



# The Community Toolbox

## Our Mission

Promoting community health and development by connecting people, ideas and resources

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## What is culture? Here is one viewpoint.

"Culture" refers to a group or community which shares a common way of living as well as common experiences that shape the way its members understand the world. It includes groups that we are born into, such as ethnic group, national origin, gender, class (social or economic), or religion. It can also include a group we join or become part of. For example, it is possible to acquire a new culture by moving to a new country or region, by a change in our economic status, or by becoming disabled. When we think of culture this broadly we realize we all belong to many cultures at once.

Do you agree? How might this apply to you?

## Why is culture important?

Culture is a strong part of people's lives. It influences their views, their values, their humor, their hopes, their loyalties, and their worries and fears. If you are from New Mexico or Montana, if your parents are Cambodian, French Canadian, or Native American, if you are German Catholic or African-American, if you are Jewish or Mormon, if you are a mixture of cultures your culture has affected you. So when you are working with people and building relationships with them, it helps to have some perspective and understanding of their cultures.

But as we explore culture, it's also important to remember how much we have in common. A person who grew up in Iraq, will probably see the world very differently than someone who grew up in Manhattan (a rich part of New York city) - but both people know what it is like to wake up in the morning and look forward to the adventures that of the day. We are all human beings. We all love deeply, want to learn, have hopes and dreams, and have experienced pain and fear.

At the same time, we can't pretend that our cultures and differences don't matter. We can't dismiss differences and pretend they don't exist, wishing that we could be alike. And we can't pretend that **discrimination** doesn't exist. Discrimination is when a person or group of people is treated differently and unfairly based on factors like race, gender, age, etc..

Hopefully as we explore the idea of culture, you will gain useful information that will help you understand different cultures. Understanding other cultures helps you establish relationships with people from cultures different from your own. Then maybe you can act as an ally against racism and other forms of discrimination.

## Why is understanding culture important if we are community builders?

The United States is becoming increasingly diverse. By the turn of the century one out of every three Americans will be a person of color. According to James Banks, more than 8 million legal immigrants came to the U.S. between 1981 and 1990, and an undetermined number of undocumented immigrants enter the United States each year (see **Resources**). In addition, the United States includes people of many religions, languages, economic groups, and other cultural groups.

It is becoming clear that in order to build communities that are successful at improving conditions and resolving problems, we need to understand and appreciate many cultures, establish relationships with people from cultures other than our own, and build strong alliances with different cultural groups. Additionally, we need to bring non-mainstream groups into the center of civic activity. Why?

1. In order to build communities that are powerful enough to attain significant change, we need large numbers of people working together. If cultural groups join forces, they will be more effective in reaching common goals, than if each group operates in isolation.
2. Each cultural group has unique strengths and perspectives that the larger community can benefit from. We need a wide range of ideas, customs, and wisdom to solve problems and enrich community life. Bringing non-mainstream groups into the center of civic activity can provide fresh perspectives and shed new light on tough problems.
3. Understanding cultures will help us overcome and prevent racial and ethnic divisions. Racial and ethnic divisions result in misunderstandings, loss of opportunities, and sometimes violence. Racial and ethnic conflicts drain communities of financial and human resources; they distract cultural groups from resolving the key issues they have in common.
4. People from different cultures have to be included in decision-making processes in order for programs or policies to be effective. The people affected by a decision have to be involved in formulating solutions--it's a basic democratic principle. Without the input and support of *all* the groups involved, decision-making, implementation, and follow through are much less likely to occur.
5. An appreciation of cultural diversity goes hand-in-hand with a just and equitable society. For example, research has shown that when students' cultures are understood and appreciated by teachers, the students do better in school. Students feel more accepted, they feel part of the school community, they work harder to achieve, and they are more successful in school.
6. If we do not learn about the influences that cultural groups have had on our mainstream history and culture, we are all missing out on an accurate view of our society and our communities.

As you think about diversity, it may be helpful to envision the kind of cultural community you want to build. In order to set some goals related to building relationships between cultures, resolving differences, or building a diverse coalition, it helps to have a vision of the kind of cultural community you hope for.