Center *for the* **Study** *of* **Social Policy**
Ideas into Action

Using Demographic Data to Advance Equity:
Insights from the Data 4 Equity and Action Lab

Background

An important step and best practice in developing targeted strategies to reduce disparities and advance equity is to collect valid data on race, ethnicity, and other demographic characteristics, such as: national origin, language spoken, tribal affiliation, disability, and sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression (SOGIE). Research points to the following benefits of collecting these data for:

- uplifting groups who have historically experienced disadvantage, misrepresentation, or exclusion,
- analyzing racial disproportionality and disparities,
- enforcing anti-discrimination policy,
- developing programs and services to affirm people in their identities and meet their specific needs, and
- making data more accessible to those who have been directly impacted and to community members.

Despite this well-established best practice, public systems often report missing demographic data, and inconsistent data collection methods and usage that are exploitative to people, and inflexible to changing needs and fluid identities. If these more nuanced kinds of data can be accurately collected, analyzed, reported, and used to support strategic change, the implications for advancing equity are considerable. To be clear, accurate data disaggregated by racial subgroups and other identity characteristics—by themselves, and even when accompanied by strategic efforts to address disparities and bias—will not repair the historical and current harm done by child welfare systems to Black, American Indian, Latinx, and other families who have been surveilled and/or forcibly separated. However, data can be used to inform policy, practice and resource allocation decisions within public agencies to address community outcomes that would otherwise go undetected, exacerbated, or ignored.

In January 2021, with funding from Casey Family Programs, the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) partnered with two people with lived experience with the child welfare system to form our Project Team, explore challenges faced by child welfare agencies in demographic data collection, and identify best practices for collecting and analyzing demographic information. Their perspectives were invaluable in guiding and developing analysis of policy and practice limitations. CSSP examined the research literature including best practices in fields such as education, public health and juvenile justice, facilitated six focus groups with 54 total participants, and surveyed child welfare agency data administrators nationwide.

In September 2021, CSSP published a literature review and a series of guides for anti-racist data collection for different audiences: frontline staff, data administrators, system leaders, and young people and families who are impacted by child welfare systems. Then, we launched the Data 4 Equity and Action (D4EA) Lab in May 2022 to better understand how these best practices could be operationalized and implemented within child welfare agencies.

The D4EA Lab brought together four jurisdictions—Hawaii, Washington, DC, Michigan, and Philadelphia, PA—to implement small tests of change, and build capacity to leverage demographic data as a tool to advance equity. These jurisdictions reflect the diversity of child welfare agencies, varying in size, population served, and community partnerships. The collaborative spirit, energy, and expertise brought by the jurisdictional teams and the subject matter experts helped increase our collective knowledge on how to leverage demographic data to advance equity.

This document reflects insights gleaned over the 12-month period of the Lab to help inform funders and organizations that are interested in convening partners and constituents to explore opportunities to leverage data to advance equity. While the D4EA lab focused on equity efforts within child welfare systems, the approach can be applied within any setting where there is interest to embark on efforts to leverage demographic data to improve outcomes for people who have historically experienced disadvantage, misrepresentation or exclusion.

D4EA Lab Overview

Jurisdictional teams met monthly from July 2022 through July 2023 and engaged in curated learning sessions and peer learning exchanges to increase their collective knowledge and skills on how to use demographic data to center equity, intersectionality, and anti-racism across their strategies. Figure 1 depicts the D4EA theory of change showing how jurisdictional teams embarked on equity-focused projects to operationalize and test the best practices for collecting, analyzing, reporting, and using demographic data. The Lab's efforts were informed by guiding values; carried out by jurisdictional teams inclusive of people who have been directly impacted by the child welfare system and community members; engagement in peer learning and exchange, the Plan Do Study Act model for improvement; and support from subject matter experts.

Figure 1. D4EA Lab Theory of Change
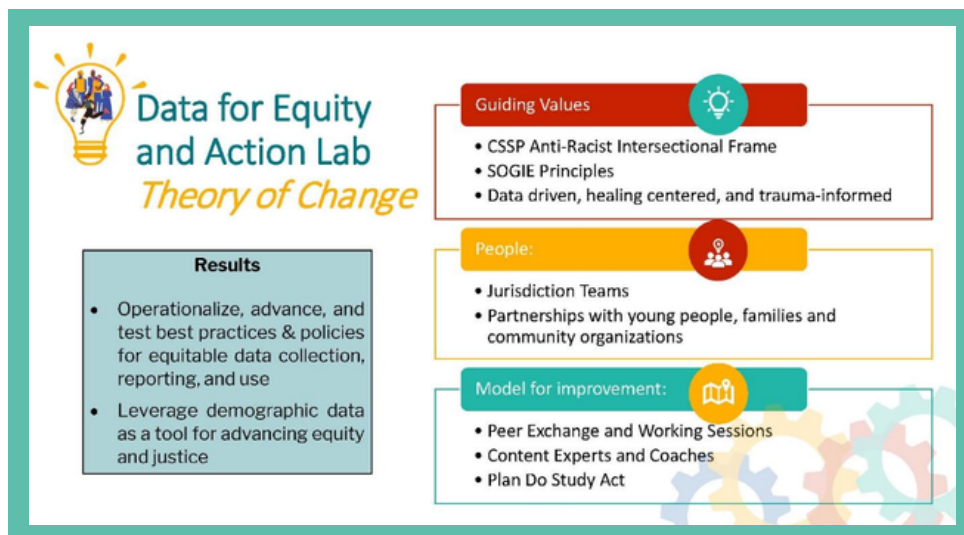
Team Structure

The application to participate in the Lab required jurisdictions to organize a diverse team. Jurisdictions were required to partner with system impacted and community partners, and ensure that there was sufficient leadership representation to make independent decisions with appropriate feedback. The suggested team composition included:

- 1-2 frontline staff (providing direct service)
- 1 supervisor (responsible for direct supervision of frontline staff)
- 1 senior leader (with decision making authority)
- 1 data administrator (responsible for analyzing administrative data and modifying the jurisdiction's SACWIS/CWIS system)
- 1-2 birth parents with lived experience with the child welfare system
- 1-2 young people between 18-26 who are either currently in or previously had experience with foster care
- 1-2 community providers (partner agencies that serve children and families)

Jurisdictions implemented small tests of change in a number of focus areas including:
- improving partnership with families, young people, and community partners with lived experience to inform data collection;
- changing policy and guidance, such as protocols to communicate with staff and establish standards of practice;
- developing training protocols and tools on how to gather valid data from families on demographic characteristics;
- updating data systems; and
- translating data into action (such as workforce, services, and budget decisions).

Monthly Topics

Subject matter experts served as guest speakers on the following topics, and the quotes below reflect themes that were discussed in the sessions.

Creating a Common Understanding and Language	*"We are bound and restricted by the identities defined by the federal government. For example, a person from Guatemala who might be a First Nations person comes to the US and might say they are Indigenous, but they are not recognized for indigeneity because they're not from a federally recognized tribe.... For example, every person in the Dominican Republic has African ancestry. There is a spectrum, and the question becomes, how do people see themselves and how do systems view them?" — Subject Matter Presenter*
Best Practices for Partnering with Young People, Families and Community Providers	*"I said, 'Given that you don't have anything else for me to do, I have some ideas, because I was actually raised in your system.' And they said, "That's okay, we have people with PhDs for that. So I said, 'Well let me go and get one of those.' ... I would love for no one else to have to go get a PhD for someone to listen to them." — Subject Matter Presenter*
Best Practices for Collecting SOGIE data	*"We know that sexual orientation and gender identity are just core parts of who we all are and they're core parts of development, so they are also just integral parts of good care of people in our families. And then an extension of that [is care] within the child welfare system, and that's where we also have a lot more places to grow." — Subject Matter Presenter*
Best Practices for Indigenous Data Collection	*"What people think and how they identify as Indigenous or Tribal or Indian etc. is varied by generation and by experience." — Subject Matter Presenter*
Best Practices for Changing Data Systems to Account for Nuanced Demographic Categories	*"As we build a new CCWIS system,… we created values and one of them is that people should be able to identify how they want to identify. The only way we are able to comply with AFCARS requirements and adhere to the value of self-identification is to create two different places that workers have to fill in data on race and ethnicity." – Jurisdictional leader in Michigan*
Best Practices for Continuous Quality Improvement for Equity Projects	*"You have to know what you want to be successful at, and what that looks like, to even know what you're going to measure and how you're going to measure it... Then you check and make sure, 'Did we actually measure what we were trying to do? Did we figure out if this is the outcome we should be looking at, or are we measuring something else?'" — Subject Matter Presenter*
Best Practices for Translating Demographic Data into Action for Equity	*"When we operate systems that have inequitable outcomes, that is not an accident… People take the most efficient pathway available to them. When lots of people are taking pathways that are leading to inequitable results, that means we made it really efficient to be inequitable and we have to be deeply curious about that. Why is this the easier road for policy makers, judges, attorneys and front line staff? What would make it easier to make different decisions? These are the kinds of questions that we want to answer through quantitative and qualitative data." — Subject Matter Presenter*

Key Lessons Learned

Team Building

Jurisdictions were required to establish a team as part of their application in accordance with guidance provided. Some jurisdictions were already engaged in related work where they could easily draw team members, while others were challenged in identifying who to engage and how. Of the four jurisdictions, two applied with a comprehensive team inclusive of people with lived experience with child welfare.

> *"I was in a new workgroup. Most of us had never met before."*
> *— Frontline Supervisor from Michigan*

Throughout the Lab, jurisdictions expressed the need for more time to gather their teams in addition to more support in how to engage different team members, particularly when these teams had not previously worked together. It is important to:

> *"There were lots of staff on our team in the beginning, they all fell off. The time commitment was a barrier, [so I want to know] how can we increase participation next time?"*
> *— Senior Leader in Washington, DC*

- **Provide** ample time, at least two months, for jurisdictions to gather teams before launching learning sessions, and create early opportunities for onboarding and relationship building.
- **Encourage** team leads to continuously assess their team composition, identify members that may be missing and provide support on how to engage new partners.
- **Support** jurisdictional leaders in determining how to continually engage participants over the course of the year.
- **Coach** team leaders on how to delineate roles for each team member based on their unique expertise and contributions.
- **Persuade** team leads to make a plan for providing team members with dedicated time and compensation to fully participate.

Sharing Power with People with Lived Experience

Authentic engagement, power sharing and decision making with people with lived experience in the child welfare system, is a critical component of the Lab's Theory of Change. Jurisdictions had varying experiences in this area. Some had pre-existing processes and structures in place, while others were just beginning to develop protocols and guidelines for engaging people with lived experience. Given that range, CSSP engaged a consultant with lived experience with foster care to interview the D4EA Lab members who had been impacted directly by child welfare systems to get their feedback on engaging constituents with lived experience in the future. Recommendations from those interviews, as well as other participant feedback included:

- **Connect** teams which are new to partnering with people with lived experience in child welfare to local consultants with lived experience to support them in developing processes and plans for engaging people with lived experience in projects.
- **Designate** a point of contact and support for lived experience experts. This person should call out and aim to disrupt power imbalances that may prevent lived experience experts from freely expressing their ideas and contributions.
- The designated person should **continuously check-in** with lived experience experts to discuss their role on the team, hold debrief meetings, provide support, and answer questions.
- **Coach** team leads on how to fully embed lived experience experts within teams and ensure that they are equal partners.
- **Create** opportunities for lived experience experts to gather together for peer exchange and support.
- **Provide** appropriate compensation to lived experience experts. They should be compensated at a competitive hourly rate for their time spent in meetings, doing prep work, and co-developing content. Childcare, transportation, technology accommodations, and other needs should be taken into consideration.

> *"This is what the young people are telling us is most important to them when they're in care, that the thing that is hardest for them is when they're separated from their siblings, and don't know what's going on with their siblings, or can't connect with their siblings. So we tried to take the lived experience voice as our priority."*
> *— Senior Leader in Hawaii*

Timing and Sequencing

Over the 12-month period, participants were required to participate in monthly internal team meetings with their jurisdiction and monthly D4EA Lab learning sessions, and had the opportunity to attend virtual open office hours. CSSP tracked and adjusted the process for facilitating the Lab based on participant feedback. It is important to:

- **Increase** length of implementation time. Given the amount of time required to support jurisdictions in recruiting team members, onboarding those team members, and allowing for relationship building, the Lab should have been extended for at least three months, to allow for a full three months of onboarding, six months of project planning, and six months of implementation.
- **Meet** with teams separately to provide a tailored orientation to the project and its goals before launching learning sessions.
- **Allow** sufficient time on each session for peer exchange. Monthly sessions began at 75 minutes but soon expanded to 90 minutes.
- **Hold** dedicated work sessions , rather than combining guest lectures with peer exchange time.
- **Provide** more individualized support and coaching earlier on in the process. Approximately halfway through the Lab, CSSP offered to join internal jurisdictional meetings rather than hold voluntary monthly office hours, and learned that format was more useful for participants.
- **Be flexible** with project ideas. Two of four jurisdictions experienced major leadership changes during the 12 months of the Lab, and had to change their projects to align with existing initiatives, or with less time intensive projects.

> *"We needed commitment from [our city] leadership first —we got stuck [while] brainstorming next steps - some things were policy or staffing, not data. And even when the team was ready, the leadership folks weren't in the room to approve"*
> *— Senior Leader in Philadelphia*

Planning for Sustainability

Many "Small Test of Change" projects did not begin until toward the end of the 12-months of the Lab, due to time spent gathering teams, deciding and adjusting priorities based on learning from the monthly sessions and other preparation activities. It is important to:

- Determine early what possible barriers may prevent projects from proceeding,
- Think about and plan for sustainability as early as possible,
- Continually assess the readiness of the team to implement their ideas.

Jurisdictional teams completed a "readiness assessment" in the early months of the Lab, before implementing their small tests of change which allowed them to discuss and rate themselves on items such as:

- "We are using a variety of sources to help us understand the needs around demographic data collection",
- "We have a plan for developing an effective approach to team governance with a leadership structure for ongoing planning and decision making,"
- "We have a plan for engaging young people and birth parents with lived experience in the development and implementation of action plans," and
- "We have identified strengths, gaps, and capacity building opportunities needed to support a project in at least one of the focus areas."

In the final months of the Lab, the teams revisited the readiness assessment to determine progress made and inform sustainability plans.

Jurisdictional Team Profiles

Philadelphia

Accomplishments: Prioritized developing mechanisms for sharing power and co-creation with community members across their data collection, analysis, reporting and use cycle.

Updates: Added co-creation of policy and practice improvements with people with lived experience to their system-wide antiracism strategies. Engaged parents with direct experience with allegations of abuse or neglect to contribute to the format and design of a training for MandatedReporters.

Next Steps: Will release an RFP to solicit local lived experience engagement and is working to integrate equitywithin data with other organizations and agencies acrossthe City. Continues to create guidance with other City departments around ensuring inclusive data collection especially for administrative demographic data.

Michigan

Accomplishments: Developed a Race Data Project shortly before the D4EA Lab launched, which added training about capturing nuanced and specific demographic data into an already existing antiracism training.

Updates: Expanded the scope of the Race Data Project implementation plan to include six new counties, and added centralized intake as a focus area, in addition to their prior focus on collecting race data for family identification and placement purposes.

Next Steps: Will be focusing their data training efforts on centralized intake, as they plan to analyze reporter demographics. Disseminated an initial survey to collect the baseline data on those who are reporting allegations to centralized intake, and will disseminate another in 12 months.

Jurisdictional Team Profiles

Hawaii

Accomplishments: Researched two separate projects, one involving data about Native Hawaiian homesteads, and, based on feedback from young people with lived experience in foster care and community partners, chose to focus the second project on improving the rate of sibling visits for Native Hawaiian children.

Updates: Continues to meet monthly to implement several ideas that were generated during the Lab, such as developing a resource list for sibling connections for staff.

Next Steps: Plans to create and distribute a report of siblings who are placed apart statewide; add sibling visits and sibling contact to a monthly form and train staff on how to track such contact; and map out steps for the creation of a statewide sibling visits and connections policy.
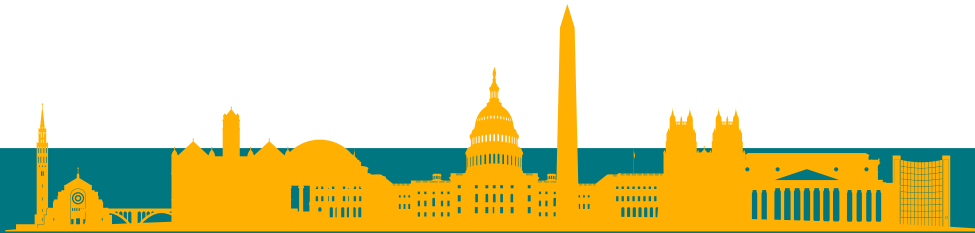
Washington, DC

Accomplishments: Disseminated a "Culture and Climate" survey to staff before the launch of the D4EA Lab, and during the Lab, developed recommendations based on the results. Recently published the subsequent report, sharing recommendations with internal leadership to inform their work on staff recruitment, retention, and becoming a more inclusive workplace.

Updates: Working to improve data quality efforts and to decrease missing race and ethnicity data to better inform their analysis and decision making related to addressing disparities.

Next Steps: Developing a practice framework for the Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging data subcommittee. Proposed focused training on data collection to all staff, which has been approved by agency leadership.