

Researchers' Experiences Inform Recommendations for Funders to Facilitate Racial Equity in Research

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Introduction

Funders of research—including federal and state agencies, philanthropic foundations, and nonprofit organizations—play a key role in shaping efforts to incorporate equity in research. This role may include conceptualizing, designing, conducting, and disseminating racial equity in research. For funders to effectively facilitate equity in research, they should understand researchers' experiences with implementing racial equity methods.

This brief aims to connect researchers' experiences and funders' work in racial equity. We interviewed several Child Trends researchers (referred to simply as "researchers" throughout this report) who have many years of experience integrating racial equity in research. We aimed to understand researchers' motivations for engaging in racial equity work, garner examples of how they have incorporated racial equity in their research, and determine the support needed to integrate racial equity methods in research. Based on findings from these interviews—and discussions with our program officer at the Annie E. Casey Foundation—we provide key recommendations for funders to better support equity-focused research.

We begin this brief by sharing key themes from researchers' experiences, as captured in our interviews. First, we recount researchers' descriptions of what racial equity research means and how their experiences shape their research. Next, we highlight their responses on categories related to integrating racial equity methods in research and improving processes to facilitate racial equity in research. In the final section, we present our recommendations to funders on:

- Requesting and evaluating racial equity work
- Adjusting funding structures for racial equity work
- Building capacity among researchers and communities in racial equity work
- Reflecting on funders' roles in racial equity research

Key Themes From Child Trends Researchers' Experiences With Racial Equity Methods in Research

Table 1 presents key themes from our interviews¹ with Child Trends researchers, which support the funder recommendations highlighted in Table 2. We provide insight into these themes and describe key funder recommendations in more detail in the narrative below.

Table 1. Categories of Exploration and Corresponding Themes

Categories of Exploration	Key Themes
<p><u>Defining and Shaping Racial Equity in Research</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For the researchers, racial equity in research centers lived experiences, investigates structures that cause disparities, applies an asset-based approach, thoughtfully incorporates race, maintains transparency in research decisions, and honors community members. • Researchers' lived experiences shape their approach to research and can provide context to challenge research assumptions, particularly research based on Eurocentric assumptions.
<p><u>Integrating Racial Equity Methods in Research</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researchers prioritize transparency, reflection, equitable compensation, capacity building, and community input to establish relationships with community members. • Researchers seek to include community voice while taking care to mitigate research burden and respect community members' interests and time.
<p><u>Improving Processes to Facilitate Racial Equity in Research</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researchers noted that conducting racial equity work will inevitably require adjustments in research organizations' internal infrastructures and operations (e.g., IRB processes, accounting processes, and communication and dissemination processes). • Researchers recognize that funders play a critical role in facilitating racial equity research and can adjust and reflect on their current funding processes to further support racial equity work.

¹ Information on the methods is outlined in the Methodology section at the end of this report.

How racial equity work is defined and shaped

Defining racial equity work

We asked researchers to define what racial equity work means to them and to highlight examples of thoughtful racial equity research. While these researchers had varied experiences implementing racial equity in their work, they highlighted defining characteristics of racial equity work, which included:

- Centering the histories and lived experiences (i.e., personal encounters with systemic barriers) of people historically excluded from resources, power, and privilege
- Intentionally investigating structures, policies, and root causes that produce inequities and appropriately attributing disparities to those root causes
- Applying an asset-based (strengths-based) approach
- Maintaining transparency with research processes and decisions, including any limitations that arise in the researcher's ability to carry out equity work
- Thinking critically about variables such as race
- Actively honoring the contributions and involvement of community members

Our respondents also contrasted these characteristics with examples of research that claimed to include a racial equity focus but lacked thoughtfulness. For example, some described how research might include people of color on research teams to 'check the box,' but is not deliberately inclusive of the lived experiences, interests, or professional skillsets of those individuals. Similarly, in quantitative research, our researchers noted that some research may disaggregate data by race without a clear rationale or theory, negating the intentionality needed for authentic racial equity research.

Researchers' own lived experiences shapes research.

We asked researchers how long they had been engaged in racial equity work; respondents of color stated that racial equity issues had always been part of their identity, and therefore inseparable from their professional work. One researcher shared that, "being a Black female in this country and knowing my family history and my own personal experiences, there was no way not to be thinking about these [racial equity] issues." This contrasted with White interviewed researchers, whose attention to racial equity issues emerged from their experiences with systems and programs; these respondents recognized the privileges in being White. For example, one researcher shared their experience navigating the affordable housing support system: They felt they had experienced fewer barriers and discrimination because they were White and spoke English.

Researchers' lived experiences shaped their racial equity work and motivated them "to do something good for the communities that [they] come from and know." One researcher described how their lived experiences helped them develop creative solutions to recruitment and data collection challenges. For example, this respondent shared how older immigrant parents may experience technical difficulties in accessing video conferencing platforms such as Zoom to participate in focus groups. The researcher was accustomed—from experiences with their own immigrant parents—to engaging in video calls on WhatsApp,² an app commonly used among immigrant communities to communicate with family and friends outside of the country. This solution with WhatsApp was free, worked within the parameters of the study (including

² WhatsApp is an easily accessible and free platform that allows people to communicate with family and friends in different countries. As such, many immigrants from Latin America, Asia, and Africa have personal experience using this app as a method of communication and connection.

adhering to data security requirements), and facilitated successful data collection. Having drawn this solution from their own experiences, the researcher noted that researchers may sometimes “lose a really authentic part” of themselves in academic training and emphasized the importance of bringing their “full self[s]” and drawing on their lived experiences.

Researchers’ lived experiences provide context to challenge assumptions in research, particularly research based on Eurocentric assumptions.

Lived experience—coupled with an understanding of the communities in which they worked—helped researchers recognize how Eurocentric values and assumptions are often elevated over the authentic experiences of community members. A researcher noted that, when applying a cultural asset model to a research project on families caring for infants, they found that the project’s indicators of success, quality, and well-being were “based on what society considers normative ... the White, middle-class standard.” In this situation, the researcher described examining an indicator of positive family functioning that held up the nuclear family unit as the standard for well-being. This standard created a challenge for recognizing the benefits of other family structures. The researcher explained that Black families have historically had strong extended family ties, which can include multiple generations living together in the same household—a structure considered supportive of family functioning and child well-being.ⁱ

Integrating racial equity in research

Many themes in this section are relevant to engaging communities in research. Community engagement methods—as our researchers employ them—center the lived experiences of individuals and communities that have been historically excluded from resources, power, and privilege in the United States, and involve active partnerships with community members to advance racial equity. We recognize that racial equity methods and community engagement are not synonymous. For example, recent research has shown that community engagement projects that do not incorporate a racial equity lens can center the perspectives of White participants and further marginalize racially minoritized families.ⁱⁱ We also recognize that racial equity encompasses more than community engagement alone. Given our researchers’ intentionality in using community engagement methods as a way to advance equity, we have chosen to highlight their feedback as examples of integrating racial equity methods in research.

Researchers prioritized transparency, reflection, equitable compensation, capacity building, and community input to establish relationships with community members.

Researchers employed a variety of strategies to develop and maintain trusting partnerships with community members and to ensure that such relationships are reciprocal:

- **Prioritize transparency in research decisions.** Our research respondents were acutely aware of the exploitative and concealed research practices that Black and Brown communities have endured^{iii,iv,v}; some highlighted the importance of transparency in the research and decision-making process because “that’s the only way that people can understand what you’re doing.” In practice, this means “not doing anything behind the veil. [Being] happy to explain ... and talk[ing] about why.” Respondents also noted that transparency was critical even if it meant providing more detail than typically thought necessary. One researcher found that transparency allowed Tribal community members to feel ownership and control over the research process because they knew what to expect and were aware of any changes or limitations to the project.
- **Deliberately incorporate community feedback.** Researchers considered it essential for researchers to solicit, accept, and process feedback, but also noted the importance of deliberately incorporating feedback into the research process—for example, by making changes to study designs, revising data

collection instruments, and editing reports. By consistently and frequently involving community members and their feedback in research efforts, researchers reported that community members felt “seen and appreciated” as well as “interested,” which resulted in stronger relationships and partnerships.

- **Maintain open communication and mitigate power dynamics.** To develop trusting relationships with communities, researchers must be available to community stakeholders about their concerns, ideas, and general questions about research processes.^{vi} Researchers can facilitate this trust by sharing their personal contact information with community co-researchers to maintain communication and mitigate power dynamics. One researcher shared, “I provided my cell phone number ... our [community research partner] ... calls me on my cell phone whenever she has a question or an idea ... we send both written texts and videos, so they see our faces a lot and they know that we're committed.” This researcher shared that exchanging personal contact information helped mitigate the power dynamics. Overall, the researchers with whom we spoke felt that being flexible, showing humanity, and creating multiple opportunities to interface and dialogue was key to ensuring accessibility and developing trust.
- **Be sensitive to who leads communication with community members.** One researcher stated that researchers working with Indigenous community members, for example, should be cognizant of and monitor how they communicate with Tribal communities. This researcher prefers to serve as a liaison between Child Trends’ administrative offices and community members and shared the need to be cautious about this type of communication: “the slightest thing can shut it all down, like an [unintentionally] wrong tone; a misunderstanding ... can just derail or break down anything that we’ve been building.” By personally managing communications with communities with which she has previous relationships, this researcher has actively sought to mitigate the possibility of miscommunication.
- **Have consistent, equity-focused internal reflection meetings.** Researchers emphasized the importance of routinely reflecting on their backgrounds, biases, and privileges to understand how these factors influence their research; to identify strategies to better honor the contributions of their community partners; and to ensure they stay true to their project’s equity goals. The following reflection questions may guide project meetings as researchers assess their biases and consider creating space for co-researchers and communities involved in the research:
 - How may our biases affect us throughout the study, and what steps can we take to minimize their effect in our work with the communities?
 - How are we bringing our unique lived experience to this project?
 - Would we have changed anything about the study design based on lessons we’ve learned so far?
 - What lessons have we learned about the funder support needed to lead this work?
 - How can we honor the stories that are shared and the lessons learned from this project?
 - What are our responsibilities to the communities we are working with?
 - Besides asking for their input on the best/most helpful ways to communicate our findings to them, how else can (or do) we plan to engage our community partners in the dissemination stage?
 - Are there parts of the work that we should ask community members to more actively lead? Are they just being informed or are they authentically engaged?
 - Have we centered racial equity in our work the way we would have liked or intended?
 - Are there instances where we can improve how we are being intentional in embedding an equity perspective?

- **Recognize that using racial equity methods takes time.** Developing partnerships and establishing trust within communities is a process that can take several months to years. One researcher stated, “I think people really underestimate the amount of time that it takes. You know whether it's on the infrastructure side or the conceptualization and the actual research ... it just takes time to hear from people, to incorporate their perspectives, to get it right, to mess up, to try again. ... that's a process.” Another researcher noted that, at its core, this work “requires relationships,” which take time to develop and maintain. From a practical standpoint, a researcher noted that studies that work with populations who speak languages other than English must include documents in multiple languages; this involves translating protocols, transcriptions, and write-ups, and identifying and hiring culturally responsive interpreters—a significant time investment.
- **Value community work through equitable compensation.** Researchers placed value on ensuring that community members are appropriately compensated for their input and experience: Community members bring specific insights and abilities to research that researchers lack. One researcher shared a conversation in which a Tribal elder stated, “[W]e are essentially the PhDs in our culture. Why are we getting a \$100 gift card when you could not do the curriculum [without us]?” While there is no defined guidance for research project compensation, researchers considered it important to discuss compensation rates openly with community members. One researcher explained that their process for compensating community members mirrors how rates are determined for other consultants: Develop the scope of work for everyone on the team, determine the payment rate based on responsibilities, suggest rates to community members, and adjust the budget based on the agreed-upon rates.
- **Provide opportunities for community partners to build capacity.** Building capacity is another form of reciprocity. One researcher noted, “You don't just ... want to pick people's brains ... you should be taking the time to build capacity in that community ... that's compensation in a different way.” Another researcher shared an example of capacity building in practice, describing how their research team had held an event to help community members learn about terminology specific to the research study (e.g., Adverse Childhood Experiences, trauma, historical trauma). A different researcher discussed how a community member had been promoted through the course of the project, moving from collecting data, to other roles with increasing responsibility including working as research assistant and specialist.

Researchers sought to include community voice while taking care to mitigate research burden on community members.

Guidance on embedding racial equity in research often recommends partnering with community members during each stage of the research process. While researchers understood the benefit of including community members throughout the research process, they were also mindful of the potential burdens on time and resources that research can pose for community members. As such, they endeavored to engage the community to the extent of their desire and ability to be involved. This approach was taken not only for community members as research partners, but also as research participants. In this section, we explore researchers' rationale and strategies on including community members in research with mindful practices.

Community members as research partners

With the momentum and push to include communities in research, researchers questioned whether partnerships with communities are always aligned with community priorities. One researcher “wonder[ed] how much burden and responsibility we're placing on communities that are already struggling, under-resourced, and marginalized ... I wonder when we talk about racial equity, are we talking about things that make us feel better?”

Some researchers articulated the importance of being mindful of the degree to which community members want to be engaged in research, especially given the recommendations^{vii} to include members throughout every research stage. One researcher noted that it might be unfair to expect community members to spend

inordinate amounts of time analyzing data and writing reports, especially if they lack the formal training, time, or sufficient resources to do so. If community partners have limited time or bandwidth to engage, researchers provided suggestions to amplify their voices while simultaneously respecting their interests/time:

- **Offer multiple options for research involvement, with clear time commitments, and ask people how they want to participate.**
- **Involve community members in the most critical points in a study, such as developing the study design and research questions, interpreting findings, and creating and/or executing dissemination strategies.** For community members with limited time, honing in on critical points of the study honors their availability and provides meaningful areas for engagement.
- **Involve community members in research review processes.** For example, ensure opportunities for people to provide feedback on data collection instruments or research dissemination products. One researcher drafted research questions and community team members provided valuable feedback, which helped revise wording of the questions and ensured translation accuracy.
- **Develop community members' capacity and professional skills to support the research effort.** Some researchers shared strategies for capacity building, such as hosting community-wide seminars to teach communities about research terms and providing accessible training sessions with community partners on research strategies.
- **Define the roles and contributions of each community member and researcher early in the process and draw on community members' strengths for their involvement in the research.** One researcher shared that Tribal leaders require project teams to receive training on the history and context of the Tribe using previously developed Tribal documents.

Community members as research participants

Researchers provided strategies to mindfully include research participants so that research participation fits their needs and preferences. One researcher noted that, for many communities with urgent issues, “research isn't necessarily a priority.” Researchers described moving the focus from their own research agenda to participants' needs. One researcher said, “I want to get so much information. I need to stop and think ‘What do you [community members] need to feel good about your participation in this?’” Many researcher strategies focused on data collection activities, which researchers felt provided the most opportunity to reduce burden, increase comfort among participants, and gain credibility with the community. Suggested strategies included:

- Provide participants with technical support to access virtual platforms and research tools.
- Offer flexible video and interview options (e.g., interview parents in their car, late at night, or in early morning).
- Assess and incorporate community and cultural preferences regarding the use of technology (e.g., video and audio devices) prior to conducting interviews.
- Use methods of communication and data collection that may be more familiar to people who are not researchers, such as text messaging or WhatsApp.
- For younger populations, develop age-appropriate study activities (e.g., photovoice) to support engagement, but remain flexible with timelines; younger groups might be more prone to getting off task and may take more time getting comfortable with the research process.
- Conduct interviews that are shorter than the norm (30 minutes vs 60-90 minutes) for participants with time or care constraints (e.g., parents, child care workers) and prioritize asking these respondents the questions that are most critical to the study.

Improving processes to facilitate racial equity research

While there has been growing support for racial equity research, researchers emphasized the need to build internal practices within research organizations. They also identified how funders could strengthen processes that facilitate racial equity in research.

Conducting racial equity work will inevitably require adjustments in research organizations' internal infrastructures and operations.

Researchers stated that conducting racial equity work will result in adjustments to research organizations' administrative processes, including institutional review boards (IRBs) and accounting and communication departments.

IRB administrative processes

While IRB administrative processes are necessary to protect research participants' rights, they can be challenging for non-researchers because of the requisite research knowledge and academic jargon involved in IRB decisions; non-researchers must often complete trainings to indicate they understand IRB standards. One researcher described the process by which their team made IRB training more accessible to community research partners: The process included summarizing IRB training content using lay terminology, presenting content verbally via a slide deck, providing a forum for community members to be trained together, and adding opportunities to ask questions about the content (including with the trainer present). These strategies differed from the standard Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) IRB training, which occurred via video, individually, and with no opportunities for group reflection or discussion. Because collecting data with community members was a new organizational process, multiple discussions within different levels of the organization were necessary to make this strategy a reality, as was the creation of a new IRB process.

Accounting administrative processes

Researchers recounted the process of working within the confines of a federally mandated accounting structure when compensating research participants. They wanted to compensate according to the preferences of research participants (i.e., paper check, direct deposit, or gift card), but encountered barriers to doing so. Similarly, another researcher highlighted how working with community members during a project's conceptualization period is often uncompensated time "that doesn't fit neatly into [accounting and billing]." Researchers felt that certain administrative processes and regulations make it challenging to compensate community members—especially members of groups such as justice system-involved youth or people with unauthorized immigration status who may not have access to the paperwork required by federal or other agencies to be eligible for compensation.

Communications and research dissemination

One researcher's experience highlights the ways in which incorporating community voices should also entail challenging and adapting expectations that products should be exclusively written to academic standards. The researcher shared a story about feedback they received for a series of written briefs created as part of their community-based research project. They stated, "We have a way of writing ... and not everyone writes like that ... It was really important for me in [the project] ... to push back on questions of my style of writing ... we left what they (community members) would put. We didn't change it at all."

While Child Trends has been working toward making data more publicly accessible, current practices around research and data ownership are often at odds with how communities operate. One researcher emphasized the importance of data sovereignty for Indigenous Tribal Nations, explaining that "ownership of

the data goes back to the Tribal community. [However,] there is a certain ownership that researchers feel over data they've been a part of collecting." This expectation of "transparent science and wanting to be able to reproduce analyses," for example, can be a source of conflict when working with American Indian and Alaska Native communities. Attention to navigating organizational expectations while also respecting and advocating for Tribal rights is an important goal when using racial equity methods in research.

Funders should reflect on and adjust their funding processes to support racial equity work.

With the recent increase in funding announcements that center and value racial equity approaches, researchers shared some ways in which funders could further facilitate racial equity. Specifically, the funding community could 1) better understand the amount of time it takes to engage communities, 2) broaden their understanding of what constitutes evidence or outputs from funded initiatives, 3) acknowledge long-time contributors to racial equity work, and 4) maintain openness to differing perspectives.

Understand that racial equity work takes time.

Researchers stated that, sometimes, the reality of the time needed to develop partnerships and relationships is often unrecognized by funders. One researcher explained, "Funders—that includes private foundations ... federal agencies—they want things to come quick. Like we'll give you two years, and we want to know everything. Two years is not a lot of time ... you need the whole year just to build partnership[s], right?" Another echoed the sentiment: "You can't just go to a community and say, 'Hey, I want to partner with you, and I want to do this together. Let's write a proposal and submit it like a month later.' It doesn't work that way ... the [community] should have some time to make some observations to make sure that I'm [the researcher is] ... not just talking to talk, but like walking the walk." Another researcher noted, however, that when funders set aside time to establish connections, they plant the "seeds that then allow you to continue to do this work" in the future.

Expand what is considered 'successful' evidence and outputs.

Researchers mentioned the pressure to produce peer-reviewed publications and research reports as sole outputs of research and evidence of success. One researcher noted that, while they understand the value of peer-reviewed publications, they also recognize the friction between the amount of time needed to manage a partnership and time spent writing: "I look like [a] ... junior scholar because I don't have the list of publications. I've planned so many meetings, I've planned so many presentations, but I don't have the peer-reviewed publications." This researcher also noted that, were funders to expand their definition of 'outputs,' this shift would help to "change the system we work in."

Another researcher highlighted the equity issues involved if funders require peer-reviewed articles as the only sources of evidence. They noted, "Historically, you know, Black people have had less access to this [peer-reviewed publications] ... like all information doesn't have to come from this very specific place where, you know, people of color have been explicitly left out of that space."

Another researcher suggested that funders elevate other evidence of success: "Following our workplan does not mean we're on track; it's the community and it's the relationship; that tells you whether you're on track ... but that's hard to do in this business."

Acknowledge long-time contributors to racial equity work.

Some researchers expressed the desire for funders to prioritize researchers who have engaged in racial equity research for an extended time. One researcher noted that the increase in racial equity funding comes with a risk of “forgetting that there are ... the researchers particularly, you know, researchers of color, who have been doing this work for the last 20-30, 40-50 years ... [who] just haven't ... had the opportunity or had the platform to really share their work.” On the flip side, one researcher emphasized the possibility of burnout for long-time racial equity researchers; this risk has been exacerbated by a recent increase in requests for racial equity research. This tension can result in long-time researchers feeling “a responsibility and pressure” to bring needed funding and attention to the communities with which they work, while simultaneously being “so stretched thin ...” that they find it difficult to take on new projects.

Be open and willing to adapt and listen.

Researchers noted the need to be more strategic about the opportunities that they pursue, including being deliberate about working with funders that have the interest and flexibility to adapt their structures to respond to what researchers and communities share. One researcher said, “We’re investing in a community, we’re not investing in a research project ... we need to be a respectful partner of the community as opposed to positioning our researchers to answer the question that we want an answer to ... this might result in a different plan.” This, in turn, would require openness by the funder to adjust plans and the researcher skills needed to develop a plan better aligned with the community.

Some researchers were cautious about working with certain funders, particularly those that have “historically been really bad to people on the team”—behavior that includes an unwillingness to listen to differing perspectives or learn from researchers. One researcher shared that they had needed to step away from a team where their equity knowledge was overlooked, and that their role on the project had been performative. Another noted that, as a result of sticking to one’s values, “you may lose a funder or two, but I firmly believe that not all money is good money.”

Key Recommendations for Funders to Better Support Equity-Focused Research

Below we present our recommendations for funders to better support equity-focused research.

Table 2. Summary of Key Recommendations for Funders

Key Funders' Roles	Key Recommendations
Requesting and evaluating racial equity work	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Collaborate with communities to develop racial equity criteria for proposals and measures of success that are more relevant for racial equity work.• Request racial equity criteria in proposals to gauge the thoughtfulness of proposed racial equity work.• Elevate additional metrics of success that are aligned with racial equity and community-engaged work.
Adjusting funding structures for racial equity work	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Allow sufficient time and funds within a funding cycle for researchers to conduct thorough racial equity and community engagement work.

Key Funders' Roles	Key Recommendations
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create more open, flexible funding mechanisms to support the flexibility needed to conduct racial equity work.
<p><u>Building capacity for racial equity work</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foster communities of learning and capacity-building specifically to support racial equity research. • Build the capacity of researchers and research organizations to support processes needed for racial equity research. • Ensure transparency with communities regarding their involvement with research and protect against community exploitation and burnout.
<p><u>Reflecting on funders' roles in racial equity work</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a culture that supports funders in building rapport and transparent communication with grantees to mitigate power dynamics. • Maintain an adaptable attitude to scopes of work that evolve and shift to be more responsive to community needs and perspectives. • Reflect on processes for identifying research partners.

Requesting and evaluating racial equity work

Collaborate with communities to develop racial equity criteria for proposals and measures of success that are more relevant for racial equity work.

To develop criteria and measures of success that are more relevant for racial equity work, funders can turn to communities for input. The researchers we spoke with noted that it is essential to incorporate community feedback throughout the research process, while also adjusting research goals based on participant and community needs. By being responsive to the community, researchers can more effectively address concerns, and community members feel more valued and heard. Funders can extend the process of community collaboration by engaging community members in developing racial equity criteria for research proposals, including new measures of success. Prior to releasing an RFP, funders can connect with relevant community stakeholders and leaders to determine what research supports community members need, what they are looking for as a deliverable or measure of success, and, generally, how they would define a healthy researcher-community partnership.

Request racial equity criteria in proposal to gauge the thoughtfulness of proposed racial equity work.

To fund thoughtful racial equity work, funders can request and assess information about racial equity strategies the applicant plans to use. For example, a funder can request:

- Information about how researchers will be transparent with participants throughout the research process
- Information on how researchers will incorporate the diversity of lived experiences on a project

- Practices for self-reflection and equity within the research team
- Practices for including participants' voices in the design and implementation of the research
- Information on communities' historical and contextual landscapes
- Processes for adjusting scope and work plans to be responsive to community needs
- Researcher reflections on ethical challenges associated with racial equity or community engagement methods (e.g., power balance, undue burden, decision making)

Each proposal should be evaluated to see how and why researchers justify their approaches and decisions—not just whether they fulfill every condition. When possible, funders could include representation from historically marginalized groups or groups that might be affected by research to review proposals and provide the support and compensation that community members need to fully participate. Funders should also be transparent about the decision-making process for funding proposals, particularly for how community input will be considered.

Elevate additional metrics of success that are aligned with racial equity and community-engaged work.

Funders can expand their metrics of success and challenge the status quo about how success is defined. Researchers stated that focusing only on traditional metrics of success such as academic publications may overlook the work conducted in communities. Funders can counteract the tendency to only elevate written products as key deliverables and can additionally elevate oral narratives, relationships, and community presentations. For example, funders can expand measures of success by considering:

- The number and length of a project's community relationships
- Community-wide dissemination events
- Capacity-building opportunities that research provides for community members,
- Presentations to community members
- Altering progress reports to be less focused on deliverables and more focused on processes, including relationship-building metrics and reflection questions

Adjusting funding structures for racial equity work

Allow sufficient time and funds within a funding cycle for researchers to conduct thorough racial equity and community engagement work.

To conduct thorough racial equity work, funders can fund time to build community relationships. Funded time to build relationships among the funder, researchers, families, community groups, and community leaders can help build long-lasting relationships. The researchers we spoke with noted that it often takes a long time to earn the trust necessary to fully engage and incorporate community perspectives in the research process, so funding opportunities must account for this time. Funders might allow a year or two of relationship building and engagement with communities before identifying research questions/scope. Providing funded time to build relationships among the funder, researchers, families, community groups, and community leaders can help build long-lasting relationships and the support that community organizations and researchers need to build strong relationships.

Depending on the scope of work, funders may need to build in time for researchers to:

- Conduct sufficient historical and landscape reviews

- Establish community relationships from the onset
- Engage community members
- Maintain partnerships
- Reflect internally and externally on how the research is going
- Confirm findings with community members
- Determine deliverables alongside the community

Create more open, flexible funding mechanisms to support the flexibility needed to conduct racial equity work.

To support the creativity and flexibility required to conduct racial equity work, funders can consider more open, flexible funding mechanisms such as cost reimbursement contracts versus fixed-price, per-deliverable contracts. Many of the researchers we interviewed noted that, at times, the rigidity of funding mechanisms is difficult to align with the more flexible structure needed to integrate racial equity into research. More open-ended funding mechanisms can allow researchers and community members to modify research questions and products to ensure that they are relevant to community needs and require less restrictive parameters around use of funds (i.e., not being able to use money to provide food for community members).

Building capacity for racial equity work

Foster communities of learning and capacity-building specifically to support racial equity research.

Researchers, funders, and communities each have a wealth of knowledge from their respective areas of expertise and can all benefit from learning from each other. As mentioned above, increasing funders' knowledge about implementing racial equity methods in research may require initial conversations with researchers and communities before RFPs are released to help funders understand needs and parameters for racial equity (i.e., sufficient time for community involvement, time for relationship building, etc.). This would allow funders to adjust before RFPs are released.

Funders can support community capacity to engage in research by offering relevant trainings (e.g., on working with researchers, data analysis, research question development, understanding research terms, etc.). Researchers stated that community members may have limited capacity or training to engage in research and emphasized the importance of building capacity for trusting relationships by ensuring that community members understand and can participate in the research process.

Funders can also facilitate learning among researchers—for example, by providing trainings for researchers interested in engaging with communities in racial equity research. By bringing together experienced researchers in the field to discuss best practices and lessons learned in engaging community members in racial equity research, funders can foster communities of learning.

When possible, funders can leverage their networks to enable natural connections between community leaders and researchers. Many times, funders have relationships within communities or with the systems that impact the communities in which research takes place. This can help researchers make meaningful connections with community organizations or other research teams that have established the groundwork for building trust within communities, thereby further supporting their own ability to build connections in relevant communities. Even with the intention to create equitable exchanges and interactions, funders should remember that power dynamics will likely be prevalent—both between the funder and the researchers and community members, and between the researcher and community members. Finding

constructive ways to name these dynamics and work together to mitigate them can not only help shift those dynamics, but also strengthen relationships.

Build the capacity of researchers and research organizations to support processes needed for racial equity research.

Funders can support changes in accounting or IRB processes by funding research projects that support necessary adjustments and building in time for the organization to adjust their processes. For example, a funder can set initial expectations for an amount of compensation—and mechanism for providing it—that is equitable to community members. This expectation, in turn, necessitates that the research organization establish policies and processes to provide compensation in ways that work for community members. Alternatively, funders can build in funds to develop community-friendly IRB trainings and support time for researchers to work with the IRB to make those trainings a reality. Funders can also facilitate access to resources or technical assistance for organizations and engage in thoughtful partnerships that build the field's knowledge around effective practices to facilitate racial equity work.

Ensure transparency with communities regarding their involvement with research and protect against community exploitation and burnout.

Funders can serve as accountability partners in protecting communities from burnout and can encourage and challenge researchers to engage in preliminary research to assess the level and type of community engagement that is appropriate for the communities themselves—essentially involving them in the way they want to be involved. Researchers highlighted the potential for well-meaning research intentions to become burdensome on communities that may be overwhelmed with navigating systemic and economic challenges or responding to other research requests. In engaging community members as partners, funders can help ensure that opportunities for engagement are clear and that engagement is aligned with community members' interests, availability, and strengths.

Reflecting on funders' roles in racial equity work

Create a culture that supports funders in building rapport and transparent communication with grantees to mitigate power dynamics.

To facilitate a cohesive relationship between funders and grantees, funders can work to improve rapport through transparency and informal dialogue. Similarly, to mitigate the deferential relationship between a funder and grantee, funders can consider what it means to be transparent about how they function, including how they make decisions and a rationale for when they cannot be transparent. Additionally, researchers shared that creating multiple opportunities to engage in informal dialogue helps mitigate power dynamics. Funders can build rapport and opportunities for informal dialogue with grantees to mitigate the power imbalance between grantees and funders. Lastly, researchers stated that they regularly reflect on how their own biases and experiences influence their research to develop strategies to support their projects' equity goals. Funders can also reflect on how their own experiences with power influence their relationships and engagement with grantees and their work and develop strategies that honor racial equity research. Funders can benefit from reflecting on their own answers to the questions (or similar ones) provided in the Integrating Racial Equity in Research section of this brief.

Maintain an adaptable attitude to scopes of work that evolve and shift to be more responsive to community needs and perspectives.

To better capture the needs and perspectives of communities, funders can encourage and maintain a flexible scope of work. Because racial equity work relies on input from the community and their evolving lived experiences, the work can shift and change throughout the course of a project. Funders can maintain openness and humility to new perspectives from researchers and community members who work in this space and allow room for uncertainty and complexity to exist within grants. In doing so, they can adapt their deliverables and research processes to be more responsive to community needs and perspectives.

Funders should be aware of the assumptions that have shaped existing research on a topic and consider alternative measures that may be more culturally responsive. For example, there is value in pilot studies that may be less extensive than randomized control trials but might nevertheless provide information on racial equity differences.

Reflect on processes for identifying research partners.

Funders can reflect on their partnership practices and connect to and support researchers who have a history of engagement in equity research. Researchers noted that it's important for funders to elevate long-time contributors to the field. Funders can examine their processes for identifying research partners, and the extent to which they may be unintentionally excluding unconventionally trained researchers or firms.

Methodology

From February 2022 to November 2022, we conducted semi-structured virtual interviews with ten Child Trends researchers. They have worked as researchers from 11 to 27 years; eight identify as Black, Latina, Afro Latina, Asian American, and American Indian and two identify as White. They identify as mixed methods researchers and have a range of content expertise (e.g., early childhood education, childhood poverty policy, mental health school-based programming, sexual reproductive health, K-12 education, home visiting, cultural linguistics, youth development, and family engagement).

After summarizing and deductively coding interviews, we applied a thematic analysis framework to combine codes and identify the themes presented in this brief. The themes are categorized into three buckets: 1) defining and shaping racial equity in research, 2) integrating racial equity in research, and 3) improving processes to facilitate racial equity research. Drawing from our themes, we then developed key recommendations for funders, in consultation with our program officer and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, to ensure appropriateness for the funding community.

Limitations

Our sample is limited to 10 experienced Child Trends researchers. While these researchers all have extensive knowledge on the topic of racial equity in research, the limited size of the sample may mean that some of this brief's themes may not be applicable to other researchers at Child Trends or to researchers at other organizations. Additionally, the researchers we interviewed interpreted racial equity in research as a process that centers those with lived experiences and focuses on community engagement as a mechanism for rebalancing the structures that caused initial harm to participants. The authors recognize, however, that community engagement is one part of racial equity and that additional strategies focused on racial equity could be further explored. The authors and project officer also recognize the potential for funding research through community-based organizations—as opposed to research organizations—and acknowledge that

this strategy has many benefits and considerations that could be explored in future work. Lastly, while all funders can help facilitate racial equity research, it is important to note that the federal government is by far the largest funder of social science research on children, youth, and families. These recommendations are most likely to be widely and sustainably implemented if they are adopted by federal agencies that fund research.

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Endnotes

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