

# BUILDING PUBLIC DATA CAPACITY AND PARTNERSHIPS FOR RACIAL EQUITY IN OAKLAND

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Elected leaders in the City of Oakland and Alameda County have highlighted the importance of addressing growing income inequality in their high-cost area. This inequality is tied to significant disparities in outcomes for people of color. These challenges, resulting from decades of discriminatory public policy and private disinvestment, cannot be solved by the public sector alone. Urban Strategies Council, a local data intermediary, has long collaborated with its local governments to advance equity, whether through coaching on using data to guide interventions or supporting action coalitions that align efforts with nonprofit and philanthropic organizations.

Founded in 1987, Urban Strategies Council is a regional research and advocacy organization dedicated to social, economic, and racial equity. It aims to hold institutions and systems accountable to community needs. The Council works locally and regionally with governments and community organizations to provide research, data, and policy analysis; strategic planning; program development; capacity building; and advocacy to serve low-income communities of color.

This case study is part of a series, including an overview brief, that demonstrates how local governments benefit from engaging with data intermediaries such as Urban Strategies Council and other members of the National

Neighborhood Indicators Partnership. In addition to their topical, analytic, and community engagement expertise, these organizations bring an understanding of local context, a reputation for impartial analysis, and a set of relationships that spans sectors. Their services build local capacity, including within governments, to use data for better decisionmaking. To read the full series, visit

<https://www.neighborhoodindicators.org/localgovt>.

## COLLECTIVE ACTION FOR BOYS AND MEN OF COLOR

Urban Strategies Council is committed to tackling entrenched challenges such as poverty and recognizes that systems must change to break out of past cycles. The Council is a facilitator and strategist for comprehensive initiatives so that the community can devise and implement solutions to problems low-income families and children face. These collaborations bring together residents, policymakers, public agency managers, service providers, and other stakeholders to address complicated issues across silos. The Council leverages the relationships and trust it has fostered to build and strengthen alliances. To support the coalitions, the Council provides analysis on many issue areas and identifies policy responses. One example is its role in supporting the Oakland–Alameda County Alliance for Boys and Men of Color, a collaborative formed in 2011 to improve

outcomes for boys and men of color in education, health, and employment. Various public- and private-sector partners come together to take action in the five key areas of the Boys and Men of Color framework (Urban Strategies Council 2015): research and data, targeted and universal strategies and programs, organizing and leadership development, public systems change, and communications. Additionally, the Council leveraged private funding from the California Endowment to support staffing for the alliance. As a trusted community partner, the Council convened the “Public System Leaders’ Table,” which included representatives from the city, county, and school district, as well as the “Community Partners’ Table,” which included nonprofit, grassroots, and faith-based organizations. Public-sector participation in the alliance allows political leaders and agency staff to get input from community stakeholders to inform program and policy design. While recognizing that inclusivity and representativeness is a constant challenge in these venues, the alliance provides an opportunity to listen and learn. Regular meetings allow room for debate and help coordinate activities and campaigns.

The Council has infused data and research into the alliance. By researching how boys and men of color are faring in Oakland and Alameda County, the organization presented important challenges and opportunities for change. Its analysis helped substantiate the need for public-sector work and investment on these issues, as

findings pointed to deep and long-standing inequalities. To simplify and disseminate findings, the staff created a data profile to present a snapshot of boys and men of color in Oakland and Alameda County and to highlight disparities relative to peers locally.<sup>1</sup> With this baseline, the Council called attention to and advocated for collection and dissemination of data not currently available. The Council continues to collaborate with partners to develop indicators to track progress and hold partners accountable.<sup>2</sup>

## **BUILDING CAPACITY OF SCHOOLS TO ADDRESS ABSENTEEISM**

Urban Strategies Council also engages with local government and quasi-governmental agencies—including the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency, Santa Clara Health and Hospital System, Alameda County Healthcare Services, and the Alameda County Probation Department—to help them answer questions and identify issues and solutions. The Council’s work with the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) to address chronic absenteeism exemplifies its approach to research and capacity building. Since 2001, the Council had been tracking education indicators, including school attendance, suspension outcomes, and populations at risk of not graduating. In 2008–09, it began to look at chronic absenteeism, a strong early indicator for student success or failure.

In 2010, the Council released an OUSD report, which revealed high levels of chronic absence, defined as missing 10 percent or more of a school year.<sup>3</sup> The report revealed racial and ethnic disparities in the OUSD school system: black children were more than twice as likely to be chronically absent as their white and Asian counterparts. In bringing attention to this issue, the reports gave OUSD and other local stakeholders the political cover to dig into hard issues related to achievement disparities within Oakland schools.

One critical component to understanding the absenteeism data was to focus on how conditions varied across Oakland neighborhoods. The Council mapped the data by neighborhood where the children lived, not just their school location. This depicted how community conditions such as crime rates and transportation access could affect attendance and helped generate ideas on how community-based organizations could tackle barriers to attending school.

By encouraging the OUSD to measure chronic absenteeism in addition to average daily attendance, this effort transformed how the district understood attendance, which transformed how it treated attendance. The OUSD's Department of Research, Assessment, and Data prepared school-level weekly reports on absence, disaggregated by grade, ethnicity, and gender. The Council, with other partners, supported the OUSD with training on how to communicate chronic absenteeism data. The

reports, benchmarked against other district schools, and rosters of individual students who were chronically absent, were sent to principals. The reports equipped them with a better understanding of their schools' situation and the data to deal with short- and long-term issues. Further, the OUSD released an attendance policy and procedures manual called "Every Day Counts: Attend Today, Succeed Tomorrow" to establish guidelines for interventions to reduce chronic absenteeism.<sup>4</sup>

These efforts changed internal collection and use within the schools. The school's new indicators and improved reporting systems also prompted community partners to request data from the schools directly to hold schools accountable for progress.

In this case, the Council's work, in collaboration with other education advocates, alerted the OUSD that there was a problem that could be addressed by improving district policy and practice. The OUSD has achieved measurable gains in attendance, reducing the districtwide chronic absence rates from 16 percent in 2005–06 to 12 percent in 2013–14.<sup>5</sup> Despite overall progress, chronic absence remains high for black students (18 percent). These results laid the foundation for future citywide initiatives, such as the African American Male Achievement Initiative.

## URBAN STRATEGY COUNCIL'S UNIQUE CONTRIBUTIONS

Urban Strategies Council has proven an effective partner to local government by providing data analysis, increasing data capacity, convening public and civic stakeholders for collective action on entrenched challenges, and identifying emerging and high-priority issues through advocacy with community partners. As an independent organization with strategic and analytical capacity, the Council can facilitate and inform conversation around the toughest governance and equity issues Oakland faces.

The Council aims not only to answer the immediate research questions, but to further build data infrastructure and capacity that the public entities they engage with can maintain. The organization recognizes that the community does better when the community and local

government have better capacity to do data work in house. The staff build training into work with clients, even on project-based, fee-for-service contracts. By making data easily available, developing user-friendly tools, and conducting hands-on training with government staff, the Council helps make it easier for both government and the community to use data.

Urban Strategies Council has become a close collaborator with the City of Oakland because of the community trust the organization has fostered through its 30-year history. The Council has gained the confidence of community groups and advocates through its focus on racial equity and income inequality, while the rigor of its quantitative, qualitative, and spatial analyses has proven invaluable to the local public sector. The Council has become the go-to partner for data collection, analysis and support for cross-sector initiatives.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Stahl, "Hard Math for Boys and Men of Color in Alameda County," Urban Strategies Council, April 27, 2015, <https://urbanstrategies.org/hard-math-for-boys-and-men-of-color-in-alameda-county/>.

<sup>2</sup> Steve Spiker, "Boys and Men of Color Indicator Tool," Urban Strategies Council, September 8, 2015, <https://urbanstrategies.org/download/boys-and-men-of-color-indicator-tool/>.

<sup>3</sup> Steve Spiker, "OUSD Chronic Absenteeism Study," Urban Strategies Council, November 17, 2010, <https://urbanstrategies.org/download/ousd-chronic-absenteeism-study/>.

<sup>4</sup> "Success Story: Oakland," Attendance Works, accessed February 12, 2018, <http://www.attendanceworks.org/what-works/oakland/>.

<sup>5</sup> "Success Story: Oakland," <http://www.attendanceworks.org/what-works/oakland/>. See also Brown and Jackson (2014).

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Coordinated by the Urban Institute, the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP) is made up of independent organizations in more than 30 cities that have a shared mission to help community stakeholders use neighborhood-level data for better decisionmaking, with a focus on working with organizations and residents in low-income communities. Urban Strategies Council helped found NNIP in 1996.

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