



Confronting Structural Racism in Research and Policy Analysis

Charting a Course for Policy Research Institutions

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Racial and ethnic disparities figure prominently into much of the analysis conducted by policy research organizations in the US. But too often our organizations give short shrift to the centuries of subjugation, discrimination, exclusion, and injustice that have produced these inequities.

If, as researchers, we aim to build knowledge that helps shape and advance solutions to the challenges of blocked mobility and widening inequality, we must do better at explicitly examining the structural and systemic forces at work. For many established research organizations, this is more easily said than done. It requires scholars to learn things about our history and its lasting implications that they may not already know. It requires changes to familiar ways of working. And it requires fresh approaches to communicating findings to our intended audiences.

Over the past several years, the Urban Institute has committed itself to making these changes. We see this goal—to rigorously address the structures and systems of racism in the content and communication of our research—as an essential part of our broader diversity and inclusion efforts. The current political climate creates a heightened sensitivity and sense of urgency, but we see this evolution as essential to our mission over the long term. Urban is by no means alone in this endeavor; many other policy analysis and research organizations have also embarked on this undertaking and have an interest in sharing tools, strategies, and lessons learned along the way.

In November 2018, the Urban Institute hosted a roundtable discussion with 23 organizations representing policy research, academia, and philanthropy to share approaches, insights, and lessons from our respective efforts to confront structural racism in our research and policy analysis. This brief discusses the rationale for these efforts at implementing institutional change; the range of challenges and constraints facing different types of research organizations; and our experience to date with

specific tools and strategies. We aim to advance understanding of and attention to structural racism in the work of our own institution and in the larger field of policy research.

Recognizing the Pervasive Legacy of Racist Policies

For nearly its entire history, the United States excluded people of color from its main pathways to economic opportunity through explicit policy decisions. In *Stamped from the Beginning*, Ibram X. Kendi argues that racism does not primarily stem from hate and ignorance, but that “racist policies have driven the history of racist ideas in America” (Kendi 2017, 9). For generations, people of African descent lived and died in bondage. Even after the Civil War and the abolishment of slavery, black people in the United States were subjected to legalized forms of discrimination that restricted where they lived, if and where they could attend school, and the kinds of jobs they could hold. And even with the constitutional right to vote (granted to men with the 15th Amendment in 1870 and to women with the 19th Amendment in 1920), barriers to exercising those rights largely prevented citizens’ ability to change the oppressive laws that obstructed their opportunities.

For example, the federal Home Owners Loan Corporation, established in 1933 as part of the New Deal, created maps that were color-coded to indicate the desirability of neighborhoods. Race was a significant factor in determining the color-coding of a neighborhood (Hillier 2005), with communities of color designated as undesirable and color-coded red. This appraisal system, called redlining, was adopted by the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), which provided mortgage insurance enabling many Americans to buy homes. Redlining made it much more difficult and expensive for African Americans to obtain loans and purchase homes. Between 1930 and 1960, African Americans received less than 1 percent of the nation’s mortgages (Conley 1999). In addition to redlining, the FHA advocated using restrictive covenants to maintain the racial segregation of neighborhoods. The FHA’s *Underwriting Manual* stated, “if a neighborhood is to retain stability, it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes” (Oliver and Shapiro 2006, 18). Because people were unable to buy homes in the past, many families today have less wealth,¹ and schools are not much less segregated than they were 50 years ago (Reardon and Owens 2014).

America’s history of discriminatory policies and institutional practices explains the deep disparities in access to opportunities and in outcomes that we see today across social and economic domains. Court cases were decided and laws were passed that outlawed these and other practices, but to paraphrase Lyndon B. Johnson, who helped found the Urban Institute, these legal rights are the beginning of the path to freedom, not the end. He goes on to say that “it is not enough just to open the gates of opportunity. All our citizens must have the ability to walk through those gates.”² Our approach to understanding current racial disparities is guided by an understanding that centuries of oppression, legal discrimination, and sanctioned inequality have long tails that continue to shape where people live, what opportunities they are exposed to, and how people engage with one another. The legacies of those structures—if not the structures themselves—continue to have impacts today. We use the definition of structural racism developed by the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change (2004):

a system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms work in various, often reinforcing ways to perpetuate racial group inequity. It identifies dimensions of our history and culture that have allowed privileges associated with “whiteness” and disadvantages associated with “color” to endure and adapt over time.

Two examples highlight how structural racism operates in policy today. First, more than 50 years after passage of the federal Fair Housing Act, America’s neighborhoods remain starkly segregated along lines of race and ethnicity, and people of color are dramatically overrepresented in high-poverty census tracts. By the late 20th century, after decades of discriminatory lending practices and redlining, civil rights legislation and evolving constitutional jurisprudence prohibited overt forms of discrimination in housing and lifted many formal barriers to residential integration. But they were quickly replaced by subtler and ostensibly race-neutral methods to exclude people of color from predominantly white neighborhoods. For example, exclusionary zoning policies make it difficult for lower-income residents to live in many suburban communities. And while the incidence of housing discrimination has generally declined, people of color looking for places to live are still told about fewer homes and apartments than white people (Greene, Turner, and Gourevitch 2017).

A second example involves law enforcement policies that criminalize behaviors in a way that disproportionately affects people of color. Federal guidelines impose substantially more severe penalties for the use of crack than for powder cocaine, two forms of the same drug. Research has found that crack is more likely to be used by socioeconomically disadvantaged members of society, among which African Americans are disproportionately represented, and that African Americans are “at higher risk for arrest and subject to [an] 18:1 sentencing disparity.”³ This is an example of color-blind structural racism, where a policy makes no reference to race but still has major disproportionate effects by race.

As Kendi argues, the differences in outcomes in these two examples, not to mention many others, resulted from policy. Too often, however, public policy researchers ignore or overlook the structures and systems that created and sustain inequality, focusing exclusively on individual choices and behaviors as the main drivers of disparate outcomes. Improving public policy research requires organizations to consider how this history of discriminatory policies affects the context, validity, and implications of our work, and to make intentional change in how we address these racist legacies.

Navigating Institutional Choices and Constraints

Policy research organizations take many institutional forms—from small, single-issue nonprofits to for-profit firms with thousands of employees to policy centers within universities to policy research organizations in the nation’s capital. Structural racism is undeniably relevant to the work of all these organizations, no matter their size or type. But the challenges we face and the paths we take to more effectively address structural racism vary widely. In particular, an organization’s primary mission, its funding sources, and its size and internal structure are likely to shape the strategies it pursues to explicitly address the realities of structural racism in the research and policy analysis it produces.

Organizational Mission

Every organization must give careful thought to how structural racism issues relate to its core mission and the audiences it aims to inform and influence. Some may conclude that racial inequity and injustice are core to their mission and that research on structural racism should take center stage. But even research organizations with broader or less normative missions can and should find ways to accurately and effectively analyze structural racism and its consequences.

Some organizations may explicitly focus their mission on advancing racial justice or overcoming white supremacy. Many of these institutions target audiences that include grassroots organizations, advocates, and social justice practitioners. These organizations can make their focus on structures and systems explicit in their research products. They can hire people with expertise and commitment to their mission and can expect their staff to make this work a top priority—putting them a step ahead of organizations whose staff might not all have the same knowledge or commitment to advancing racial justice. These organizations are also more likely to devote institutional resources to developing internal training for staff members and to building capacity around these crucial issues.

ORGANIZATIONS WITH MISSIONS FOCUSED ON ADVANCING RACIAL JUSTICE

- **PolicyLink** “is a national research and action institute advancing racial and economic equity by Lifting Up What Works.”
- **Kirwan Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity** works “to create a just and inclusive society where all people and communities have opportunity to succeed.”

Many other long-established research organizations have broader missions than advancing racial justice, but they can still decide to give structural racism explicit attention within a larger frame. These institutions’ target audiences typically include elected officials, government agencies, and business leaders, as well as on-the-ground practitioners and advocates. They can develop a structural racism-focused program area or an important cross-cutting initiative within the broader scope of their research analysis, also providing institutional legitimacy in the process. They can also make it a priority to hire staff with relevant interests and expertise to lead in this area of study. In addition, staff with this expertise can be encouraged to contribute to other work, since structural racism is pervasive across research areas. Organizations with broader missions can also offer training, tools, and incentives to staff interested in engaging with the conversation around advancing racial justice in their work.

ORGANIZATIONS WITH MISSIONS BROADER THAN, BUT INCLUSIVE OF, RACIAL JUSTICE

- **The Brookings Institution's** mission is “to conduct in-depth research that leads to new ideas for solving problems facing society at the local, national and global level.”
 - **Abt Associates** aims to be “an engine for social impact, fueled by caring, curiosity and cutting-edge research that moves people from vulnerability to security.”
 - **Mathematica** “is dedicated to improving public well-being and reimagining the way the world gathers and uses data.”
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The Urban Institute, founded in 1968 to “bring power through knowledge to solve the problems that weigh heavily on the hearts and minds of America,” has chosen to **elevate issues of racial injustice** and inequity as central to our broader mission. We seek to inform and support a wide variety of audiences, including changemakers in government, philanthropy, business, advocacy, and practice. Our Next50 initiative, which draws on our previous 50 years of work to inform priorities for our next 50, focuses on advancing mobility and narrowing equity gaps. One of the big questions we want to tackle in our future work is “What would it take to eliminate the policies, programs, and institutional practices that impede racial equity?” We are committed to devoting resources to encouraging and supporting steps to advance racial justice in our work, but we do not mandate this focus across all staff or projects.

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) State Fiscal Policy division has been exploring ways in which structural racism has affected their staff, how they do their work, and the landscape in which they operate. They examine how race implicitly or explicitly impacts their decisionmaking from the policy issues they choose to the research they conduct to the partners with whom they choose to work. They are undertaking efforts to make these systemic barriers more transparent and to develop strategies that will help staff identify their own assumptions and biases, analyze their decisions, and choose to use a racial equity approach to the work. An example of such work is their seminal paper *Advancing Racial and Ethnic Equity with State Tax Policy* (2018), which examines structural racism in state tax policy. In addition, CBPP administers a state policy fellowship program with a focus on candidates who have experience with communities that are underrepresented in state policy debates.

Funding Sources

The funding sources upon which an organization relies may either constrain or accelerate its ability to make issues of structural racism explicit in its work. Some funders find the language of structural racism too controversial or political and are unlikely to support work that puts the issue front and center. And policy research organizations that compete for awards with strictly defined scope and focus face limitations on their flexibility to explore these issues.

Despite these constraints, researchers have opportunities and responsibilities to identify and describe the structures and systems that drive disparate outcomes, when these outcomes are

addressed by their work. As discussed further below, they can avoid data and methods mistakes that obscure key drivers, avoid language that dehumanizes people, and publish separate products targeted to audiences other than the original funder. These additional products may leverage supplemental funds to dive deeper into structural racism in the work and examine its effects without the constraints imposed by the original scope of work or funding source.

In contrast, some funders, particularly in the philanthropic world, have determined that structural racism should be a central focus or lens for the organizations and work they support. To capitalize on these funding sources, research institutions must first prove they have the capacity to delve into this type of work and go beyond the superficial. Developing a robust evidence base around structural racism and its effects is critical to attracting these funders, which will in turn allow organizations to dig more deeply into the disparate effects of structures and systems in their future work. To win support from these funders, organizations must also actively engage with communities of color to surface questions and gather evidence. They must have an inclusive staff with expertise in structural barriers to opportunity. And they must identify policy and practice reforms that stretch conventional thinking.

Many other funding organizations, including those in the philanthropic, government, and corporate spaces, are exploring how they want to tackle the structural forces that sustain inequity and injustice. Seeking funding from these sources provides organizations with the opportunity to work together with a partner and learn how to best address these issues through research. Institutions seeking these funding sources can expand their research areas to ask challenging, “outside the box” research questions they want to investigate. They can also experiment with less conventional data sources and methods and reach out to new audiences that may be unfamiliar with their work.

Size and Structure

Organizations’ size, structure, and internal culture play a central role in how they implement efforts to better address structural racism. Differences in these characteristics do not excuse institutions from taking steps to improve. Rather, they offer an opportunity for organizations to take advantage of their unique strengths and capacities.

Small organizations with a tight-knit team structure may be especially well positioned to establish a strong shared understanding of and approach to analysis of racial inequity and injustice. In these smaller organizations, the leader is critical to setting the tone and focus for everyone. A smaller size makes it easier for the entire staff to take training together to improve their awareness of these issues, and it encourages close collaboration around how to advance lessons learned and new approaches. These advantages can also apply to small internal teams within larger, more complex organizations.

Highly centralized organizations with top-down review and approval mechanisms may be able to mandate that everyone adopt the lens of structural racism, apply appropriate data and analytic methods, and adhere to language guidelines. They can require all staff to complete training that centers around the disparate effects of structural racism. These organizations can also implement a centralized

review of proposals, work plans, research designs, and research products to ensure all work takes into account, when applicable, a racial equity lens.

Many research organizations, however, are both large and decentralized and place a premium on researcher independence rather than top-down direction. This poses challenges for adopting and applying new ideas and approaches. Nonetheless, signals from leadership that they see this work as a priority can be very powerful. These larger and more decentralized organizations can prioritize racial equity in their work by celebrating researchers who are working on these issues, making connections between researchers who might not otherwise know each other, offering voluntary tools and training to advance awareness and adoption around racial justice, and providing internal financial support and incentives to researchers who commit to prioritizing racial equity in their work.

Organizations also vary in the composition and diversity of their staffs. Many research organizations set goals and track progress for diversity in staff and leadership. Having a diverse staff is an important goal, and research has shown that increasing diversity can bring benefits in communication, innovation, and productivity (Ellison and Mullin 2014; Gao and Zhang 2017).⁴ Just as important, a diverse staff brings different perspectives and sensitivities, which can improve how organizations engage with and talk about particular populations, and a diverse staff accurately reflects and represents the world in which we live and work. However, a staff that is less representative does not prevent an institution from advancing a structural racism lens in their work. Tools like those listed in this report can enable organizations to take concrete steps toward a better account of structural disadvantage in their work. Additionally, developing this lens can provide opportunities for growth for staff of color already in the organization and may be a draw to increase the diversity of staff through hiring.

Tools for Moving Forward

Progress may look different depending upon institutional choices and constraints, but all policy research organizations can move forward with efforts to explicitly address the structures and systems of racism by building understanding and awareness among staff members, reexamining data sources and analytic methods, and improving communication strategies.

Boost Awareness and Learning Among Staff

Research organizations can build their internal capacity to produce rigorous research on racial inequities and injustice by seeking external guidance, creating intentional spaces for reflection and education, and embedding mechanisms that raise staff consciousness at each phase of the research process—from proposal development to product dissemination. Many organizations have few staff with the knowledge and expertise to effectively address structural racism in their work. Institutions should build up their staff so people with this expertise work in each of the institutions' policy domains. Tools being tested to boost staff awareness and learning include the following:

- **Structural racism speaker series:** The Urban Institute invites outside experts to spark discussion on structural racism and advance new lines of inquiry among researchers. These “brown bag” seminars expose researchers to established and emerging frameworks, methods, and data sources around structural racism while providing examples of how researchers can contextualize research results. This speaker series also helps researchers broaden their networks and foster new partnerships for future work.
- **Structural racism blog post series:** The Urban Institute’s *Urban Wire* invites staff at all levels, including research assistants and analysts, to write blog posts that apply a structural racism lens to research findings and policy developments. This approach has elevated structural racism as a topic of discussion at Urban, and it encourages collaboration among researchers across different domains and years of experience.
- **Leveraging internal funding:** Several policy research organizations dedicate flexible (internal) resources to work around structural racism, including the staff time needed to organize, facilitate, and debrief meetings, as well as to develop public-facing products.
- **READ groups:** The CBPP developed learning modules about racial inequity that are designed to spark discussion among small groups of staff. These modules include books, articles, and videos at the intersection of public policy, research, and structural racism. They are helpful resources for staff committed to building their knowledge and improving their research, and they encourage engagement and discussion among staff who might not have the opportunity to talk about these issues otherwise.
- **Research project checklist:** The CBPP created a checklist of questions that prompt staff to consider structural racism at each stage of a research project. The checklist encourages researchers to examine each decision they make throughout the project, from choosing populations of interest to data sources to background research to participant compensation to the structure of the analysis. These questions prompt researchers to push themselves and think deliberately about how structural racism may play a role in their work.

Improve Data Sources and Methods

Research organizations can take concrete steps to include people and perspectives that are left out of standard research practices by improving the data sources upon which they rely, and to develop analytic methods for rigorously measuring the structures and systems that sustain racial inequities. As gatekeepers for what constitutes valid research, our institutions have the obligation to develop and elevate data sources and methods that more accurately and respectfully represent marginalized communities and more accurately document the barriers they face. These methods and data sources also improve the rigor of our research and the relevance of our policy analysis:

- **Cultivate community-engaged research methods:** Researchers can better understand the people they study and the realities they face by actively engaging with communities and building on their knowledge and insights. Creating a collaborative, equitable learning

partnership requires researchers to include community members in multiple phases of research, including study design, data collection, analysis, and dissemination.

- **Devote resources to translation:** Language barriers among survey respondents and research partners can result in some populations being left out of studies. Research organizations should include in their budgets to funders resources for translation services to ensure that everyone in a study population is included and that their responses are accurately reflected.
- **Compensate survey respondents:** Time and expertise are valuable assets. Researchers can acknowledge these contributions by paying survey respondents and community partners. Financial remuneration may be most appropriate, but if this is not possible, alternative forms of compensation, such as providing food or securing child care, should be offered.
- **Reconsider race as a dummy variable:** Researchers often use dummy variables to represent race and ethnicity in multivariate analysis, but this practice implicitly assumes there is no relationship between race and other explanatory variables. Instead of uncritically using dummy variables, researchers should examine what role they think race actually plays in their model and how best to test their hypotheses about its impact on particular outcomes. Examining these assumptions may require researchers to recognize their own biases. Failing to account for the fact that not everyone has access to the same assets or opportunities can result in misleading findings about differences in outcomes.

“LIKE FISH WHO DON’T SEE WATER, ECONOMISTS DON’T SEE STRUCTURAL RACISM” (EMMONS 2018)⁵

A standard approach in economics is to include race in the analytic equation as a “dummy variable”—a numeric variable used to represent subgroups of a sample. This approach makes the implicit assumption that individuals are alike in every way except for their race. Emmons and Ricketts (2017) demonstrated the flaw in this assumption by testing two models for explaining the racial wealth gap. The first model used standard dummy variables for race. Its results suggested that differences in wealth were almost entirely explained by differences in education, employment, and other similar independent factors. The second model expressed the independent factors as deviations from the racial group average. This approach found that, although the independent factors were important, they did not explain away most of the wealth gap. In fact, the researchers concluded that over 70 percent of the racial wealth gap stems from structural factors that lead to families of color facing greater constraints.

This study was inspired by Darrick Hamilton’s critique of the dummy variable. His research (Darity, Hamilton et al. 2018; Hamilton and Darity 2017; Hamilton et al. 2015) has demonstrated that even when African Americans have made all the “right” choices, they have substantially less wealth than white people. White high school dropouts have more wealth, on average, than African Americans with a college degree (Darity et al. 2018). Unemployed white people have more wealth than African Americans who work full time. White homeowners possess \$140,000 more in net worth than African American homeowners. And the net worth of single-parent white families is more than two times that of two-parent African American families.

Adopt Communication Guidelines and Engage Diverse Audiences

Research institutions can better steward their reach and influence by contextualizing data on disparities with information on historic and current inequities, committing to using respectful and inclusive language and images in their products, and by elevating marginalized voices and perspectives in public events and outreach. Historically, researchers have perpetuated stereotypes about people of color by using dehumanizing language and imagery. Organizations can dismantle this harmful legacy by favoring meaningful change over the status quo:

- **Establish communication guidelines:** Urban Institute staff are creating guidance documents that share the social and historical context of various phrases, labels, and racial categories; provide examples of labels to use and not to use; encourage researchers to use labels preferred by the communities they study; and offer other helpful resources. These guides aim to ensure that all products consistently use language that conveys respect for the individuals and groups studied, and avoid language that reinforces stereotypes about groups that have been marginalized in society.
- **Employ a principled image selection process:** Researchers can be more intentional about the images they attach to their reports, presentations, and blog posts. Images should be representative of the research and avoid perpetuating stereotypes (for example, in an evaluation of a federal program, the image should reflect the racial breakdown of that program). Images should also show people in marginalized groups in contexts beyond those solely about them being marginalized (for example, researchers should include images of black people in reports about homeownership or career advancement, rather than just research about poverty or joblessness).
- **Implement event panel guidelines:** Organizations can ensure their event planning and outreach procedures explicitly address the importance of including diverse speakers and reaching diverse audiences. The Urban Institute's event guidelines prompt researchers and communications staff to ask whether the proposed speakers and audience invitation lists are diverse and whether they include the perspectives of people with lived experience in the topic being discussed.
- **Diversify products and dissemination strategies:** Researchers can make their work more accessible by publishing a variety of products—such as technical reports, briefs, blog posts, podcasts, and infographics—that target different audiences. A lengthy research report might not always be the best avenue to communicate findings, as shorter and more accessible options often reach broader audiences. Researchers can also share their work with smaller, more specialized news outlets to reach a more diverse audience, rather than targeting only elite media outlets.
- **Partner with advocacy organizations to take the work further:** Research organizations can develop robust partnerships with advocacy organizations to ensure their products are useful in directly or indirectly informing and creating more equitable policy and programming.

- **Host community data walks:** Researchers can share key data and findings with the people closest to the issues through community data walks (Murray, Falkenburger, and Saxena 2015). These data walks aim to ensure the people most affected by the research have a robust understanding of the data, to help inform better programming and policies to address the strengths and needs of a community or population, and to inspire individual and collective action among community agents.

DATA WALKS: COMMUNITY-CENTERED TOOLS TO SHARE DATA

During a data walk, stakeholders split up into small groups and rotate through “stations”—each one a visual and/or textual display of data that forms a narrative about the community that participants can confirm, critique, and complicate.

Data walks provide opportunities for researchers and community members to cocreate meaning and solutions based on community data; in other words, community members are not only research participants but also equal research partners.

Assessing Progress

With these considerations and strategies in mind, one big question remains: How can we, as institutions, hold ourselves accountable and determine whether these efforts are working? As research organizations, our assessments of progress and decisions about next steps should be rooted in evidence. We propose five basic indicators for researchers and policy analysts to assess their progress in confronting structural racism in our work. Each organization would need to determine which of these indicators are most aligned with its mission and goals and develop systems to create baseline measures, track progress, and ensure accountability.

- Increasing numbers of staff will participate in efforts to learn about structural racism and apply this lens in their research about issues of difference and disparities.
- Wider and more diverse audiences will read our work, attend our events, and find our work relevant and useful.
- Audiences we typically engage will recognize the value of our work on structural racism and find it relevant and enlightening.
- More experts of color will want to work for our organization and contribute to the bodies of work we produce.
- Independent “audits” of the language and images in our published research products will find improvements in respect, equity, and inclusion.

We would argue that no research organization has fully figured out how to effectively implement a structural racism lens in their work and that all institutions interested in making their work more equitable and impactful still have room to grow. As we move forward with these efforts, research organizations should continue to share ideas and strategies and to seek the expertise of others inside and outside our field who have made more progress.

Notes

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- ³ New York University, “Powder vs. Crack: NYU Study Identifies Arrest Risk Disparity for Cocaine Use,” news release, February 19, 2015, <https://www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/news/2015/february/-powder-vs-crack-nyu-study-identifies-arrest-risk-disparity-for-cocaine-use.html>.
- ⁴ Phillips, Katherine W., “How Diversity Makes Us Smarter,” *Scientific American*, 1 October 1, 2014, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-diversity-makes-us-smarter/>.
- ⁵ William R. Emmons, 2018, unpublished transcript from the Structural Racism Roundtable at the Urban Institute, Washington, DC, November 7, 2018.

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