

EQUITY IN ACTION?

**Assessing the Role of Community in Declarations of
Racism as a Public Health Crisis**

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PURPOSE

The purpose of this brief is to present the findings from a series of surveys, Learning Circles, and media analyses designed by The Praxis Project and Berkeley Media Studies Group, a program of the Public Health Institute, to examine the extent to which community basebuilding organizations (CBOs) played a role in declarations of racism as a public health crisis and how the declarations were covered in the media. We provide recommendations derived from government representatives and CBOs on how to authentically center community in political processes.



INTRODUCTION

With the global COVID-19 pandemic and the police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Tony McDade—among countless others—Summer of 2020 saw an explosion of media and public attention to health inequities and racial justice. As community organizers and public health researchers exposed the disproportionate toll that COVID-19 was taking on essential workers—many of whom were Black, Indigenous, or people of color—corporations made statements about the Black Lives Matter movement, and a number of jurisdictions formally declared racism a public health issue.

Community groups have long been organizing to bring attention to racial inequities and their impacts on health outcomes. Community efforts have been proven to help strengthen policy.¹ Governments doing equity work must center community power in collaborative and meaningful ways.

In light of the essential role of communities in racial justice spaces, we wanted to understand more about their role with the declarations, their perceptions, their concerns, and lessons learned (particularly compared with the experiences of government actors). Further, learning about community involvement could help us understand whether the declarations were reactionary (in response to the 2020 uprisings, COVID-19 pandemic, etc.) or if the groundwork had been laid beforehand. Additionally, we wanted to know whether these declarations played a role in shifting power dynamics and if they were connected to building community power.

Declaration:

An official statement, announcement, or proclamation that what is being stated is true. Declarations can set the foundation for offices, policies, and budgets.

The goal of our exploratory study was to examine the local jurisdictions that have declared racism a public health crisis to determine how proponents of the declarations are framing their work and to learn more about the community's involvement in writing, passing, and implementing the declarations.

In this analysis, we mapped, categorized, and assessed news coverage about declarations from across the country, focusing on how community voices and perspectives appeared. News narratives are important because they provide a window into the public discussion around a range of issues and help shape the policy agenda.



¹ Christens B, Speer P. Community Organizing: Practice, Research and Policy Implications. *Social Issues and Policy Review* 2015, 9 (1), 2015,193-222.

PROCESS

Survey Methodology

We used the Collaborative for Anti-Racism & Equity and American Public Health Association's databases to identify localities that had passed declarations. We then narrowed this list down to create a sample of contacts from government agencies and CBOs—CBOs bring together individuals and groups to build power and address issues concerning their communities. Our criteria for inclusion included:

- Locations where project staff had preexisting relationships;
- Areas that had not been over-researched; and
- Locations that we were referred to by project staff, respondents, and partner organizations.

We also made decisions about inclusion to ensure diversity in geography and political leanings. We asked each survey participant for recommendations on who else we should invite, and we extended invitations to all suggestions from government agencies or CBOs. A total of 111 people from 18 localities were contacted to participate in the surveys.

We then created two surveys to assess community involvement in the declarations: one for government agencies and another for CBOs. Government agency surveys focused on questions about the extent and impact of community involvement in their community's declaration. In the survey for CBOs, we also asked them if they were involved in declaration processes as well as the skills, qualities, resources, or insights their organization could have brought to the process were they not.

The surveys were disseminated between March and June 2022, and we used the findings from the survey to inform the design of our Learning Circles.

Learning Circle Methodology

In the survey, we asked participants if they were interested in being in contact with us about the project. We used the list of people who consented to future communication as the foundation of our Learning Circle if they were involved in declaration processes as well as the skills, qualities, resources, or insights their organization could have brought to the process were they not.

The surveys were disseminated between March and June 2022, and we used the findings from the survey to inform the design of our Learning Circles.

Praxis Learning Circles:

Virtual or in-person convenings that bring grassroots organizations together from across the country to share expertise, build relationships, encourage community-building, discuss tools and experiences, and engage in capacity-building opportunities to strengthen community organizing. The primary goal of our Learning Circles is to build power among Praxis's basebuilding and community organizing partners.

For this project, we expanded our Learning Circle model to provide space for community partners to build relationships with representatives from government agencies. Given we view Learning Circles as an opportunity to build attendees' capacity, part of the Learning Circle model involves offering participants a workshop or training based on their areas of interest for growth. Consequently, we divided the Learning Circle into two parts, with the latter being determined by survey participants interested in strategic planning:

- **Session one:** a space to provide background on the declarations, share findings from the surveys and media analyses, and hold discussions between government representatives and CBO representatives.
- **Session two:** a workshop on "Strategy and Love," facilitated by Shiree Teng.

In this brief, we focus on the findings from session one of the Learning Circle given the second session was not focused on the declarations.

For session one, we opened the Learning Circle with government agency representatives in one breakout room and CBO staff in another. In the government breakout room, they responded to prompts related to how the declarations came to be, community involvement, implementation of the declarations, and measuring the success of the declarations. In the CBO breakout room, participants responded to prompts related to the issues they are currently organizing around, their recent organizing successes, their involvement in the declarations, and whether they believe the declarations would lead to tangible change. Later, we created mixed breakout rooms to facilitate relationship building across sectors. Throughout the Learning Circle, we used Jamboard to take live notes that participants could edit or add to themselves. We centered Praxis's Working Principles for Health Justice and Racial Equity, which include act with care, inclusivity, authentic community collaboration, sustainable solutions, and commitment to transformation.

Following the completion of the surveys and Learning Circles, we quantitatively evaluated survey data. We assessed all qualitative responses from the survey, as well as all notes from the Learning Circles, to identify key themes and outstanding questions.

Media Analysis Methodology

We conducted a content analysis of print news articles about policies and declarations of racism as a public health crisis published in US newspapers and through wire services between January 1, 2019, and December 31, 2021. We assessed the following:

- how declarations of racism as a public health crisis were framed in local news coverage;
- whether community or government voices were highlighted;
- who the declarations were described as benefiting; and
- if the news described community involvement in the drafting or implementation of the declarations.



RESULTS

Survey Results

We collected survey responses from six government representatives and 20 individuals from CBOs. Half of government respondents affirmed that community residents were involved in writing their declaration. One-third shared that community members were involved in passing the declaration, while another third described community involvement in implementing the declaration. Respondents shared tangible examples of the value of working with community members, sharing stories of how they provided language recommendations or helped the declaration gain attention and support in the community.

Learning Circle Results

The Learning Circle included representatives of four government agencies (three of which were at the county level and one at the state level). We also had representation from CBOs and academic institutions in Oakland (CA), Los Angeles (CA), Hartford (CT), Chicago (IL), New Orleans (LA), Washington, DC, and Seattle (WA).

Participants were experienced organizers deeply engaged in work around racial, reproductive, economic, climate, and food justice. During their time with us they shared organizing wins from cities across the country relating to issues as diverse as increasing local food access, reallocating funds to support Black students and students of color, and decreasing police presence in schools.

Government Agency Breakdown

To open the conversation, we asked participants about the infrastructure that people or groups created to help build momentum around the declarations. While one participant said the foundation for their localities declaration came from their staff, others named diverse stakeholders including community groups, philanthropy, private partners, and hospitals. Others named how internal systems and structures make it hard to operationalize declarations, which, in turn, can make it hard for them to predict what will happen after declarations are passed to reassure the community.

Despite the lack of community engagement, respondents highlighted that their localities' declarations led to the formation of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion offices. They elaborated that these offices have led to an increase in conversations around equity and equity-centered partnerships across departments, and they reflected on longer term goals, like the elimination of inequities and disparities. They acknowledged that to achieve this goal greater alignment across departments and more input from government leaders would be necessary, coupled with power sharing and authentic community engagement and participation. Indeed, when asked about lessons learned, many respondents said they would focus on building trust, building partnerships, maximizing community engagement, and acknowledging the immense amount of labor that goes into the process.

Mixed-Sector Breakouts

Conversations in the mixed-sector breakouts focused on challenges and needs encountered by community members in engaging with the government around declarations of racism as a public health issue. Community members named transparency as a key need and called on government actors to be more transparent about issues like budgeting, administration processes, data sharing, and evaluation. Participants representing community organizations also named fears of performative, rather than substantive, government action and patronizing treatment of community members by government actors.

Despite these challenges, participants agreed that it is valuable for community members to be engaged. One respondent, for example, shared that CBOs can help government hold themselves accountable to their actions. To that end, a number of different concrete strategies emerged for ways to address challenges and engage communities meaningfully and authentically. One point of agreement across groups was the importance of evaluation. Government actors and community representatives framed evaluation as a critical means of tracking resource allocation, service delivery, and the overall impact of the declaration on people’s lived experiences. In addition, to address concerns about performative action or short-term efforts, participants suggested that each department should have a community engagement policy and invest adequate resources to ensure that engagement work continues even when people leave or relationships change.

Community representatives also spoke of the need for champions in government and called for a “cultural shift” to ensure that the government sees the community as experts and that the most directly impacted people are centered in all of their efforts. Community participants suggested “rules of engagement” to ensure that interactions with government were not patronizing. Conversely, government actors called on CBOs to be involved in the democratic process at the county level.



Media Analysis Results: News about Declarations of Racism as a Public Health Issue

In this analysis, we examined news coverage about declarations from across the country, focusing on how community voices and perspectives appeared. News narratives are important because they provide a window into the public discussion around a range of issues and help shape the policy agenda.

Our analysis (now undergoing peer review), revealed that though declarations about racism as a public health crisis regularly appeared in news coverage following the events of June 2020, the role of community leaders in drafting or enacting declarations was less visible. Government was a predominant part of the narrative, appearing in almost all of the stories while community voices appeared in only a quarter of news articles.



RECOMMENDATIONS & REFLECTIONS

This exploratory research project provides insight into community involvement in declarations that have named racism as a public health crisis. Some CBOs shared that they would have been interested in collaborating with government if a variety of conditions were met, including assurance that the declarations would lead to tangible action and a commitment to making the collaborative relationship meaningful, reciprocal, and nonperformative. Despite this exclusion, across our surveys and interviews, both government and CBOs underscored the importance of authentic community engagement and shared recommendations on how to address the barriers.

Limitations of our study include our small sample size, the short time frame for our discussions, and our inability to meet in person. Given that our project was exploratory, we invite others to use it as inspiration for projects that could account for some of the limitations of our own.

Authentic community engagement	Infrastructure
Government should focus on building trust and partnerships and maximizing authentic community engagement.	Declarations should be accompanied by community-led and centered evaluations.
Government should redistribute power and opportunities to communities leading this work.	Government should have transparency around the measures they will use to hold themselves accountable to implement the declarations.
Government should pursue a culture shift so they honor communities as experts.	Government should have funding and resources to ensure that shared community ownership is possible over a sustained period.
Government should enact a community-engagement policy so their relationships are not only with particular people in their institution.	Government should keep the momentum around the declarations up by ensuring they have staff or an office to support implementation.

CBOs are advancing meaningful change for racial justice. They are critical partners and leaders in advancing racial equity. Community organizers and government employees have identified concrete recommendations to strengthen the infrastructure underlying their declarations to ensure accountability and effective outcomes. If taken seriously, these recommendations could support the opportunities for government entities to authentically share power with community organizers to accomplish shared goals of addressing racism as a public health crisis.



COMMUNITY-LED RACIAL JUSTICE ORGANIZING WINS: CASE EXAMPLES

Black Women for Wellness

Black Women for Wellness (BWW) envisions a future for Black women and girls where, in their full wellness, they use their power, beauty, and intelligence, to pursue and attain healthy lives and families. BWW builds and sustains healthy communities and, within them, empowers other women and girls to improve their own well-being.

BWW was awarded the LA2050 (a grant that supports social impact organizations that are making LA a more thriving and equitable region) to support its work around food access. It has partnered with Golden State Opportunity for that work and their initiative to enroll 25,000 people in CalFresh over the next five years.

InnerCity Struggle

InnerCity Struggle's mission is to build a powerful and influential movement of young people and families on the Eastside of Los Angeles to promote healthy, safe, and nonviolent communities.

It won tenant protections in the County of Los Angeles. It reduced the school police budget in the LA Unified School District and redirected the funds to support Black students and students of color. It fought for and won the reallocation of \$700 million into an LAUSD Student Equity Need Index.

RE-Center: Race & Equity in Education

Re-Center: Race and Equity in Education activates young people and adults across the country to drive transformative change toward racially just schools and communities.

It created youth equity squads who have leaned into and leveraged power to change their school district policies and practices around dress code, police in schools, and curriculum content.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

We invite you to reflect on the content of this brief by answering the questions below. We welcome you to share the questions and your responses with your community and colleagues.

General Reflection Questions

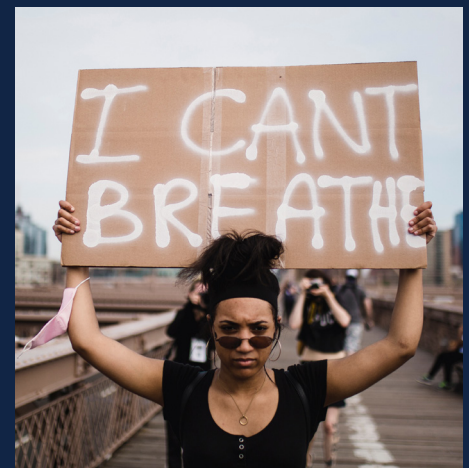
- Was a declaration of racism as a public health crisis passed in your community?
- What are your personal thoughts about the challenges and opportunities that exist with CBOs and government collaborating with each other?
- Beyond declarations, what efforts are you aware of that aim to address racism as a public health crisis? What is one small way that you can be in solidarity with these efforts?

Reflection Questions for Community

- Are you striking a balance between the urgency of racial justice organizing work and the need for rest and reflection? If so, how?
- Is there a dominant narrative in your community about the declarations (in the news, on social media, or more broadly about racism and racial justice)?
- What is that narrative? What, if anything, needs to be shifted in this narrative to support efforts for racial and health equity?

Reflection Questions for Government

- Are you meaningfully engaging community members in the process of creating declarations and/or policies?
- Have you reached out to community groups to speak about the declarations when approached by members of the media?



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

American Public Health Association Map: “Racism Is a Public Health Crisis”: <https://www.apha.org/topics-and-issues/health-equity/racism-and-health/racism-declarations>

Collaborative for Anti-Racism & Equity (CARE): <https://herenow.org/>

The Institute for Healing Justice and Equity’s Racism is a Public Health Crisis: Here’s How to Respond report (2020): <https://ihje.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Racism-is-a-Public-Health-Crisis.pdf>

The Network for Public Health Law’s “Racism as a Public Health Crisis” resources: <https://www.networkforphl.org/resources/topics/racism-as-a-public-health-crisis/>



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the following organizations for their help and efforts to make this work possible:



HEALTH
EQUITY
SOLUTIONS

**INNERCITY
STRUGGLE**



*Building a Movement
in the Eastside*

Support for this research was provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. *The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation.*

ABOUT THE PUBLISHERS



The Praxis Project (Praxis) is a nonprofit organization that collaborates with national, regional, state, and local partners to achieve health equity and justice. Since 2002, Praxis has partnered with community organizers, advocates, and public health experts to advance health justice and racial equity nationwide. Its mission is to build healthy communities by transforming the power relationships and structures that affect our lives and communities.

Learn more at thepraxisproject.org.



A program of the Public Health Institute, Berkeley Media Studies Group (BMSG) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to expanding advocates' ability to improve the systems and structures that determine health. BMSG conducts research to learn how the media characterize health issues. Through media advocacy training and consultation, it helps advocates harness lessons from that research and develop the skills they need to shape journalists' coverage of health issues so that it illuminates the need for policies that improve the places where people live, learn, work, and play.

Learn more at bmsg.org.

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