

FOUNDATIONS IN EQUITY DESIGN

What Is the Issue?

How do we truly advance equity? How do we move past well-intentioned aspirations to confront and disrupt systems, policies, programs, and practices that create inequity? How might we disrupt the status quo and replace it with sustainable systems, practices, and interventions that create and uphold equity?

Policies and practices that create inequity are designed to create exactly the outcomes they produce. When we don't challenge the multitude of ways that inequity is seared into the fabric of our systems and institutions, we fail to examine the pervasive and invasive ways in which racism, sexism, ableism, and other ills permeate our structures and institutions. Without this examination, despite our best intentions, we continue to build on flawed foundations and create policies, practices, and programs that cannot, by design, produce equity.

Equitable design focuses on designing with those who have been historically and/or systemically pushed to the margins and made vulnerable due to factors like race, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomics, gender, and sexual orientation. Equitable Design is a human-centered design practice that aims to expose the root causes of inequity and design with (and not just for) so that we can (re)imagine and (re)design systems to achieve equity. Through this practice, we can work to redesign systems to be equitable both in process (how they work) and in outcomes (what they produce). We can support decision making to better meet the needs of communities by reimagining approaches to how decisions and policies are made. By leveraging equitable design frameworks, tools, and mindsets, we can move from rhetoric and performative efforts that only address symptoms of inequity to transformative and sustainable change. For those entities that are seeking solutions, we can affirmatively answer the question: Is there an actionable path toward equity?

What Did MITRE Do?

Through our Social Equity Platform and beyond, MITRE data scientists, engineers, analysts, and human-centered design experts have collaborated to understand how to build and leverage this actionable path. We apply MITRE's capabilities to advance equity in government programs and processes and create and sustain equitable communities. We seek to center equity in policies and programs so that they are more effective in meeting public needs, and less likely to lead to devastating consequences.

In this policy wrapper, we describe our work connecting with other organizations and local governments to understand how they have been advancing equity and to uncover and share lessons learned and best practices. [City Insights](#), produced in partnership with the city of Bozeman, Montana, highlights the various ways cities across North America are working to advance equity in their respective jurisdictions and illuminates practices the federal government can adapt to enable and enhance equity efforts. In [City Insights](#), we learn from leaders from Flagstaff, Arizona; Vancouver, British Columbia; Washington, District of Columbia; Boise, Idaho; Missoula, Montana; and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.



When the work of equity is approached with humility, honesty, and action, we can create new ways of thinking, working, and being that help forge a fundamentally better, more inclusive, and equitable foundation for policymaking and governing.

MITRE's mission-driven teams are dedicated to solving problems for a safer world. Through our public-private partnerships and federally funded R&D centers, we work across government to tackle challenges to the safety, stability, and well-being of our nation.


Additionally, we share a small sample from the “Designing for Equity Starter Guide,” an introductory guide to equitable design that outlines techniques, frameworks, and tools to design for equitable processes and outcomes, considering historical context and the unique needs of individuals and communities. The starter guide is designed to meet individuals where they are, enabling them to better identify, question, call out, and mitigate issues of inequity.

What Did We Learn?

Several key themes emerged in our City Insights interviews, in which city leaders provided critical insights on what we can do to make equity efforts actionable and successful. Our “Designing for Equity Starter Guide” equips us with techniques and frameworks that can be leveraged to operationalize (using human-centered design) these key themes.

Power and Proximity:

Shift Power and Acknowledge Community Agency

 **Insight:** Too often, policymaking and solutioning are shepherded by those with power who make decisions for others who will be most impacted by the policies created. The latter group usually has little to no part in the making of decisions that affect them. The former group usually is removed from the problem and minimally impacted by the decisions that they make for others, if they are impacted at all. Equity requires those with power (including those who provide information and other inputs to inform decisions) to recognize their power, privilege, and positionality so that these intentionally exclusionary practices (can) change and evolve—that we redefine roles, revalue ways of knowing, and reassess the ways we reach decisions (equityXdesign).¹

Equity also requires proximity. By being in closer proximity to the communities they serve, government agencies can support the creation of policies that are more responsive to the needs of the people, and new bridges can be established based on trusted relationships, accountability, transparency, and reciprocity.


It is recommended that organizations assess their readiness to engage through a candid and transparent assessment of their internal capacity for equity work. This can include acknowledging harmful policies and practices the organization may have implemented and ensuring that government representatives who are involved in equity efforts have acknowledged and mitigated any implicit biases and stereotypes that they may hold about certain groups, so as to not inflict (additional) harm and trauma.

Tool: Participatory Policymaking

Participatory policymaking (PPM) is a participatory democracy practice that focuses explicitly on ways that community members can inform and decide on policy.² A PPM approach, which often leverages equitable design practices such as participatory design,

*is responsive to the needs of communities and can help with shifting power and increasing proximity to communities. A “one-size-fits-all” blanket approach to decision making is often ineffective because it does not consider location, historical context, and other factors. What may work in one place and with one group may not be effective with another. By leveraging PPM and taking an *asset-based* perspective, the federal government can *work with, listen to, and learn from local municipalities and community organizations, and engage community members themselves as actors in decision making.* PPM can include partnerships with academia, the private sector, and social entrepreneurs, and/or be completely community-led, where policies and decisions are bottom-up instead of top-down.*

Hegemony and Heuristics: Challenge and Disrupt Zero-Sum Bias


 **Insight:** Hegemony centers the ideas and practices of those groups with the most power while dismissing (and often disparaging) the values and ways of being and knowing of other groups and communities. Hegemonic practices leave little to no room for discourse and exploration of other ways of doing that could lead to better outcomes. Hegemony maintains a rigid set of ideologies, beliefs, and practices that show up in how policy is made, and what policies are created. While heuristics (the term that describes the process by which humans, and by extension organizations use mental shortcuts to make decisions) may allow policymakers to act with speed and to make decisions in the face of uncertainty, these shortcuts can often be biased and enable inequity.

A prominent output of hegemony and heuristics is zero-sum bias. Simply stated, zero-sum bias is the view that more for you means less for me. In the [Executive Order on Further Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government](#), President Biden stated, “*It is imperative to reject the narrow, cramped view of American opportunity as a zero-sum game. When any person or community is denied freedom, dignity, and prosperity, our entire Nation is held back.*” Zero-sum bias, by design, positions people against each other by creating arbitrary constraints that may appear inescapable and intractable.

Tool: Futures Thinking

Futures thinking provides methods and frameworks that allow us to question our current framing, and to push past what exists by asking “what if?” Futures techniques such as strategic foresight, speculative design, and critical design (among others) allow us to (re)imagine society, how we govern, and how we create policy and practices. This reimagining can open new possibilities; we can then envision the futures that we want, see what may be holding us back from those futures, and adjust our current practices and mindsets to build toward futures that are more equitable.

Systems and Structures: Equity Is an Inside Job

 **Insight:** Finally, and perhaps most important, equity requires outside *and* inside change. Organizational structures and systems must be examined and, when necessary, either redesigned or completely replaced, to ensure they support and enhance equity practices. Incentives must be realigned, processes must be evaluated, and culture must shift. Otherwise, the goodwill of creating change to advance equity will always succumb to the prevailing forces that pull, tug, and force change efforts to conform to the status quo where inequity and harm are created.

Tool: Reflective Inquiry

Organizations must create a routine of being deeply reflective, and with honesty and transparency ask and answer questions such as:

- What biases and power dynamics are embedded within the organization that inhibit equity?
- Are incentives and rewards aligned in ways that impede equity?
- Who is making decisions and how? For whom are they making decisions? What processes exist for bringing those impacted into the process of decision making?
- How might we reimagine organizational structures and processes to make equity an inevitable outcome of our work?
- Do we have an organizational culture that operates on fear, scarcity, and zero-sum bias?
- What trauma-informed practices do we employ, to help ensure the well-being of both our staff and the communities we serve?
- Have we acknowledged the ways in which we may cause harm to those we serve (past or present)?
 - If past harms were caused, what legacies of these harms continue to exist?
 - How do we repair these harms?

Recognize that this line of inquiry is likely to make some people uncomfortable and, in that discomfort, some may be defensive and seek to abandon, avoid, or thwart equity efforts (again, reverting to the status quo). To move the dial on equity, we must sit with this discomfort and move from fragility and defensiveness to openness and equity-centricity.

City Insights: [Social Equity Platform - Resources \(mitre.org\)](#)

Designing for Equity Starter Guide: [Social Equity Platform - Resources \(mitre.org\)](#)

¹equityXdesign (equity meets design) is a practice that merges the consciousness of racial equity work with the methodology of design thinking: <https://medium.com/equity-design/racism-and-inequity-are-products-of-design-they-can-be-redesigned-12188363cc6a>

²“Participatory Policy-Making.” Democracy Beyond Elections, 30 Nov. 2021, www.democracybeyondelections.org/policy

What Does It Mean

No matter how inequities manifest—in technology, in policy, or in services and programs—people are at the center. Because people continue to uphold the thinking and practices that create inequity, only people can change it. Advancing equity, therefore, requires a human-centered approach such as equitable design. Through equitable design, we can shift our mental models *and* we can change our systems. When the work of equity is approached with humility, honesty, and action, we can create new ways of thinking, working, and being that help forge a fundamentally better, more inclusive, and equitable foundation for policymaking and governing.

About the Author

Tammy Freeman leads MITRE’s Social Equity Platform’s Equitable Design and Futures lead capability area; her work crosses equity, human-centered design, futures, social innovation and impact, and other emerging areas. Ms. Freeman is the co-author of MITRE’s Equity Assessment Framework, a framework for program and policy equity assessment for consideration, use, and enhancement by federal agencies.

About the Center for Data-Driven Policy

MITRE’s Center for Data-Driven Policy brings objective, evidence-based, nonpartisan insights to government policymaking. As a not-for-profit organization, we work in the public interest across the federal government, and in partnership with industry and academia. The Center for Data-Driven Policy leverages MITRE’s experts to examine policy issues on a wide range of topics, generally falling in four cross-cutting domains: national security, science and technology, cyber, and domestic policy. We apply our unique vantage point working across government and with our federal R&D centers to create objective analysis on current government affairs. We share this information with federal policymakers on Capitol Hill and in the executive branch.

Connect with us at policy@mitre.org