

2021 Annual Poverty Research And Policy Forum Virtual Series: Understanding And Addressing Inequities In Human Services

Hosted by the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Event Summary

As described in the President’s Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government, inequities around race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, sex, and ability continue to create barriers to success and well-being for many individuals and communities in the United States. The field of human services can play a crucial role in advancing equity for these populations, but to do so must identify the ways in which it creates or perpetuates disparities. This Forum investigated how federal, state, and local human services policies, systems and providers contribute to inequitable outcomes, as well as how policy, practice, data, and research can combat systemic inequities created in and outside of human services.

Highlights and key takeaways of the event are summarized below. Presenter slides, event recordings, and other materials are available at: <https://www.irp.wisc.edu/2021-understanding-and-addressing-inequities-in-human-services>

Opening Keynote

Speaker: *Dr. Celeste Watkins-Hayes*, University of Michigan

Presentation Highlights:

- Learnings from the HIV Safety Net supporting individuals with HIV/AIDS through healthcare, economic assistance, social support, and political and civic engagement can be applied to human services to disrupt inequities and help participants improve their lives after individual, institutional, and/or structural trauma.
- Representation and participant voice in investment decisions, policy design and formation and implementation is essential and can act as a crucial accountability tool.
- Programs incentivize what they measure, impacting whether programs work to support or surveil participants.
- Trauma-informed care challenges the narrative of the “difficult client” and provides holistic services to address “injuries of inequity.”

Panel 1: Understanding and Addressing Inequities from a Systems Level Perspective

Participants:

- Racial/Ethnic Inequities: **Bradley Hardy**, Georgetown University
- Inequities based on Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation: **Ellen Kahn**, Senior Director, Human Rights Campaign
- Inequities by Ability: **Kimberly Mills**, The Virgin Islands University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities

- Moderator: **Margaret Simms**, Urban Institute

Discussion Highlights:

- Weaker state safety nets, particularly for TANF and Unemployment Insurance, are, on average, more likely to be located in regions with a higher proportion of Black residents.
 - Strengthening the safety net, including EITC and child tax credit expansions, will require acknowledging regional disparities, administrative burdens, and biases.
- A lack of Federal protections and standards for human services organizations, patchwork state and municipal protections, and unstandardized data collection, facilitate long-standing inequities by sexual orientation and gender identity.
 - Disrupting inequities will require more equitable employment practices, leadership and accountability, inclusive data collection and protections, and robust outreach and community engagement.
- Unique barriers faced in U.S. territories complicate serving people with disabilities. Disparities rooted in historical racism contribute to inequities in funding, infrastructure challenges, and lack of territorial capacity, which all prevent equitable access to preventative care and early intervention and coordinated care service models.
 - Equalizing territories' funding to that of states and deepening partnerships with U.S. Departments can provide more resources and services to address inequities.

Panel 2: Understanding and Addressing Inequities from a Direct Service Level Perspective

Participants:

- Racial/Ethnic Inequities: **Drayton Jackson**, Dismantle Poverty in WA
- Inequities by Ability: **Maria Martinez**, Pueblo Brain Injury
- Inequities based on Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation: **Terra Russell-Slavin**, Los Angeles LGBT Center
- Moderator: **Bernadine Futrell**, Office of Head Start

Discussion Highlights:

- Lessons and successes from the Dismantle Poverty in Washington Poverty Reduction Work Group reinforce the importance of meaningfully including impacted communities in policy making and data analysis to help pose the most useful research questions and provide expert analysis and recommendations.
- Promoting equity for LGBTQ+ populations begins with inclusive and person-centered language, and necessitates robust funding and data collection, an intolerance for discrimination, and increased cultural responsiveness that is embedded in all levels of government and grantees.
- Rural inequities, from physical inaccessibility to internet connectivity limitations and insufficient funding, complicate serving people with disabilities in rural areas.
 - Strategies to address these issues include integrated service delivery to reduce administrative burdens, increased education of human services providers to promote cultural competency, and funded peer support programs to increase service accessibility and empower participants.

Panel 3: Understanding and Addressing Inequities in Data and Research

Participants:

- **Jenita Parekh**, Child Trends
- **Amy Hawn-Nelson**, University of Pennsylvania
- **Krista Thomas**, Chapin Hall, University of Chicago
- Discussant: **Sharrica Miller**, California State University, Fullerton
- Moderator: **Kirk O'Brien**, Casey Family Programs

Discussion Highlights:

- Advancing racial equity through research requires an examination of backgrounds and biases and a commitment to digging deeper into the data.
 - Inclusive research design necessitates genuine and substantive partnerships with communities and cautions against the assumption that “white” is the normative or default position.
- Data sharing is as relational as it technical, as we also need to integrate people and everyone can do something to center racial equity in data.
 - It is important to embed equity throughout systems and across all elements of the research process: planning, data collection and access, use of algorithms and statistical tools, data analysis, and reporting and dissemination.
- Engaging impacted communities from the start of the research process helps identify problems which need to truly be solved, how key constructs should be defined and measured, and how data can be responsibly and respectfully collected.
 - Leaders and decision-makers have the ability to identify and address inequities in research and evaluations when conceptualizing research needs, commissioning requests for proposals, conducting the research, and using the findings.

Breakout Room Discussions

- Engaging people excluded from historical knowledge production in the research process requires addressing the disconnect between research funding timelines and the time needed to form trusting relationships as well as reorienting historical power dynamics and structures.
- Disseminating equitable research into policy and practice entails cultural translations, accessible language, and targeted outreach efforts.
- Additional federal guidance, including how to measure equity and data collection and accountability tools, can help states, tribes, and territories meaningfully address inequities.
- Moving past colorblind policies helps acknowledge and address the unique needs of various populations facing historical barriers, particularly for participants with intersectional identities.

Closing Keynote

Speaker: *Steven Lopez*, Counselor to the Secretary, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

- Equity remains a top priority for the Biden-Harris Administration and Secretary Becerra and HHS, as evidenced by government wide planning and action to identify and address inequities, including through specific HHS related efforts such as the COVID-19 Health Equity Task Force and the newly established HHS Office of Climate Change and Health Equity,

- Silos between the health and human services sectors can reinforce inequities, and HHS remains committed to expanding collaboration across agencies and with partners across the country.
- Conversations such as these and hearing directly from on-the-ground actors and people with lived experience, drive more equitable federal research, policy, and practice.