

Why Are the Deaf Considered a People Group?

In 2005 the World Health Organization estimated that 278 million people had moderate to profound hearing loss.¹ Perhaps 75% of these people--especially those with later-in-life hearing loss--are integrated into the hearing culture where they live. They usually function in the majority language used in their country. This large number of people with a hearing loss is not part of a Deaf people group. However, the World Federation of the Deaf estimates a constituency of 70 million Deaf and hard-of-hearing people around the world.² This subset of the global deaf population is treated as Deaf people groups because they meet the criteria for being people groups.

What are those criteria? Most definitions of a people group include terms like “ethno-linguistic group,” “common self-identity,” and “shared cultural patterns among various members.” The Joshua Project defines a people group as “a significantly large sociological grouping of individuals who perceive themselves to have a common affinity with one another.”³ Mission strategists describe a people group as “the largest group through which the gospel can flow without encountering significant barriers of understanding and acceptance.”⁴ So, people groups are characterized by a shared language. They also have a shared history and common customs. Recognized clans and families, marriage rules and traditions, and covenants and inheritance patterns are all indicators that identify a people group.

Deaf communities do meet the essential criteria for being classified as people groups. First, **Deaf people groups share a language**. Researchers estimate that 160-200 sign languages are in use around the world. The Deaf consider sign language to be their “heart” language, regardless of how proficient they may be in reading and writing the majority (spoken) language. Sign languages may include a few influences from the majority language in their country, but the sign language is not derived from that majority language. Sign languages have their own vocabulary, grammar and syntax.

This use of distinct languages distinguishes the Deaf from other groups with physical challenges, such as blindness or mobility impairment. People who are blind or mobility-challenged do not have a separate language, so they do not meet this criterion for recognition as a people group.

Second, **the Deaf share a common culture**. The Deaf cultural identity includes factors like shared educational experiences at Deaf schools, marrying a Deaf spouse, a socio-political network centered on the Deaf community (locally and internationally), and widespread discrimination against them. The resulting suspicion of hearing people typically expresses itself in an “us versus them” attitude. Deaf people identify more strongly with Deaf people from other countries than with hearing people from their own country. The Deaf receive the gospel much more readily from Deaf Christians. For this reason IMB prioritizes sending Deaf people as missionaries to the Deaf. The reality is that the Deaf around the globe, wherever they exist in community (and often even in isolated situations), share a common worldview.

¹ World Health Organization website-- <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs300/en/index.html>

² World Federation of the Deaf website-- <http://www.wfdeaf.org>. The difference between the Deaf as a people group and individuals with a hearing loss is indicated by the use of a capital “D” (for a people group identity) and a lower case “d” (a reference to a person with a hearing loss).

³ Joshua Project website-- <http://www.joshuaproject.net/definitions.php>

⁴ People Groups website—<http://www.peoplegroups.org/faqs.aspx>

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Third, **the Deaf perceive themselves as a people group**. They perceive themselves as being Deaf, first and foremost. This transcends their national identity, such as Mexican, German, or Kenyan. Many books, articles, and postings have been written about the Deaf, their culture, their identity, their language, and their uniqueness as a people. Although their ethnicity is defined through a disability rather than a blood lineage, they see their community as regenerative through their common characteristics.

International Mission Board (IMB) categorizes the Deaf as people groups and not as segments of the majority populations of each country. IMB's Global Research Department conservatively estimates that there are about 36 million Deaf people in the world today who meet the criteria for a distinct people group as described in the paragraphs above. Their distinct languages, cultural identity, and attitude toward hearing people are barriers to their "understanding and acceptance" of the gospel through hearing Christians, so IMB treats them as distinct people groups. Because most countries use a different sign language, IMB usually counts the Deaf in each country as a separate people group.

In conclusion it is important to note that an effective approach for reaching the Deaf includes Scripture in the heart language (sign language), non-print methods of evangelism and church planting, and an attitude that facilitates empowerment of trained Deaf believers. We cannot just tweak hearing-culture strategies and print-based methods for reaching people and planting churches. We must use linguistically- and culturally-appropriate methods that train Deaf believers to serve in every facet of ministry among their people group.