

Understanding how data justice pertains to our work as a governmental institution

This document was developed by Coalition of Communities of Color in consultation with the Oregon Health Authority's REALD and SOGI team.

One function of government is to provide services that promote the well-being of communities. To understand the needs of communities, the government collects data in two primary ways:

- (1) Data is collected whenever someone interacts with a government service;
- (2) Government programs collect data via regular surveying of populations.

Both forms of data quantify the needs and, to some extent with surveys, the experiences of a subset of a population, as well as quantify certain demographic information. Government relies on these data to make programmatic decisions and allocate resources; and often uses these data to answer certain questions about community needs and experiences.

What is data justice?

Data justice recognizes that the types of data the government collects and relies on are insufficient for understanding community needs, experiences and, equally important, desires. These data do not represent communities in ways that communities would represent themselves – and government data often entirely erases some communities due to “the problem” of small sample size (e.g., Pacific Islanders) or using too broad, and ultimately meaningless, categories (e.g., Asian).

Data justice is an approach that

- (1) Recognizes that mainstream/government data cannot sufficiently account for the needs, strengths, and desires of communities.
- (2) Values diverse kinds of data (i.e., not only population-level quantitative data).
- (3) Centers community-led ways of collecting, analyzing, storing, sharing, and using data as the most meaningful and impactful way for communities to be accurately represented and avoid erasure.
- (4) Always views data to be in the service of catalyzing change and supporting community self-determination, rather than record-keeping and/or fulfilling agency-level requirements/agendas (e.g., compliance, funder guidelines, advancing programmatic initiatives, publicly reporting outcomes).

Data justice efforts, therefore, cannot be led by governments. Governments can support community-led data justice efforts by setting the conditions for internal/agency-wide shifts and external/community-facing shifts (see some examples below). First, they should begin with the internal work and slowly build up meaningful, substantive, and sustainable external shifts.

Internal work to support data justice:

Be critical of dominant ways of doing data.

- What assumptions do you have about data? Challenge them.
- If you believe that “data speaks for itself,” what would it mean to believe that “data doesn’t speak for itself”?
- If you believe that “data is objective,” what would it mean to believe that “data isn’t objective”?

- If you believe that stories and narratives are “just anecdotal,” what would it mean to believe that stories and narratives are fundamental data for decision-making?

Be transparent about the data that your department, agency, or bureau collects and publishes. This means:

- Explicitly state the limitations of the data.
- Be clear about and state how this data will be used.
- Be explicit about how publicly available data is collected and analyzed.
- In other words, provide as much context about data as possible.

Elevate and promote the importance of disaggregated data by collecting and analyzing data on race, ethnicity, language, disability, sexuality, and sexual orientation for the purpose of illuminating the pervasiveness of systemic inequities.

External work to support data justice:

Establish relationship-building processes around all the work you do. Establish meaningful ways that community voice and power shift can transform organizational decisions and realities.

Establish collaborative research and data projects where the most marginalized community members lead and have authority to decide the direction of the work.

Resource, provide technical assistance, and build capacity for communities to research and collect data on the questions and desires of their communities.

Let community own any data that is about the community and support them in how they would like to use their data.