



DATA DISAGGREGATION

Racial Equity in Advocacy, Fact Sheet #5

September 2020

This fact sheet is the fifth in the *Racial Equity in Advocacy* series for social policy advocates addressing unequal opportunities by race. Each fact sheet will provide information equipping advocates to embed a racial equity lens into their work to close gaps and improve outcomes for communities of color. Please see the [first fact sheet](#) in the series for a review of key terms and concepts.

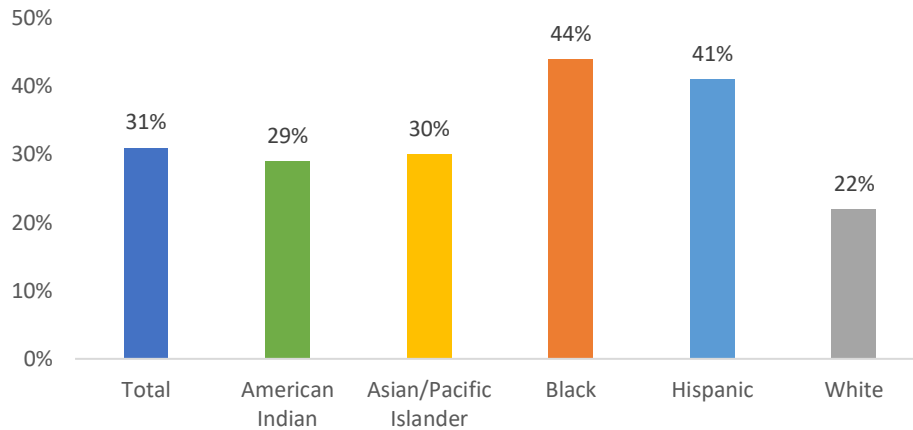
Data disaggregation provides the critical information we need to conduct thorough policy analysis on behalf of marginalized communities. Because some disparities are not as obvious as others, data disaggregation helps us to uncover disparities previously unknown to us. Obtaining a detailed count of indicators, outcomes, and program data has many implications for which programs are developed, where they are placed, and how resources are dispersed. Furthermore, data disaggregation provides evidence for why interventions are necessary and helps to make the case for why resources should be directed to specific populations.

For a full picture of inequities, population-level data should be disaggregated by race, gender, age bands, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and ability. Moreover, it is valuable to further break down race and ethnicity into subgroups (e.g. disaggregate for Japanese, Burmese, Filipino, etc. rather than Asian) to reflect the diversity of experiences and outcomes of racial groups. Other subgroupings could include returning citizens or immigration status.

To illustrate the value of data disaggregation, we can look at several economic indicators of child well-being. For example, 31 percent of U.S. children live in households with a high housing cost burden¹. While this number is significant, it becomes even more illuminating when broken down by race and ethnicity.

¹ Children living in households with a high housing cost burden is the percent of children under age 18 who live in households where more than 30 percent of monthly household pretax income is spent on housing-related expenses including rent, mortgage payments, taxes and insurance.

Percent of U.S. Children Living in Households with a High Housing Cost Burden



Data Source: *The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Kids Count Data Center*

Reference Group Considerations

It is important to disaggregate data by race and ethnicity to see where differences occur. While historically—and today in many parts of the country—whites receive a disproportionate share of resources and experience better outcomes in wellbeing than communities of color, that is not always the case. For example, in California, the mortality rates of young and middle-age whites increased between 1995 and 2014, while the mortality rates of Blacks, Asians, and Hispanics decreased during that same period.ⁱⁱ Because disparities are not always between whites and people of color, it is not always appropriate to use whites as the reference group when describing disparities in services or outcomes for people of color.

Working with Government Agencies to Obtain Data

The federal government (and all 50 states) have freedom of information laws intended to promote transparency about the workings of government. The federal Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) establishes that the public may access records from any public agency unless the requested information would be harmful to personal privacy, national security, or law enforcement.ⁱⁱⁱ States vary widely in which records can be released, what kinds of meetings can be open to the public, and who can make requests.^{iv} In practice, it can be very difficult at the federal or state level to obtain government data expediently through the FOIA process.

The best way for advocacy organizations to minimize hurdles to accessing information is by partnering with public agencies and maintaining a good working relationship with them. This is a much better alternative to going through an arduous FOIA process which still may not result in the requested information. Advocacy organizations intending to use the data in public-facing documents, tools, and resources will likely need to develop a data sharing agreement with the

agency. This agreement should include the purpose and intended use of the data sharing, description of the data to be shared, permissible data use, and publication/dissemination.

An agency is taking a risk by releasing their data to an outside organization. Data related to race and ethnicity is especially sensitive because of the social issues and political ramifications attached to it. To build trust, it is necessary to pay close attention and place value on the *process* of developing the data sharing agreement. If you do not already have an established relationship with a public agency, keep in mind that trust takes time to build, and only develops after repeated, consistent acts of honesty and reliability. Demonstrate that your organization can be trusted by your solid history, the quality of products you release, and the effectiveness of the campaigns you lead. Point to your organization's good reputation in the community and in the state. Mention prior projects or partnerships involving either data sharing or some other element of risk/vulnerability requiring trust.

Risk has to be reciprocal in order to gain trust: since the agency is taking a risk, your organization also has to risk vulnerability.^v What are you willing to put on the table to get the agency to trust you? Are you willing to defend them if the data could lead people to believe the agency is underperforming? Are you willing to work with them on another project or help them in some other way?

Developing the data sharing agreement should be a collaborative process and transparent for the agency sharing its data. Because you will be partnering with an agency charged to serve the public, be prepared to describe how the eventual product of this data sharing agreement will benefit the public. Find connections to the agency's work and describe how the product will inform or help the agency find answers to outstanding questions.

Once the agreement is developed, the researching organization should strictly adhere to the stipulations of the agreement to maintain trust with the agency. The researching organization can also share drafts of their work with the agency before publishing it. This is a good opportunity for the agency to help provide context for the data which will strengthen the researcher's work.

Using Data to Drive New Narratives

A common barrier to advocacy is the narrative that communities of color are disproportionately poor, sick, etc. because of personal deficits. As social policy advocates, it is our job to shape new narratives that replace prevailing myths about low income communities and communities of color by showing the disparities in access to opportunities. However, we cannot stop there. Otherwise, audiences can draw their own conclusions from the data which can reinforce stereotypes. Advocates must further the analysis by describing the diminished opportunities which contribute to these outcomes through institutional and system level indicators such as housing and spatial segregation, proximity to jobs, and quality of schools.

As we go about our work, we can humanize broken systems by thinking about members of marginalized communities as individuals with stories.^{vi} Policy advocates should highlight the strengths of these communities while simultaneously recognizing their vulnerabilities. The new narratives should be strengths-based, utilizing data on disparities to establish need, and focusing on systemic and structural solutions rather than individual ones.

Further Reading

The resources below include details about developing and negotiating data sharing agreements, as well as samples and templates you can adapt for use by your organization.

- [Guidelines for Developing Data Sharing Agreements to Use State Administrative Data for Early Care and Education Research](#)
- [Aligning Education and Housing: Data Sharing Agreement](#)
- [Measuring Performance: A Guidance Document for Promise Neighborhoods on Collecting Data and Reporting Results](#)
- [Collection of Example Data-Sharing Agreements: Labor + Human Services](#)

ⁱ The Annie E. Casey Foundation. KIDS COUNT Data Center. Retrieved from <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/7678-children-living-in-households-with-a-high-housing-cost-burden-by-race>

ⁱⁱ Woolf, Steven H. et al. (2017). *Why are Death Rates Rising Among whites in California? The Role of Stress-Related Conditions*. Richmond, VA: Center on Society and Health, Virginia Commonwealth University. Retrieved from <https://societyhealth.vcu.edu/media/society-health/pdf/StateMortalityStudiesCaliforniaFinal.pdf>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Office of Information Policy (OIP), U.S. Department of Justice. *Freedom of Information Act: Learn*. Retrieved from <https://www.foia.gov/about.html>

^{iv} National Freedom of Information Coalition. *State Freedom of Information Laws*. Retrieved from <https://www.nfoic.org/coalitions/state-foi-resources/state-freedom-of-information-laws>

^v Weaver, Liz. (2017). *Turf, Trust, Co-Creation & Collective Impact*. Waterloo, Ontario: Tamarack Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/latest/turf-trust-co-creation-collective-impact>.

^{vi} Forward Promise National Program Office. (November 2019). *Disrupting Dehumanization and Affirming the Humanity of BYMOC and their Villages*. Retrieved from <http://forwardpromise.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/FP-Dehumanization-Concept-Paper.pdf>