



# Conducting Prison Research with a Racial-Equity Frame

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**The history of slavery in America shapes the experience of incarceration for Black people and must therefore inform strategies to remediate institutional harms. This brief sets forth guiding values and recommendations for grounding prison research and policy in principles of racial equity. These values are intended to help researchers and change agents more accurately capture and measure racial biases, and design and conduct research that can elevate and disrupt systemic biases.**

Prison research holds a responsibility to advance racial equity; it should critically consider the ways in which historical and structural decisions have contributed to racial bias in prisons, how policies and practices and other systemic drivers of inequity affect Black incarcerated populations, and identify and use processes that more accurately measure preexisting systemic biases and embody diverse perspectives and identities. Researchers who do not take this approach may fail to adequately represent how Black people experience incarceration, compromising analyses and evaluations intended to help make prison policies and practices more equitable.

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## BOX 1

### **The Prison Research and Innovation Initiative**

This brief is part of a larger research agenda for the [Prison Research and Innovation Initiative](#), a five-year effort to leverage research and evidence to shine a much-needed light on prison conditions and pilot strategies to promote the well-being of people who live and work behind bars. The research agenda aims to change the national narrative on corrections so that it embodies data-driven transformative innovations for reform and inclusive research approaches to build transparency and

accountability for safer and more humane environments for people confined and working in them. This living document covers several topics ranging from prison climate to redemption and desistance, and will be updated regularly to remain relevant to discourse occurring around us.

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In this brief, we focus on biases against and experienced by Black people in US prisons. Although other incarcerated groups also experience biases, the most persistent and profound disparities are experienced by Black people as a result of the carceral system's deep roots in the enslavement of Black people in the US.

## Racial Inequity in the US Justice System

Research has documented the disproportionate share of Black populations incarcerated in the US—in fact, more Black people are in prisons and jails or under community supervision than were enslaved in 1850 (Alexander 2012). Over the past 40 years, rates of imprisonment among Black people have ranged from six to eight times greater than rates among white people. These high rates are a function of structural inequalities that restrict access to education, health care, and community resources (Massey and Denton 1998); of institutional biases baked into every stage of the criminal justice system, from policing to pretrial detention, prosecution, incarceration, parole, and community supervision (Alexander 2020); and of personal biases that, though often implicit, nonetheless result in the differential treatment of people of color (Bonilla-Silva 2006). Racial biases are perpetuated in correctional settings, demonstrated by, for example, the disparate rates of staff use of force and placement in punitive segregation that Black people experience during incarceration. In prison research that advances racial equity, researchers should center the historical context of racism and involve the people who are most impacted to define inquiries and design research processes and implications.

## Inclusive Research

Prison research that is grounded in principles of racial equity should at minimum adopt inclusive and interdisciplinary approaches. Black people who have experienced incarceration should be partners in and co-owners of all research and policy procedures—from inquiry and design through interpretation and application of findings—and be fairly and equally compensated for their time. They should inform survey design so that research questions and language are relevant and appropriate, analyze and interpret data from within their contextual framework, and identify diverse and appropriate outlets for disseminating findings that promote equitable change. This approach to research provides a platform for highlighting racial inequities embedded in prison systems and for effecting meaningful change in those environments.

Beyond including people with lived experience in research design and implementation processes, inclusive research must promote equity in its implications. Everyone involved in the research process should have *influence* in decisionmaking processes, such as those concerning how data are used to shape

policy and practices. This is not to suggest that all people are or should be responsible for solving problems rooted in systemic bias, especially without equal power to effect change. Rather, inclusive research grounded in principles of racial equity should be transformational, providing voice and power to suppressed populations and placing responsibility on systems to be transparent and held accountable.

Lastly, researchers should address the fact that incarcerated people (who, again, are disproportionately Black) have been underrepresented in corrections research because of barriers related to difficulty with physical access and, importantly, because of challenges with literacy and disabilities that can impact comprehension and communication. For example, paper-and-pencil surveys, though generally effective and efficient for gathering data, may exclude people with cognitive, visual, auditory, or other communication-related disabilities, many of whom are more likely to be Black (Bronson and Berzofsky 2015; Williams et al. 2006). Including these populations in research requires adaptive approaches, including translation, one-on-one administration, and accommodations for visual and auditory needs.

## Participatory Research Methods

Inclusive research rooted in principles of racial equity can be conducted using various participatory research methods. Participatory methods start from the ground up to help researchers establish an equal partnership between themselves and the people experiencing the circumstances being researched (Fine 2013; Huffman 2017). Effective participatory methods integrate people at the center of the research as research partners at every stage of research design and implementation (Stoudt and Torre 2014; Torre, Cahill, and Fox 2015). It is critical to ensure that research teams represent a diversity of racial and ethnic backgrounds and lived experiences, which happens organically when participatory methods are employed. Such approaches, when applied in the carceral space, can illuminate the unique and varied ways different populations experience prison, which may not be detected otherwise.

Participatory research can also enrich the field's understanding of prison cultures, climates, contexts, and experiences and helps researchers identify potential interventions to mitigate the negative impacts of carceral spaces.<sup>1</sup> In one instance of participatory prison research, Byrne (2005) engaged incarcerated people to serve as consultants and to give feedback on instruments and publicize the study to others. In another, Fine and colleagues (2013) trained a group of incarcerated women and worked alongside them to design research questions, analyze results, and publish findings. Others have found that participatory methods can help researchers build trust with and elevate the voices of incarcerated participants and enable people with shared experiences to collaborate toward common goals (Camarota and Fine 2008; Dupont 2008; Israel et al. 2017; Reiter 2014).

Examples of participatory research methods include the following:

- Participatory action research involves partnering with the people who are closest to and are experiencing the issue at hand; it entails an iterative process of planning, researching, implementing changes, reflecting, and refining (Freire 1970; Pant 2014; Swantz 2008).
- Street participatory action research, an offshoot of participatory action research, has often entailed partnering with people of color in communities that have experienced crime and the criminal justice system (Payne 2017; Payne and Brown 2016; Payne and Bryant 2018).
- Community-based participatory research is grounded in the needs, knowledge, and advocacy interests of members of marginalized and underresourced communities, who collaborate with outside researchers to conduct research, explore findings, and discuss policy implications (McCracken 2019; Minkler et al. 2012).

Using participatory methods specifically in a prison environment involves certain risks and limitations, including challenges associated with ensuring confidentiality in group research contexts; barriers to including people with disabilities in research (Bronson and Berzofsky 2015); risk of retaliation from staff or other incarcerated people (Reiter 2014); limits on power sharing associated with confinement and the coercive environment of correctional settings; and the inability to promote change because of the power imbalance and lack of access to correctional leadership and decisionmakers. Nonetheless, participatory methods could yield research that uplifts the experiences of incarcerated Black people and promotes actionable recommendations for transforming prison environments more equitably. Moreover, by elevating all of the voices in particular prisons, these methods can bring disparate actors together to collaborate, forge new relationships, and strengthen existing ones (Israel et al. 2017).

## Measuring Race

To adopt a racial equity framework, researchers must acknowledge that the concept of race was fabricated to create a hierarchy of moral and social superiority and inferiority (Muhammad 2011). Conceptualizing and measuring race and ethnicity for research is a challenging undertaking that can further racial inequities and biases, especially when data collection and analyses are at times inherently biased.<sup>2</sup> Researchers should examine what role they think race plays in their research—understanding that examining these assumptions requires recognizing their own identities and biases (Andrews, Parekh, and Peckoo 2019)—and determine whether including a race variable in analysis is actually a measure of other complex constructs, such as social class and socioeconomic status. Furthermore, forward-thinking research should consider that the concept of race may actually be measuring more the complex effects of racism, oppression, and the experience of discrimination in decisionmaking. This should be critically examined before and during analyses and, more importantly, when applying research findings to policy development.

Moreover, race as a demographic variable often inappropriately and inaccurately groups racial and ethnic categories, precluding survey respondents from selecting multiple categories, which is important for accurately capturing and reflecting identity. People who identify differently from the categories

typically provided in survey research (e.g., Black, white, mixed) often report their race as “other” or are forced into a “white/nonwhite” dichotomy. This can result in the undercounting and misrepresentation of certain populations, especially because the “other” category is often excluded from analyses. Including and accurately distinguishing racial and ethnic categories in research, especially as populations become more heterogeneous, is critical for guiding policy and effecting change in the communities to which they apply.

Even in contexts that enable people to self-identify their race and/or ethnicity, researchers need to carefully contemplate what race actually measures and why and how to use it in their statistical analyses. When used in models that fail to include additional variables that represent aspects of structural inequality—such as access to employment, education, health care, and housing—results will erroneously suggest that race is the sole determining factor of outcomes of interest (Darity et al. 2018).

Though race is an important predictor of disparate treatment by the correctional system, researchers should also focus on measuring race to identify when and how systemic racism disempowers people and how to best analyze and interpret data to promote racial equity.

## Key Takeaways

Prison research should be grounded in principles that advance racial equity, beginning with a critical examination of how the history of racism in America continues to shape the experiences of incarcerated Black people in US carceral systems. Researchers should more accurately capture and address these biases by adopting inclusive approaches, using participatory methods, and reconsidering the measurement and application of race variables in analyses. Prison research grounded in principles of racial equity should do the following:

- Be centered by the historical context of systemic racism and how it continues to disproportionately impact incarcerated Black people.
- Include diverse representation on research teams and broadcast findings to diverse audiences.
- Employ participatory methods to engage incarcerated people and correctional staff at all stages of the research process.
- Design studies to generate concrete steps to improve prison experiences and environments.
- Employ mixed methods to ensure the views and experiences of all stakeholders are represented in research.
- Solicit and highlight personal narratives to contextualize empirical findings.
- Share findings with the people who helped generate the data and enable them to interpret meanings and identify policy implications with stakeholders across all levels of decisionmaking.
- Enable people to self-identify their race and ethnicity.

- Ensure tools for data collection are inclusive of all possible racial and ethnic categories, and allow respondents to select more than one.
- Control for measures of structural inequality in models that employ race and/or ethnicity.
- Conceptualize and operationalize race from the point of recruitment to instrument development to analysis and interpretation.
- Apply research findings to policies and practices that promote the advancement of racial equity and to empowering marginalized groups.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See Dupont (2008), Fine (2013), Fine and coauthors (2003), Hatton and Fisher (2011), Reiter (2014), Israel and coauthors (2017), and Sherwood and Kendall (2013). A forthcoming brief by the Prison Research and Innovation Initiative project team examines the history and considerations of applying the most holistic participatory action research method, community-based participatory research, in carceral settings.
- <sup>2</sup> William Isaac and Andi Dixon, “Why Big-Data Analysis of Police Activity is Inherently Biased,” *The Conversation US*, accessed January 19, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/why-big-data-analysis-of-police-activity-is-inherently-biased-72640>.

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