



*Promoting Social Equity in  
an Evidence-Based Policy  
Environment: An Action Plan  
for 2021*

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*Academy Election 2020 Project  
Working Group:  
Foster Social Equity*





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***PROMOTING SOCIAL EQUITY IN  
AN EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY  
ENVIRONMENT: AN ACTION  
PLAN FOR 2021***

***A REPORT OF AN ACADEMY WORKING GROUP***

**NATIONAL ACADEMY OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION  
ELECTION 2020 WORKING GROUP:  
FOSTER SOCIAL EQUITY**

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## **THE CHALLENGE**

Over the past 60 years, significant progress has been made toward promoting social equity in both the public and the private sectors in the United States. Prominent examples include actions on civil rights, women's rights, poverty reduction, and gender equality; and this progress has been hard won. But continued progress remains uneven and, in some cases, has regressed. The roller coaster can be partially explained by macro shifts in economic conditions and political priorities. Even in this context, social equity can be advanced by building a strong federal platform that would include increased awareness, rigorous measurement, formal evaluation and consistent application.

While equity in the distribution of public services and administration of programs should be the goal of any presidential administration, it is difficult to move programs and practices toward equity through legislative actions alone. Therefore, one of the social equity recommendations set forth for the first year of the presidential term beginning in 2021 emphasizes administrative frameworks, data collection, research and evaluation that should be put in place quickly. This would allow agencies to determine if existing services are effective and equitably distributed, if new initiatives are likely to have equitable impact, and if statutory changes are warranted.

## **A FRAMEWORK FOR CHANGE**

The federal government, over the past two decades, has gradually expanded its focus on using evidence to improve results and inform policy decisions. Existing regulatory and performance measurement frameworks and evidence-based policy initiatives can be leveraged to incorporate social equity concepts into practices for which federal agencies are already responsible.

Several key laws include reporting, performance, and regulatory provisions that provide a framework for developing and tracking results of programs and policies, and assessing the performance of senior government managers. They feature guidelines for collecting information measuring performance and determining program effectiveness. For example, The Paperwork Reduction Act of 1980 established the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA) within the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), and required that Agencies estimate the value of new regulations that require collecting information from the public and the resulting burden of this collection effort. Regulatory policy was further revised in an attempt to rationalize and modernize how Agencies issue and implement regulations by Executive Order 12866, issued in 1993. The Order directed Agencies to consider whether existing and proposed regulations are necessary, required a benefit-cost analysis, and codified and expanded the role of OIRA in the regulatory review process. As a result of this Executive Order, OIRA developed and issued a set of important guidelines, including guidelines for conducting benefit cost analysis that federal agencies use when proposing new or revised regulations.

Later, performance measurement was more directly incorporated into the administrative fabric of the federal government as a result of the Government Performance and Results Modernization Act of 2010 (GPRA-MA). This Act, and its predecessor legislation, requires federal agencies to publish strategic plans that clearly delineate specific goals, cross-agency actions, and performance measures. Some of the performance indicators are built into the annual evaluation criteria for senior managers.

### **Evidence-based Policy Initiative**

The latest federal initiative for improving federal government decision-making is The *Foundations for Evidence-based Policymaking Act of 2018* (the Evidence Act).<sup>1</sup> This law directs the federal government to implement a series of activities that move agencies toward greater use of evidence to measure government effectiveness. The Evidence Act and GPRA-MA provide a framework for a White House evidence initiative on Social Equity that would (1) institutionalize a government-wide focus on social equity within the evidence-based policy framework (2) prioritize equity in Federal programs and policies and measure progress toward that goal; and (3) represent a model that state and local governments and the non-governmental and private sector can follow.

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<sup>1</sup> Pub. L. No. 115-435, 132 Stat. 5529 & Pub. L. 111-352; 124 Stat. 3866

Because the implementation of various features of these acts have specific timelines for embedding the process in federal agencies, the addition of a social equity focus can readily be initiated early in the next presidential term/administration. Moreover, since it builds on a priority objective of the federal government moving forward, it can be implemented as part of ongoing efforts to embed the requirements of the Acts into agency operations.

The Evidence Act applies to all Chief Financial Officer (CFO) agencies; addresses a range of activities related to evaluation, data, and statistical functions; and requires agencies to have an Evaluation Officer, a Chief Data Officer, and a Statistical Officer who together are to expand the use of various sources of evidence to improve decisions and results. Other (non-CFO) agencies are strongly encouraged to also implement evidence-based policies and strategies. To strengthen agencies' evidence related infrastructure and capacity, OMB issued detailed guidelines in July 2019<sup>2</sup> for a four-phase implementation, coordinated with the strategic and performance plans. The implementation guidelines offer a timely opportunity to incorporate a framework of Social Equity constructs and objectives into many Evidence Act activities:

- **Phase 1 (beginning in 2019 and ongoing): Learning Agendas, Personnel and Planning** (including multi-year learning agendas, annual evaluation plans concurrent with annual performance plan

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<sup>2</sup> Office of Management and Budget Memorandum for Heads of Executive Offices and Agencies, OMB Memorandum M-19-23.

and strategic plan, evidence capacity assessments, and open-data plans)

- **Phase 2 (beginning in 2019 and ongoing): Open Data Access and Management** (including a data inventory, a data catalogue, and a repository of tools and best practices)
- **Phase 3 (beginning in 2020 and ongoing): Data Access for Statistical Purposes** (including expanded secure access to data for researchers and other users)
- **Phase 4: (beginning in 2020 and ongoing): Program Evaluation** (including program evaluation standards and best practices)

## **Public Administration and Social Equity**

Social equity is a complex issue related to access to, and distribution of, resources and opportunity in a society, with many theoretical and practical definitions.<sup>3</sup> Fundamentally, social equity conveys a strong notion of equal opportunity, justice, and fairness for all in society. When social and cultural norms and public administration, policies, laws, and practices do not promote equity and instead reinforce historical or institutional inequities, population disparities by race, gender, sexual and gender identity, geography, and other dimensions arise or are exacerbated.

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<sup>3</sup> See for example, Marla McDaniel, Tyler Woods, Eleanor Pratt, and Margaret Simms (2017) *Identifying Ethnic and Racial Disparities in Human Services*, Washington, DC: Urban Institute [https://www.urban.org/research/publication/identifying-racial-and-ethnic-disparities-human-services/view/full\\_report](https://www.urban.org/research/publication/identifying-racial-and-ethnic-disparities-human-services/view/full_report); and Brian D. Smedley, Adrienne Y. Stith, and Alan R. Nelson, eds. (2003) *Unequal Treatment: Confronting Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health Care*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.



Structural barriers that limit equitable access to opportunity result in disparities in education, employment, income, wealth, health, housing, criminal and legal justice, environmental safety, business and economic development, and other desirable individual, family, and community societal outcomes. Intergenerational factors can exacerbate inequities, as centuries of structural, legal, and political discrimination compound inequity challenges for racial minority groups and communities.<sup>4</sup>

Many US government programs and policies are designed to provide services equitably to people and communities in the nation, and some are designed to help specific populations and communities to address the negative effects of past inequities. For example, anti-poverty programs are intended to reduce or address the repercussions of poverty, and compensatory education programs are intended to equalize educational opportunities for students regardless of community wealth or individual family circumstances. Measuring how successful individual programs are in achieving those equity objectives as well as other programmatic objectives should be part of measuring their effectiveness.

Yet identifying the metrics to measure progress toward social equity is very challenging. While there are global indicators of inequality, such as the GINI coefficient and the Inequality-adjusted Human Development

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<sup>4</sup> See Kilolo Kijakazi, K. Steven Brown, Donnie Charleston, and Charmaine Runes (2019) What Would it Take to Overcome the Damaging Effects of Structural Racism and Ensure a More Equitable Future? Washington, DC: Urban Institute [https://next50.urban.org/sites/default/files/2019-05/2019.05.12\\_Next50%20structural%20racism\\_finalized%20%281%29.pdf](https://next50.urban.org/sites/default/files/2019-05/2019.05.12_Next50%20structural%20racism_finalized%20%281%29.pdf)

Index (IHDI), there are few existing measures that have been adopted by either the federal or state governments. A few efforts, such as Equality Indicators<sup>5</sup> developed by the City University of New York and the Opportunity Index<sup>6</sup> developed by the Forum for Youth Investment, provide examples of possible approaches to developing guidelines for measuring progress. Another promising effort being led by the National Academy of Public Administration (the Academy) seeks to develop a framework that will examine key considerations for social equity across three dimensions:

1. Program areas such as those discussed above (health, criminal justice, education and other areas).
2. Demographic groups such as race/ethnicity, religious, gender, geography and culture.
3. The bodies of research and data that are available to help assess likely or expected impacts.

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<sup>5</sup> See CUNY Institute for State & Local Governance, Equality Indicators. <https://islg.cuny.edu/sites/our-work/equality-indicators/>

<sup>6</sup> See Rackers, Hannah & Samantha Anderson. (2019, Dec). A guide to using the Opportunity Index to support your community. <https://forumfyi.org/knowledge-center/opportunity-index-user-guide/>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Implement a White House Initiative on Social Equity Evidence

Since the factors that inhibit achieving social equity are complex, policy and public administration strategies to achieve evidence-based equity objectives should be multi-faceted. A White House Initiative on Social Equity Evidence should be initiated that operates concurrently with the implementation of the Evidence Act, GPRA-MA and regulatory policy, incorporating a focus on equity to the already established principles of effectiveness and efficiency inherent in public administration and management.<sup>7</sup> The White House Initiative on Social Equity Evidence would include an agenda with four components:

- **A Social Equity Evidence Review** of rigorous research and evaluation on approaches that have improved social equity and gaps in research that should be filled with new research,
- **A Social Equity Data and Statistical Inventory** of public data and statistical series with periodic (e.g., annual) information on equity and inequity by nation, state, and local areas;
- **A Social Equity Cross-Agency Priority (CAP) goal**, and
- **A Social Equity Measurement System.**

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<sup>7</sup> See H. George Frederickson (1990) Public administration and social equity, *Public Administration Review* 50:2 228-237.

## Social Equity Evidence Review

A critical first step will be to review existing research on effective strategies that improve social equity, the extent to which there is credible and rigorous evidence, and gaps in knowledge that should be filled to improve policies and strategies that advance equity. A review should include the literature and research on social equity and a systematic review of rigorous impact evaluation results using established standards as set forth in major federal evidence-based clearinghouses such as the What Works Clearinghouse, Crime Solutions, and the Clearinghouse for Labor Evaluation and Research.<sup>8</sup> The intent is to summarize what is known, identify existing gaps in the base of knowledge, and recommend how to fill those gaps.

The review should also identify a common set of core measures and definitions of social equity. Macro definitions would be common across agencies while more micro definitions would be required to conform to agency programs and missions. Common definitions could include identification of populations that are most impacted by social inequities including race/ethnicity, gender, economic, geographic, religious and other factors. Micro definitions could include agency specific mission and objectives such as housing, criminal justice, environmental justice, healthcare, and so on. These definitions should be established based upon existing literature as well as input from agencies and external stakeholders

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<sup>8</sup> Federal evidence-based clearinghouses include, for example, Department of Education's what Works Clearinghouse <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/> ; Department of Labor's Clearinghouse for Labor Evaluation and Research <https://clear.dol.gov/> and Department of Justice's <https://www.crimesolutions.gov/>

including non-governmental organizations, academia, state and local governments, and people with lived experience with the issue of focus.

As noted above, among the main Evidence Act activities agencies are expected to undertake are conducting an evidence capacity assessment that includes refining the agency's evaluation policies and practices, reviewing data quality and access, and developing multi-year learning agendas to identify priority evaluations and research for the annual evaluation plan. A learning agenda ideally builds on existing research and expands (or adds to) the high-quality evidence.<sup>9</sup> The Social Equity Evidence Review should identify issues or topics on which evaluations, research or analysis can be conducted to fill gaps in knowledge.

Individual agencies should also be strongly encouraged to conduct an objective and systematic review focused on their specific programs or missions, or two or more agencies with complementary missions could conduct a joint review. The study could be done in-house by federal evaluation specialists or could be conducted by outside contractors. One important point is that the review should be done systematically and objectively, following standard academic research principles, with the results used to identify potential research and evaluation projects that could fill gaps in knowledge. A second critical point is that the review should be specific to an agency, program, or policy area (e.g., employment

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<sup>9</sup> Demetra Smith Nightingale and Molly Scott. (2018) Building Evidence Culture and Capacity in Federal Agencies, Washington: DC Urban Institute  
<https://www.urban.org/research/publication/building-evidence-culture-and-capacity-federal-agencies>

opportunity, civil rights, education, business entrepreneurship, housing, health).

The Review should therefore, feed into the learning agenda process required by the Evidence Act, informing individual departments or cross-agency partnerships on research that will expand the existing base of evidence.

### **Social Equity Data and Statistical Inventory.**

Open data and access to statistical resources are also covered by the Evidence Act and OMB guidelines, along with the preexisting requirements under GPRA-MA for strategic planning and performance management and consistent with the strict privacy provisions included in the *Confidential Information Protection and Statistical Efficiency Act of 2002 (CIPSEA)*<sup>10</sup>. The Federal government has many data and statistical systems and surveys that collect and maintain a wealth of information relevant to particular populations, communities, the nation as a whole, and businesses—including income, employment, education, poverty, household composition, health, and housing. Since the Evidence Act requires agencies to prepare a data inventory and catalog, data and potential metrics should be reviewed and identified for their ability to allow agencies to track progress in improving

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<sup>10</sup> Pub.L. 107-347, 116 Stat

social equity and reducing inequities. Those to be reviewed should include the major statistical resources, a few of which are:

- Bureau of Labor Statistics surveys (Establishment Survey, Non-standard Employment Survey)
- Census Bureau surveys (Current Population Survey, Decennial Census)
- National Household Education Surveys
- National Longitudinal Survey of Youth
- American Housing Survey
- National Health Interview Survey

The inventory should also include relevant state and local data, and any data from federal grants programs. Many federal programs collect or require funds recipients such as state and local governments and nonprofit organizations to collect data on recipients of services or funds. Federal grant reports in addition to any locally maintained data could also be a source of information on equitable distribution of funds and program activities, assuming the recipient characteristics are included in the data collection.

### **Social Equity Cross-Agency Priority (CAP) Goals**

To fully address high priority policy areas that require multiple departments, the GPRA-MA calls for the Administration to set a few CAPs and associated goals. The CAP goals and progress are to be included in the Department's Strategic Plan and highlighted in each annual budget proposal submitted to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). The Social

Equity CAP would apply to all departments, since each would at a minimum be expected to set some administrative goals to improve social equity outcomes for the programs administered through their agency (e.g., reduction in income disparity across groups or communities, improved equal opportunity) as well as social equity goals for their own federal workforce (e.g., hiring and promotion policies, career opportunities, procurement and government contracting, program budget allocation procedures, stakeholder engagement, customer relations) and/or within specific programs.

A core CAP workgroup should be established to assess progress on improving social equity outcomes. The core group would consist of agency leaders from departments that have particularly relevant missions related to equity, such as reducing poverty, discrimination, or inequality (e.g., the Departments of Health and Human Services, Labor, Education, Housing and Urban Development, Agriculture, and Justice). The Social Equity CAP workgroup would identify 5-6 core goals for the Federal government. Each department would set appropriate Social Equity goals and targets for its department. Establishing Social Equity as a CAP will send a strong message to all departments about its importance to the White House.



## **Social Equity Measure for Assessing Programs**

A Social Equity framework could not only provide a guide for the questions that public administrators need to proactively consider but would also provide a valuable resource for accessing extant data, research and expertise. Ultimately, a framework could continue to evolve as research and data gaps are identified and as determined by practical implementation. In the meantime, some basic guidelines could be used to assess what we know about existing programs and the possible impact of new initiatives.

During the first phase of the Social Equity Initiative, the President should issue an Executive Order (EO) requiring that agencies incorporate social equity indicators into their future planning and budgetary considerations. It would also establish a cross-agency framework to oversee the initiative. The EO would require agencies to submit a preliminary action plan to assess and prioritize programs that impact social equity outcomes. Importantly, the EO should not focus solely on social programs, but should be broadly issued to encompass all agencies. For example, even certain military, tax, and other regulatory programs can impact various populations.

## **Starting Up and Implementing the Initiative**

As a top priority, the Social Equity Evidence Initiative should begin as early as possible in 2021, by designating the leadership team, identifying initial agencies and programs for the review and inventory, and finalizing the CAP goal.

## **Leadership**

The White House Initiative on Social Equity Evidence would receive the highest attention and momentum if it is led by the Vice President, supported by Cabinet level principals from key agencies (e.g., Education, HHS, Labor, Justice, HUD), who meet at least quarterly and spearhead actions in their own departments.

## **Initial Agencies and Programs**

Recognizing that the goal of reducing social inequality within/through government programs is a huge undertaking, it will be important to identify those agencies and programs on which to focus first for the evidence review, data and statistical inventories, and the CAP goal. OMB would subsequently incorporate language into CAP guidance that both signals strong interest in social equity and uses the common definitions and metrics that emerge from the evidence reviews and statistical and data analysis. The initial set of agencies should include those responsible for programs or services that represent important potential approaches that can reduce inequality and improve Social Equity, such as:

- Department of Education (Title I Grants; Career and Technical Education; Higher Education, Federal Student Loans, Pell Grants),
- Department of Labor (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act adult and youth programs, Job Corps, Youth Build, Apprenticeship Program, Worker Protection enforcement programs)

- Department of Health and Human Services (Child Care Development Block Grant, Medicaid, SCIP, Public Health Service, Indian Health Service)
- Department of Agriculture (Farm to Early Care and Education Initiative)<sup>11</sup>
- Department of Housing and Urban Development
- Department of Justice (Youth Offender Reentry Program, Civil Rights Enforcement Programs)
- Equal Employment Opportunity Commission

### **First Year Deliverables**

- Evidence Reviews from at least two departments
- Initial Data Inventory from at least two departments and establishment of a metric to track progress in improving Social Equity
- CAP Goal Metrics established in CAP Plan government-wide

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<sup>11</sup> See the NAPA Social Equity Working Group's paper on food insecurity, *Improving Child Well-Being & Reducing Food Insecurity: An Action Plan for 2021*. <https://www.napawash.org/grandchallenges>

## **Conclusion**

Social equity can feasibly be elevated as a national priority by incorporating it into the administrative framework and requirements of existing laws, especially the Evidence Act and GPRA-MA. Progress in achieving this critically important social objective could be made without substantially adding to bureaucracy since agencies are already required to strengthen their use of data, evaluations, statistics and other evidence to analyze and improve program results. A White House Initiative on Social Equity Evidence, led by the Vice President, would initially: (1) conduct a Social Equity Evidence Review; (2) prepare and maintain a Social Equity Information System with statistical data and analysis that can be used for research, analysis, and tracking progress; (3) establish a Social Equity Cross-Agency Priority goal; and (4) establish a process for assessing social equity in proposed programs and initiatives and through program evaluation and research.

The Initiative would benefit from the infrastructure and practices being institutionalized to improve public access to performance data, and disseminate the results of rigorous, objective research and evaluations. At the same time, the agency improvements in data, statistics, evaluation, and performance systems required by the Evidence Act and GPRA-MA will be enhanced by including social equity data and measures to more fully reflect and reinforce government's responsibility to promote well-being and equality.

In the early 1990s, there was a move toward fiscal conservatism in an effort to reign in and rationalize government spending. Through both administrative and legislative actions, the budget deficit went from 4.5% of GDP in 1991 to a surplus of 2.4% in 2000<sup>12</sup> and benefit cost analysis became a requirement for all new legislative and regulatory actions. Similarly, strong administrative action on social equity can yield significant results and serve to catalyze investment across the public and private sectors.

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<sup>12</sup> Congress passed the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1990 and later extended it through Acts in 1993 and 1997. In addition, Executive Order 12866, issued in 1993 codified and expanded the role of Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA) in the regulatory review process to include rigorous cost-benefit analysis.

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