Equitable Recovery Assessment

Toolkit

National Resource Network
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Equitable Recovery Assessment Toolkit

In March 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic took hold in the United States, public health emergency measures triggered widespread and immediate shutdowns that triggered immediate economic crisis. Characterized as falling off an economic cliff, the downturn was unprecedented in both its speed and intensity. As the pandemic’s health impacts took hold and accelerated in the subsequent months, it became apparent that economic recovery would need to be targeted to critical concerns related to job loss due to extended business closures, and housing instability related to wage reductions and losses. The pandemic brought new attention to the faltering childcare sector, disparities related to broadband access and the digital divide, and a workforce divided between essential and non-essential classes of jobs. As infection rates, hospitalizations and deaths increased, it became clear that COVID-19 was disproportionately impacting Black, Latinx, Indigenous and low-income communities, exposing deep racial and socioeconomic disparities that predated the pandemic. The pandemic did not cause them but exacerbated and illuminated pre-existing disparities in cities and communities across the country.

What is Equitable Recovery?

Equitable recovery enhances economic recovery. It seeks to address the racial and socioeconomic disparities illuminated by the pandemic and centers the hardest hit groups in recovery efforts. Prioritizing equitable recovery requires developing an economic vision that is inclusive, sustainable, and collaborative. It also requires embracing diversity and broadening opportunity for communities that have been historically left behind. Achieving equitable outcomes will pose challenges and will push local leaders and community partners to address historical income, wealth and employment gaps between White and Non-white households to ensure the city’s long-term prosperity. Equitable recovery will require new solutions to meet the urgency of the time and to improve the inequities of the past. Throwing the same old solutions at entrenched problems and expecting different results is unlikely to work.

Why Conduct an Equitable Recovery Assessment?

The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and the CARES Act offer unprecedented opportunities to leverage federal resources for equitable recovery. Federal funds can be used to support targeted investment in structurally disadvantaged communities. The scale of federal funding allows for innovative approaches to ongoing emergency response and longer-term recovery efforts. To ensure that funding is deployed as equitably as possible, cities and community partners should engage in inclusive planning and implementation processes to identify goals, priorities, metrics and tracking mechanisms to ensure measurable progress towards equitable outcomes. Strategic planning should start with an Equitable Recovery Assessment to gain insight into baseline conditions and ensure that recovery is not a return to status quo, but rather an opportunity to rebuild better by closing pre-existing disparities. A data and stakeholder-informed approach is necessary to ensure that programs and policies are appropriately targeted and aligned to achieve maximum impact. Ultimately, Equitable Recovery Assessment should inspire cross-sector collective action to ensure that an inclusive vision is achieved, and communities of color thrive throughout recovery and beyond.

The scale of ARPA funding allocations enables cities to replenish depleted funds in existing programs, and – more importantly – provides leverage for broader cross-sector work to address critical community needs. The COVID crisis has highlighted the urgency in taking decisive and cross-cutting action to address the root causes of entrenched inequities. For the first time in a generation, cities have the resources to take a comprehensive
approach to addressing longstanding racial and economic disparities. This is the time for cities to issue a collective call to action.

**Equitable Recovery Assessment Approach and Methodology**

The Equitable Recovery Assessment approach has been designed to help cities and community partners uncover local contexts and challenges that underly existing racial and socioeconomic disparities in your communities. It is an inquiry-based approach that recognizes that no two cities and communities are the same, and that the most effective program and policy solutions will be those grounded in local realities. It recognizes that equity is not a fixed destination or singular dimension. It is directional and dependent on a community’s starting point, defined by the community’s priorities and self-determination, and tied to specific needs and opportunities.

An equitable recovery for cities is built on six key principles:

- **Equitable recovery places black and brown communities, low-income households, small businesses, and children at the center.** It begins with respect, works to gain trust, and builds on community priorities and strengths. Many of these communities—often deemed essential, yet economically vulnerable have been hardest hit.
- **Equitable recovery is built on cross-sector solutions.** These crises impact multiple sectors—from housing and food security, to employment and local businesses, to mental health and city budgets. The challenges compound each other, and effective solutions are integrated.
- **Equitable recovery builds on successful emergency response activities** and any equitable pre-COVID practices, and these successes are integrated into standard practice moving forward.
- **Equitable recovery addresses acute fiscal challenges in communities,** as recovery requires solvency. Effective financial planning invests in equitable outcomes.
- **Equitable recovery leverages and aligns funding so that each dollar has multiple impacts**—supporting food secure households better connecting through improved broadband access in healthy homes, more accessible to good schools and jobs, in thriving communities.
- **Equitable recovery addresses pre-existing inequities** that led African American, Latinx, low-income and other groups to be more vulnerable to the negative health and economic impacts of COVID-19. Equitable recovery does more than just return to the pre-COVID baseline.

Equitable Recovery Assessments apply a systematic approach to the assessment process that includes quantitative data collection, interviews with key leaders, and the development of a tailored set of findings and analysis for each city or community. This is a holistic approach that builds on local expertise and provides cross-disciplinary insights in four impact areas: housing instability, local economic development, workforce development, and school-community connections. Within each impact area, the assessment draws on initial review of baseline conditions in the city and builds on qualitative data collected through interviews and focus group with key stakeholders.

**Equitable Recovery Impact Areas**

The breadth and scale of the COVID-19 economic crisis is unprecedented in our history. Driving towards economic recovery will require cross-sector collaborations and a shared commitment to achieving equitable outcomes. This toolkit draws on experience assessing cities across the country and identifies critical impact areas where strategic planning, cross-sector investment and collaboration will be essential to equitable recovery. While some of these impact areas are commonly incorporated into policy making, others have come to the forefront during the COVID crisis, with new urgency pushing cross-sector partners to act in unfamiliar...
areas and collaborations to address critical recovery needs. As cities look ahead to recovering equitably, there is need for collective action to address the following impact areas:

**Housing Stability:** COVID has exacerbated and illuminated the existing instabilities in the housing sector, as well as disparate impacts on neighborhoods and residents. In addition to immediate relief and eviction prevention, equitable recovery presents an opportunity to rethink city housing strategies and better align them with the economic, labor, and education systems.

**Equitable Access to Child Care & Youth Services:** Childcare access effects a household’s ability to participate in education and employment. Early education and childcare providers are an often-vulnerable population whose income stability has been shaken by the pandemic. Public programs to provide afterschool and weekend programs to school-aged children have limited resources to expand programming to safely meet families’ needs. Continued access to these essential services will be critical to equitable economic recovery as individuals return to school and work.

**Equitable Access to Quality Jobs:** COVID displaced and interrupted education and career pathways for many individuals, particularly those in low-wage or hourly jobs such as hospitality, retail, and food service. Those working in jobs designated as “essential” often experienced greater impacts on the health and stability during closures. Urgent attention is needed to support and reskill those displaced while work is done to develop accelerated pathways to obtain valuable skills and quality jobs for future resilience.

**Civic Investment in Equity:** Federal funding is critical to bolster flagging local revenues in order to support services essential to community health and stability (e.g., transportation, food distribution, social services). However, even with federal resources, local governments cannot recover alone; they will need to develop strong and visionary relationships with private, philanthropic, and nonprofit partners to develop a collaborative and collective response to the economic crisis.

**Sustaining Small Businesses:** COVID-19 has had a detrimental impact on small businesses, particularly retail, personal care, and restaurants, including many minority and immigrant-owned businesses. Minority and immigrant-owned small businesses often face barriers to accessing federal and local financial support. Reaching underserved business owners and entrepreneurs will require intentional efforts to build relationships, trust, and credibility. Partnership with community organizations and affinity groups is critical to sustaining small businesses through recovery.

**How to Use This Toolkit**

The Equitable Recovery Assessment approach is intended to be cross-cutting and holistic. To that end, the toolkit has been organized into four sections – economic development, housing stability, workforce development, and education & youth services – representing the complex and often interconnected sectors that drive community progress. It is advisable for cities and community partners to engage in the assessment process to examine the policies, practices, and programs across sectors and between impact areas that can move cities towards their goals for equitable recovery. For instance, the downturn in the childcare industry crosses into the workforce, local economic development, and education sectors, and even housing stability in situations where childcare businesses are home-based. While a sector-specific assessment is possible, reviewing the presence of and responses to this impact area, and others, across sectors can provide a deeper understanding of the issue and elevate opportunities for a more intentional and coordinated response.

Each of the following sections includes an introduction that provides framing and an overview of the assessment process within that sector. It then presents an inquiry-based approach to gathering quantitative and qualitative data to establish your community’s equity baseline, informed by local context, and provides guidance for
analyzing the data. From there, each section includes suggestions for interviews and focus groups to support the assessment and sample protocols that provide a starting point for your conversations. Throughout the assessment process, keep the following concepts in mind as you investigate diverse perspectives and communicate your findings.

**Adopt a Racial Equity Lens**
In recent years, many cities and communities have witnessed a racial reckoning, confronted by the public to recognize pervasive racism and take accountability for the treatment of marginalized communities. In cities across the country this began several conversations on the changes needed to create a more just society and implement the right reforms and investments to rebuild equitably. Adopting a racial equity lens within your assessment acknowledges the uneven impact of COVID-19 on lower-income and Black and Brown communities, and positions investment in improvements at the heart of long-term prosperity for your city.

**Be Open to Alternate Experiences & Truths**
As you work with leaders, focus groups, and community representatives, you should determine if there is a common language or baseline understanding around your community’s current challenges and priorities moving forward. Assess the areas that stakeholders perceive inequity does exist and their willingness to respond or elevate concerns. Validate focus group and community interview findings against the experiences of program administrators and assess existing metrics at a high level – if metrics do not account for gaps in service delivery or community outcomes, it may demonstrate that racism is operative in ways we may not see but can almost always feel. Your assessment may elevate opportunities for strategic investments that support an equitable recovery.

**Recognize Knowledge Gaps**
Greater equity and inclusion cannot be achieved without an understanding of the most marginalized segments of your community. Unfortunately, the experiences of these groups are often unaccounted for in local and regional statistics. In pursuit of an equitable recovery, you should acknowledge the limitations of current practices and commit to closing the gap between programmatic theories and residents’ lived experiences. With the incredible amount of federal resources currently being made available to cities, the concern around implementation is not necessarily funding but coordination and bold thinking when responding to community needs. Fragmented initiatives, conflicting findings, and duplicated efforts will not yield desired outcomes. With updated data collection and sharing, decisionmakers can begin to close the gaps in service delivery and identify new indicators of change, opportunities for program development, and potential policy interventions. In many cases, the lack of clarity on current actions can become a starting point for future problem solving.

**Amplify Partnership Opportunities**
While a considerable portion of relief dollars is intended to address city budget shortfalls through 2024, millions will go to external partners (e.g., school districts, counties, states) who have the internal capacity, community relationships, and strategic vision to stand up an equitable recovery. Bringing these entities together to leverage available dollars and invest in what communities need should be the primary goal for equitable recovery planning. City departments and mayoral offices are often uniquely positioned to facilitate this planning process, serving as a convener of key stakeholders with the genuine interest in building community resilience to future challenges.
Economic Development

Traditionally, economic development activities have prioritized growth over equity. Focused at the regional scale, traditional economic development prioritizes business attraction and retention. Success is measured by jobs gained and lost, and the size of employers lured, or retained, in the area. While these efforts remain important – particularly for large scale industries and sectors that benefit from clustered services, logistics and supply chains – COVID-19 public health measures hit small and local businesses particularly hard and focusing on these businesses presents the greatest opportunity for cities to recover from the economic fallout of the pandemic.

Investing in small businesses, particularly minority-owned businesses, is critical to addressing structural disparities and promoting an equitable economy. Growing jobs and businesses from within creates the opportunity for cities to focus directly on equitable economic development outcomes. Cities and community partners can tailor programs and outreach to meet the specific needs of the local business community, and so provide a platform for Black, Latinx, immigrant and women-owned businesses to grow and expand. At the same time, local economic development offers the greatest opportunity for investment to stay in the community and strengthen neighborhood and central business districts that have been hit hardest by COVID.

National data indicate that small Black, Latinx, immigrant and women-owned businesses receive a smaller percentage of business lending and supports. For instance, in the months following the start of the COVID-19 crisis, national data showed that businesses owned by people of color faced disproportionate barriers to accessing federal CARES Act funding due to the program’s initial reliance on depositary institutions and banks which had a history of racially discriminatory lending practices. This speaks to a need for cities and community partners to prioritize efforts to ensure that local funds are equitably distributed. Many cities have identified communication and education gaps as major barriers preventing small business owners from accessing support and implemented an array of tactics to break down barriers. Key to this has been leveraging informal and formal networks to broadcast city emergency relief programs, utilizing a hands-on approach to overcoming technical and digital barriers faced by owners, simplifying application requirements, and leveraging community ambassadors as liaisons and translators for immigrant communities. Cities prioritizing equitable recovery have also investigated long-seated barriers for minority, immigrant, and women-owned businesses – e.g., lack of capital and procurement opportunities – that have been further exacerbated by the pandemic. Additional outreach and focus has also been prioritized for entrepreneurs with home-based businesses who
were not eligible for local relief programs due to lack of formal documentation.

Intentionally targeting outreach, communications, and program dollars to supporting these businesses presents an opportunity for the City and its community partners to invest in place and people at the same time. There isn’t a one-size-fits-all program model to support local business investment, so it is critical that cities conduct an assessment of local business community needs at the start of the program design process to ensure that programs and interventions meet the real needs of businesses and can begin to address investment disparities.

**The State of Economic Development in Your City**

The first step in assessing equitable recovery in the local economy is to gather baseline data. By digging in to find answers to key questions, you will be able to get a clear picture about the current state of the local economy, which will provide the basis for developing programs and policies to support equitable recovery. Gathering data will require both publicly available data and local data collected by the City, County, local agencies, or partner organization, which may or may not be available online. Data should include both quantitative measures (e.g., number of businesses by industry/sectors, business revenue, employment, business license/permits, lending by partner organizations, etc.), and qualitative insights gathered through interviews, focus groups and surveys of the local business community. Gathering regional data will be important to highlight broad patterns affecting the region, and local data will provide insight into the recovery needs of local businesses.

Often, data are unavailable – they may not be collected at all, or they may be proprietary and not accessible to support the assessment process. In these cases, the lack of available data is, in itself, data. In many cities, the first step in gaining clarity about local economic needs is to create a data gathering systems and partnerships to support investments in ongoing data maintenance and tracking.

**Quantitative Data: Establishing Your Community’s Baseline**

**Industry and Employment**

Regional data help set the context for small business assistance. Economic activity is rarely confined to city boundaries, and many economic data are reported at the region and state levels. In many cases – particularly for small and mid-sized cities – economic data are reported at the Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) level and are listed according to the largest city in the area.

Key questions for investigation:

- What sectors have seen job/establishment/wage growth or decline?
- Which sectors in the city show growth relative to the region or state?
- What has been the overall employment trend for the city and region over the last decade?
• What do the employment data tell you about which industries are thriving or struggling in your city and/or region? (measured by percent change over time)
• What do the data tell you about the pandemic’s impact on regional industries? (measured through comparison of percent change between 2019 and 2020, and 2021 as data become available)
• Which industries were hit the hardest as measured by employment decline? (measured by percent change between 2019 and 2020, and 2021 as data become available)

The following are key data sources that can help you find answers to your questions. Economic development data are often reported at the Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), rather than the city level, which is particularly important for medium and smaller sized cities, and rural areas.

• MSA Total Non-farm Employment 2010-2019 (Annual Averages)
• MSA Employment by Industry 2010 vs. 2020
• MSA Employment by Industry 2019 vs. 2020 (get 2021 if you can)
• Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Employment Statistics (Not Seasonally Adjusted)

Figure 1: Sample MSA Employment by Industry. Enterprise Community Partners.
Local Business Context

Cities and local governments often collect data about their local businesses through a local business registry. This data can provide valuable information to support the Equitable Recovery Assessment, since local governments may have deeper insights into their local businesses in terms of business start-ups/closures, seasonality, and owner characteristics, including race, ethnicity, or gender. Data provide insights into key metrics for assessing both economic recovery and urgent needs to remedy existing equity challenges. Often these data are collected and maintained by cities through small business permitting or licensing processes.

Key questions to investigate:

- Does the City collect local business data? If so, how many businesses are there? What share of the economy do small businesses represent? Where are these small businesses located and what are their characteristics (including industry/sector, ownership status, size, employees, and capacity)?
- Where are MWBEs located (with respect to neighborhood opportunity)? How do their employment levels and revenue compare to other businesses?
- How does rate of minority-owned businesses compare to racial distribution as a whole? What about for small business/entrepreneurs regardless of MWBE status?
- Does the City have a local procurement policy? Does the City have an MWBE vendor list and related procurement policy?
- Does the City have a local hiring policy? Does the City have stated diversity targets for hiring across all departments?
- Does the City have records of grants issued to local businesses, available funding, and grantees over the last 5 years? Does the city have any record of
how many of the grants have gone to MWBEs (certified or non-certified) local small businesses? How was funding distributed geographically?

- Are there any special programs or policies targeted at minority or women-owned businesses promoted by the city or state government?
- How are private investment flows to small business (CRA lending, CDFI lending, SBA Business loans) distributed geographically across the city?

If your City doesn’t collect these data, then one of the key recommendations will be to put measures and procedures in place to start. Having no data is a data point about the City’s ability to really understand and measure equitable investment, funding, and resource allocation over time.

**Understanding COVID impacts on local businesses**

Quantifying COVID’s impact on local small businesses can be challenging due to lack of real time, publicly accessible data. Available data will typically come from either the City or community partners who administer grants and programs for local businesses. As mentioned previously, the lack of data is data! If the data are not currently collected, then one of the first steps will be to put measures in place to collect and share data in the future to measure progress towards achieving equitable outcomes.

- Is there data tracking local business closures since March 2020? Is there data about how many of these firms were MWBEs (certified or non-certified)? Is there data about how many were classified as “working self-employed”?
- How much CARES Act funding and other federal grant funding were issued to local businesses (e.g., PPP, etc.)? Do the data indicate how many of these firms were MWBEs (certified or non-certified)? How was this funding distributed geographically?
- What was the City/local jurisdiction’s policy and program response to COVID (e.g., small business supports/outreach, microloans, restaurants grants, loans, etc.)? How was this funding distributed geographically?

Ask your community partners – gathering detailed small business data may require reaching out to community partners for assistance. Although they may not be available, it is worth asking to gain helpful insights into potential implementation opportunities and cross-sector partnerships to support recovery.

- Is there a list of grant recipients from local CDCs, CDFIs, Business Improvement District (BIDs) and other local business funders?
- Is there a list of local funding programs available to small businesses and entrepreneurs, and funding available to them?
- Is there a list of partner organizations who fund or provide program support for small businesses in the city? (e.g., incubators, CDFIs, Small Business Administration (SBA) offices, Chamber of Commerce, local credit unions, etc.)

**Analyzing Quantitative Data**
After working through the quantitative data questions above, take a look at what the data show. The goal is to use the quantitative data to get an objective look at what small businesses in your city are experiencing and to assess the effectiveness of local programs and policies.

And remember – having no data to a question IS DATA. Part of your analysis is to recognize where there are data gaps, and where key measures are lacking. The quantitative data have provided the skeleton and framing for the qualitative investigation that follows.

- What do the quantitative data tell you about the local business ecosystem in your city?
- What do the data indicate about possible disparities between MWBEs and the wider business community?
- What knowledge gaps remain?
- Are there other ways to gather quantitative data to fill gaps or dig deeper into the issue?
- Do the data suggest any interventions by local government or community partners at this point?

Qualitative Data: Understanding Your Community’s Context

Quantitative data provide a solid foundation for understanding the local economic development conditions in a city and surrounding region. They bring objectivity to the analysis that can clarify challenges and illuminate areas of concern or “blind spots” that local leaders should address as recovery moves forward. However, quantitative data alone often miss important local considerations and context that are critical to developing policy and program solutions tailored to needs of the local business community.

Qualitative data provide community input necessary to develop effective interventions and supports to ensure equitable economic recovery. They are the key to tailoring solutions to fit your city. These data are collected through stakeholder engagement, and should be informed by the questions, gaps and insights discovered through the quantitative data gathering process. Stakeholder engagement also provides an important opportunity to listen for details that are not included in quantitative data measures, which are important for prioritizing racial equity outcomes in the future. For instance, stakeholders may provide insights into culturally appropriate outreach methods and programs that community partners have developed to support small businesses and local investment. Alternately, stakeholders may uncover areas of bias that negatively impact entrepreneurial activity in the city. Active listening and probing questions are critical to fill in important knowledge gaps in the quantitative data, which in turn will support effective and equitable recovery through policy and program offerings.
Stakeholder engagement in an assessment process generally relies on the following:

**Interviews with key stakeholders** provide insight into priorities, policies and programs that are in process, as well as goals for the future. Interviews should include a mix of city leaders, city department heads, community organizational leaders, implementing agencies and local business leaders.

**Focus groups** provide an opportunity to hear from multiple voices about a particular topic. The ensure that the assessment process expands into the community, is inclusive and enables voices that are often not present in larger community processes. When assessing equity, focus groups are valuable to dig deeper into equity concerns and to ensure that real challenges are uncovered. Focus groups should be tailored to meet local community contexts and needs.

Sample interview protocols are included at the end of this section.

**Qualitative Analysis**

After conducting interviews and gathering qualitative data, take a look at what the data add to your understanding of local economic development conditions and equity concerns. The data gathered through interviews and focus groups will add rich detail and local context to the quantitative data collected earlier. Often, new solutions to old problems are uncovered in these conversations – the key is to listen actively and to dig into the areas where equity issues may be present.

- What do the qualitative data tell you about the local business ecosystem in your city?
- What did you learn through interviews and focus groups about possible disparities between MWBEs and the wider business community?
- How successful have programs and policies been to date? Where are there gaps that future programs and policies should focus?
- What new partners and potential partnerships were uncovered in the interviews and focus groups?
- What new priorities that came to light? New possibilities for solutions or further research?
- Do the data suggest any interventions by local government or community partners at this point?
Interpreting Your Findings

The local experiences and economic context realities learned through interviews and focus groups should determine the city’s path forward, and stakeholders often identify viable solutions that can be implemented in the near term. The goal of conducting an Equitable Recovery Assessment of the local business support ecosystem is to identify both immediate response needs and long-term opportunities to address underlying inequities that limit the city’s economic growth over time. The data should provide a rational for shifting resources to investments that promote equitable economic growth but this is not enough.

Is there a collective vision for equity and economic growth? If the City, community partners and local businesses are unable to articulate a shared vision for inclusive equitable growth, then this highlights the need for additional strategic planning as the city shifts from pandemic crisis response to sustained long-term recovery.

Are there strong and functional partnerships between the local government, regional economic development entities, chambers of commerce and local business networks? Initiatives to bolster local businesses and recovery will require concerted, cross-sector commitment to achieve and sustain equitable outcomes. If local government, economic development, and business leaders are not working in tandem, then long-term recovery will be fragmented and achieving equity unlikely. Next steps should include developing a collective vision and effective cross-sector partnerships.

Are cultural blind spots and community divisions limiting knowledge and access to business support programs? If programs and policies are in place to support equity, but local businesses report a lack of knowledge about them or distrust the lending process, then equitable solutions and next steps are likely related to communications, outreach, and community-organizing rather than program design.

Is there a way to measure the equity impacts of policies and programs over time? If neither the city nor community partners collect detailed business data that is disaggregated by race, gender, immigrant status, and receipt of funding, then it will be challenging to evaluate the effectiveness of equitable recovery initiatives and to course correct over time. Next steps include developing processes to collect and share data across partners to support evaluation and progress towards achieving equitable outcomes.

Pivoting from Assessment to Strategy

The Equitable Recovery Assessment lays the foundation for current and future local economic development efforts. Cities and their community partners should use the assessment process as a tool to drive analysis and guide policies and programs to achieve equity. Assessment interviews often uncover local solutions and contribute to building momentum and buy-in for collective action to create change. Your assessment findings should inform next steps and priorities for short and long-term implementation. As you shift from assessment to strategy, adopt an outcome-driven approach to program and policy design – what are the equity outcomes you want to prioritize, measure, and achieve? Design programs and policies to achieve outcomes. While the easiest path forward may rely on tried-and-true program solutions, focusing on outcomes to guide design is essential to achieving change. Your assessment should be a catalyst for innovation and true systems change.
Sample protocols

Protocols for interviews and focus groups should be tailored to meet the needs of your city and community’s equitable recovery concerns. Ideally, protocols will be designed specifically for each individual, organization, or community group you meet with. This toolkit includes sample protocols to help you get started.

**Sample Interview Protocol for Community Organizations**

- What are the most pressing economic recovery priorities facing your city? Are these new due to COVID or are they long-standing priorities?
- How would you characterize your local economy prior to COVID? What is the reality now? What businesses and industries have been most affected?
- What policies or programs are in place/under discussion to address immediate and longer-term local economic development needs? Do you think that these programs are positioned to address the most pressing economic challenges in the business community? What program and funding gaps remain?
- To what extent has racial equity been centered as part of local response? Who else should be included in discussions and implementation to ensure that racial equity is embedded into local economic planning?
- In planning for an equitable recovery, to what extent has planning, outreach and support been extended to Black, Latinx and women-owned businesses?
- What local economic development initiatives, partnerships and collaborations existed pre-pandemic? Have any new partnerships developed in response to the pandemic and economic crisis?
- Who are the City’s strongest economic and business community partners? Is there regional cross-sector commitment to working collaboratively to achieve equitable outcomes? How would you characterize cross-sector partnerships to support implementation?
- Describe the City’s efforts to engage Black, Latinx, New American and other business owners in recovery planning to date? What have been the strengths of engagement efforts? Challenges? Opportunities for expanding inclusion?
**Sample Interview Protocol for Community Organizations**

1. What are the most pressing economic recovery priorities facing your city and community? Are these new due to COVID or are they long-standing priorities?
2. How would you characterize your local economy and business ecosystem prior to COVID? What is the reality now? What businesses and industries have been most affected?
3. What programs or initiatives are in place/under discussion to address immediate and longer-term local economic development concerns? Do you think that these programs are positioned to address the most pressing economic challenges in the business community? What program gaps remain?
4. To what extent has racial equity been centered as part of local response to the economic crisis? Who should be included in discussions and implementation to ensure that racial equity is embedded into local economic planning?
5. In planning for an equitable recovery, to what extent has planning, outreach and support been extended to Black, Latinx and women-owned businesses? Does your organization prioritize equity in leadership and planning?
6. What local economic development initiatives, partnerships and collaborations existed pre-pandemic? Have any new partnerships developed in response to the pandemic and economic crisis?
7. Is there regional cross-sector commitment to working collaboratively to achieve equitable outcomes? How would you characterize cross-sector/public-private partnerships to support small businesses and local economic recovery?
8. Describe your organization’s efforts to engage Black, Latinx, New American and other business owners in recovery planning to date? What have been the strengths of engagement efforts? Challenges? Opportunities for expanding inclusion?

**Sample Focus Group Protocol for Business Community**

1. What are the most pressing business priorities facing your city and business community? Are these new due to COVID or are they long-standing priorities?
2. How would you characterize the strengths and challenges affecting the local economy and business community prior to COVID? What is the reality now? What businesses and industries have been most affected?
3. What programs or initiatives are available to you/the business community to support recovery? Are there additional concerns or gaps that you think would be helpful to helping local businesses recover and grow?
4. Do you think that the local business community is aware of programs and lending opportunities to support recovery? Are there members of the business community who need additional knowledge, information, and outreach?
5. How would you characterize diversity and racial equity in the local business community? To what extent are diverse voices included in planning and leadership to support local businesses?
6. To what extent has planning, outreach and support been extended to Black, Latinx and women-owned businesses?
7. What local business development initiatives, partnerships and collaborations existed pre-pandemic? Have any new partnerships developed in response to the pandemic and economic crisis?
8. Is there a shared commitment to collaborating to achieve equitable business development and economic outcomes? Are there opportunities to expand inclusion of Black, Latinx, New American and other voices in local economic development efforts?
Housing Stability
Housing Stability

The breadth and scale of the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a once in a generation financial, public health, and economic crisis. These shocks have illuminated existing instabilities in the housing sector, revealing the fragility of communities and individual households. The widespread job and wage losses resulting from extended business disruptions and closures widened the gap between local household earnings and the cost of living. Within weeks of the March 2020 shutdowns, many households fell behind in housing debt payments and fears of eviction and foreclosure grew rampant. Simultaneously, the need for rental assistance and mortgage forbearance stretched state and local service providers and resources thin, challenging the effectiveness of pre-existing models for service delivery. As communities awaited relief packages and re-openings, cities struggled to determine which needs should be addressed immediately (e.g., evictions and housing insecurity) and which needs could be incorporated into long-term recovery (e.g., economic restructuring).

Although the threat of mass evictions and foreclosures as a result of the pandemic has not yet materialized, the United States housing sector continues to fall deeper into an affordable housing crisis. The eviction moratorium provided a temporary stop gap to worsening housing instability fueled by pre-existing factors like gentrification, the wealth gap, and a chronic shortage of housing for the working class and poor. However, housing prices have continued to increase at historic rates throughout the pandemic and those who at historic rates and lower-income households are finding themselves locked out of homeownership, saddled with debt, and at greater risk of losing their own homes or facing increased competition for available units.

The recent availability of federal, state, and local emergency supports has been pivotal to keeping individuals and their families housed, but now program administrators must begin to plan for the scaling back of these resources and address the realities of our nation’s housing crisis and its impact across the income spectrum. As support was distributed to renters, homeowners, and landlords, the crisis revealed gaps in existing housing programs and policies and encouraged decisionmakers to re-evaluate their approach to the challenges experienced by residents. The Equitable Recovery Assessment process presents an opportunity to adopt new priorities and flexibilities to improve programs and deploy relief to the most vulnerable populations, particularly minority and immigrant communities who have been disproportionately hard hit by the pandemic and are more likely to experience discrimination, cost-burden, and homelessness.
The Equitable Recovery Assessment recognizes housing stability as a key indicator of economic and social resilience and encourages stakeholders, practitioners, and decisionmakers to look beyond previous implementation models and begin a dialogue that centers equity across all spectrums of the housing sector. This process requires a critical look at the policies and actions that have resulted in unhealthy, unsafe, and unstable housing situations, simultaneously gauging the willingness of communities to develop targeted solutions that ensure more equitable outcomes. In conducting your own assessment, identify the factors contributing to the housing landscape and the opportunities and barriers to improvement, the process may also examine topics of housing quality, fair housing, new housing production, and low-income assisted housing depending on the unique needs of your community.

The State of Housing in Your City

To begin your assessment of housing stability in a given community, you will need to analyze data and trends about the current experiences of residents across market-rate and subsidized housing, including housing costs, demographic and household characteristics, workforce trends, and development activity. Whether quantitative or qualitative, this information can provide a snapshot of how the housing sector influences local market dynamics and has contributed to the creation of specific policies, systems, and strategies. Within the Equitable Recovery Assessment, these data points will help you understand the gaps between current needs and what products and resources are being provided within a community.

Quantitative Data: Establishing Your Community’s Baseline
Reviewing quantitative data will be particularly helpful in identifying housing conditions prior to the pandemic. These data points can characterize the market area and inform your understanding of demographic and economic factors that influence a community’s housing needs. Expanding this search to city, county, or metropolitan statistical area will further contextualize your findings and off a comparison of events at each level. Gathering quantitative data can be time-consuming and costly, however, there are several organizations and government agencies that publish free, community-based data that can support your search. Some of the most common data sources include:

- **American Community Survey (ACS)** – The U.S. Census Bureau’s ACS helps local officials, community leaders, and businesses understand the changes taking place in their communities. It is the primary source for detailed population and housing information in the nation.
- **HUD’s Office of Policy Development and Research** – The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD's) Office of Policy Development and Research maintains current information on housing needs, market conditions, and existing programs, as well as conducts research on priority housing and community development issues. The U.S. Housing Market Conditions (USHMC) website and HUD-eGIS Storefront contain national, regional, state, metropolitan, and local data and mapping tools in a detailed and readable narrative.
- **Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing (AFFH) Data and Mapping Tool** – This tool provides access to maps and reports that illustrate segregation trends, areas of
concentrated poverty, disparity in housing needs and access to opportunity, and location and tenant characteristics of publicly supported housing for every HUD entitlement community in the country. Generate maps to support fair housing analysis.

- **Opportunity360**– This tool developed by Enterprise helps analyze barriers to opportunity by census tract, which can be helpful for neighborhood analyses.
- **Local Housing Solutions: Housing Needs Assessment** – Through a partnership with PolicyMap, Local Housing Solutions has created a tool that generates a housing needs assessment report for every US Census jurisdiction in the country.
- **The National Association of Realtors (NAR)** – NAR produces housing statistics on the national, regional, and metro-market level where data is available.
- **Zillow Real Estate Data** – Zillow publishes data on typical home value and market changes across a given region and housing type and includes a variety of housing variables: Home Value and Rent Index, Median list and sale prices, % sold in the last year, etc.

**Key Questions to Investigate**

- What was the state of the housing market prior to the pandemic?
- What does the data tell you about the pandemic’s impact on housing across the region?
- What housing products and/or supports were in greatest demand because of the pandemic?

Data points that contribute to the local housing market can cover a variety of topics with various results depending on the geographic coverage, timeliness of data collection, or what information is publicly available. Wherever possible, disaggregate (i.e., breakdown) the data by the characteristics of interest. For instance, housing affordability might be a useful indicator, but housing affordability by racial group or gender of the head of household tells a more nuanced story, one that is essential for advancing choice and opportunity.¹ To access information on protected classes or marginalized communities, connect with associated organizations and government offices who may have data related to the populations they serve or knowledge on how to interpret the data that is available. Below is a sample table of relevant datapoints that may serve a starting point for your research. Be sure to use the most recently published data sets and compare any percentage changes over time, this information will further characterize your community’s housing conditions and elevate any new trends.

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Qualitative Data: Understanding Your Community’s Context

A comprehensive list of data points does not substitute for a true understanding of local real estate dynamics or housing trends within a city, and where quantitative data is limited or unavailable, qualitative data can identify which kinds of housing solutions can both address needs and are compatible with neighborhood dynamics. As often is the case during emergency response and early stages of recovery, information on the level of impact or scale of need may be unavailable despite enormous social pressure to respond. By hosting community surveys, key informant interviews, focus groups, and community forums, you can better determine the reception of response efforts and begin to identify opportunities for improvement. Priority topic areas for the Equitable Recovery Assessment have been grouped into the following categories: local housing context, housing support programs, and partner data. Your research and interviews should aim to answer questions that characterize these areas and their priorities in COVID-19 response and recovery.

Local Housing Conditions

Qualitative data on local housing conditions can provide context to the underlying circumstances behind what the data may illustrate. If your city or region already has a local housing strategy featuring goals or policies aimed at addressing housing issues, conducting this assessment can help determine which disparities have been exacerbated or what new issues may take priority moving forward. Your research should focus on grounding truthing the quantitative data you collected and complete your understanding of housing conditions across neighborhoods.

### Data Snapshot

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population Demographics</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total population</td>
<td>147,070</td>
<td>284,819</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population change over time</td>
<td>-1.76%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median household income</td>
<td>$44,252</td>
<td>$54,489</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration Data/&quot;Foreign Born&quot;</td>
<td>11.84%</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment Rate</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household Trends</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Homeownership Rate</td>
<td>54.25%</td>
<td>65.86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rental Occupancy Rate</td>
<td>45.75%</td>
<td>34.14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vacancy Rate (Residential)</td>
<td>10.41%</td>
<td>8.69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vacancy Rate (Businesses)</td>
<td>18.31%</td>
<td>15.39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eviction Rate</td>
<td>4.55%</td>
<td>(124% U.S. average)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Households that are Doubled-up</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population in Subsidized Housing</td>
<td>6.92%</td>
<td>3.89%</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Racial/Ethnic Composition</th>
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<th>State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Population</td>
<td>Percent of State Population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>67.67%</td>
<td>71.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>21.64%</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>3.37%</td>
<td>5.47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0.04%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian or Alaskan</td>
<td>0.33%</td>
<td>0.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or More Races</td>
<td>4.26%</td>
<td>2.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity: Hispanic</td>
<td>18.42%</td>
<td>17.12%</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Homeowner/Renter Experience</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rent Burden</td>
<td>34.70%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renters that are Severely Cost Burdened</td>
<td>31.19%</td>
<td>25.21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eviction Filing Rate</td>
<td>0.70%</td>
<td>0.37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Housing Units</td>
<td>67,812</td>
<td>206,376</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Households that are Doubled-up</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likelihood of Eviction or Foreclosure</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimate of Homeless Population</td>
<td>722</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Key Questions to Investigate

- What was the state of the housing market prior to the pandemic?
- What has been the impact (including unintended consequences) of the current housing preservation or development approach on community members? What strategies address immediate impacts? If impacts are not aligned with racial equity goals, what adjustments should be made?
- Were any new policies or programs put in place to address immediate needs that will likely be adopted into long term practice?
- Are there particular neighborhoods or communities that lack access to critical housing supports or amenities?

Housing Support Programs

Implementing a response to housing instability created by the economic impacts of COVID-19 required significant collaboration and expedited service delivery to keep individuals and their families housed. Essential to the implementation of these initiatives were state and local housing programs that served as the primary avenue for disbursing aid to and promoting participation from eligible applicants. Within your Equitable Recovery Assessment, you can begin to identify how organizational priorities shifted to address immediate needs, which responses proved to be the most effective, and how accessible these offerings were to communities they intended to serve.

Key Questions to Investigate

- What is the capacity of program administrators to address emerging community needs? Have challenges in service delivery been related to specific issues – financial constraints, bandwidth, staff training, etc.?
- How are recovery efforts adapting to align with, support, embrace and engage rural or New American/Immigrant communities through the crisis and beyond?
- What kind of data has been most useful in depicting program results and service delivery?

Partner Data

While many housing relief programs were administered by state or local government agencies, most jurisdictions partnered with nongovernmental entities to review applications and select recipients for emergency housing assistance. This kind of collaboration and distribution of resources in essential to emergency response as many municipalities often do not have the capacity for new, targeted
initiatives or established community relationships that will ensure program uptake. Your assessment should examine the local partner ecosystem related to housing and community development who will likely participate in recovery planning and build local advocacy for desired community improvements.

Key Questions to Investigate

- What role do partners expect the City to play in housing recovery and/or neighborhood revitalization?
- What is the readiness and willingness of the city/your organization to advance racial equity? Is there political will to challenge historical practices?
- To what extent are sectors coordinating service delivery in response to the housing crises and the promotion of individual, youth, and family well-being?
- Is there a roundtable or partnership conversation about the housing sector and recovery planning? What partners/industries are currently missing from the conversation?

Interpreting Your Findings

As you begin to interpret your findings, the political realities and economic situation of the community will ultimately dictate what solutions are currently attainable, but this should not limit the possibilities for a coordinated response to long-term recovery. The purpose of the housing stability assessment goes beyond development pipelines or financial incentives and produces a holistic approach to the sector – examining homelessness prevention to residential rehab programs and advocacy for affordable housing creation. Keep the following concepts in mind as you review the data collected and determine whether to revisit certain topic areas that may have initially been overlooked or identify additional cases in support of a desired course of action.

**What opportunities exist to advance racial equity in housing?** An analysis of housing conditions and support services may produce different results when racially disaggregated data is or is not applied. Historically, the absence of this lens has created false narratives about economic recovery and opportunities for upward mobility while perpetuating structural racism throughout communities. Your Equitable Recovery Assessment should aim to truly understand, acknowledge, and begin to address the racial inequities in specific housing and neighborhood experiences to inform the creation of targeted, antiracist policy solutions.

**What gaps have you uncovered in your city’s housing recovery approach?** For the housing sector, the gap between the current state of events and the desirable or aspirational state could be the result of:

- A gap due to knowledge – interested parties do not know an alternative course of action or have the information to understand the need for change
- A gap due to skills – interested parties do not know how to implement change
- A gap due to practices – interested parties are not able to apply knowledge and skills under the current environment

Whatever may be the case, these limitations have contributed to the current attitudes or misconceptions of residents and decisionmakers on implementing change. By acknowledging these gaps, practitioners can identify early signs of resistance or elevate opportunities for coalition building and gain a deeper understanding of the interconnected issues that affect the housing sector.

**What opportunities are there to amplify funding opportunities?** Disaster response urges practitioners to address the most pressing housing challenges; however, municipalities must prepare to leverage incoming flexible funding in a way that fills financing gaps for immediate response and addresses long-term underinvestment in the issues that contributed to the current crisis.
While cities should ensure that any federal recovery funds follow all regulatory requirements and guidelines, get creative about potential housing solutions that drive equitable outcomes and target spending on geographies that historically lacked investment from public and private sectors.

Pivoting from Assessment to Strategy

The Equitable Recovery Assessment will serve as a vital reference in future planning efforts by decision makers and housing advocates throughout the sector as a tool to communicate the need for action or special attention. To move from assessment to strategy development, your team will need to apply these findings as a source of data driven decision-making for long term equitable recovery. Although the priority for many cities during the pandemic was resident access to rent relief, your community’s strategy forward should aim to do more than prevent evictions, foreclosures, and homelessness. By securing housing stability for the most vulnerable households and strengthening social safeguards, your city can better protect its residents from the next housing crisis, build community resilience, and secure economic vitality for decades to come.

Sample Protocols

The goal of these interviews is to obtain local insight from area stakeholders regarding current housing conditions and trends, to identify anticipated housing needs, and to determine if there are barriers that exist that may limit residential development in the market. Stakeholders will be asked for input on current COVID response strategies and desired outcomes for equitable recovery. Ideally, protocols will be designed specifically for each individual, organization, or community group you meet with. This toolkit includes sample protocols to help you get started.

Sample Interview Protocol for City Leaders and Elected Officials

1. How would you characterize the city’s housing sector? What are the assets, opportunities, or community challenges that contribute to resident quality of life?
2. Where are the current gaps in the housing market? Was there significant demand for specific housing programs or assistance prior to COVID? (homeownership, rehabilitation, rent relief, mortgage forbearance, etc.)? Have these needs changed since the pandemic?
3. What is the most important/successful cross-sector work that has happened to date? What made this possible? What were the biggest obstacles?
4. What is the City’s capacity to lead to response to equitable housing recovery?
5. How would you characterize cross-sector capacity to address housing challenges? Who are the partners? Who is missing? What are the local strengths? Gaps?
6. What level of coordination or interaction do you have with the City or other housing partners? Has there ever been a stakeholder convening around housing needs and data sharing towards improved service delivery and housing stability?
7. Was the public consulted on past recovery strategies or initiatives in a meaningful way?
8. What is the readiness and willingness of the city/your organization to advance racial equity? Is there political will to challenge historical practices?
9. Is there commitment to work collaboratively with community partners to achieve equitable outcomes? Are they willing to take different approaches to work towards equity?
10. To what extent has racial equity been centered as part of local response? Who else should be included in discussions and implementation to ensure that racial equity is embedded into recovery planning?
Sample Interview Protocol for Housing Providers and Support Services

1. How would you characterize the city’s housing sector? What are the assets, opportunities, or community challenges that contribute to resident quality of life?
2. Where are the current gaps in the housing market? Was there significant demand for specific housing programs or assistance prior to COVID? (homeownership, rehabilitation, rent relief, mortgage forbearance, etc.)? Have these needs changed since the pandemic?
3. What has been the primary concern for tenants and homeowners throughout the pandemic? What’s the scale of the unknown? Are there any assistance efforts for small landlords?
4. What has been the experience of voucher holders and residents in subsidized housing throughout the pandemic?
5. Do you have any visibility into the homeless population and their housing experiences throughout COVID?
6. Did your organization implement any new policies or programs to address immediate housing challenges that will likely be adopted into long term practice?
7. What successes have you had or challenges have you faced collaborating with other organizations/stakeholders/fields/sectors to address housing issues?
8. What level of coordination or interaction do you have with the City or other housing partners? Has there ever been a stakeholder convening around housing needs and data sharing towards improved service delivery and housing stability?
9. Are there commonalities between your clients that would suggest additional policy or program interventions (e.g., housing policies, childcare needs, education/workforce training, etc.?)
10. To what extent has racial equity been centered as part of local response? Who else should be included in discussions and implementation to ensure that racial equity is embedded into recovery planning?

Sample Focus Group Protocol for Housing and Community Development

1. How would you characterize the city’s housing sector? What are the assets, opportunities, or community challenges that contribute to resident quality of life?
2. Where are the current gaps in your city’s housing market? Was there significant demand for specific housing programs or assistance prior to COVID? (homeownership, rehabilitation, rent relief, mortgage forbearance, etc.)
3. Have you started to see an increase in evictions or foreclosures within communities?
4. Are there particular neighborhoods or communities that lack access to transportation, jobs, quality schools, or other critical amenities?
5. How would you characterize initial response and current operations related to housing relief? Have there been certain improvements or adjustment to programs to reach eligible applicants?
6. How would you characterize the capacity of local support services in addressing housing and community challenges?
7. To what extent are sectors coordinating service delivery in response to housing crises and the promotion of individual, youth, and family well-being?
8. What program, policy and financial supports do you see needed in the community? Any changes in long term partnerships? Increased efforts in data sharing? Who needs to be at the table?
9. Is your organization working in partnership with the city on long-term recovery planning?
10. What does the City need to do differently to support a more equitable housing recovery?
Workforce Development
Workforce Development

Workforce is a key facet of any successful economic development plan. In the U.S., workforce development remains a key ongoing issue for many communities. In 2019, over 1.1 million jobs went unfilled across the country. This can be attributed to many different issues including equitable access to education and opportunity for different racial demographics and socioeconomic backgrounds. It can also be attributed to the disorganized nature of most community workforce development ecosystems with many different types of organizations working towards a similar goal. However, these different organizations are often not brought together to strategize how to move the needle forward for the community’s workforce. This leads to a loss of business which is to the detriment of the community; whether in lost economic activity, lost tax revenue and/or lost jobs.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated workforce issues in many communities. Increased unemployment in public-facing industries may be attributed to unemployment assistance supplements provided by the federal government but this doesn’t explain everything. Low wages, childcare issues, healthcare concerns and any myriad of other challenges can be attributed to current workforce barriers. More cities are considering more targeted, organized, and interdisciplinary approaches to their workforce strategies that include the current education system and better match current market trends in job creation.

Philosophies around workforce development have shifted over time. Historically, workforce development organizations have enacted a problem-focused strategy that trains low-income and low-skilled individuals. In recent years, many of these organization have begun to take a more holistic approach that addresses the multitude of barriers many low-income community members face in seeking employment. This includes not just hard skill development (i.e., welding, plumbing) but also soft skill training (i.e., interviewing skills, interpersonal communication).

Equity Considerations

In the U.S., minority communities often face higher unemployment rates, lower wages, increased job instability and worse benefits than their white counterparts. Outright discrimination against minority communities can certainly be a part of the problem. However, access to education, workforce, and skill building opportunities are disparate across different racial demographics. These disparities are often at the root of most workforce development challenges and connected directly to systemic racism and inequality.
Minority communities are not the only demographic challenged by workforce issues and joblessness. During the COVID-19 pandemic, women left the workforce in startling numbers.

To consider trying to modify the workforce ecosystem without understanding its primary challenges will lead to limited success. A clear understanding of what populations are directly impacted by joblessness and lack of opportunity will only strengthen any workforce system. Therefore, any workforce development strategy should include an equity lens.

The State of Workforce Development in Your City

Workforce development initiatives usually take on an assortment of forms. It’s important to develop a clear understanding of the “what”, “why”, & “how” before embarking on developing new strategies. Although many challenges are often similar in many different communities, developing a solid understanding of your baseline can draw out the nuances of your community’s workforce challenges. Understanding the nuances of your baseline strengthens your ability to initiate the right solutions for the most pressing problems.

Quantitative Data: Establishing Your Community’s Baseline

To begin a workforce development analysis, it’s important to understand the community’s baseline. Quantitative analysis provides a good look at the “what?” of your workforce. Understanding the size, race, gender, and relative age of the workforce can help with correctly sizing your working-age population and provide you with the ability to project future trends. This is helpful in calculations of how many jobs can be supported in your community which can help define realistic job development goals.

Identifying disparities in unemployment and underemployment is also key to promoting equitable workforce outcomes. It answers the “who” is most impacted by being under skilled and how a community should target its initiatives. This can help establish whether disparities are felt geographically, racially, or both. Understanding this baseline can help you target your strategies for equitable recovery.

Analyzing regional and city industry data also provides key context around what jobs you currently have in your community. Looking at industry growth provides you with what increase or decrease in jobs may be felt in your community in the near and long term. This context helps you distinguish what industries are in most need of increased workforce and can help inform the workforce development programs and trainings hard-skill focus areas. This information can also help you understand what transitions may need to happen if your city depends on a declining industry. Transitions with workforce are time intensive and so considering these transitions early can smooth out challenges that may occur with changes industry. It is also important to understand which sectors tend to have to have good and/or promising jobs and whether or not these sectors are growing or declining. This will help focus the city’s attraction efforts on business in industries that will positively contribute to economic mobility for the local workforce.

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2 https://www.brookings.edu/research/opportunity-industries/ The Opportunity Industries framework defines “good” jobs as those that provide stable employment, middle class wages and benefits. “Promising” jobs are defined as entry level positions from which most workers can reach a good job within 10 years.
Lastly, business size can make a significant difference to understanding the needs of the local workforce. Small businesses employ approximately two thirds of the U.S. population. Although critical in other parts of equitable recovery, it is all important to understand this part of your community in the context of job creation and workforce development.

We’ve provided several links to data sources that may be helpful. See the local economic development section on page 11 to look critically at what questions you need to ask about small business and data sources for industry data.

Questions for investigation:

- How many working age adults are currently in your community? What is the 5-year prediction for population fluctuation?
- What is the unemployment or underemployment demographics of your community? Are they geographically connected?
- What is the size of the disconnected youth population (age 16-24 and not employed or enrolled in school)? What about returning citizens?
- Which sectors tend to have good and promising jobs? Are those sectors growing or declining? In what parts of the city is this growth occurring?
- What are the growth prospects according to market trends? Are your local small businesses thriving and is there demand for more growth?

Following are key data points that can help you find answers to your questions. Workforce development data are often reported at the Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), rather than the city level, which is particularly important for medium and smaller sized cities, and rural areas. Most data can be found on the U.S. Census Bureau website, but others will need to be locally sourced through city records or from local partners. (https://data.census.gov/cedsci/)

**Employers:** number of establishments by size, number of employees, employee retention and turnover, number of unfilled positions

**Employees:** highest level of educational attainment, number of years employed, reported barriers to employment (e.g., work permit/immigration documentation, criminal record, skill certification requirements, etc.)

**Educational institutions and other non-profits:** certification and training programs available, program enrollment, program completion, post completion job placement rate, strongest programs by registration and attendance, cost-benefit analysis of programs

Of note, if data are unavailable or uncollected by the community, state, or federal government then collecting data is a critical next step in preparing for an equitable recovery.
Qualitative Data: Understanding Your Community’s Context

Now that the “what” has been established, it’s important to build context around the quantitative data. Asking the “how” and “why” can provide depth to the analysis and will impart a more complete picture of what challenges are facing the workforce of the community. Qualitative research is often completed through interviews and discussions with key stakeholders and can help provide a local understanding to needs and barriers facing your workforce.

Interviews can provide the provide perspective around what challenges are currently identified by those involved in workforce development. Interviewees can include nonprofits focused on workforce development and perhaps specific populations. Additionally, your community or region will likely have a workforce development board that’s directly connected to the state’s larger board. These entities can provide regional context to the local challenges your community is facing.

Educational institutions are integral to your workforce development network. Community colleges, in particular, often provide trade-skill development programs and have begun to also offer soft-skill programs. Often underutilized in workforce development, traditional universities can also be important partners in your workforce strategies. The local school system can also be a valuable partner in workforce development particularly in developing pipelines from student interests into further education or skill-building. Leveraging all educational institutions and conceptualizing how all could work together can help your community begin the process of strengthening your workforce strategy.

In addition, speaking with key employers can help you understand the challenges they have had in finding a workforce. This includes how many unfilled positions they currently have open and why they may have trouble both finding and keeping their workforce.
These interviewees will also help define what skill development may be necessary to better ready your workforce for jobs with these employers. Employers can also be involved in workforce development directly but providing paid internships or working in tandem with other workforce development partners in the community.

Existing networks can help you understand which workforce development entities are actively engaging in discussion. Existing networks can be great capitalize and institutionalize to increase the impact of their work. They also often identify cross-sectoral issues and can implement strategies to meet these complex issues.

This information is vital to begin building strategies. Understanding these barriers like transportation, childcare, and skill-building, can help you direct limited resources to address the most critical challenge facing your community. Questions about barriers can be answered by employers, workforce development agencies and educational institutions but they are best answered by community members, worker, potential employees. Through this perspective, you’ll get a more realistic and community-based idea of what’s facing your workforce. After having discussions about barriers to your workforce, it’s then important to understand what resources are currently available to meet those barriers. It’s also critical to see if the current resources are meeting the most critical needs or if that resources are meeting a less important need. Through these discussions, you can also identify what needs are not being met all together.

Questions to investigate

- Who are the major traditional workforce development organizations in the community?
- Who are the major educational institutions in the community? How are they connected?
- Who are the key employers in the area?
- Are there any current networks of organizations in the workforce development system?
- What are the barriers (i.e., transportation, childcare, skills, low wages) to employment that are most prevalent in the community?
- What resources are available to your workforce? What needs are not being met?
- What types of requirements are there for businesses to offer paid leave and other supportive benefits?

Compiled at the end of this section are a number of sample interview protocols to inform the questions and information you need to aggregate from interviewees. Additionally, it will be beneficial to aggregate statewide reports about workforce to provide an overarching understanding of trends in the community’s region and whether the community’s challenges are unique or consistent across the state.

Interpreting Your Findings

After completion of interviews, there should be significant amount of context around the workforce data analyzed initially. Stakeholders in the interview process who are integrated into the workforce system can often offer interesting options to move workforce development in the city forward. These stakeholders’ interviews can also help identify the inequities apparent in the current system including if implicitly or explicitly certain populations are being totally left out of the system. Equitable Recovery Assessments are meant to provide both long-term and short-term priorities in the current workforce system but also are meant to identify critical gaps in the understanding of the system. To address these gaps, it may be important to prioritize building a better system of understanding around workforce development.
Is there no workforce data available? Data is critical to implementing any workforce strategy. If there is little or no data collected by the city, it may be time to begin the process of collecting that data. Designing an employment data collection system can remove some of the unknowns of strategy creation.

Is there a clear understanding of different workforce stakeholders and how they work together? After aggregating all the workforce development system stakeholders during your analysis. It then may be helpful to map the relationships between stakeholders and understand how these relationships can be further connected or leveraged to increase resources. This can also provide greater understanding of the gaps that may be limiting equity in your system. A system map should answer the following questions:

- Who are the key stakeholders involved in workforce development?
- What services do they provide and what needs do they meet?
- How are key stakeholders and how are their services interrelated?

Is there an institutional understanding of what the community believes are quality jobs? The city should incorporate the voice of the worker to understand grassroots thoughts about quality jobs. This can be invaluable when considering industries to bring into the community, what work trainings are most interesting to community members and what pay is considered good and fair. A model to consider is the Community Design Process that was designed by CenterState CEO. This model centers racial equity in the conversation to ensure that racial systemic barriers are acknowledged when developing a definition of a quality job.

Pivoting from Assessment to Strategy

The assessment process provides the basis for current and future workforce development strategy. Communities should use this process to provide data and context that drives programs and policies that put equity at the forefront. Through this assessment, the city can identify both long-term and short-term policy and program implementation strategies. Utilize the data and context collected to develop an outcomes-based approach to new and current initiatives which prioritizes equity. Overarching goals and outcomes are important to implement in approaching the fragmented workforce development systems. To begin your implementation process, it may be necessary to start from the ground up and begin reorganizing the workforce development system in a way that is most beneficial to the community. The following steps can guide that process.

- Begin with the end in mind, develop outcomes and goals for your system
- Begin to establish an organized system by developing a Workforce Development Working Group
- Connect your different pipelines together by connecting major educational institutions to jobs
- Work with employers to expand work-based learning or apprenticeships opportunities

Sample Protocols

Protocols for interviews and focus groups should be tailored to meet the needs of your city and community’s equitable recovery concerns. Ideally, protocols will be designed specifically for each individual, organization, or community group you meet with. This toolkit includes sample protocols to help you get started.

The Clark Family Foundation in St. Louis provided funding to build a workforce ecosystem for the city. It can be found [here](https://clarkfoxtl.com/mapping/workforce-development/).

Community Design Process: [https://www.centerstateceoequity.com/home](https://www.centerstateceoequity.com/home)
Sample Interview Protocol for Employers
1. What are the current challenges you’ve seen in the current workforce?
2. What are the current strengths of the current workforce?
3. What hard skills does the current workforce need to develop to be the right fit for your business?
4. Do they need soft skills (interpersonal communication, time management, etc.)?
5. How have you sourced your employees? (online ads, Indeed)
6. How many job postings have gone unanswered?
7. What are some of the reasons that you’ve not hired an applicant?
8. Have you performed exit interviews with employees who have resigned?
9. What future challenges do you foresee for the workforce?
10. Are you partnered with workforce development programs? Education programs?
11. Are you involved in any workforce development steering committees?
12. Do you have second chance employment programs or “ban the box” practices?

Sample Interview Protocol for Non-Profit Partners/Educational Institutions
1. What type of workforce development programs or resources do you offer?
2. What industries do you focus on?
3. What are the current challenges of the workforce?
4. What are the current challenges of your participants?
5. What are the strengths you see in the current workforce?
6. Are there barriers to employment? (i.e., childcare, education)
7. To what extent is affordable, reliable childcare available for the workforce?
8. How effective do returning citizens tend to be at securing employment?
9. What programs are in place to serve disconnected youth or returning citizens?
10. What gaps do you see in resources?
11. Do you work with other local educational institutions?
12. Are there steering committees or formal networks for workforce development in the local area? In the regional area?
13. What are future challenges you see for the local workforce?

Sample Interview Protocol for Employees/Community Members
1. Are you employed?
2. Why did you choose your current and previous occupations?
3. Are there barriers to you going to work? What makes going to work difficult?
4. Do you feel like you’re missing certain skills to move to the next step in your current or previous job?
5. What educational attainment do you have?
6. Have you ever utilized workforce development programs?
7. How do you search for jobs?
8. How did you develop your resume? Did you have help?
9. Do you feel prepared for work every day?
Education & Youth Services
**Education & Youth Services**

The COVID-19 pandemic adversely affected early childhood and K-12 educational programming across the country. Educators, staff, and school leaders at all levels were called to adapt quickly to address the needs of students and families during initial disaster response. Parents, family members, and caregivers adjusted their routines to provide additional support through remote learning and limited childcare while navigating housing, workforce, and economic challenges. And for our youth, the disruption not only impacted progress in educational attainment but social and emotional learning – delaying cultural milestones and behavioral development opportunities. Although the government-enforced restrictions were aimed at keeping the population safe from infection, the wider impact of these actions have left lasting effects on the lives of young people and their communities.

This extended period of learning disruption is expected to exacerbate preexisting opportunity and achievement gaps, particularly for historically marginalized communities. Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) communities and communities facing extreme poverty are suffering the brunt of the pandemic because of structural and institutional racism leading to inequities in systems like education, employment, health care, housing, environmental conditions, and food security. However, the three major challenges that appear to be impacting the education and youth services sector across all communities have been: access to quality childcare, disrupted learning, and access to mental health services. Although data on the true scale of these challenges is limited, tracking responses to their presence within communities is sure to dictate the rate and strength of each city’s recovery.

The Equitable Recovery Assessment will be a crucial first step in examining the disparities in the education and youth services sector – both pre-pandemic and now. It will require an understanding of the deep-rooted challenges in our school systems that predate the pandemic and have resisted many reform efforts, while simultaneously examining the roles of decisionmakers in marshaling recovery funding into sustainable programs that keep young people engaged and moving towards improved long-term outcomes. Your assessment questions should identify any current biases and inequities in service delivery and uplift partners and practices that are contributing to an equitable path forward. Ultimately, your review and final recommendations are a rare opportunity to provide children and parents – and the organizations and institutions that serve them – with sustained support through recovery, ensuring our nation’s schools are defined not by their disparities but by the equity and opportunity available to all students.
The pandemic revealed how interconnected educational services are to the daily functions of individual households and their families – often providing stable educational settings and facilitating meal provision, emergency support, technology access, and in some cases childcare. As cities, school districts, and community-based organizations struggled to support households through pandemic-related school closures and disruptions, the importance of valid and reliable data was critical to identifying needs and closing gaps in service delivery. In conducting your assessment of education and youth services, focus primarily on current goals and objectives; barriers to effective response; and resource availability or organizational capacity to implement change. Your findings, or in some instance the lack of clarity on topics, may encourage stakeholders to improve data collection and sharing within their own programs and incorporate equitable outcomes into future program development, evaluation, and resource allocation.

The following data points and questions will be crucial in identifying patterns or trends in your community’s delivery of educational and youth services. As you collect this information, be sure to disaggregate the data by marginalized group, gender, region, or level of education to document the complexity or nuance of response efforts. Your findings can also be grouped into strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats and for easy review as you move towards strategy development.

- How do students’ opportunities break down by race and ethnicity, family income and location?
- What does your data or conversations with stakeholders tell you about existing racial inequities within the education sector? How is this being taken into consideration for recovery planning?
- In addition to the required stakeholders, which other stakeholders are needed to identify local needs?

Quantitative Data: Establishing Your Community’s Baseline
Quantitative research in education provides numerical data that can prove or disprove theories on current practices of experiences in your community. These number-based results may speak to a relatively small sample size, but the data can predict outcomes in larger student or youth populations and groups. A number of free data sources are available to support your research, some of the most popular data platforms and indices available include:

- **Common Core of Data Statistics** – The Common Core of Data (CCD) is the Department of Education's primary database on public elementary and secondary education in the United States. CCD is a comprehensive, annual, national database of all public elementary and secondary schools and school districts.
- **National Center for Education Statistics** - DataLab is a platform of web-based tools that provide the public with access to data on education in the United States
- **City Health Dashboards** – the City Health Dashboard provides data on over 35 measures of health and drivers of health for the 500 largest U.S. cities.
- **Health Resources & Services Administration** – The HRSA website provides maps, data, reports, and dashboards to the public about HRSA’s health care programs.
- **Center for American Progress: Cost of Childcare** – This calculator quantifies the additional costs that licensed childcare providers are facing as they provide safe and developmentally appropriate childcare during the pandemic.

Connect with local community organizations or government offices for additional information on the populations they serve that may not be included in more general community surveys, establishing this relationship with practitioners may also help contextualize your findings and opportunities for improved
outreach or participation. The following list of data points serve as a useful starting point in understanding the community your city and its partners serve and the quality-of-life resident’s experience.

### Data Snapshot

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population Demographics</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total population</td>
<td>143,293</td>
<td>464,242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population change over time</td>
<td>-2.74%</td>
<td>1.29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median household income</td>
<td>$36,308</td>
<td>$59,225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration Data/Foreign Born</td>
<td>13.27%</td>
<td>7.86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment Rate</td>
<td>5.65%</td>
<td>6.50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Poverty Rate | 31.79% | 14.63% |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children and Youth</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Households without children</td>
<td>71.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children in Poverty</td>
<td>46.30%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Absenteeism</td>
<td>29.40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Percent of People in Age Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 5</td>
<td>7.16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 18</td>
<td>24.94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Age (18-64)</td>
<td>58.36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aging (65+)</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Attainment (All Races)</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Some High School, No Diploma</td>
<td>18.37%</td>
<td>9.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Diploma, No College</td>
<td>26.89%</td>
<td>25.77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College or Associate's Degree</td>
<td>27.26%</td>
<td>29.98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's Degree</td>
<td>14.90%</td>
<td>19.84%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Access to Healthcare and Wellbeing-related services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Medically Underserved Areas and Populations</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>8 Census Tracts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Health Behaviors</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>County</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poor Physical Health</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>23.97%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poor Mental Health</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>County</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>20.90%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food Security/Access (Census Tract)</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Vulnerability</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderate to High</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Free and Reduced Lunch</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 5:** Sample Education & Youth Services Data Snapshot. Enterprise Community Partners.

### Qualitative Data: Understanding Your Community’s Context

The ongoing COVID-19 crisis is creating deep and disparate consequences for young people and their families, consequences that can be challenging to quantify or identify across diverse groups or geographies. Where quantitative data is limited or opaque, qualitative data can provide greater depth and detail into what people actually say, do, think, or feel and why an individual, group, event, or community may prompt a particular response. The following questions may provide additional context and ground truthing to your Equitable Recovery Assessment and highlight opportunities for more strategic intervention. Priority topic areas for the assessment have been grouped into the following categories: local community context, education and youth-serving institutions, and community partners. Your research and interviews should aim to answer questions that characterize these areas and their priorities in COVID-19 response and recovery.

#### Local Community Context

Collecting data on the local community context will allow you to examine performance gaps and identify, understand, and prioritize the needs that must be addressed to improve outcomes for all students. Community level administrative and vital statistics data, community surveys, and topic-specific assessments can be helpful resources in tracking the experiences of youth in your area. Engaging youth and families in your research not only serves as a trust-building opportunity between your organization and community residents but can also provide additional insight on the issues and community assets that shape public opinion on the resources currently being provided.

**Key Questions to Investigate**

- What data are required to best understand local needs?
- What are the potential root causes of inequities or performance gaps?
- How should needs be prioritized when several priorities are identified?
Education & Youth-Serving Institutions

The work of youth service professionals is cross-disciplinary, requiring knowledge and skills that cut across fields like workforce development, youth development, education, counseling, and disability services. Their work contributes to a sense of culture and belonging within communities and is complimentary to the work of educational institutions providing academic, social, and emotional learning. An assessment of the partner landscape will help identify the capacity of service providers to identify and develop programs and interventions that address youth needs and provide an early indication of key partners who can lead recovery plan implementation.

Key Questions to Investigate

- How did schools and youth programs adapt their services during the pandemic? What effect did that have on young people’s academic, social, and emotional needs?
- Do administrative agencies (departments of education, behavioral health, health and human services, and juvenile justice) have shared access to relevant data?
- What data have service providers been using to identify student needs — including needs that were unmet prior to the pandemic — and monitor how students are progressing?
- Are providers engaging children, families, partner organizations, and/or communities of color in program development and response planning?

Community Partners

To have the greatest impact on academic and wellness outcomes for students, it is imperative that schools and communities work together. Identifying the willingness of decisionmakers to commit to collaborative and comprehensive problem-solving with schools, community organizations, and social service agencies will be critical to long-term equitable recovery.

Key Questions to Investigate

- Has COVID response been coordinated with local partners?
- Who makes up the education and youth-serving partner ecosystem? What are the local strengths? What is the cross-sector capacity to address community needs?
- Which industries/sectors/communities are missing from conversations about our young people and recovery planning?
- Is there a commitment to work collaboratively with community partners to achieve equitable outcomes? Are partners willing to take different approaches to work towards equity?
An assessment of the partner landscape will help identify the capacity of service providers to identify and develop programs and interventions that address youth needs and provide an early indication of key partners who can lead recovery plan implementation.

Key Questions to Investigate

- How did schools and youth programs adapt their services during the pandemic? What effect did that have on young people’s academic, social, and emotional needs?
- Do administrative agencies (departments of education, behavioral health, health and human services, and juvenile justice) have shared access to relevant data?
- What data have service providers been using to identify student needs — including needs that were unmet prior to the pandemic — and monitor how students are progressing?
- Are providers engaging children, families, partner organizations, and/or communities of color in program development and response planning?

Interpreting Your Findings

The Equitable Recovery Assessment will explore the role of child-serving institutions in the immediate response to the pandemic and contributions towards long term recovery. Whatever your findings may reveal, several factors will determine the efficacy of city-led initiatives and the opportunity for collaboration with community champions. Considering the enormity of current challenges and unprecedented funding available for response, practitioners may understandably default to working on community issues within their organizational and institutional silos. However, recovery cannot be achieved by one sector or agency and will require cross-sector alignment across the region to improve outcomes for our youngest residents. The following concepts have been identified by child-advocates and research institutions as some of the leading challenges effecting the education and youth service sector during the pandemic. As you interpret your findings, take stock of their presence in your own community and what actions are being taken to address growing concerns.

What are the short and long-term implications of interrupted learning? As disruptions continue, the concern that many children will fall behind in their academic development or be lost completely has grown significantly. High schoolers have become more likely to drop out of school, and high school seniors, especially those from low-income families, are less likely to go on to postsecondary education. The response from many educators has been to explore an asset-based approach to learning that engages students based on their individual needs and re-examines the expectations for proficiency of certain content and skills.

Is there a collective community-wide vision guiding supports for youth mental health and wellness? Over a year of loss, grief, isolation, and uncertainty has taken a toll on many students’ mental health and ability to learn, whether online or in-person. Most have contended with not seeing friends or family and worries about catching the virus. Some have dealt with a parent having lost a job, caring for a sick relative, or the loss of a loved one. Some children have been exposed to abuse, neglect, or family violence. Supporting children’s wellness and social and emotional skills – their ability to recognize and manage their emotions, to build relationships with peers and adults – should be a priority for cross-sector action in recovery from the pandemic.

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What are the key barriers to meaningful access, opportunities, and outcomes for youth in your city? The response to the pandemic has revealed disparities in the quality and levels of access to education, skill-development, and social supports, experienced by our young people, especially those most marginalized. To address gaps in service, schools in many communities were tasked to expand Internet access, deploy devices, and provide continuity of learning, in addition to serving as a community hub for resources like meal distribution and health services. Community partners are now exploring opportunities to address and strengthen partnership and collaboration across all government levels and service providers to increase access to vital resources for children and their families.

Pivoting from Assessment to Strategy

As you review the findings from your assessment additional challenges and opportunities unique to your community will present themselves, however, the priority for the education and youth services sector will likely focus on service integration and coordination. Achieving an equitable recovery from COVID-19 will require city governments and local partners to establish a set of shared, data-driven outcomes for recovery and a policy agenda that supports those who were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. Consensus on and commitment to these goals will help to organize the work of stakeholders and create shared accountability for the results that matter most to families. Establishing shared outcomes and policy agendas can also help affirm and mobilize partners and the community around the changes that need to be made. The reality of the situation is that implementation of an equitable recovery will take years, if not decades, but by completing an assessment and identifying opportunities for intervention for the communities that tackle this work, you can catalyze real change in your community and address the disparities that have held children and families – and their neighborhoods – back for far too long.

Sample Protocols

Protocols for interviews and focus groups should be tailored to meet the needs of your city and community’s equitable recovery concerns. Ideally, protocols will be designed specifically for each individual, organization, or community group you meet with. This toolkit includes sample protocols to help you get started.
Sample Interview Protocol for City Leaders and Elected Officials

1. What are the most pressing issues impacting your city’s youth? Are these new concerns due to COVID or are they long-standing issues? Are there barriers to them?
2. How are city departments coordinating service provision to promote child, youth, and family well-being?
3. What is the most important/successful cross-sector work that has happened to date? What made this possible? What were the biggest obstacles?
4. What is the cross-sector capacity to address needs? Who are the partners? Who is missing? What are the local strengths? Gaps?
5. Has the city taken on any initiatives to connect education services with at-risk households?
6. Was the public consulted on past recovery strategies or initiatives in a meaningful way?
7. Is there commitment to work collaboratively with community partners to achieve equitable outcomes? Are they willing to take different approaches to work towards equity?
8. How will the city target additional resources, including federal stimulus funding, to create safe and equitable learning environments and provide whole child supports, particularly for vulnerable and systematically neglected students?
9. How has the city collaborated or partnered with other public, private, or nonprofit organizations on the topic of childcare in the past and present?
10. What is the readiness and willingness of the city/your organization to advance racial equity? Is there political will to challenge historical practices?

Sample Interview Protocol for Education & Youth Serving Institutions

1. What are the most pressing issues impacting your city’s youth? Are these new concerns due to COVID or are they long-standing issues? Are there barriers to them?
2. How have schools/service providers addressed critical needs? Are you partnering with the City?
3. How would you characterize the capacity of youth and family service providers prior to COVID? What is the reality now?
4. What data have service providers been using to identify student needs — including needs that were unmet prior to the pandemic — and monitor how students are progressing? Is this data being shared across the sector?
5. How have the pandemic’s disruptions in learning and instruction impacted youth/educators/and youth programs? Has service provision and attendance resumed as cities reopen?
6. How is the school system preparing recent graduates and seniors to enter the COVID-19 post-secondary job market? What approach are schools taking to increase post-secondary career and college readiness?
7. To what extent has racial equity been centered as part of local response? Who else should be included in discussions and implementation to ensure that racial equity is embedded into recovery planning?
8. How are education or youth services meaningfully engaging a diverse and representative set of stakeholders – including students, families, educators, and the broader community – in developing a plan to use recovery funds and implementing that plan?
9. What are the school districts priorities in allocating federal funding towards COVID relief?
10. What policies or programs are in place/under discussion to address immediate and longer-term needs regarding digital access and remote learning?
Childcare: The Small Business Behind Businesses
Childcare: The Small Businesses Behind Businesses

The pandemic has revealed the deep importance of childcare for both children and their parents. However, the pandemic has also been difficult for the childcare sector. The informal nature of the childcare sector meant that COVID restrictions, social distancing, and fear of transmission due to the intimate nature of home-based services resulted in many childcare services – licensed, licensed-exempt, licensed family and unlicensed – closing for weeks or months during the pandemic. Some have reopened, some have remained closed.

The childcare sector includes businesses of many forms, ranging from formally licensed centers with accreditation to unlicensed informal arrangements between neighbors or family members in the care provider’s home. Nationally, 92% of the workforce is comprised of women, and many are immigrants and women of color. The sector was showing serious signs of strain prior to the pandemic, characterized by low wages, and rising workforce poverty rates. In 2019, the median hourly wage for childcare workers in Illinois was $11.16, which represented a 1% decrease since 2017. During this same period, childcare center directors – often MWBE small business owners themselves – earned a median hourly wage of $24.44, representing a 3% decrease since 2017. Nationally, Black early educators are paid on average $0.78 less per hour than their White peers. As the pandemic continues, centers that have remained open incur additional costs related to cleaning, safety protocols and staff health absences. The pandemic has highlighted the reality that childcare workers’ poverty wages, lack of health insurance and paid sick leave are symptoms of a strained and unsustainable business sector. They are the workforce behind the workforce, and they are struggling.

Childcare is also a huge burden on low-income families. Nationally childcare remains incredibly expensive and sometimes out of reach for families below the poverty line. Average estimates for the U.S. put childcare expense at around $1,300 per month or $16,000 per year for the average family, an incredible financial strain for low-income households already struggling to cover costs for other necessities like housing, utilities, and food. Although many states have implemented a higher minimum wage, budgets remain tight, and childcare remains expensive relative to other critical needs.

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Beyond the benefits of childcare as a business for the economy, childcare is also critical to supporting all other businesses particularly front-line businesses who aren’t able to work from home. However, with more employers welcoming their workers back into the office, there will continue to be increased need for childcare. Working families across the U.S. have had to make hard adjustments and choices to stay safe and take care of their children. Even as the economy reopens, there are fewer options available to those looking for childcare services to support full workforce participation. With limited supply, costs will likely increase, and the low-income workforce will be hard pressed to find spots needed to return to work outside the home. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted how essential childcare businesses are to supporting the local workforce and centers the sector as foundational to an equitable recovery.

Researching Your Childcare Sector

Given the informal nature of the sector, it is difficult to gauge how many childcare businesses are actually recognized in a community through data. Typically, if there is data available, it will be aggregated at the state level through licensing data of childcare centers. This will likely not include all home-based childcare businesses. A regional non-profit or the ‘411 system’ operator in your community will also likely have a list of childcare businesses in your city that you can access. Both data sources are imperfect but will be a good starting point. Some key questions you need to ask when assessing childcare sector capacity.

Key Questions to Investigate:

- How many childcare establishments can you identify? (licensed, unlicensed)
- What kind of childcare establishment are they? (home-based, chain, religious)
- What type of care do they provide? (i.e., after-school, preschool, etc.)
- How many total seats are available?
- How many children are in your community? How many do estimate need childcare?
- Does the supply of seats meet estimated current demand for childcare?
- What is a typical teacher to student ratio?
- What is the median salary for early childhood education providers? Other childcare providers?
- Have any childcare businesses in your community accessed state or federal funding?
- Are there organizations that provide technical assistance to childcare businesses? (i.e., for certification, funding, marketing, etc.)
- Is there funding available in the public, private or non-profit sector for childcare businesses?
- What are the challenges of starting a childcare business?
- What is the monthly expense of childcare for a typical family?
- How does this relate to area median income?
- Are there subsidy programs for childcare?
- Are childcare businesses dispersed throughout the city or concentrated in on part of the community?
- Do all community members have access to quality childcare?

What opportunities are there to create solutions for your childcare sector? After you’ve identified the current structure of the childcare sector in your community, use the findings from your questions to identify needs and create strategies to meet these needs. Typically, childcare sector needs are identified in both the supply and demand side of system. Demand needs revolve around not having enough childcare businesses to meet current market demand. Supply-side needs revolve around low-income community members not being able to access childcare because of lack of access or too high of expense. Several solutions to consider are below.
What technical assistance is available to childcare businesses? There are numerous regulations childcare businesses need to navigate. Back-office support and providing technical assistance on licensing can be a huge help to childcare businesses. These programs can be funded and administered by the private sector or funding may be provided to a non-profit partner already connected to the childcare system in your community. The level of funding designated should be directly related to the need you’ve identified throughout your analysis.

Are there small business or other service-based funding programs in place to strengthen the childcare sector in your city? Funding and business education can be critical needs for childcare businesses. Funding can fall into several categories:

1. Start-Up Funding for childcare entrepreneurs
2. Real-Estate Loans for home-based childcare businesses wanting to scale to brick-and-mortar businesses
3. Emergency Funding for childcare business

Again, the amount of funding and type of funding should be related to your analysis findings. Assess and prioritize the how many businesses are currently needed and how many businesses are need of help growing to properly fund and support your community’s childcare sector.

What opportunities exist to develop subsidy programs for low-income families to access childcare? Providing subsidy to low-income families will help ease a significant burden to your most financial vulnerable community members. The subsidy should be developed with the community’s cost of living in mind. The depth of the subsidy should relate to the cost of housing, food, utilities, and other necessities. This ensures that the subsidy can truly help stabilize a family’s finances. Providing this subsidy will also impact your workforce by allowing more parents to head back to work with affordable childcare being offered. This increases employment and opportunity in the community as a whole.

Are there opportunities to provide supplemental income or funding sources for childcare workers and/or mandate minimum wages for childcare workers in your city or state? To ensure that childcare workers are properly compensated, your community may consider developing a supplemental income program focused on this subset of workers. A weakness to such a program may be that childcare businesses may decrease salaries because of this supplement. To combat this behavior, it may be beneficial to implement a minimum wage standard for childcare workers. This minimum wage can be directly connected to certification requirements and other regulations that childcare businesses already must adhere to in the state and community.
From Assessment to Strategy
From Assessment to Strategy

Economic recovery from the downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is underway. Jobs are starting to return, vaccinations have decreased virus transmission in many places, and there are glimmers of hope for returning to pre-pandemic life. However, pandemic disruptions persist and then end is still not clearly in sight. It’s been 19 months since COVID-19 caused the first shutdowns in the United States, and only things that are certain are that the pandemic has caused a devastating loss of life – most acutely in the hardest hit Black, Latinx, immigrant and low-income communities – and post-pandemic realities will require local government and community leaders to find new solutions to old problems intensified by this crisis.

The American Rescue Plan Act includes funding to states, local governments and school that can not only replenish depleted funds in existing programs, but more importantly provide leverage for broader cross-sector work to address critical needs in the community – needs stemming from long-standing racial and ethnic disparities, income loss and housing instability, and lack of access to opportunity. The needs are not new, but the COVID crisis has illuminated them in a way that underscores the urgency in taking decisive and cross-cutting action to address root causes and entrenched inequities. For the first time in a generation, local leaders have an opportunity to meet urgent needs with urgency and to strategically focus resources on programs that maximize impact across critical areas in order to address longstanding racial and economic disparities. This is the time for local leaders to issue a collective call to action.

An equitable approach to economic recovery must be data driven. This toolkit provides the foundation for using a combination of quantitative and qualitative data to conduct a highly localized inquiry-based assessment into community conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Quantitative data include publicly available data, local city and county data that provide the ability to compare local conditions with those of other jurisdictions or across time. Qualitative data are gathered through interviews with local leaders, city staff, grassroots agencies, and most importantly, residents and business owners. Analysis of findings should inform the development of an equitable recovery vision, supported by strategic allocation of funding and resources to achieve the vision’s outcomes.

Each section of this toolkit includes assessment recommendations to support strategy development within each focus area. However, there are overarching recommendations that are consistent across all areas and provide broad context for the assessment approach, underscoring the urgency needed to recovery equitably in the coming months and years.

Cities and their community partners must adopt an outcome-driven approach to achieving equity. To create lasting equitable outcomes, cities and community partners must find new approaches to addressing longstanding inequities. Program funding sources to support community development, housing and economic mobility are most often tied to federal CDBG, ESG, HOME and, more recently, CARES Act and COVID relief allocations. As a result, local programs funded through federal allocations typically mandate compliance with income qualifications, tax status and other eligibility measures. While these programs are needed and valuable, eligibility requirements present challenges to residents and businesses owners, and may not address the broad spectrum of need related to the COVID-19 economic crisis. The American Rescue Plan Act provides some additional flexibility over past eligibility and compliance regulations; the risk is that cities will fall back on legacy programs that are effective, but do not drive toward equity.

- **Equitable outcomes require new solutions to old problems.** Strategic planning must develop and implement solutions to today’s needs and not rely on past programs to drive impact in new directions.
- **Implementation should be regularly measured against accountability metrics.** Collected data must include measures of equity impacts and outcomes, not only funds deployed and compliance requirements.
Cities cannot recover on their own. Bring in institutional and community-based partners to create complementary programs to provide resources unbounded by federal eligibility requirements in order to meet the full needs of the community.

Cities must convene cross-sector problem solving groups in each of the critical impact areas. Ideally launched out of the Mayor’s Office, cross-sector groups or task forces should include high level decisionmakers who can meet regularly to provide real guidance and support effective action in the community. The objective of each group should be to break down institutional siloes in order to drive collective action toward equitable outcomes, support effective implementation, and measure accountability across all partners. Each cross-sector problem solving group/task force should include representatives of marginalized communities who can speak to lived experiences in communities, identify ongoing implementation concerns and provide input into effective solutions.

Cities should establish funding priorities to drive equitable outcomes. This assessment includes recommendations across multiple focus areas that include both short-term actions and longer-term strategic planning.

Cities needs to prioritize data collection to drive policymaking and evaluate effectiveness of programs and implementation. Identifying key equity metrics and regularly evaluating program performance will allow cities to measure outcomes, realign funding to meet changing community needs and course correct as needed.

- **Expand outreach to business community** in order to expand data collection and evaluate effectiveness of services. Cultivate stronger connections with local affinity groups that can improve service provision to small businesses. Use data to hone decision-making around City investment, procurement, and supply chain management efforts.
- **Collect both resident and landlord data** to support strategic use of federal and other housing assistance funding to meet the breadth of community housing needs.
Appendix

Interview and Focus Group Participants

City Representatives

- City Mayor
- City Administrator
- City Finance Director
- Community & Economic Development Department
- City Health & Human Services Department
- Public Works Department
- Parks and Recreation Department
- City Council Members

Economic Development

- Local Development Corporation
- Chamber of Commerce

Housing & Community Development

- Local Housing Authority
- Local Charity or Philanthropic Organization (could be part of a focus group)
- Neighborhood Group/Organization
- Religious and Cultural Affinity Group (could be part of a focus group)

Workforce Development

- Local Workforce Development Organization
- Post-Secondary Educational Institution (could be part of a focus group)

Education & Youth Services

- School District Superintendent
- Childcare, Youth, and Families Service Provider
- Local Charity or Philanthropic Organization (could be part of a focus group)

Proposed Focus Groups

- Philanthropy and local and regional foundations - philanthropic foundations, nongovernmental and nonprofit organizations with assets provided by donors and expended for socially useful purposes
- Post-secondary educational institutions - schools (including technical, trade, or vocational schools), junior colleges, colleges or universities
- Community health providers – Health care providers encompass organisations and actors that deliver health care goods and services, applicable providers may include: hospitals, residential long-term care facilities, preventive care providers, and the City or County Health Department
- Business owners – citywide representation of business owners engaged in commercial, industrial, or professional activities (could also be individual interviews)
- Childcare, Youth, and Families Service Provider – child and family advocates, including: parents, youth-serving organizations, and community members
Glossary

Affordable Housing: Housing is typically considered affordable if total housing costs do not exceed 30 percent of a household’s gross income.

Aggregate/disaggregate – used in data analysis to refer to aggregated data – sums gathered into a mass or whole – versus disaggregated data that is separated into contributing parts. For instance, data disaggregated by race and ethnicity can provide insights that aggregated totals may miss.

Area Median Income: The median income is the income amount that divides a population into two equal groups, half having an income above that amount, and half having an income below that amount. The median income may differ from the mean (or average) income.

American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) – A $1.9 trillion coronavirus rescue package designed to facilitate the United States’ recovery from the economic and health effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

BIPOC – an acronym which stands for Black, Indigenous, People of Color. The term is used to acknowledge that not all people of color face equal levels of injustice.

CARES Act – The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES) is a $2 trillion stimulus bill enacted by the U.S. legislature to blunt the impact of the economic downturn triggered by the global coronavirus pandemic in March of 2020.

Community Development Corporation (CDC) – CDCs are 501(c)(3) non-profit organizations that are created to support and revitalize communities, especially those that are impoverished to struggling. CDCs often build and manage affordable housing, but they can also be involved in a wide range of community services that meet local needs, such as education, job training, healthcare, commercial development, and other social programs.

Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) – CDFIs are private financial institution that are dedicated to delivering responsible, affordable lending to help low-income, low-wealth and other disadvantaged people and communities access capital. By financing community businesses – including small businesses, microenterprises, nonprofit organizations, commercial real estate, and affordable housing – CDFIs support job growth and retention in hard-to-serve markets.

Cost Burdened Households – households who pay more than 30 percent of their income for housing and may have difficulty affording necessities such as food, clothing, transportation, and medical care. Severely Cost Burdened Households pay more than 50 percent of their income for housing

Equity/equitable – justice according to natural law or rights, but in this context specifically referring to freedom from bias or favoritism. Equitable means dealing fairly and equally with everyone. Glenn Harris President of Race Forward speaks about racial equity as follows: “Racial equity is about applying justice and a little bit of common sense to a system that’s been out of balance. When a system is out of balance, people of color feel the impacts most acutely, but to be clear, an imbalances system makes all of us pay.”

Eviction – Eviction is the removal of a tenant from rental property by the landlord. In some jurisdictions it may also involve the removal of persons from premises that were foreclosed by a mortgagee. An area’s eviction rate is the subset of those homes that received an eviction judgment in which renters were ordered to leave.

Industry vs. sector – Industry refers to a specific group of companies or businesses, whereas the term sector describes a large segment of the economy. For instance, the public sector is made up of governments and
agencies that are publicly funded, and the private sector is made up of private businesses. But these private sector businesses may represent multiple industries based on the type of good or services they provide.

Latinx – Relating to people of Latin American origin or descent, used as a gender-neutral or nonbinary alternative to Latino or Latina.

Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) – MSAs are delineated by the United States Office of Management and Budget as having at least one urbanized area with a minimum population of 50,000. MSA is the formal definition of a region that consists of a city and surrounding communities that are linked by social and economic factors.

Minority or Woman-owned Business Enterprise (MWBE) – Generally used to refer to a business entity that has been certified as a minority and/or women-owned business enterprise.

Owner Occupancy Rate – the proportion of occupied households which are occupied by the owners, also referred to as the homeownership rate.

Payment Protection Program (PPP) – $349 billion in federal funding included in the CARES Act to support small business’ efforts to maintain their payroll and some overhead expenses through the period of emergency. The goal was to keep workers paid and employed during the emergency.

Postsecondary Education – the level of education that follows the successful completion of secondary education (often referred to as high school). Postsecondary education includes colleges and universities, as well as vocational and trade schools.

Procurement – The process of acquiring goods, services, or work from an external source, often via a tendering or competitive bidding process. Corporations and public entities often define processes intended to promote fair and open competition for their business while minimizing risks such as exposure to fraud and collusion.

Qualitative – Data that is not easily reduced to numbers and tends to answer questions about the “what”, “how” and “why” of a phenomenon, rather than questions of “how many” or “how much”.

Quantitative data – Data expressing a certain quantity, amount or range; usually associated with measurement.

Stakeholder – a person with an interest or concern in something. In community development, stakeholders are often businesses, residents, and/or community organizations.

Vacancy Rate (residential) – estimated percent of housing units that are vacant. Vacant units are excluded from the housing inventory if the roof, walls, windows, and/or doors no longer protect the interior from the elements or if they are condemned or they are to be demolished.