Researching Racial Equity: Promoting justice and fairness through rigorous research

Last updated March 2026

Motivation

Long-standing racial differences in economic and social outcomes in the United States are deeply rooted in historical injustices, discriminatory policies, and unequal access to resources and opportunities. These inequities are widely reported in studies of the earnings gap,[1] the role of wealth accumulation,[2,3] and reviews of inequality in the labor market, wealth, mobility, and geography.[4,5] For example, the median Black household in the United States has approximately $24,000 in wealth, compared to the median white household wealth of $189,000—a gap that has grown wider over the past few decades.[6] Racial inequities extend to other markers of well-being such as health, safety, and educational attainment. As a stark illustration, Black women who have graduated college are nearly twice as likely to die in childbirth as white women who have not graduated from high school.[7] The persistent nature of racial inequity suggests that past and current policy approaches aiming to remedy significant disparities have been insufficient. Policymakers need clear and credible evidence on solutions that may disrupt the stark racial inequities in the United States.

Scope of J-PAL North America's Researching Racial Equity RFP

Randomized evaluations can play a critical role in shaping policy with evidence. When designed intentionally, randomized evaluations studying racial equity have the potential to: (1) generate credible evidence on the impact of specific policies aimed at improving racial equity, (2) rigorously investigate the root causes of racial disparities, enabling the identification of potential solutions, (3) build upon theories and questions regarding race identified within a broad set of fields including sociology, stratification economics, history, and other existing work on race, and (4) detect different types of discrimination. At J-PAL North America, we believe

[1] Bayer, Patrick, and Kerwin Kofi Charles. "Divergent Paths: A New Perspective on Earnings Differences between Black and White Men since 1940." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 133, no. 3 (2018): 1459–1501. https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjy003.

[2] Derenoncourt, Ellora, et al. 2023. "Wealth of Two Nations: The U.S. Racial Wealth Gap, 1860-1890", Working Paper, (May). https://economics.princeton.edu/working-papers/wealth-of-two-nations-the-u-s-racial-wealth-gap-1860-2020/.

[3] Feir, Donn L., Maggie EC Jones, and Angela Redish. "American Indian Wealth in the Early Twentieth Century." In *AEA Papers and Proceedings*, 114: 210-14.

[4] Jones, Damon, et al. "Tracing the Color Line: An Overview of Black-White Economic Inequality in the United States." *Uncovering Inequality, Ira A. Lipman Center for Journalism on Civil and Human Rights*, Mar. 2023. https://journalism.columbia.edu/system/files/content/tracing_the_color_line_final_headers_print.pdf.

[5] "What Would It Take to Close America's Black-White Wealth Gap?" RAND Corporation, May 9, 2023. https://www.rand.org/blog/rand-review/2023/05/what-would-it-take-to-close-americas-black-white-wealth-gap.html.

[6] "What Would It Take?" RAND Corporation, May 9, 2023.

[7] Baumgaertner, Emily, and Farnaz Fassihi. "Racism and Sexism Underlie Higher Maternal Death Rates for Black Women, U.N. Says." The New York Times, July 12, 2023. https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/12/health/maternal-deaths-americas-un.html#:~:text=Black%20women%20in%20the%20United,have%20not%20finished%20high%20school.

this evidence can enable a broader ecosystem of organizations and policymakers to identify and scale up effective policy solutions.

We seek to fund rigorous, ethical, and theory-driven randomized evaluations that look into the drivers and mechanisms of racism and discrimination, and explore what policies and interventions promote justice and fairness. In particular, we aim to fund research that has the potential to inform policies that promote racial and ethnic equity.

Defining Racial Equity

We define racial and ethnic equity as the process of ensuring that race is no longer used to reinforce social hierarchies. Racial equity does not imply the absence of racial group identities, communities, or cultural traditions, but that such aspects are not used against individuals or groups in social, political, and legal domains. This process involves acknowledging and addressing historic harms and racial injustices, making amends, working to create racially just systems, policies, practices, attitudes, and cultural messages, and eliminating systems that reinforce differential outcomes by race (AISP Toolkit).

Racial equity should be central to the primary research questions. We encourage studies that meet the following criteria:
- Racial equity or racial inequality is a primary outcome.
- The research design is informed by or informs theories of racial disparities.
- The study is powered to identify differences across racial groups (if relevant).
- The study identifies an anticipated disparity based on an understanding of historical context and systemic sources of racial inequity.
- The study intentionally involves impacted communities throughout the research process from co-creating research questions, outcomes of interest, study design, analysis and interpretation, and communicating about results. *[Related activities can be covered through travel/proposal development grants and pilot grants]*

Potential Research Themes

Here, we highlight potential research themes. For each theme, we present example studies, with a focus on randomized evaluations conducted by J-PAL NA researchers. Racial equity is central to the research question and design of each example study, and each study is powered to detect effects as relevant (for example, detecting differences across racial groups). This list is not comprehensive; there may be other relevant themes.

Studying systemic racial discrimination.

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Defining Systemic Racial Discrimination

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We define systemic discrimination as the process through which past acts of direct discrimination –by creating differences in endowments, institutions, and norms– entrench racially disparate outcomes even in the absence of current direct discrimination. This does not preclude ongoing direct discrimination, which can amplify and reinforce systemic discrimination, and also be enabled or concealed by systemic discrimination.

(Francis, Dania V., Rob Gillezeau, Damon Jones, Corinne Low, and Angelino C.G. Viceisza, "Proposal: What Can We Learn about Systemic Racial Discrimination from Randomized Controlled Trials?" Working Paper.)

- J-PAL researcher Dania Francis (UMass Boston), and co-authors Angela C.M. de Oliveira (UMass Amherst), and Carey Dimmitt (UMass Amherst) study the underrepresentation of Black students in Advanced Placement (AP) courses.[8] Rather than relying on deficit-based theories[9] of under-investment on the part of Black students, Francis and co-investigators are developing a randomized evaluation to build upon their quasi-experimental work in order to understand how existing systems and social dynamics may constrain Black students' ability to choose AP courses.

    - The study examines structural forces within schools and society as an explanation for underrepresentation in STEM courses among women and Black students.

- J-PAL researcher Peter Hull (Brown University) and co-authors J. Aislinn Bohren (University of Pennsylvania) and Alex Imas (University of Chicago) developed a framework that decomposes racial disparities into components arising from direct and systemic discrimination.[10] They test that framework in an audit experiment with hiring managers and find that systemic discrimination is a large driver of racial disparities in hiring decisions. They demonstrate that individual level informational interventions are insufficient to overcome systemic discrimination.

    - This study broadens our understanding of discrimination by highlighting the importance of systemic discrimination, a component of racial discrimination that has been recognized in sociology but has long been overlooked by economic literature on racial disparities.
    - This study specifically documents an anticipated source of racial discrimination in hiring: because of discrimination in other parts of the labor market, Black candidates have less experience on their resumes than equally qualified white candidates, making them less likely to be hired.

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[8] Francis, Dania, Angela de Oliveira and Carey Dimmitt. 2023. "Disentangling Sources of Bias: Evidence from Advanced Placement Course Recommendations." AEA RCT Registry. June 30. https://doi.org/10.1257/rct.7927-4.0.
[9] Deficit-based theories focus on what an individual or group lacks as an explanation for disparities. Asset-based approaches focus more broadly on what might support individuals or groups in achieving success.
[10] Bohren, J. Aislinn, Peter Hull, and Alex Imas. *Systemic discrimination: Theory and measurement.* No. w29820. National Bureau of Economic Research, 2022.

Behavioral change among decision makers who may exhibit bias.

- J-PAL researchers Will Dobbie (Harvard University) and Crystal Yang (Harvard University) are testing interventions designed to increase equity in bail decisions.[11] In partnership with Harris County, Texas, this study examines institutional policy (public report cards for judges) and individual-level education (personal feedback to judges) and how these different levels of approaches interact to increase equity.

  - The intervention is designed to address hypothesized underlying causes of racial disparity in bail decisions: that disparities exist in part due to rushed judicial decision-making and a reliance on heuristics as well as biased beliefs about the relative risk of defendants based on race.

Redesigning programs or processes to account for underlying causes of disparity and improve outcomes for under-served groups.

- J-PAL researcher Marcella Alsan (Harvard University), and co-authors Owen Garrick, and Grant Graziani investigated the potential drivers of health inequities between Black and white patients by varying the racial concordance between patients and physicians.[12]

  - The study informs theories of racial disparities by documenting the importance of racial concordance.
  - The study population was composed entirely of Black men; differential effects of racial concordance for Black versus non-Black patients were not relevant for this study.
  - The study is based on an understanding that some existing health disparities result from historical discrimination against Black communities.

Identifying discrimination in new and important settings.

- While existing literature has studied discrimination by employers toward potential employees in hiring decisions, J-PAL researcher Denvil Duncan, and co-authors Phillip Doerrengberg, and Danyang Li examined discrimination in the labor market by workers toward potential employers.[13]

  - This study uses the same methodological approach as existing audit studies, but reverses the roles of workers and employers to test for a new kind of discrimination in the labor market.

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[11] Dobbie, Will and Crystal Yang. 2021. "Reducing Racial Disparities in Bail Decisions: An Experiment on Public Accountability and Feedback in Texas." AEA RCT Registry. April 05. https://doi.org/10.1257/rct.6872-1.1

[12] Alsan, Marcella, Owen Garrick, and Grant Graziani. 2019. "Does Diversity Matter for Health? Experimental Evidence from Oakland." *American Economic Review*, 109 (12): 4071-4111. DOI: 10.1257/aer.20181446

[13] Doerrenberg, Philipp, Denvil Duncan, and Danyang Li. "The (in) visible hand: do workers discriminate against employers?." *Journal of Public Economics* 231 (2024): 105065.

Understanding disparate impacts of race-neutral policies on racial equity.

Race-neutral policies can yield unequal results when they meet entrenched systemic forces that are the result of past racial discrimination. They can also be useful in closing disparate racial outcomes when considering how past direct discrimination has led to racially disparate endowments, norms, and institutions.

- J-PAL researchers Oeindrila Dube (University of Chicago) and Anuj Shah (University of Chicago), along with co-author Sandy Jo MacArthur, designed a general cognitive training program that encouraged police officers to slow down and consider alternative explanations in stressful situations.[14] Although the study was not focused on racial equity, in that it did not focus on race as an outcome and the training did not explicitly address racial bias, the intervention produced an 11% reduction in arrests of Black individuals.

    - This work illustrates how a race-neutral program can still reduce racial disparities when it interacts with pre-existing systemic forces such as unconscious bias.
    - Future research that probes the mechanisms behind this effect, or that tests such approaches with these dynamics in mind from the outset, can better identify how and when race-neutral interventions produce equity-enhancing impacts.

- J-PAL researcher, Ellora Derenoncourt, and co-author Claire Montialoux's study, Minimum Wages and Racial Inequality, finds that expanding federal minimum wage coverage to industries disproportionately represented by Black workers (e.g. agriculture, restaurants, nursing homes) reduced the racial earnings and income gap.[15]

    - The paper points out that racially motivated exclusion of minimum wage coverage decades earlier helps to explain why the race-neutral policy might impact racial disparities.
    - This study investigates the impact of race-neutral policies using quasi-experimental methods. We seek to fund proposals that expand our understanding of race-neutral policies through randomized evaluations.

Understanding the impact of discrimination on the beliefs and behaviors of those discriminated against.

- J-PAL researchers Marcella Alsan (Harvard), Damon Jones (University of Chicago), and Crystal Yang (Harvard) have proposed a randomized evaluation to examine how experiences of discrimination in one institutional domain shape behavior and decision-making in another.[16] Building on prior quasi-experimental evidence showing that salient discriminatory encounters can affect trust, engagement, and information-seeking in unrelated public systems, this study will experimentally prime participants, particularly Black and Latine individuals, with reminders of discrimination by law enforcement and then measure spillover effects on behaviors in health care and other contexts.

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[14] Dube, Oeindrila, Sandy Jo MacArthur, and Anuj K. Shah. "A Cognitive View of Policing." Working Paper no. 31651, National Bureau of Economic Research, September 2023. https://doi.org/10.3386/w31651.

[15] Derenoncourt, Ellora, and Claire Montialoux. "Minimum Wages and Racial Inequality." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 136, no. 1 (2021): 169–228. https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjaa031

[16] Alsan, Marcella, Damon Jones, and Crystal Yang. 2021. "Identifying and Addressing Structural Racism." AEA RCT Registry. February 23. https://doi.org/10.1257/rct.7246-1.0

- This work advances racial equity priorities by directly centering the beliefs, perceptions, and adaptive strategies of those who experience racism, rather than focusing solely on the actions of institutional decision-makers.

- J-PAL researcher, Dania V. Francis, and co-author William A. Darity Jr., use quasi-experimental methods to understand why fewer Black students take Advance Placement coursework compared to white students.[17] They find that Black high school students, fearing racial isolation, are less likely to enroll in AP classes when there is a smaller share of Black students currently enrolled in those classes.

  - This study highlights how past and present direct discrimination can be reinforced by changes in Black students' enrollment decisions.
  - This study uses quasi-experimental methods. We seek to fund studies that expand our understanding of this theme through randomized evaluations.

The following relationships to racial equity are, on their own, insufficient for a study to be considered under this request for proposals:

1. Only conducting a post hoc heterogeneity analysis, without testing a theoretical framework for why differences exist nor testing an intervention *specifically* designed to reduce a known disparity.
2. Pointing to overrepresentation of racial or ethnic minorities as study participants as the sole relationship to racial equity.
3. Simply noting that the study addresses a topic with a disproportionate impact on particular racial/ethnic groups as the sole relationship to racial equity.

A hypothetical example of a study that is unlikely to be considered:

- Researchers are evaluating an intervention that aims to generally increase access to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. Researchers note that Black people are disproportionately represented amongst those who are eligible for SNAP but do not take it up, and thus may benefit disproportionately more than the white population. The researchers will also analyze heterogeneous impacts by race.

  - Research on general, or race-neutral interventions that may nonetheless reduce racial disparities can be aligned with racial equity research, but it is important to make those connections explicit. This study is more likely to be considered racial equity research if, for example, it:
    - Included a primary outcome on racial equity or racial inequality.
    - Had enough power to measure heterogeneity.
    - Tested theories to understand underlying reasons why Black people do or do not take up benefits for which they are eligible that would explain the gap between eligible Black and non-Black participants, including, for example, systemic discrimination. [see definition above]

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[17] Francis, Dania V., and William A. Darity Jr. "Separate and Unequal Under One Roof: How the Legacy of Racialized Tracking Perpetuates Within-School Segregation." *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 5, no. 3 (2019): 112–134. https://doi.org/10.7758/RSF.2019.5.3.06.

- Addressed underlying reasons for disproportionate representation amongst those eligible for SNAP.
- Evaluated interventions designed specifically to address barriers identified in the literature that disproportionately affect Black people.

To learn more about J-PAL's Racial Equity work or to better understand our proposal criteria please email re@povertyactionlab.org.

Academic Leadership

This work is led by Damon Jones, Scientific Advisor for Racial Equity for J-PAL North America, and our Racial Equity Advisory Committee (REAC) members.

Current REAC members: Dania Francis, Rob Gillezeau, Corinne Low, and Angelino Viceisza.

Past REAC members: Randall Akee, Courtney Bonam, Gerald Daniels, and Silvia Robles.