

## Urban Institute Guide for Racial Equity in the Research Process

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Council  
Working Group on Content and Communications  
*September 2020 draft*

Researchers at the Urban Institute have been considering how to shape and evolve the research and communications processes to ensure that our work is inclusive, respectful, and incorporates a racial equity lens. Though we originally developed this guide as an internal resource, we are releasing it publicly to share what we are learning and solicit feedback from our peers in the academic and nonprofit sectors. We do so with humility and a spirit of openness, keenly aware that we must continue to learn from voices of lived experience, particularly Black voices, and others who work for social justice.

This guide has three sources:

- a conversation between members of the original Urban Institute Diversity and Inclusion Steering Committee (DISC) and staff at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) about CBPP's racial equity framework,
- brainstorming sessions by the DISC subcommittee on research and communications, and
- a cross-organization racial equity meeting with representatives from Urban Institute, CBPP, the Economic Policy Institute, and the Brookings Institution.

We encourage Urban Institute staff and our peers across sectors to provide feedback on this working document and suggest further refinements. The research and communications processes at Urban are highly decentralized, and we seek to provide guidance that is useful for and can support all efforts. Please send your comments and suggestions to [disctoolkits@urban.org](mailto:disctoolkits@urban.org).

Although this guide focuses on racial equity, the principles can be applied to promote equity and inclusion more broadly.

### Incorporating Racial Equity Guidance into the Research Process

Racial equity should be considered early and often in the research process. In the absence of required procedures, we recommend researchers consider all the following opportunities to promote racial equity in their work.

#### *Using This Guide*

- **Proposal planning:** Review this guide when drafting your proposal to ensure that you, your team, and your funders are aware of a racial equity focus in your research.

- **Kickoff meeting and early design phase:** Review the questions in this guide during kickoff meetings or when planning kickoff meetings, as well as during the early design phase. This ensures that the research team is alert to racial equity concerns and that the final research design incorporates a racial equity framework.
- **Institutional Review Board memorandum:** Urban’s Institutional Review Board typically assures that research procedures guarantee proper protections for the people being studied (i.e., human subjects protections). But the benefits and costs of research—which are also assessed and compared by the Institutional Review Board—may vary across racial and ethnic groups. Review the questions in this guide when preparing your Institutional Review Board memorandum and consider how you can incorporate racial equity into your understanding of human subjects protection.
- **Communications planning:** Urban’s Communications department can help researchers develop products (including reports, blog posts, features, events, and media and outreach strategies) that accurately frame research and point to meaningful solutions to advance racial equity—and ensure that those products reach changemakers focused on racial equity. Review the questions in this guide before or while collaborating with Communications teams.

### *Promoting or Disseminating This Guide*

- **Brownbags and presentations:** The DEI Council should consider holding brownbags or presentations at center staff meetings to discuss the Guide for Racial Equity in the Research Process. These should be considered opportunities to disseminate the guide and solicit feedback on it.
- **Resource libraries and trainings:** The DEI Council should link to and incorporate the guide in various resource libraries and trainings, including the proposal resource library and any Institute-wide training on diversity and inclusion.
- **Project meetings with the Communications Department:** Communications staff can share this guide and the language toolkits at kickoff meeting for communications products.

## **Key Questions to Promote Racial Equity in the Research Process**

### *When Conceptualizing Your Research*

All researchers should consider the following questions when they are still developing their problem statement and research questions:

- What problem is this research addressing?
- Is the problem worse or exacerbated for people of color?
- What factors contribute to or compound racial inequities around this problem? More specifically, what policies, institutions, or actors have shaped these inequalities, disparities, and/or disparate impacts? What actors, at what levels of influence, could reduce these inequities?

- How are changemakers who use a racial equity lens or changemakers from diverse backgrounds approaching these racial inequities?
- What steps can be taken now to ensure research findings will be communicated effectively to the people being studied, appropriate policy actors, and other changemakers?

Researchers who are unsure if their research focuses on racial equity should consider these questions:

- What opportunities are there to highlight or study the barriers faced by people of color?
- Can the project be completed with integrity without analyses of racial and ethnic groups?
- How will barriers, structural racism, or historic discrimination be included in the framing of the research?
- How will voices from the community be incorporated into the research process, either as a part of the research design phase or product review? How will these voices be incorporated in communications products, from research reports to outreach?
- What have researchers from the populations being studied written on the subject? How will these researchers be cited?

### *When Writing the Proposal*

- How can we include representation from the community being studied in the proposal process?
  - » Do we have a relationship with the program or community we propose to study? If so, can we consult them for input?
  - » How can past community-based research inform the proposal?
  - » Can the external affairs team or other colleagues connect us to advocacy, nonprofit, civil rights, social justice, or legal advocacy groups who work closely on the topic with a racial equity lens?
- How do we acknowledge data constraints and other issues that restrict what can and cannot be concluded about underrepresented populations? Where can we get information and data that alleviate these constraints?
- What resources do we need to communicate findings effectively and appropriately? Which communications products best demonstrate the changes needed to advance racial equity?
- Does the proposal use language and terms recommended in the DEI toolkits?
- Does the proposal advance Urban's commitment to racial equity?
- Are racial equity issues identified in the proposal's statement of understanding of the problem? Are we acknowledging the institutions and policies that created and perpetuate racial inequity, regardless of the proposed scope of work?

### *For Research with Rigid Requirements for Analysis and Products*

Some research projects may be constrained by requirements placed on the analysis, the research product, the communications products, or all of the above. For example, many solicitations for federal evaluation contracts include detailed research questions that must be answered or analyses that must

be undertaken. When your research is constrained in this way, use these questions to promote racial equity in your research.

- How can a racial equity lens be incorporated in the introductory statement of the problem?
- Is there scope for subgroup analysis beyond the required analyses? Can this subgroup analysis have accompanying explanatory text? If so, could that text include an explicit discussion of racial equity, instead of a simple reporting of the results?
- Is the research mixed-methods?
  - » Can the voices of the people studied be integrated into the research product through qualitative research?
  - » Can qualitative findings be integrated into discussions of quantitative subgroup analyses?
  - » How can communications and dissemination elevate community voices?
- Can a racial equity lens distinguish you from competitors? Even if research requirements are rigidly laid out, would the funder be interested in the addition of a racial equity lens?
- For research projects already awarded, what companion communications products could build on the research, identify solutions, and move the country toward racial equity? Could a blog post, event, Hill briefing, or podcast—with an alternate funder—allow for a fuller discussion on the systems, structures and changes needed?

### *When Conducting Qualitative Research*

- How are interview subjects and sites selected?
  - » Do we have data on site-specific demographics to use for site selection? If not, do we have demographics of the local community?
  - » Can demographic information be obtained without quantitative data? Can program staff provide information on the demographics of their clients?
- Can we include the people we are studying when designing our survey instrument or interview protocol?
  - » Can we pretest the instrument with representatives of the population?
  - » Can representatives of the population studied help design the instrument?
  - » Have we consulted the DEI language toolkits while drafting our instruments?
- Does the survey instrument or interview protocol include questions that address racial equity?
  - » Do these questions need to be explicit? (Questions to program staff may need to ask about barriers or disparities faced by people of color. Questions to clients or individuals might ask about barriers in general or be phrased using a racial equity framework.)
- Do all survey instruments and interview protocols guarantee anonymity? (Respondents whose race or ethnicity is mentioned may be identifiable. Does the final report take proper precautions in ensuring anonymity, particularly as it relates to responses pertaining to racial equity?)

## *When Conducting Quantitative Research*

- What data are available about our research topic? Are those data broken down by race and ethnicity? How detailed is the racial and ethnic breakdown?
- Is the data we plan to use the best available when disaggregated by race?
- Are we correctly differentiating between income levels and race, making sure not to conflate the two and making sure not to perpetuate stereotypes?
- Have we considered unconventional data sources?
- Is the analysis produced and the data made available and accessible at the appropriate level of detail and complexity for actionable policy solutions and change?
- Who are we leaving out of our analysis?
  - › Could we include these populations using alternative data sources?
  - › If there is no possibility of including these populations, how do we acknowledge their exclusion in a note or in-text description? Do we cite other research on excluded populations? How do the DEI language toolkits suggest we phrase this acknowledgement?
- Are the data labeled respectfully and inclusively?
  - › Have we consulted the DEI language toolkits?
  - › Have we fully documented our decisions around data labels and excluded populations?

## *When Forming Research Teams*

The composition and organization of research teams shapes the research process as much as the data, methods, or research questions. A respectful and inclusive research environment improves Urban's workplace culture, and it ensures that the research reflects diverse insights and perspectives. Ask these questions as you build your research team.

- How does our research team reflect diverse perspectives? If it doesn't, is it possible to include underrepresented perspectives on the team?
- If there are barriers to assembling a diverse research team, is it possible to include underrepresented perspectives by asking external reviewers or experts to comment on the research?
- How will the research process include the voices of early-career staff?
  - › What processes are in place to ensure that early-career staff can voice their perspective?
  - › Are early career staff aware of these processes? Have you asked them? (Consider clarifying the role and the importance of early-career staff at the kickoff meeting and other key points in the research process.)
- Are project leaders communicating with colleagues who supervise early-career team members, so early-career staff working on multiple projects have a manageable and fulfilling workload?

## *When Writing Research and Communications Products*

- How are we using a racial equity lens to frame the problem?
- What do Urban's DEI language toolkits suggest considering before writing?
- What findings in our research point to specific actors and institutions who can make structural change and advocate for racial equity? How do these changemakers consume information, and which communications products reach them most effectively? Are we invested in creating those additional research or communications products?
- Does our writing include examples or cases that may reinforce stereotypes? Can we add other examples or acknowledge a wide variety of experiences?
- Does our writing identify historical context and the structures and institutions involved? Does our writing start with the system, leading *to* race rather than *with* race? Does it explain how racial inequity is created and maintained? Does it specify the actions needed (e.g., change in statute, regulation, budgeting) to address racial inequity, and at what magnitude? If the barriers are in governmental systems, can the LAB or the government affairs team help identify policy levers?
- Do we cite researchers that consider these problems from a racial equity perspective?
- Do we cite researchers who come from the people studied?
- Have we given the people studied the opportunity to review our research product?
- Are we writing in a format that the people studied will find approachable? Or have we planned for a companion product or dissemination method that will accomplish this?
- Does the research product—in addition to communications products—elevate marginalized voices?
- Is lived experience—a powerful form of evidence—included in the research and communications products?
- Have we consulted the Communications department to ensure that all images used (including charts, graphics, and photographs) are inclusive and do not perpetuate stereotypes?

## *When Developing Communication Products and Dissemination Strategies*

For all communication products, consider the following questions:

- Is our work accessible to the people we are studying?
- Are our products written for nontechnical readers? What accompanying fact sheet, brief, feature, or blog post can ensure our findings are accessible to a broader audience?
- Could translating our products help us reach the groups we are studying? Have we discussed translation service options with the Communications department?
- If we're writing a blog post, have we consulted with the blog team and reviewed its guidance on including a racial equity lens?

- Do our products elevate diverse voices, including those of early-career research staff, populations being studied, people with lived experience, or marginalized voices?

For events, consider the following questions:

- Have we consulted with the events team and reviewed its guidance on creating diverse, equitable, and inclusive events?
- Have we addressed the racial equity implications of the work in the framing and format of the event?
- Have we worked with the events team to develop an inclusive panel of presenters for events?
- Have we worked with the events team to invite a diverse audience to our event?

For strategic communication plans and media outreach, consider these questions:

- Have we pursued diverse media sources to promote our research?
- Have we ensured a racial equity lens, historical context, and actions to address racial inequity are included in our message management document, key points, and other talking points?

For outreach to stakeholders and policymakers, consider the following:

- Have we worked with the government affairs team to accurately identify the governmental systems and structures that are perpetuating racial inequality? How do we plan to reach and engage these systems/actors with our research findings?
- Have we worked with the stakeholder outreach team to ensure that our emails, briefings, and meetings are available to a diverse group of changemakers, including community activists, the public, high-level funders, policymakers, and advocates?
- Do our outreach emails, including those sent from researchers, use an inclusive tone and follow best writing practices for advancing racial equity?

For social media promotion and outreach, consider the following questions:

- Do our social media promotion plans acknowledge and credit community partners or organizations, early-career staff, people with lived experiences, and others for their contributions? Have we shared contributors' social media handles with the social media team?
- Does our social media messaging acknowledge the role of systems in perpetuating inequities (versus individual behavior) or link to content that does?
- If our outreach plans include paid advertising, have we consulted with the digital and external affairs teams about the best strategies and platforms for reaching and engaging diverse audiences?

## Additional Resources

- “Applying Racial Equity Awareness in Data Visualization,” [https://medium.com/@urban\\_institute/applying-racial-equity-awareness-in-data-visualization-bd359bf7a7ff](https://medium.com/@urban_institute/applying-racial-equity-awareness-in-data-visualization-bd359bf7a7ff)
- “Confronting Structural Racism in Research and Policy Analysis: Charting a Course for Policy Research Institutions,” <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/confronting-structural-racism-research-and-policy-analysis>
- “How We Should Talk about Racial Disparities,” <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/how-we-should-talk-about-racial-disparities>
- “People First: Changing the Way We Talk about People Touched by the Criminal Justice System,” <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/people-first-changing-way-we-talk-about-those-touched-criminal-justice-system>
- “Reckoning with Structural Racism in Research,” <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/reckoning-structural-racism-research-lbjs-legacy-and-urbans-next-50>
- “What Would It Take to Overcome the Damaging Effects of Structural Racism and Ensure a More Equitable Future?” <https://next50.urban.org/question/structural-racism>

Urban’s research products and blog posts on structural racism are collected at <https://www.urban.org/features/structural-racism-america>.



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