

Social Policy Research Initiative Request for Proposals (RFP) Proposal Instructions

This document outlines the steps to submit a proposal. Please also review the “Evaluation Criteria” document for how we make funding decisions and the “Grant Requirements” document for what’s required if the proposal is funded.

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RFP Overview

Focus of the RFP

The J-PAL North America Social Policy Research Initiative (SPRI), is calling for randomized evaluations that contribute to J-PAL's mission to reduce poverty by ensuring policy is informed by rigorous evidence. This could include randomized evaluations across a broad range of sectors including but not limited to education; climate; energy and the environment; housing and homelessness; and labor. Proposals related to crime and health, may be better aligned with J-PAL North America's Initiative for Effective US Crime Policy and US Health Care Delivery Initiative RFPs.

We particularly welcome proposals that incorporate research questions aligned with our [Researching Racial Equity](#) priorities.

RFP Timeline

SPRI RFP Opens	April 8th, 2026
SPRI RFP Full Proposals Due	June 3rd, 2026
Funding Decisions Announced	August 10th, 2026

Send all proposal materials to email na_rfp@povertyactionlab.org by 5pm ET on June 3. Questions? Email initiative staff, na_rfp@povertyactionlab.org.

Eligibility Criteria

Proposal Eligibility

J-PAL North America funds randomized evaluations, or randomized controlled trials (RCTs), in the United States. These include:

- Randomized evaluations of policies or programs
- Randomized correspondence or audit studies (ex: "[Systemic Discrimination Among Large U.S. Employers](#)")
- Re-analyses of past instances of randomization (ex: "[When Scale and Replication Work: Learning from Summer Youth Employment Experiments](#)")
- Lab experiments, only when part of a larger evaluation involving a real-world intervention (see above criteria). Pure lab experiments are not eligible for J-PAL North America funding.

J-PAL North America will fund non-randomized work under pilot and travel/development funding if there is a clear link to how it will lead to an RCT. The same proposal (or different

versions of the same proposal) may not be submitted to multiple J-PAL North America RFPs simultaneously unless given explicit permission to do so.

J-PAL North America has a “no wrong door policy” for Initiative RFP submissions; in instances where a proposal topic is eligible to be submitted to more than one open RFP, researchers can submit to one relevant Initiative, and J-PAL staff will vet and redirect proposals to other open and relevant Initiatives for review as needed.

Researcher Eligibility

J-PAL affiliates, J-PAL post-doctoral fellows, and researchers invited by J-PAL North America to participate in the initiative ([invited researchers](#)) are eligible to apply for funding of any type. Applicants may submit a maximum of three proposals per 12-month period to a single initiative. PI and co-PI status are counted towards this limit.

Graduate Students

To apply, graduate students must meet the following criteria:

- They have a [J-PAL affiliate](#) or [invited researcher](#) on their thesis committee. The researcher does not need to be based at the same university as the student.
 - Pre-thesis PhD students may apply if they anticipate an affiliate or invited researcher will be on their thesis committee and the affiliate will supervise the proposed project.
- To apply for full funding, graduate students must have previously received a grant from J-PAL for the same evaluation or have documented evidence of successful piloting activities. Note: for graduate students the total amount of funding they may receive across time is capped at \$50,000 per initiative, regardless of the number of projects funded.

Proposal Types

Full Research Projects

Full research projects are typically awarded \$150,000 to \$250,000, with **a maximum budget of \$400,000. The award period may be up to three years.** A full project proposal is one where applicants:

- Can propose a clear and well-developed research question, with references to previous literature
- Can provide detailed randomization design, power calculations, and indicate outcomes of interest
- Can provide proof of commitment from partner organizations (in the form of letters of support)

Full project proposals may be submitted for an ongoing study that has already begun without J-PAL North America funding. Please see [“Required Documents”](#) for more information.

Pilot Studies

Pilot studies may be awarded a **maximum of \$50,000**. **The award period may be up to three years**. A pilot proposal is one where applicants:

- Seek to answer a particular research question but the design and implementation require further testing and development before a full project launches
- Can clearly explain how the pilot will lead to a randomized evaluation in the future, although random assignment does not necessarily need to occur during the pilot
- Aim to facilitate access to administrative data for designing or conducting an RCT

Please see [“Required Documents”](#) for more information.

Add-on-Funding

Add-on-funding may be awarded to projects previously funded by any J-PAL North America initiative. Funding requests are capped at **\$400,000 minus the amount of all funding previously awarded to the evaluation** (i.e. if a proposal previously received \$150,000 from J-PAL North America, add-on-funding is capped at \$250,000). **The award period may be up to three years**. Add-on-funding proposals may seek to:

- Add additional sites or treatment arms to an implemented evaluation
- Support additional activities on ongoing or past RCTs, such as follow-ups to measure long-term effects
- Extend the project timeline or cover additional costs due to implementation challenges

Research Management Support (RMS)

Researchers are strongly encouraged to apply for Research Management Support (RMS) when submitting their proposals. RMS provides short-term, customized, and expert support to help design and launch a randomized evaluation for researchers in the J-PAL network. Support may include activities such as project management, stakeholder management, technical support, and staff recruitment. To apply for RMS, please fill out the questionnaire ([available here](#)) and submit with your RFP application materials. You do not need to alter your budget when applying for RMS. The value does not count towards the funding limits referenced in other sections of these instructions. In most cases RMS will be provided free of charge. More information can be found on the [website](#), or by contacting NA_RMS@povertyactionlab.org.

How to Apply for Pilot or Full funding

Required documents

1. Cover sheet
2. 5-page narrative

- Please save the narrative as a Word document, **titled [PI Name]_[Topic Name].doc(x)**.
- The narrative **may not exceed five pages in length**.
- The narrative should address each of the points listed in the “Proposal Evaluation Criteria” document. If necessary to fully address the guiding questions on Ethics and Risks, please include an addendum (details under 2A).
- The narrative should begin with an abstract of 150-200 words. The abstract should include information on the research question, hypotheses, intervention, (potential) sample size, and outcomes.
 - For full studies, power calculations must be included in order to be considered for funding. For pilot studies, “back-of-the-envelope” power calculations are required.
- References to previous literature are required to provide context for your research question. Chicago Author-Date style is suggested. References are not included in page count.

2A. Optional: Potential ethical risks

- If included, please respond to the following questions found [here](#).
- Please save the addendum in the same document as the full narrative, using the same formatting conventions. Label the relevant section, “Addendum on Ethics and Risks.”
- The addendum may not exceed one page in length, for a total combined document of no more than six pages.

2B. Optional, as applicable: Advancing Racial and Ethnic Equity Addendum

- Please respond to the prompts in the [evaluation criteria document](#). You may also wish to reference the [Researching Racial Equity](#) document for more information on J-PAL’s funding priorities in this space.
- The addendum should be a clearly labeled section within the proposal narrative and should not exceed one page in length, for a combined total of six pages (seven if also including addendum 2A).

3. Budget

- Please use the provided budget template and submit as an Excel workbook, titled [PI Name]_[Topic Name].xls(x)
- Carefully review the “instructions” tab in the budget template for allowable expenses. In particular, please note the following:
 - J-PAL North America will fund **indirect costs up to 9%** of total direct costs.¹
 - J-PAL North America **will not cover: PI, co-PI, or co-Investigator effort; cost of the intervention** or activities related to partner day-to-day operations.; activities outside the **US or Canada**.

¹ If MIT will be the institute receiving the award, please contact us for additional instructions as a different indirect rate may apply.

- Budget years must follow the **MIT fiscal year (7/1-6/30)** vs. the project year. The project can start/end at any time, meaning that the first or final year may be less than 12 months.
- If your total project budget exceeds your request from J-PAL North America (J-PAL NA), please complete both the "Total Project Budget" and "J-PAL NA Budget" worksheets and include any co-funders and/or your plan to cover any deficits in the "Notes" column.

4. Budget narrative

- Please save the budget narrative as a Word document, titled [PI Name]_Budget Narrative_[Topic Name].doc(x).
- The budget narrative should describe and justify each line in the budget; for instance, what are the proposed activities, goals, and timeline for costs.
- Please provide justification for the expenses requested in your budget.

5. Letter of intent

- Please provide a letter of intent from the institution that would receive the award²
- The letter must be signed by an authorized official and include the following:
 - Project title and proposed funding dates
 - Name and email for the PI and contracting point of contact
 - A statement that the institute has reviewed the proposal
- Please reach out in advance if you are unable to secure a letter by the RFP deadline.

6. Full projects only: Partner letter(s) of support

- Full projects are required to provide a letter of support from implementation partners. Applicants for pilot funding are encouraged, but not required, to submit letters of support.
- Letters of support should indicate willingness to share cost data, when appropriate.

7. Optional: Questionnaire for RMS

- Fill out the [questionnaire](#) if you are interested in applying for RMS.

8. Optional: Addendum on Team Experience and Expertise

- If included, please respond to the following questions in the same document as the full narrative, using the same formatting conventions. Label the relevant section "Addendum on Team Experience and Expertise." The addendum should be no more than one page in length.
- Are there important aspects or qualities of the study team (that may not otherwise be apparent in other application materials or CVs) that make you particularly well-suited to carry out this research? Conversely, are there aspects that may pose challenges to carrying out the research? This may include discussion of:
 - The team's positionality, i.e., their education, professional experience, training, positions, personal experience, or social demographic identities, as related to the topic or population being studied

² You do **not** need to provide a letter of intent if MIT would be the institute receiving the award.

- Any steps taken to modify your research approach given the team's positionality, if relevant
 - *Example: Given the diverse make-up of our study population, we have a diverse team of RAs conducting interviews and will be able to control for participant-enumerator concordance.*
 - *Example: I am a researcher for the University of Chicago, collecting data on Black families from the South Side of Chicago. The tensions between the University and neighboring communities with respect to policing and neighborhood investment may render study participants weary of the research team.*
 - *Example: One of the co-authors of this study has personal experience with the criminal legal system, giving a unique perspective on potential pathways and mechanisms by which the intervention we test may reduce legal system involvement, and influencing the way in which we plan to engage participants in the study intake and debrief processes.*
 - *Example: I am an African American researcher collecting data from police officers on their racial preferences. Given that my race is similar to the subjects in the vignettes, the study participants may not be completely forthcoming with their preferences or biases.*
 - *Example: One of the co-authors of this study worked as a primary school teacher in public schools for 15 years, and is now a leading researcher in early childhood education. The breadth and depth of their knowledge on the existing literature has been invaluable to the study design. Their classroom experience has also shaped our survey questions, and has been crucial to gaining trust and buy-in from educators.*
9. Graduate students only: Letter of support from the [J-PAL affiliate](#) or [invited researcher](#) on your thesis committee
- Pre-thesis students are required to submit a formal letter of confirmation from an affiliate or invited researcher that explicitly states: "I am actively responsible for supervising this project/research and anticipate being on the student's thesis committee."
 - Students with a thesis committee in place should submit a letter in which the J-PAL affiliate or invited researcher attests to being on the committee.
 - Pilot or full proposals submitted by graduate students must also reference the student's prior travel/proposal development grant and/or document successful piloting activities.

Additional Steps for Off-Cycle Proposals

In rare cases, proposals facing time constraints may apply for funding off-cycle. Off-cycle proposals will face the same scrutiny as proposals submitted during the RFP round and **must include a justification for off-cycle submission**. Examples of acceptable justifications may include a pressing policy or program implementation timeline (ex. implementation must align with the academic year) or other constraints outside of the research team's control. Acceptable justifications do not include timeline changes under the research team's control or other internal factors.

Review Process

Proposals are reviewed by two peer reviewers from J-PAL's academic network. After peer review, the Social Policy Research Initiative Review Board (Matthew Notowidigdo, Judd Kessler, and a third permanent review board member) reviews each proposal and makes all funding decisions. All applicants will receive redacted comments from the referees and the Review Board.

Important Notes

- Applicants **must have IRB approval or exemption** from an IRB with [IORG status](#) before MIT can establish a subaward agreement to set up funding. IRB approval/exemption must be from the institution receiving funds or there must be a reliance agreement between the reviewing IRB and institution receiving funds.
- Please see the [Grant Requirements](#) document for more detailed information about post-award requirements.