

Measuring Equity

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GETTING STARTED

Local governments and nonprofits are increasingly thinking about ways to include an equity lens in their plans and actions. To understand where equity shows up in your work and measure the change you intend to make, it's important to measure where you are, and to track progress as your work advances. This tip sheet is meant to accompany the [Opportunity Index](#) by the Forum for Youth Investment, and to help you think about ways that you can take action on this critical topic.

THE OPPORTUNITY INDEX

The Opportunity Index is an annual report and online tool developed by [Opportunity Nation](#), a campaign of the [Forum for Youth Investment](#) and [Child Trends](#). The Index provides data that show what opportunity looks like in the United States. Since 2011, the Index has provided a snapshot of conditions that can be used to identify and improve access to opportunity—in comprehensive terms—for residents and their communities.

The multidimensional nature of the Opportunity Index provides a broad picture of opportunity that goes beyond economics alone. The Index provides Opportunity Scores for all 50 states plus the District of Columbia and 2,065 counties, which together represent 97 percent of the US population. The Index includes indicators in four dimensions based on what we know are critical to improving opportunity: economy, education, health, and community. Each dimension of the Index includes three to seven indicators—the specific measurements used to quantify opportunity. Counties are also assigned Opportunity Grades that correspond to their scores, ranging from A+ to F. The table in Appendix A includes a list and description of each indicator that is included in the Index. For more information on methodology and data sources, please [click here](#).

Following are three high-level steps that you can take to use the Index to achieve your equity goals:

Step 1

IDENTIFY WHAT YOU WANT TO CHANGE

Start by thinking about your desired end goal. Perhaps it's an administrative change, like improving processes for addressing discrimination. Maybe your City has an initiative to improve health in historically marginalized communities through access to healthy food or additional walking paths. Or are you aiming to diversify business ownership, expand employment opportunities, and decrease the racial education achievement gap for black and brown children and youth?

To find your starting point, it can help to take a look at existing documents like strategic and departmental plans or state of the city speeches to see where racial equity has been discussed publicly. This can be a helpful way to see whether and how this issue has already been prioritized, even if explicit goals and initiatives have not been established.

If you believe you are starting from scratch with setting racial equity goals, this is a great opportunity to gather input from departments in your city or county. Seattle's [Race and Social Justice Initiative](#) developed a [Racial Equity Toolkit](#) that has been used to assess how departments address race equity. It's important to work with stakeholders outside of city or county government as well.

Now that you have a sense of what you want to accomplish, choose one key performance indicator (KPI) for each goal. It is critical that the KPI is connected to an initiative, policy, program, budget - in other words, you should be measuring some aspect of what you are actually working on. It's OK if you do not have complete control over all factors related to your chosen indicator. For instance, the unemployment rate almost entirely relies on many factors outside of local government, but it is a well-understood measure of economic health, and can be used to compare a place to national and state trends or other local governments. For each measure, set a target that will indicate whether your work is leading you toward the desired goal. For more detailed reading on setting performance targets, please see [this guide](#).

There may be instances where you develop an indicator that is unique to your place or population. For instance the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines a food desert as one in which at least 33 percent of the census tract's population resides more than one mile from a supermarket or large grocery store. But in Baltimore, because of the way communities are distributed due to the built environment and its history of codified racial segregation, one mile is too much. In 2012, the City created its own definition of a food desert: "An area where the distance to a supermarket or supermarket alternative is more than 1/4 mile, the median household income is at or below 185% of the Federal Poverty Level, over 30% of households have no vehicle available, and the average Healthy Food Availability Index (HFAI) score for all food stores is low."

Step 2

CHOOSE YOUR INDICATORS

Step 3

MEASURE YOUR PROGRESS

Next, try to gain an understanding of why the problem still exists if it is something you have worked on for awhile, or why it is emerging now if it is new. Gather historical and current data for each indicator. This may be [administrative data](#) that you collect in the course of your work, proxy data from the Census or other sources, or new data that you collect through a survey.

Begin to look for trends in this data, discussing potential reasons for those trends with relevant staff. Can the trends be explained by seasonality, changes in funding, staffing fluctuations, or some other reason? Based on the historical data analysis, create a baseline against which future changes can be observed. Use the space below to record your observations about the data, and how you hope to see it change based on step 1.

WHY CHANGE IS NEEDED

The problem you identified in Step 1

CURRENT STATE

Observations of trends in data

FUTURE STATE

Ideally, what are the outcomes you hope to achieve? How will you know when they are achieved?

In 2017, the City of Pittsburgh's new [Office of Equity](#) began publishing an [annual progress update](#) on 80 indicators in four domains for various populations as a way of understanding disparities. For instance, from 2017 to 2018, the report revealed improvements in asthma hospitalizations, domestic violence, homicides, and property crime victimization for black and white people in Pittsburgh. Meanwhile, diabetes rates improved in higher income areas, and worsened in less well-off neighborhoods. This annual comparison indicates to City staff and partners whether their interventions are working, or if change is needed.

Remember that identifying and addressing equity is a process that will not happen overnight. In addition to Seattle and Pittsburgh, other cities are thinking about how to define, measure, and operationalize efforts to achieve racial equity. Whether you connect with your peers through conferences, peer learning cohorts, or your own relationships, try not to rush the conversation toward solutions. Conversations about how people fare today compared with other populations or parts of the country can be deep, uncomfortable, productive or frustrating. For more on approaching conversations about equity, please see the notes below from [Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems](#).

Step 4

TALK TO YOUR PEERS

RACISM IS REAL BUT RACE IS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT.

There are no inherent or biological differences between races. Race is a social construct—it has changed over time and will continue to change. Because our society treats people of different races differently, lots of outcomes vary by race. When we see differences between races, we are seeing the result of current and historical injustices.

PEOPLE ARE MORE THAN THEIR RACE.

While metrics broken down by race can provide a picture of inequities in the food system, categories of race obscure differences within races. These metrics should not be used to treat entire races of people homogeneously. All of the metrics presented here should be considered in conjunction with intersectional analyses of inequities based also on factors such as immigration status, primary language, class, culture, and gender.

ISOLATED DATA POINTS ARE NOT THE WHOLE STORY.

Metrics data should be situated within people's actual lived experiences through qualitative data or other modes that show the ways in which the issue is experienced in people's lives.

RESEARCH CAN BE A DISTRACTION.

The extent and impact of racism is well-documented; it does not need to be proven further. Gathering data on these or other metrics should be used to inform action or hold ourselves accountable for action, but not as a stalling tactic for taking action.