# ATLANTIC CITY INFORMATION GAPS AND NEEDS
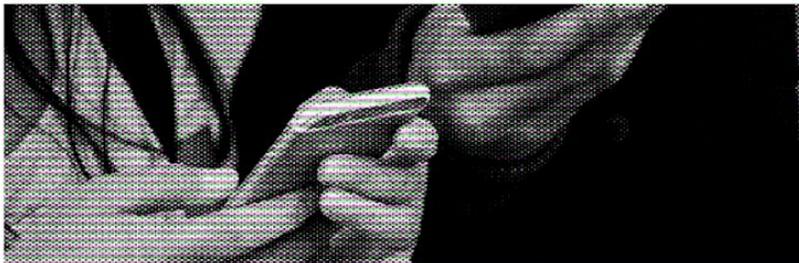
NEED RESOURCES OR INFO AS WE CONTINUE TO DEAL WITH COVID-19?

TEXT "ATLANTIC" 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.
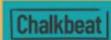
WE KNOW YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT

FOOD
JOBS
KIDS/SCHOOL
HEALTH/SAFTEY
MENTAL HEALTH
AND MORE

WE ARE HERE TO HELP

To learn more about our work and how we protect your privacy visit www.outliermedia.org

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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.

Knowing what information people need but don't have — what we will refer to as an information *gap* or information *need* — is only a necessary first step in beginning to make news and information services able to improve the conditions in people's lives and in communities. With this assessment in hand, how do we change the nature of reporting to address the challenges our communities face and hold agencies accountable to the people they've been failing?

In this report, we are going to take you from the methods for identifying information gaps to our recommendations for addressing those gaps, getting editorial partners on board, and laying the groundwork for a news ecosystem that is more responsive and accountable to the communities it serves. Throughout the memo, you will see purple boxes that indicate special annotations relevant to our Atlantic City analysis (you can find a snapshot of that analysis here).

Information gaps

Information gaps are not just what people don't know; it is information people don't have but need but where there is a barrier to accessing, understanding, or trusting the information.

For our audiences, not having information can lead to severe consequences. In the hierarchy of needs, we are talking about core needs for day-to-day life, like housing, food, and employment.

The most important information gaps change over time and with specific periods. For instance, people are more likely to need to know how to find utility bill assistance during the winter. At the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, we saw the information people needed shift to reliable health and safety info and how to successfully navigate the unemployment benefit system.

Methods

Newsrooms have limited resources. So, the question of what people need to know *most* becomes a critical one. No community has a single information gap, and we know that poverty and divestment in people lead to a slew of negative outcomes that are all connected. So how do we pick which information gaps we allocate resources toward filling?

The first and most straightforward method is we ask them. We purchase phone numbers and use SMS to survey people to better understand what information they need to thrive, what information they are unsure of, and how they would prefer to receive information in the future.
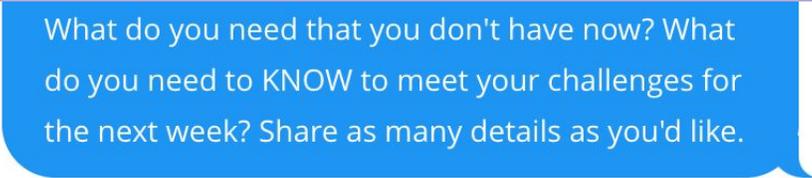
> What do you need that you don't have now? What do you need to KNOW to meet your challenges for the next week? Share as many details as you'd like.
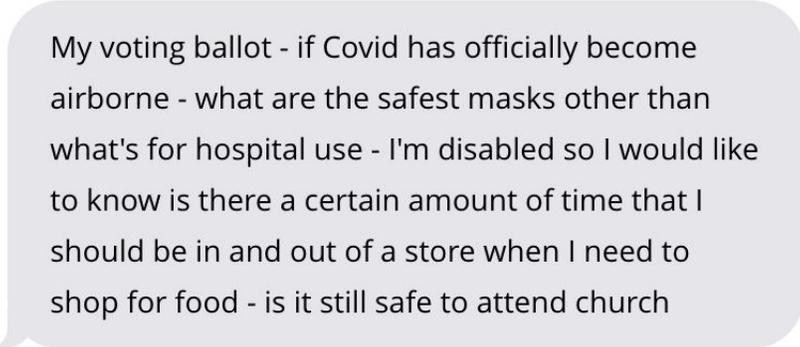
> My voting ballot - if Covid has officially become airborne - what are the safest masks other than what's for hospital use - I'm disabled so I would like to know is there a certain amount of time that I should be in and out of a store when I need to shop for food - is it still safe to attend church

At roughly 38,000 people, Atlantic City is by far the smallest community we've ever surveyed. Normally, we budget to give the first 50 respondents a gift card for their time — but we were only able to get 14 people to complete the survey. We would recommend pulling together another 10-20 people for a focus group, which we would be happy to facilitate.

The majority of information needs were relevant to money, debt, and bills. More than half of respondents need to know how to make ends meet and what resources are available to keep afloat.

Thinking ahead to the next few MONTHS, what do you see as your top two challenges? What are TWO THINGS you think might keep you and/or your family from thriving again, share as much as you would like.

Money and money!! I need to make it to pay for my bills!

The most common immediate and longer-term need voiced by participants in the Atlantic City survey related to issues of income support and employment. That was followed by a need for basic needs in food, utilities and transportation.

Beyond asking individuals we also look for signals in the city at large that necessary resources or information is scarce. We look for sources where people have tried to get this information themselves. This could mean reviewing a log of complaints or inquiries filed with public agencies. It could be data on the nature of calls made to 211. If you're lucky to have access to granular Google data, it could be search trends for your community. What we are asking here is: absent quality information, how did folks go about trying to get what they needed? What questions did they ask?

We pursue those answers so that we can later ask: how could my reporting have gotten folks that information? How will I hold the agencies responsible for disseminating that info accountable to the people who need it?

We collected and reviewed Atlantic City 211 call data for the past year from 211 Counts. Since 2019, the overall need for information spiked dramatically; in Sep. 2019, **AC residents called 213 times, in Sep. 2020 they called 1,265 times**. This surge could be the product of other factors, such as a push to advertise 211 as a resource. Regardless, this requires a dramatic reconfiguration of how agencies make resources available to folks in AC.

In particular, people are asking for more info on financial assistance, rent assistance, utilities (specifically electric), and child care. There are more than four times as many calls for help with utilities as compared to a year ago. Almost 5% of all renters in AC called for help making rent in May 2020 alone. **We recommend making these subjects and resources a staple of AC newsrooms' coverage**.

> In addition to looking at 211 data, we requested complaint records from law enforcement agencies, and county and city constituent service agencies. We received a log of complaints against county sheriff deputies and PDFs of emails regarding pothole damage to people's vehicles.
>
> Emails like these can enrich our understanding of the hoops folks have to jump through to get the resources they need. The records are also unredacted, which means sources can be reached out to directly, and public agencies can be held directly accountable.

We request complaint data from law enforcement agencies and resident service agencies, looking for signals that people tried to fill their own information gaps. We also request property tax and school free/reduced lunch records to identify distress signals that show who is behind on property taxes or facing food insecurity.

> I am told that in your capacity at the county law department that you handle such situations. Please note, I did not wait until now to set forth my claim. I visited your office in person in early December and followed up with a call about three weeks later. I am taking the opportunity to write as you are most likely juggling a lot of balls right now. Please let me know what I should do next to follow up on my situation.

> An excerpt from an email received in response to a public records request for complaint records from Atlantic County. The responsive records returned were a series of emails like this one and correspondence with county and private agents, all managing claims for pothole damage to people's vehicles. **When looking for information gaps, ask what kind of public records are created when people seek the resources they need.**

If there is a government data portal available online, we assess those resources as possible flags for information needs.

> Atlantic City does not have an open data portal available online. However, there are other sources of online information data, such as the Atlantic County foreclosure sales listings.

In some cases, we are interested in identifying the sub-communities that need concentrated reporting and attention. We use income as an identifier for folks who are underserved by traditional media.

In some ways, this is intuitive. We know that newsroom business models drive resources toward an audience who can afford it. We also know that income is a good predictor for other indices of wellness: education attainment, housing stability, physical and mental health.

Income is also a data point that is often collected. Depending on the population size, we might identify the ZIP codes, neighborhoods, or wards that are lowest income and focus on getting them the information they need in the format that is most accessible.

> Atlantic City is contained in a single ZIP code. In our SMS survey, a few residents indicated which neighborhood they lived in, which seemed like the best way to divide up the city and make sure our responses were from various areas.

While data is an important tool for assessing resource availability, you may note we don't use any real *statistical* language, no confidence intervals or sample size calculations. We are not academics. We are looking for better ways to direct and format our reporting.

If one survey respondent writes that they are getting the runaround from officials that are paid to serve them, that is a story — one that deserves more time and attention than a pitch based on a reporter's spidey senses (which we often regard, with pride, as a skill: a reporter's *intuition*, we call it).

While data on prevalence and severity might guide us to ask certain questions, it does not relieve us of the obligation to be responsive to the communities we serve.

The final method we employ is looking for the outcomes of an information gap: what happened as a result of people not having the information they needed?

> **Unemployment:** The leisure and hospitality industry is the biggest employer in Atlantic City and had the largest rate of workforce cuts this year. The industry dropped over a third of its jobs, according to Bureau of Labor Statistics data.
>
> Further reporting should help people navigate financial insecurity. It should aim to hold agencies accountable when they fail to remedy this hardship.
>
> **Property tax:** From Census Bureau data we know the majority of Atlantic City occupied housing is multi-unit and renter-occupied. We requested property tax records from the city clerk to understand whether property owners are paying what they owe the city. In the U.S., property ownership is perhaps the most stable indicator of generational wealth.
>
> **Our initial findings indicate that for properties above the median value, the city has far from collected even the principal amount owed — while for properties below median value, records indicate the city has over-collected.**
>
> In the attached sheet, you will find sample queries of the data. We recommend contacting the city for metadata and answers to basic questions about how certain events are recorded — tax foreclosure, for instance.

The assessment

We look at Census and American Community Survey data to determine how many people speak a language other than English at home.

> **Language at home, children 5-17:** 47% English only, 34% Spanish, 14% Indo-European
> **Language at home, adults 18+:** 53% English only, 26% Spanish, 13% Indo-European
>
> **In Atlantic City, we recommend providing as many news products in Spanish as possible.**

There are three main ways we try to identify the most critical information needs from a data perspective:

1. Prevalence: the information gaps that affect the most people.

   In Atlantic City, right now, the most prevalent information gaps surround navigating unemployment and underemployment. We would suggest coverage on the unemployment insurance system, the gig economy, economic mobility, economic development, and state and municipal solutions. This coverage should center the information needs of the unemployed or underemployed.

2. Severity: the information need that results in the most critical harm or suffering.

   The most severe information gap we found in Atlantic City was the inability to provide for basic needs like food, rent and transportation. We suggest coverage that critically examines the lack of resources available and who is and who is not affected.

3. Rarity: the information gaps that stand out, relative to other communities.

   The information gap that stands out to us is the question of property assessment, taxation and collection. We suggest this issue warrants more reporting and investigation.

Information should be delivered, at least in part, over SMS message based on internet usage and survey participant preference.

We note some demographic basics in every assessment, namely: population size, race, rate of home-ownership, median age, unemployment rate, median income, transportation methods, and places of birth.

Population: 38,372
Median household income: 27,786 (*roughly half that of the Atlantic City-Hammonton, NJ Metro Area and about one-third of the amount in New Jersey*)
Commute: 47% of workers drive alone
Race: 34% Black, 31% Hispanic, 17% Asian, 15% White
Foreign-born population: 33%
Ownership of occupied units: 73% renter-occupied
Housing stock occupancy: 76% occupied

What's next?

Knowing what people need to know is just the first step. The next is finding the answers to those questions, finding the actual information that could meet their needs.

Know that your audience is intelligent and capable — if the information were easy to access, they likely would have found it. Often, it requires some real reporting to get the answers people need. In Detroit, we have found a lot of the resources — particularly around housing and utilities — aren't "googleable," and often agencies haven't lowered barriers to access because they've never had someone ping their public relations person to ask what gives.

The next step is getting people the information you've found. We always respond to our SMS news consumers directly. And if we can't get them actionable info, we explain why and offer to cover that issue. We make that offer without contingency that they offer an interview.

We underpromise and overdeliver. We know someone who is facing eviction or utility shut-off does not have time for another runaround. We make calls to the hotlines that purportedly offer help. If we have to wait on hold too long, we ask the media relations officer why it's so difficult to get help.

If we get more folks asking for the same resources, we offer the information we have and let people know that we are working on getting info to help. If we get important actionable information we try to come up with the best ways to disseminate that info.

A screenshot from an SMS exchange in Outlier's Detroit info needs service. Sarah introduced herself and the organization, quickly gave info she thought would meet the respondent's needs, and then made it clear she was still available to follow up if her initial response didn't solve their problem.
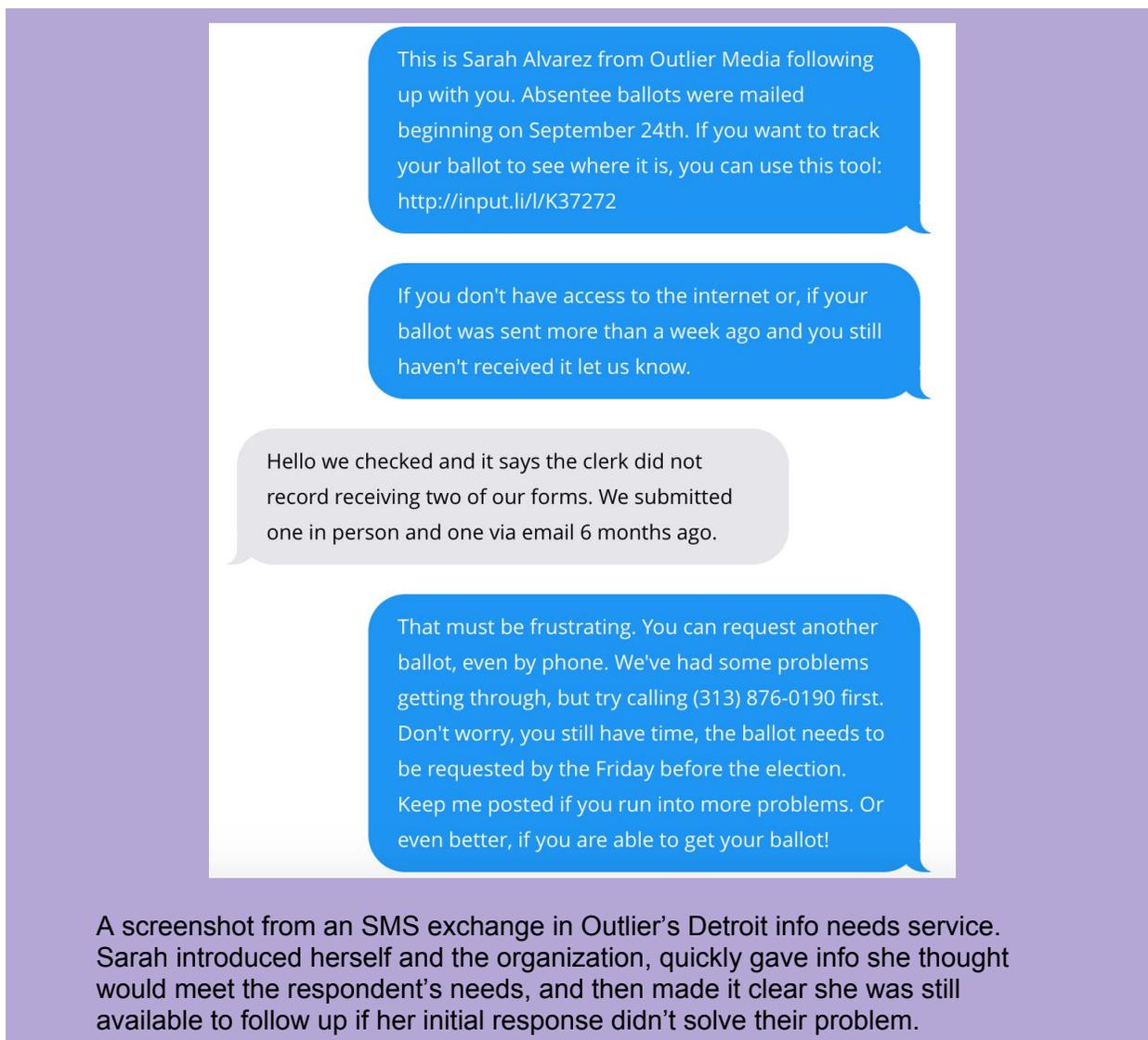
We suggest using bundling — the practice of making resources available where related resources are already accessed — when appropriate. In practice, states that register folks to vote when they get an ID or other government document are bundling two services together to lower barriers to access. While we might not have the resources to text everyone facing housing insecurity, we can offer fliers to churches, food distribution centers and libraries — places we know low-income folks go already for resources.

Never forget the digital divide. As storytellers shift to new platforms supported on new devices, we must cope with tools that have little investment. SMS isn't sexy; there isn't a lot of forward momentum in developing tools for reaching audiences via text message. To better understand what communities need, we ask people their preferred method for receiving information, and we look at internet access markers from the U.S. Census Bureau.

Household internet access of any kind
Atlantic City: 63.3%
Atlantic City-Hammonton Metro Area: 81.2%

Household cellular data plan
Atlantic City: 28.9%
Atlantic City-Hammonton Metro Area: 49.4%

Atlantic City households without internet access by income
Less than $20,000: 56.9%
$20,000-$74,999: 28%
$75,000 or more: 13.6%

We can see from ACS data that the digital divide is particularly wide in Atlantic City, and that it is felt more acutely by low-income folks. We recommend getting critical information to people using media that is accessible: SMS, fliers, billboards, and in-person presentations at community meetings.

Importantly, writing an article is the last step. It is our answer to a true accountability dead end, when we know we can't ideate our way to better mechanisms for getting people the info they need. We are reporters every step of the way; our products are just for an audience most newsrooms haven't honestly or deliberately served before.

Once we have connected folks with the information they need, we have to track *impact*. We understand that word can be triggering. The point here is not digital engagement metrics or change in legislation (although that can certainly be a positive outcome). We have to follow up with our sources to understand whether the information we gave them improved their circumstance. If not, what went wrong? Did we miss the story? Was our information bad?

Most often, information gaps are longstanding. You will not be able to address them with a single story. If your assessment of information needs was at all correct, you will become a beat reporter on that issue. You will become an expert on housing, or food, or unemployment.

If enough members of your community have had to become experts in these issues in order to get by, then you should become one too. And you should do so in a way that relieves them of some of the burden of getting and vetting that info.

Rethinking fundamentals

As we restructure our reporting processes to better serve our communities, we must reimagine things as fundamental as the news lede.

A good traditional news lede — the first paragraph of a news story — contains the most pertinent information. It covers as many of the five Ws (who, what, where, why, when) as possible without being clunky and clause-heavy. The lede is a sacred editorial device. It should contain the most important and engaging information so that the reader will either continue reading or, at least, be more informed on the issue even having read only a sliver of the piece.

> "Two popular and highly regarded restaurants in Atlantic City will remain closed permanently, victims of the coronavirus and the restrictions that came with it."
>
> The lede from recent AP coverage of two COVID-related restaurant closures in AC. In the fourth graf, they note the restaurants laid off 100 employees, but none of them were interviewed. There is no information on where those folks are from and how this will affect them, let alone information to help laid off workers know what to do next.
>
> Readers can tell from the way this was written that it is for an audience that is *interested* but not really *affected* by the story — people who are lamenting the "Brussels sprouts and wasabi mashed potatoes, and the oversized martinis that often accompanied them" — but not the people whose lives are dramatically impacted by losing a chance at income.

But for someone undergoing real hardship, how important is it to know they are one of many in an unprecedented tally? For someone facing unemployment, the most engaging lede is not about the spike in job loss — it is about the agencies stepping up to help. It has contact info and actionable details for what to do next.

With a better understanding of the information your community needs, ask yourself how other aspects of reporting — from the sources you interview to the way you write a lede — should be reimagined if you are truly writing with the intention of filling an information gap. Bury the lede you thought was most important because it was alarming, and surface the information that could make a difference in your audience's life.

Know that, if your newsroom becomes a trusted source for high impact information, you may have to start filling information gaps that are less imminent or severe. Once you develop a relationship with that audience, they may come to you for info on voter registration or school enrollment, for instance. If your read of information needs is changing, we consider that a sign of success.

The good work

Identifying information gaps is not a new method for finding a scoop. It is a step in revolutionizing the way we think of our duty, as journalists and stewards of information. This is about correcting the course of an industry that is indifferent to the attention of people who lack critical resources — largely low-income communities of color.

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones said of education in America, "In a country built on racial caste, we must confront the fact that our schools are not broken. They are

operating as designed." A similar thing can be said of newsroom business models that were always meant to uphold the status quo.

We also know that information is not a solution on its own. We can exert real effort trying to identify what people need to know, but if all the agencies with the resources to reach people aren't trusted by the communities they serve, then we have reached a dead end. What good is a promise from a newsroom no one trusts?

These are real questions that must be answered in each organization that wants to envision a better news ecosystem for their communities. Asking ourselves what people need to know — and how we have failed them thus far — is the first step.