-19 continues to have health, economic, and societal impacts in Newark, info needs that are widespread have also become more severe. Securing the basics; food, shelter, and energy, is now an acute need for many in Newark.

We ask respondents to tell us if their need is acute in our info needs survey. More than half of our respondents, 54%, said they "really needed" information to help them navigate their challenges. Another 32% said the information "would help". Only 13% said they were "just curious" for the information. This acute need for information is something we have seen across all of our information needs studies in low-income communities.

In a pattern we have also seen repeated since the pandemic, respondents have several short term information needs instead of just one challenge they are dealing with. Only 22 people only had one information need, while 20 respondents had two needs, 11 people had three, and three people had four.

### Atypical info gaps

Teen birth rates are an easy starting point for assessing info gaps in data across the country. The data is available at a Census block level across the nation, and the relationship between access to information and outcome (better information leads to lower teen pregnancy rates) is well-established.<sup>2</sup>

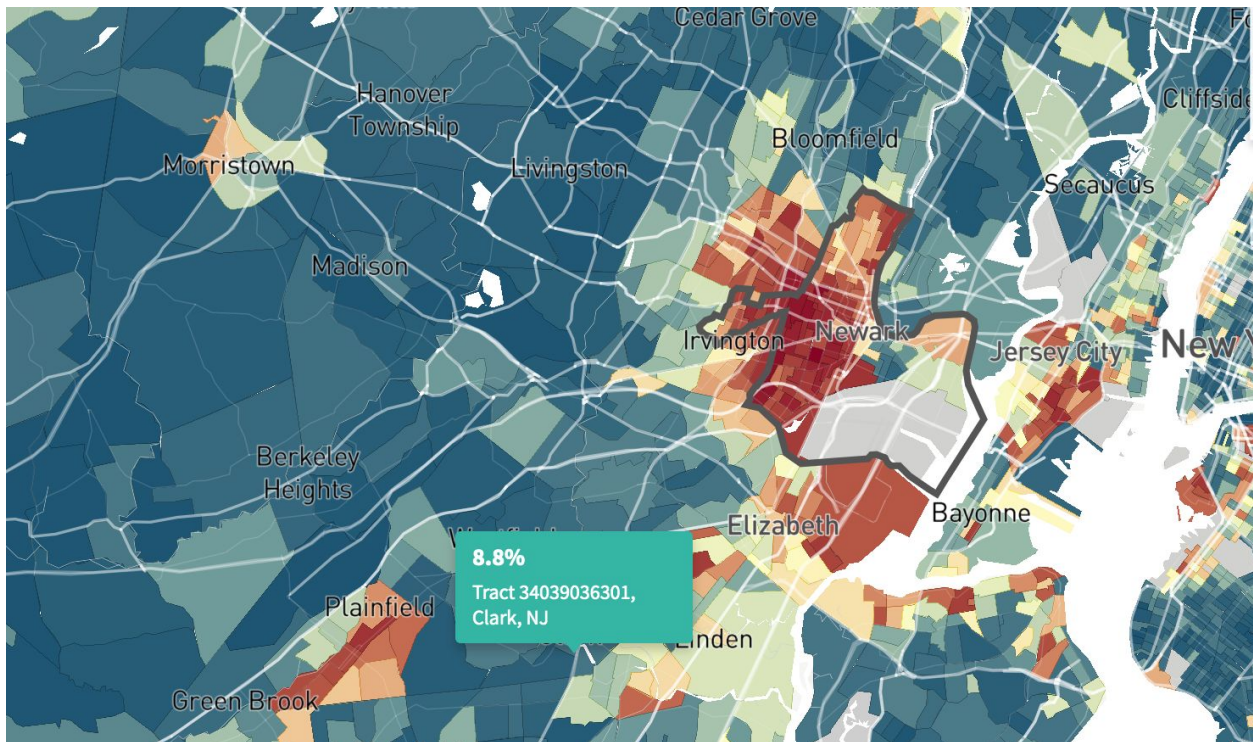
The Opportunity Atlas is a tool that shows outcomes by the location where someone was raised and their parents' household income. As shown in the screenshot below, Newark's teen birth rate is high relative to the surrounding area. Teen birth rate here refers to the percentage of women who were raised in Newark and have at any point

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<sup>1</sup> [Focus-19](#)

<sup>2</sup> Stanger-Hall KF, Hall DW. Abstinence-only education and teen pregnancy rates: why we need comprehensive sex education in the U.S. PLoS One. 2011;6(10):e24658. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0024658

claimed a dependent on their taxes that would have been born when the woman was a teenager.



Several Census tracts in southwest Newark have a teen birth rate over 50 percent. This is true across parents' household income brackets.

It is instructive that an outcome-teen pregnancy-that is a risk factor for a host of future challenges and could be addressed with better information is so prevalent in Newark.

This gets to the heart of what it means to be responsive to the information needs of a community: better information can lessen the prevalence an issue with big negative downstream effects.<sup>3</sup> If schools or health care providers are not addressing the issue, reporters should.

The information gap most at the forefront of our thoughts relates to COVID-19. In the context of an atypical info-gap, we used this simply to see if the numbers of cases and deaths were proportionate to the city's population. COVID-19 is more prevalent and deadly in Essex County than in the state as a whole, but Newark's population is not struggling with the disease relative to the county.

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<sup>3</sup> Paranjothy S, Broughton H, Adappa R, Fone D. Teenage pregnancy: who suffers?. Arch Dis Child. 2009;94(3):239-245. doi:10.1136/adc.2007.115915



As of June 18, 2020, the city reported 7,680 positive cases and 616 deaths<sup>4</sup>. According to their data, that means Newark had more than 35 percent of Essex County's deaths and more than 40 percent of their cases; relative to the state, the city had 4.8 percent of the deaths and 4.5 percent of the cases. Newark makes up 35 percent of the county's population and 3 percent of the state's.

Today, Essex County reported roughly 13 percent of the state's deaths and 10 percent of its total cases. Essex County makes up about nine percent of New Jersey's population.

### Future needs

We ask SMS survey participants what they think will keep their families from thriving over the next few months.

Over the longer term, participants still anticipated having challenges and concerns related to income support and employment more than in any other area. Fully half of all the respondents, 26 out of 51, anticipated that economic concerns would keep them from thriving.

### Recommendations

The prevalence and severity of information needs in Newark indicate a real need for better information distribution and more accountability to low-income residents. Our recommendation is that news and community organizations continue to engage with the individuals we surveyed to learn more about their resource and information gaps.

We also recommend trying to understand what barriers are keeping so many people from accessing basic services to better understand what part of the problem can be attributed to a lack of information and what can be attributed to a lack of accountability.

Products or projects to address information needs should be offered in English and Spanish. Nearly a quarter of Newark's population was born in Latin America, and roughly a third of the Newark community speaks Spanish at home, according to 2018 American Community Survey data. Our SMS survey was conducted in English, but we would recommend the next time a survey is done that it be in both English and Spanish.

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<sup>4</sup> [City of Newark press release, June 18, 2020](#)