

# Sustainably Speaking: Considering Linguistic Isolation in Citywide Sustainability Planning

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## Abstract

*In recent years urban planning has evolved such that many cities have environmental sustainability offices and departments, enabling environmental concerns to receive significant attention from people and policy makers. However, these offices may not be available equally to all members of the community. Individuals and members of households who have Limited English Proficiency (LEP) can be acutely affected by communication issues that may create impediments for individuals and their ability to meaningfully participate in decision making by their communities and to hold policy makers and administrators accountable. This study evaluates the attention that sustainability planners give to LEP communities. A review of the linguistic accessibility of sustainability documents from the most populated cities in the United States shows that many cities are failing to take basic steps to provide LEP communities with access to public policy documents. Marginalized populations potentially face increased vulnerability because their exclusion can have profound consequences on their participation in civic life. Linguistically isolated LEP populations are often inhibited by these challenges, thus limiting their abilities to have legitimate roles in environmental decision making pertaining to their communities.*

**Keywords:** environmental justice; linguistic isolation; sustainability plan; urban planning

## Introduction

While environmental sustainability planning receives considerable attention from local governments—evidenced by the proliferation of sustainability and climate action plans as well as greenhouse gas emissions monitoring and attention to food access—questions remain about the consideration that planners give to environmental justice concerns. The consequences of this attention deficit culminates in the absence of equity and environmen-

tal justice in the lexicon of urban planners.<sup>1</sup> Language limitations can have profound effects on how people and groups experience environmental quality and the extent to which they access environmental services. In order for sustainability planning to be wholly democratic, its outputs must be accessible to the body of linguistic communities that comprise American cities. Accordingly, this study evaluated the accessibility of municipal sustainability documents to non-English speaking communities.

The United States has over 61 million residents who speak a language that is not English while at home and over 25 million residents have LEP,<sup>2</sup> defined as individuals “who do not speak English as their primary language and who have a limited ability to read, speak, write, or understand English.”<sup>3</sup> The U.S. Census Bureau identifies households as linguistically isolated when “no member 14 years old and over 1.) speaks only English or 2.) speaks a non-English language and speaks English “very well.”<sup>4</sup> While linguistic isolation