

# OUR IDENTITIES | OURSELVES



## ***A Guide to Anti-Racist Data Collection for: Case Workers and Other Frontline Staff***

The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP), in partnership with Casey Family Programs, presents this guide to share best practices for collecting data about race, ethnicity, and other personal information including sexual orientation, gender identity and expression (SOGIE), national origin, language spoken, disability, and tribal affiliation in child welfare agencies nationwide. Our purpose is to produce recommendations for how caseworkers and service providers can ask young people and families about their race, ethnicity, and other identities in more accurate, inclusive, and affirming ways, and how child welfare agencies can better report and incorporate that information to support them. We sought input from caseworkers, data administrators, young people with lived experience in foster care, parents, and caregivers over the course of six focus groups. We surveyed data leaders from 27 different jurisdictions and completed a literature review, drawing from the fields of education and public health. This guide will support the collection of comprehensive demographic data to serve multiple purposes: to affirm young people and families in their identities, to be able to identify trends and analyze racial disproportionality and disparities, to enforce anti-discrimination policy, and to develop programs and services to meet specific needs.

### ***Why is collecting data on race, ethnicity, and other intersecting identities important? How can this guide advance equity?***

As caseworkers, it is important to recognize the power imbalance that typically results from the child welfare system imposing requirements and obligations on young people and families. To promote antiracism and equity, young people and families must share in the power of the decisions that affect them, and staff must respect and affirm their identities. This guide is about asking about race, ethnicity, and other identities, which will help caseworkers get to know the young people and families they serve. Asking questions about identity creates an opportunity to engage young people and families in conversations about their stories, their experiences, their strengths, their needs, as well as the types of support they think will help them. When this data is aggregated at a systems level, it will help systems take responsibility for outcomes, rather than focusing on individual mistakes. This will help families experience equity.

"I think that case workers, if they could do anything, it would just be to listen to hear, not to check a box and say that they did it."

– Birth Parent

## How will this guide support me in my work?

This guide will help normalize conversations about race, ethnicity, and other identities so the information can be incorporated into everyday practice. Asking questions about identity will help caseworkers understand the unique strengths and needs of each young person and family served. Child welfare agencies rely on caseworkers to capture accurate and specific data about who they serve and the best way to support them. This will better equip the agency to fulfill its mission by:

- ◆ Providing culturally affirming, relevant, and specific services;
- ◆ Ensuring receipt of quality treatment and supports;
- ◆ Promoting supportive environments for youth in out-of-home placements;
- ◆ Identifying disproportionality and disparities, and holding system leaders accountable to addressing the root causes of disproportionality and disparities; and
- ◆ Addressing, acknowledging, and implementing steps to overcome explicit and implicit bias among the workforce and partner agencies.

“I was not always comfortable talking about race or asking about things, but I feel like it’s the way you do it. Like if you ask about it in a non-judgmental way to learn about it and help that determine how you can support them... It’s what you do with it.”  
- Caseworker

## Data Collection Tips

1. Ask young people and families about how they identify their race, ethnicity, and their pronouns.
  - Self-reporting is the most accurate source of information because it reflects how young people and families describe themselves, acknowledging that each family member might identify their races and ethnicities in different ways.
  - Self-reporting allows young people and families to change and update their information over time, particularly as the young person grows and develops.
  - Place yourself in the mindset of a “learner” rather than “expert” when conversing about a young person or family’s race, ethnicity, or personal background.
  - Do not assume that the young person or family will tell you about their race, ethnicity, pronouns, or other personal information if you do not ask. Do not take omission of this information to mean it is not important to the young person or family members.
2. Ask young people and family members about their identities in a private place, keeping in mind that conversations about race and ethnicity may be triggering. Some people may be disconnected from their birth families or don’t otherwise know their ancestry
  - How and when the questions are asked matters. Asking about race and ethnicity should not be for the purpose of checking a box but rather a starting point for a conversation about what aspects of a young person or family member’s identity are important to them.
  - Acknowledge that young people and family members might not want to share information or would only be comfortable sharing aspects of their identity with you if it is kept confidential from other people (judges, caregivers, siblings, etc.).
3. Be mindful of the purpose of collecting this information. Purposes include developing a relationship with the family, connecting young people and families to culturally relevant services, and collecting accurate and affirming data on a macro level to inform policy, practice, and resource allocation decisions.
4. Be aware of your state’s privacy laws and any data-sharing agreements the child welfare agency has with other agencies.
5. Be non-judgmental and affirming. Maintain positive body language. Reassure young people and family members that you are not judging them, and this information will not be used against them.
6. Ask young people and family members questions about their identity throughout your relationship. As time goes on, their identities may change due to personal growth, increase in trust, or other factors.
7. Be curious. Ask open-ended questions and think about how you would like others to ask you questions about your own identity.
8. Acknowledge that you may have implicit biases and assumptions that you should reflect on and question. These biases may be related to race, ethnicity, or other aspects of identity, and are caused by systemic factors, but have very real consequences.



## How to talk about this with young people and families?

Young people and families, especially those of different backgrounds from you, may be concerned when you ask questions about their race, ethnicity, national origin, disability, language, or SOGIE. Address their concerns and explain why you are collecting this information and how it will be used. Ask your supervisor how the agency uses data on personal identity, so you can better explain it. Research shows that once young people and families understand the purpose of questions and can ask about and get answers to their concerns, they are more likely to respond. This will help give you a more complete understanding of who they are and how you can support them.

“As a parent partner now, what I feel has been helpful and has opened families up, and not put up a defense, is when I give the context of, I’m just trying to understand how you were brought up. What kind of cultural values did you grow up with? Is that something you want to implement for your children in your own household?”  
– Birth Parent

Start by explaining the following:

- ◆ We are collecting this information from all young people and families that we serve.
- ◆ We hope this information will improve our practice with all young people and families. The data are collected to get to know all aspects of your identity.
- ◆ Data will be analyzed to examine whether all young people and families are receiving quality services that build on their strengths and meet their unique needs.
- ◆ Data will NOT be used to discriminate against young people and families.
- ◆ Data will NOT be shared with immigration services. We are NOT asking about documentation status.
- ◆ We will NOT ask you or any member of your family to interpret on your behalf. If you would like an interpreter, we will find one for you. You can speak in whatever language you prefer.
- ◆ Data will be used to identify inequities in practice, services, and resources, and to inform policy and practice changes at a systems level.
- ◆ This data will be kept private whenever possible. It may be shared with a supervisor and/or program staff to ensure that you are connected to culturally relevant services that meet your needs. Data will only be reported publicly in de-identified form, at an aggregate level (meaning your information will be combined with everyone else’s data, so it cannot be tied back to you). You can update this information at any point in time.
- ◆ Provide a copy of the agency data privacy statement along with the Our Identities, Ourselves “Know Your Rights” Guide for Young People and Families.

## Sample Script

“We want to make sure that all our clients get the best services and support we can offer. I will be asking you questions about your personal identity characteristics, which includes your race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, language you speak, sexual orientation, and gender identity, or if you have a disability, if you feel comfortable sharing with me. We are required to record your race and ethnicity and want to make sure that you can provide that information directly so that I don’t assume how you identify. We are collecting this information so we can review the services all clients receive and make sure everyone receives support that best meets their needs. This data will help us identify if young people and families are experiencing treatment differently or in an unfair way, so we can address those issues. This information can also help me provide more culturally responsive and affirming services and resources. What you share will be kept private except for my supervisor, or maybe a service provider of a program that would be a good fit for your particular identity. Your information may also be used for analysis as part of the combined data of all young people and families served, so you will not be identified, and the information will not be tied to you specifically. It will never be used to discriminate against you or harm the way you receive services. I will record what you share with me in our data system. You can request to update this information at any point in time. I or one of my colleagues might ask you for updated information at another point in time. I’m happy to answer any questions you may have. If you choose not to answer these questions, it will not affect your access to services.”





## Sample Conversation Starters

1. I would like to get to know you so that I can best support you. How do you describe yourself? What is the most important thing for me to know about your identities to best serve you?
2. How would you like me to address you? What name should I use?
3. What are your pronouns? Mine are \_\_\_\_\_.
4. What's important for me to know about your race, ethnicity, the language you speak, and other identities to make sure you get services that are accessible to you?
5. What are some incorrect assumptions that people have made about you and your family that have created problems for you in the past? If I say something that is not right, please feel free to correct me.
6. Can you tell me about any traditions, celebrations, and practices that are important to you and your family?
7. Where are you from? Where did you grow up?
8. What types of foods are important to you? What foods are important to your parent/child?
9. What television shows or music do you like? Is anything you like to watch or listen to related to your cultural background or personal identities?
10. What language(s) do you speak or want to maintain? What languages do your parent/child speak?

## Responses to possible questions from families

### 1. **Am I required to share information with you?**

You are not required to share information about your identity and may opt not to respond to any questions. We are asking about this because we want to hear from you rather than make assumptions that could be wrong. We want to provide you with a safe and open space to share what you feel comfortable sharing. We hope to collect the information to better meet your needs and gain a broader understanding of who we serve.

### 2. **What is the difference between race and ethnicity? Or ethnicity and national origin? Aren't they the same?**

Race and ethnicity are different but connected, like ethnicity and national origin. Race is a social construct without a biological basis, meaning there is no gene for your race. Race is used to categorize people into different groups based on visual traits (e.g., skin color, facial features, hair type). Examples of race include Black, White, and Asian. You can identify as more than one race. Ethnicity is used to refer to a shared heritage, ancestry, and culture that may include traditions and language. Examples of ethnicity include Jamaican, Hmong, Arab, and Italian. Knowing both will allow us to better understand your experiences and how best to serve you. For example, Chinese and Korean communities may fall under a single 'Asian' race category but have distinct experiences and needs. National origin refers to where you or your ancestors were born and can also help us to understand your background. You may identify by the country where you are from, for example, the Dominican Republic or Guatemala, rather than your race or ethnicity. We also want to know if you have a connection or affiliation to a particular Native American Tribe—you may identify American Indian heritage as either your race or ethnicity. If you are a member or eligible for enrollment in a Tribe, that Tribe may also be considered your national origin, and we want to respect your Tribe's sovereignty and your rights, especially if you are a member of a Tribe.

### 3. **I am multi-racial (or multi-ethnic)—will you capture all of my racial identities or just one?**

We can record as many categories as you'd like to describe yourself

### 4. **I would like to keep my gender identity private from my parents, the judge, and other staff. Can you do that?**

You can tell me how you would like to identify, and I will do my best to speak to you about your gender identity only in private. Please tell me which pronouns I should use.

### 5. **What if I identify in a different way than my child/parent/sibling?**

We understand that a lot of families are blended with many cultures and that people might identify differently. I will ask each member of the family separately how they identify and make sure that we record information separately, with however much each person wants to share about their personal identities.

### 6. **What is meant by Hispanic, Latino, Latinx, or Spanish? Is that the only ethnicity?**

A person is Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish if they or their family originally come from a country in South or Central America or another Spanish-speaking country. Spanish typically refers to people from Spain. Hispanic is a term referring to people who speak Spanish, or descendants of those from Spanish-speaking countries. The terms Latino, Latina, Latinx, or Latine refer to geography rather than language, so the term encapsulates people from Latin America who are from several countries and speak languages other than Spanish. Latinx and Latine are gender-neutral terms used to refer to people with Indigenous, African, or Spanish ancestry from Cuba, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, South America, or Central America. For example, someone from Brazil might identify as Latina but not Hispanic. Although the federal Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) asks whether a family is of Hispanic or Latino ethnicity as its own question (separate from



race), Hispanic or Latino is not the only ethnicity that exists. Even though we must report one ethnicity to the federal reporting system, we also want to capture more detailed information to better understand how you identify and best serve your needs.

**7. *My ethnic category or Tribe is not usually listed as an option in official documents. Should I still share that information?***

While we may not be able to record your ethnic category or Tribe in our data system yet, we would appreciate this information so we can better understand your background and needs. We can update the data system in the future so that the categories accurately reflect everyone who lives in our community.

**8. *I am unsure of my racial or ethnic background.***

It is okay to be unsure about your racial or ethnic background. If you'd like to explore your background further, I am happy to help you in any way that you need. I can share the list of possible categories with you to see if any best capture how you identify. I can also mark your racial or ethnic background as "unknown." I will be happy to update your information if anything changes.

**9. *If there is a change in my identity, should I tell you?***

It is always your choice to disclose any information. If you choose to share changes in your identity, I will update your records to reflect that. I or another worker in the future may ask you again about how you identify, because we recognize that how you identify may change over time.

**10. *Who will see my information? How will my privacy be protected?***

I will record your responses in our agency data system. Access to this information is protected by privacy legislation; specifically, the Personal Health Information Protection Act of 2004 (PHIPA). The agency data system is secure. The information will only be used and disclosed as permitted or required by law and to meet your needs. Your de-identified personal information may be grouped with information from others who encounter the agency and used in reports or analysis that are shared internally (i.e., with staff) to inform policy or practice decisions, or shared externally (i.e., with the public or other organizations). Some information about what the agency does is reported by race, age, and county on our website. If you are a member of a group with a small population, for example, a Native American or First Nations Tribe, your information will likely not be reported to protect your privacy. Any public reporting of this information would make it impossible for anyone to identify you as an individual. We collect and store this information in a way that respects all the health and information privacy laws.

**11. *How will you use this information?***

My first goal is to understand your background, strengths, and needs so that I can understand you better, and provide you with services, support, and resources that work for you. As an agency, another goal is to look at who is receiving which services and ensure that everyone is receiving quality care and help. For example, if the data show that only certain communities are having a negative experience, like frequently moving placements, or are unable to access a particular service, like talk therapy in a native language, then the agency leaders will use that information to make different decisions. Collecting this information will help us monitor if our agency is treating families equitably, which means that everyone gets what they need, instead of everyone gets the same.

**12. *What if this information is used to discriminate against me or to stereotype my family or community?***

These concerns are valid and important. A lot of communities share this fear. However, we want to get to know you better, and want to make sure that the agency understands gaps in the services we offer, at a systems-level. We are trying to avoid discrimination and stereotypes and figure out how to tailor our support to your unique needs. Individual privacy will be protected by privacy legislation, specifically the Personal Health Information Protection Act of 2004. When we are using and analyzing your personal information, the goal is to uncover and work to eliminate the negative impacts of discrimination and racism, rather than to cause them.

**13. *Why are you asking all these questions?***

We are asking because we want to get to know you better and to make sure all your needs are met. We also want to make sure the agency represents you correctly.

**14. *How will I know you won't use this information in team meetings or in court?***

I will only report information that you tell me that I can report. For example, if you'd like to have your racial identity public but your gender identity private, or you'd like to share your disability with some people but not others, I will keep track of who should know what information about your identity. There may be times where I will have to share this information in court or with service providers. Before sharing anything, I will explain why I am sharing the information and with whom. For example, the court might ask why a specific culturally relevant service was selected and I will have to explain that it was in response to your needs.

