

RACIAL EQUITY

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Racial equity is even a more difficult topic than social justice. It often gets confused with racial equality, equal opportunity or equal net worth, which are different.

In this project we take racial equity to mean that ideal situation in which society's systems and markets perform equally well for different racial and ethnic groups. It means that our educational systems work as well for African Americans as they do for Whites, that our justice systems works equally well, that our health systems work equally well. Unfortunately, the data for most of our systems and markets do not currently show equity or parity for different racial and ethnic groups.

This notion of racial equity is closely tied to the notion of gaps. Data consistently show gaps in the performance of society's various systems and markets, yielding very different results for different racial and ethnic groups. For more information, see *An Inventory of Gaps*, on this Web site. These gaps are maintained, we believe, by denial of equal opportunity and equal protection. Even though equal opportunity and equal protection are guaranteed by the Constitution, practices, whether institutional or customary, intentional or unintended, do not always reflect these mandates.

Achieving greater racial equity means achieving greater social justice. It means closing those gaps – in our educational systems, our justice systems, our job and capital markets, and so on. The *Pathways to Progress* on this Web site present the roles that philanthropy, in particular, can play in increasing equity and social justice.

Inequity exists to the extent that a particular system or market does *not* perform equally for different groups, on average. If mortgage applications, for example, are turned down disproportionately more for African Americans than for Whites with identical applications, inequity in the mortgage system exists. The good news is, because such systems are man-made, they can be changed in ways that achieve greater equity; and philanthropy can play a useful role.

A similar notion – racial disparities – exists in public policy and research literature. The term “racial disparities” is shorthand for racial disparities as shown in data. It too refers to the gaps in society's system and market performance. Parity, the opposite of disparity, is akin to equity.

Improving racial equity in justice, for example, means improving the performance of the justice systems such that there are no group differences in sentences, jail time, rehabilitation rates and other indicators. Improving racial equity does not mean that every individual is to be treated exactly the same or that everyone experiences the same outcomes; educational and work environments can be created to work differently for folks of different capabilities and talents, such that their gifts and talents are maximized, as long as designations are not made on the basis of race, and as long as designations are

made in the best interests of those individuals. Individualized treatment or attention is allowed if it helps groups achieve parity or equity.

Popular images of equity

A popular expression capturing a part of the notion of equity is that of “leveling the playing field.” The idea is to make sure that neither side has an unfair advantage. This image suits our purposes too, though the playing field analogy assumes that there are only two teams, that they are in competition against each other, that only one side can win and that it wins at the expense of the other. These assumptions are not helpful, but the notion that as a society we want to make sure a particular group does not have an *unfair* advantage is useful.

Another useful expression is to “reduce barriers” that some groups might unfairly face as a group. Everyone, of course, faces barriers in their lives, but some groups face laws or practices or even expectations that, intentionally or not, create barriers for whole groups at a time. If one group faces barriers worse than other groups do, it is not likely to lead to good outcomes for all.

At Effective Communities, LLC, when we think of equity we think of one of those old statues or murals of a scale of justice one sees in older courthouses. Typically justice is shown as a strong, noble woman, blindfolded so she’s not influenced by irrelevant facts (like biased testimony, or race) holding the scale – two large weighing pans on either side of a needle that registers balance and suggests fairness or truth. It also says equity in our vocabulary. The two weighing pans are, in our view, justice as experienced by Whites and justice as experienced by African Americans. When they are in balance, we have achieved equity.

Finally, two useful quotes, one from Carolyn Milne, President & CEO, Hamilton Community Foundation (Ontario), “For me, social justice means ways of leveling the playing field so that everyone gets a chance, getting at root causes and ultimately making social change.”

Another, from David Dodson of MDC, Inc., summarizing a group discussion with participants in a Ford Foundation conference on Community Philanthropy and Racial Equity in the American South, is rooted less in an analysis of gaps and more in the spirit of equity. “Equity is society's commitment to meet people where they are and provide for each the resources necessary to enable them to achieve at their highest levels. Equity is about respecting each person's inherent worth and acknowledging in word and in deed that the primary infrastructures of our society have failed to do so.”