



Open Data for Racial Equity: A Project of the Center for Open Data Enterprise

SUMMARY

The [Center for Open Data Enterprise](#) (CODE) has launched a program on *Open Data for Racial Equity*. CODE, whose mission is to maximize the value of open and shared data for the public good, believes that better public data will be critical to identify gaps in racial equity and devise data-driven solutions. This program will address equity in five focus areas: policing and criminal justice, environmental justice, fair housing, healthcare access, and economic and workforce opportunity. For each of these areas, CODE will produce a public Briefing Paper, host a public Webinar, conduct a virtual Roundtable with 70-80 experts, and publish a Summary Report with recommendations. The program will leverage opportunities provided by the Biden administration's commitment to racial equity and data-driven decision making.

CODE is now actively seeking partnerships for this program, including government agencies, nonprofit organizations, publishing partners, and funders. Interested parties can contact CODE's president, Joel Gurin, at joel@odenterprise.org.

BACKGROUND

The current administration presents an unprecedented opportunity to do research and provide recommendations that can shape government data policy and data use in the interest of equity. President Joe Biden has committed to making racial equity one of his administration's top priorities. He has issued Executive Orders to address [discriminatory housing practices](#), review [racial discrimination](#) in government actions, eliminate Federal [private prisons](#), and address the outside impact of [COVID-19 on minority communities](#). In these and other Executive Orders, the President has emphasized the importance of using data from Federal and other sources to make rapid progress. Perhaps of most significance, the President has committed to establishing an [Equitable Data Working Group](#) to improve Federal data programs in order to "measure equity and capture the diversity of the American people."

The Biden administration has simultaneously prioritized racial equity and committed to expanding the use of data for decision making across all Federal programs. The continued implementation of the [Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act](#) and the [Federal Data Strategy](#) help provide a framework for a data-driven approach to achieving racial equity.

CODE has launched a program on *Open Data for Racial Equity*, described in this [Government Executive](#) article, to address five areas where data-driven research, insights, and application can lead to more equitable policies and practices. We hope that our work in each of these areas can help inform and support government leaders and stakeholders with a commitment to racial equity. Our areas of focus are:

- Policing and criminal justice
- Environmental justice
- Fair housing
- Healthcare access
- Economic and workforce opportunity

CODE's projects in each of these areas will evaluate existing data sources, review gaps and challenges in the relevant data, highlight high-priority use cases of data application, and identify opportunities to improve data for equity and put it to better use.

CODE's program will be built around a series of five Roundtables. Each will bring together a wide range of stakeholders including government officials at the national, state, and local levels, community leaders, nonprofit organizations, business leaders, and academics. Like CODE's other Roundtables with the White House and a wide range of Federal agencies, [described in this brief video](#) on CODE's website, each Roundtable in this series will include four components:

- A *Briefing Paper* providing an overview of data in this field. For an example, see [CODE's January 2021 report on policing data](#), the first published report in this program.
- A *Public Webinar* that will include a keynote address from a Federal official and several lightning talks from experts sharing data-driven solutions.
- The *Roundtable* itself, a day of action-oriented Breakout Discussion Sessions with diverse participants, including a summary of highlights for all participants at the end of the day.
- A *Summary Report* of the Roundtable's findings and CODE's recommendations for action.

CODE's Roundtables have visibility and impact beyond the 70-80 government and non-government leaders who attend the event itself. CODE's public Webinars can attract a thousand or more viewers both live and in recorded form. CODE has regularly published articles about its Roundtables and related work in *The Hill*, *Government Executive*, and *FedScoop*. CODE also has published Roundtable recommendations and high-level findings for additional input on crowdsourcing websites.

As racial equity continues to grow as a major national focus, many organizations are developing expertise in the different areas that CODE plans to cover. CODE is now in discussions with several organizations to partner on this program, including:

- *Nonprofit organizations* with deep expertise in different focus areas.
- *Federal agencies* with authority in different focus areas. CODE has found that Federal partnerships for its Roundtables increase participation, visibility, and impact. CODE has established relationships with data leaders in many of the departments and agencies relevant to this program.
- *Publishing partners* who can amplify CODE's findings.

DESCRIPTIONS OF FOCUS AREAS

Focus Area 1: Policing and Criminal Justice

With increasing nationwide calls for both police reform and a better understanding of institutionalized racism, there is an urgent need for data to provide insight on police involvement and violence in

marginalized communities. Groups like [Campaign Zero](#) and the [Mapping Police Violence Project](#) have compiled important datasets on law enforcement activity and police reform. Despite these efforts, however, policing data currently remains sparse, decentralized, and inconsistent around the United States.

Better data is needed to understand the deep structural, systemic, and institutional problems that surround the police presence in Black and Brown communities. Data shows that African Americans are more likely than white Americans to be arrested, convicted, and experience lengthier prison sentences than other groups. As police officers are routinely dispatched to 911 calls, they may escalate problematic interactions when they respond to incidents with individuals experiencing homelessness, mental health crises, or domestic disputes. At the same time, police may not be protecting communities adequately from the real risks of violence they face.

To reduce violence in minority communities, we need data-driven solutions that include analyzing socioeconomic factors related to community violence, the behavior of police, and alternatives to police action. The Roundtable on criminal justice in this program will address ways to provide better data resources to communities as they move to improve police accountability, reform their police departments, and find community-driven ways to reduce the threat of violence.

Focus Area 2: Environmental Justice

Communities of color are disproportionately impacted by environmental hazards, including both long-time environmental pollutants and the more recent risks associated with climate change. Recent [studies](#) have shown that minority communities are disproportionately located near toxic waste sites, with nearly three out of five Black and Latinx Americans living in the vicinity of a Superfund site. These problems have deep historical roots as city planners intentionally created redlining not only to segregate Black and white communities, but also to locate heavy industry and toxic sites within minority neighborhoods. The location of industry also relates to climate hazards: Many urban heat islands [are located](#) in neighborhoods with large African-American and low-income populations.

In addition to heat islands and toxic sites, many Black communities are located in areas at risk of hazards like hurricanes and flooding. Large metropolitan areas are regularly impacted by flooding as aging sewer systems are overwhelmed and concrete surfaces are impervious to flooding. For example, after Hurricane Harvey made landfall in Houston, the neighborhood that suffered the most flooding damage was a section of Southwest Houston where half of the residents are Black. According to a [recent analysis](#), flood insurance payments demonstrate that flooding tends to harm African-American communities disproportionately.

In June 2021, CODE co-hosted a Roundtable with NOAA on *Data for Climate Risk Assessment in Vulnerable Communities* (see our [Briefing Paper](#) and [Webinar](#)) that helps provide a basis for further work. NOAA and other Federal agencies are now working to implement President Biden's recent [Executive Order to address the climate crisis](#), which took the important step of establishing an Office of Climate Change and Health Equity. Efforts are under way to revive and expand data-driven programs like the [EJ SCREEN: Environmental Justice and Mapping Tool](#), and the [Justice40 Initiative](#) is focusing Federal funding on the needs of vulnerable communities. The Roundtable in the *Open Data for Racial Equity* series will build on these efforts to explore data-driven solutions for environmental and climate justice and the roles of Federal and local government.

Focus Area 3: Fair Housing

COVID-19 has led to disastrous economic consequences for many Americans, and as a result has caused communities of color to face especially high rates of unemployment, mortgage default, and eviction risk. In summer 2020, [thousands of eviction filings in Florida and Georgia](#) primarily targeted minority and low-income neighborhoods. These risks are related to a long history of racial discrimination.

[Steering](#), redlining, and [mortgage lending](#) discrimination are all examples of discriminatory housing practices that impact people of color in the U.S. The act of ‘steering,’ in which a real estate agent uses words or actions to influence prospective consumers, has been shown to deny good housing to [disproportionately high](#) numbers of minority households in poverty, and contributes to the gap in intergenerational income mobility between Black and white households. Redlining, another common practice in which residents are denied financial services based on racial characteristics of a community, was designed to segregate America’s [housing stock](#) and is still an ongoing practice.

The Biden administration now has an opportunity to strengthen longstanding data-driven tools to fight housing discrimination. The [Fair Housing Act](#) (FHA) is a civil-rights era Federal law that prohibits discrimination against people seeking housing assistance based on race, color, national origin, and other factors, and is administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The [Home Mortgage Disclosure Act](#) (HMDA), administered by the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB), requires financial institutions to maintain, report, and publicly disclose loan-level information on mortgages. Together, FHA and HMDA can ensure that data is available to expose housing discrimination and remedy it. The Roundtable on housing in this program will explore the current state of data-driven programs for fair housing and ways to improve the use of data to ensure this basic right.

Focus Area 4: Healthcare Access

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted how Black Americans and other people of color have a disproportionately high risk of adverse health outcomes, including much higher rates of severe COVID-19 infection and death than their white counterparts. In addressing the pandemic, public health experts and policymakers have become increasingly focused on the [social determinants of health](#) (SDOH), a wide range of socioeconomic and other factors that are related to health risk. SDOH data enables policymakers to analyze healthcare disparities across communities and understand health inequities. Factors like a poor neighborhood environment, substandard housing, limited access to healthy food, and other social determinants are closely intertwined with lack of access to high-quality healthcare. The Roundtable for this program will build on two previous Roundtables on the SDOH co-hosted by CODE and HHS (information is available [here](#)) and a third being planned for August 2021.

While the SDOH apply to Americans of all races and ethnicities, SDOH data can be an especially important tool to understand and address issues of racial equity in healthcare. In particular, SDOH data can help identify factors that can interfere with healthcare access and the relation of race to those factors. Access to healthcare is both an important determinant of health in its own right, and a necessary means to addressing other SDOH through coordination with public services. The SDOH factors that impact healthcare access range from income and education to structural factors like poor public transportation and lack of healthcare facilities, which may disproportionately affect minority communities.

The Roundtable for this program will also examine data-driven solutions to reduce bias in the healthcare system. Access to healthcare is not enough: Healthcare needs to be delivered in ways that are free of racial bias. Government agencies including HHS and academic and nonprofit groups are now assessing

bias in healthcare and ways to prevent it, including such factors as inequitable rates of hospitalization, algorithmic bias in clinical decision support programs, and bias in the treatment of Sickle Cell Disease. By addressing data that relates to both healthcare access and bias in healthcare, this Roundtable will analyze and develop recommendations on racial equity in healthcare from diverse perspectives.

Focus Area 5: Economic and Workforce Opportunity

Access to good jobs, and the education and training to qualify for them, are keys to reducing racial economic disparities. These opportunities depend on data: data about job skills, educational opportunity, and hiring and employment practices. Recent years have seen government and private-sector efforts to improve critical data in all three areas.

The Federal government can work with businesses and state governments to collect better earnings and employment data to shed light on pay, promotion, and hiring practices, and workforce composition. Such efforts could have a major impact on ensuring equity in the workplace and correcting hiring and employment bias where it exists. For example, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) has launched its E-Race initiative to identify issues, barriers, and criteria that can contribute to discriminative actions.

Job skills data, a priority of many workplace reform efforts, need to be improved to ensure alignment between individual job seekers, employers, and educational and training institutions. All three parties need to use the same job skills descriptions and data to ensure that an individual's skills meet the requirements of a specific job, and that their education and training will fill any gaps. The Department of Labor can play a critical role by accelerating efforts to improve [O*NET](#), the government's Occupational Information Network. Descriptions of job categories on O*NET need to be thoroughly updated to reflect the current skills demanded in the marketplace.

On the education front, we need better data, and better data standards, to ensure that the training provided by educational and credentialing organizations will match employers' needs. This is particularly important for Black and Latinx students, who are less likely than whites to graduate from four-year colleges and more likely to rely on other forms of education and job training. The Department of Education can also encourage more minority students to attend college by making data on scholarship opportunities readily available and accessible to them.

The Roundtable in this program will address all these aspects of workforce opportunity and ways to develop data-driven solutions.