Moving from Theory to Practice: An Evaluative Assessment of Social Equity Approaches

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Introduction

For nearly half a century, social equity has been viewed as an integral component of public administration (PA) theory and practice. Although equality, at least rhetorically, has been a foundational tenet of the United States’ democratic system, it was not until the first Minnowbrook Conference in 1968 when social equity was introduced as a pillar and value of public administration (Frederickson, 2010). Since that time, there has been an increase of scholarly research focused on explaining social equity and its importance (Gooden, 2014; GAO, 2011; Pitts, 2011; Svara, Watt, & Takai, 2014). While the presence of social equity in PA literature has increased, there remains an inconsistent understanding of what social equity truly encompasses, as well as a long-term commitment to address equity issues in practice. The lack of a generally accepted definition of social equity becomes problematic for practitioners and serves as a challenge for public administration as a field. This challenge is exemplified in the field’s seemingly slow progression to identify methods to appropriately measure social equity.

Many organizations do not promote equity as a value for meaningful consideration or measurement, which decreases the professional impetus of practitioners to acknowledge equity issues for underserved populations. Public institutions and public administrators need to be aware of inequities and how they are perpetuated across demographic groups in order to minimize incidences of discrimination, marginalization, and disparity. The development of a comprehensive and inclusive response from public administration helps to moves the field beyond a passive acknowledgement that social equity is important to a proactive investment in infrastructure and training in order to improve quality of life outcomes for underserved
populations. Achieving social equity requires more than an agreed upon operational definition and the identification of appropriate measurement tools. Courageous leaders who are willing to prioritize social equity outcomes through investments in infrastructure and human capital are also needed if discrimination, marginalization, and disparity will ever cease to exist for underrepresented groups.

Social equity indicators often fall behind, in large margins, to effectiveness and efficiency, even when included in performance measurement (Charbonneau, Riccucci, Van Ryzin & Holzer, 2009; Charbonneau & Riccucci, 2008). The lack of a universal definition and a clear method for measuring social equity leaves administrators without an operational guide for assessment. As a result, administrators are tasked with implementing programs and policies that positively impact social equity, oftentimes without a collective understanding of where exactly to focus or how to effectively measure. This juxtaposition of expectation and reality creates a contemporaneous issue: how do public administrators meaningfully assess social equity?

Pitts (2011) called upon PA scholars to supplement existing normative discussions on social equity with empirical research in order to create “the knowledge that policy makers need to make policies and programs more effective at eliminating inequities” (p. i79). Although existing social equity scholarship espouses the importance and validity of social equity in programs, policies and organizations, very little evaluates the tools that can be used to improve social equity outcomes (Pitts, 2011; Collins & Gerber, 2008; Charbonneau & Riccucci, 2008; Svara & Brunet, 2004, Johnson & Svara, 2011). As there is no universal social equity measurement infrastructure (e.g. specific indicators, tools, frameworks), as with effectiveness,
efficiency, or economy, organizations are left to conceptualize, operationalize, and evaluate social equity performance without the knowledge and skills necessary for meaningful, rather than haphazard implementation and assessment. The implication of social inequity and the consequences of inaction are too great to continue to be ignored. A real commitment is needed to not only identify undue burdens, but also to assess organizational practices, policy outcomes, and administrative actions to improve the quality of life for residents.

This report seeks to achieve several goals. First, the authors create an operational definition of social equity with the aim of identifying accepted variables for the measurement of discrimination, marginalization, and disparity. Second, we identify a decision-making framework and criteria to assist in prioritizing social equity. Thirdly, we classify various approaches community and government organizations and utilize to support social equity measurement and evaluation. Finally, the authors offer strategies for local and government organizations to exceed the low standards for social equity measurement.

The discussion begins with the evolution of social equity definitions and presents a new operationalized definition. An operationalized definition aids in the development of meaningful measures. Next, we explore the barriers and benefits to performance measurement in general, and social equity measurement, specifically. We then present a Model of Social Equity that, through the evaluation of existing practices, proposes a categorization of the least to most comprehensive approaches to social equity measurement. Through this evaluation, the researchers are able to identify replicable approaches for social equity measurement. The report concludes with future considerations for the meaningful measurement of social equity and recommendations for how administrations can engage in such endeavors.
Defining social equity

Social equity is defined in varying ways. Shafritz and Russell (2005) define social equity as “fairness in the delivery of public services; it is egalitarianism in action – the principle that each citizen, regardless of economic resources or personal traits, deserve and has a right to be given equal treatment by the political system” (p. 434). In 2013, the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) revised its Code of Ethics and included a statement on “strengthening social equity.” Ideally members of ASPA will commit themselves to strengthening social equity by treating “all persons with fairness, justice, and equality and respect individual differences, rights, and freedoms. Promote affirmative action and other initiatives to reduce unfairness, injustice, and inequality in society” (ASPA, 2013, para 7). While Shafritz and Russell and ASPA offer statements that connect to issues of fairness and justice, they are also grounded within notions of equality and equal distribution. Equality, in certain contexts is considered an aspect of social equity. Yet, a distributional approach to justice that is based on equality, rather than equity, presumes equal footing. Based on this assumption everyone originates from the same starting point. Existing inequities in the United States in public education, criminal justice, healthcare, among other areas, exemplify systemic injustices that result in disproportionate outcomes. A deeper examination of race, class, and gender experiences, within these and other areas, reveal consistent patterns of neglect and inaction by public institutions and administrators to address the differential realities for underserved groups. In these examples, equal treatment or equal distribution, would only exacerbate disparities rather than work to eradicate them.

The National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) (2000), defined social equity
The fair, just and equitable management of all institutions serving the public directly or by contract; the fair, just and equitable distribution of public services and implementation of public policy; and the commitment to promote fairness, justice, and equity in the formation of public policy.

Woolridge and Gooden (2009) assert, “the essence of social equity actively considers how fairly administrators, systems, and policies operate when delivering public goods and services” (p. 223). Johnson and Svara (2011) offer a definition suggesting that

social equity is the active commitment to fairness, justice, and equality in the formulation of public policy, distribution of public services, implementation of public policy, and management of all institutions serving the public directly or by contract.

Public administrators, including all persons involved in public governance, should seek to prevent and reduce inequality, unfairness, and injustice based on significant social characteristics and to promote greater equality in access to services, procedural fairness, quality of services, and social outcomes. Public administration should empower the participation of all persons in the political process and support the exercise of constructive personal choice (p. 282).

These definitions move beyond the “starting point” assumption and focus on equity (rather than equality). They also incorporate, as does the ASPA principle, the ideal of fairness. Theoretically, these definitions provide insight into understanding the concept of social equity and the impact of inequitable practices, however they are limited in their practical application. The term “fairness” is subjective. What may seem fair to one administrator in one context may
not to another administrator in a different context. Therefore, measuring fairness becomes a challenge.

According to Dubnick and Frederickson (2010), fairness issues are “laden with accountability questions” (p. i147). Consequently, administrators struggle with equitable application, particularly given limited resources and time (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). Discussions of fairness often relate to policy implementation and individual treatment i.e. whether a policy is fair in its application, intent, and impact or if a person perceives to be treated fairly. Fairness is subjective in its measurability as it can be viewed differently in different contexts. Definitions, therefore, that include subjective concepts limit the ability of administrators and researchers to operationalize and measure social equity. Explanatory discussions of the aforementioned definitions may offer more insight into the measurement of social equity (see Johnson and Svara, 2011, Gooden, 2015), but the definitions themselves do not explicitly incorporate measureable concepts.

The existing body of social equity research further complicates the issue of creating an operational definition of social equity. Pitts (2011) argues, “much of the research over the past 20 years has become complacent in viewing social equity as part of an ambiguous cluster of concepts that do not need to be distinguished from one another” (p. i78). Public administration scholars have neglected to dedicate ample research focused on distinguishing social equity from diversity, cultural competence, and representation (Pitts, 2011). While related, these concepts represent overlapping ideals however; cultural competency, diversity, and social equity are almost always linked and used interchangeably (Lopez-Littleton & Blessett, 2015).
The lack of distinction between the aforementioned concepts contributes to imprecise conceptualization and difficulties in the empirical measurement of social equity.

Social equity reflects activities designed to enhance the political power and economic well-being of disadvantaged populations (Frederickson, 2010), by redressing injustices and remediating damages that were previously incurred, by fully incorporating all segments of the community in the political process, and by establishing measures to prevent future inequities from occurring (Johnson & Svara, 2011). Therefore, it is the combination of these collective actions that can mitigate the marginalizing effects policy decisions, inadequate service delivery, and a lack of engagement has had with underrepresented constituents. The ability of public administrators to effectively address inequity requires not only a nuanced understanding of historical, institutional, and structural contexts but also the ability to empirically measure and understand how a policy limits disparities or supports the status quo. A real commitment to social equity requires assessing the pervasiveness of disparities, as it exists across any and all marginalized groups, and implementing an intervention. The fundamental starting point therefore for meaningful measurement is grounded within a responsibility to advance equity through the identification and remediation of disparity.

Figure 1. Relationship of Social Equity Definition, Conceptualization, and Measures
Figure 1. Relationship chart illustrating the importance of an operational definition in the assessment of social equity.

“Measurements begin with operational definitions. Operational definitions are instructions or descriptions of sets of actions or operations an investigator can follow exactly, designed to link concepts to magnitudes of the world” (Bowen & Bowen, 1999, p. 53).

Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between a conceptual and operational definition and the measurement of social equity. A universal definition must aid in the empirical measurement of the impact policies and initiatives have on reducing or advancing disparity, otherwise, public administrators will be faced with the challenge of assessing strategies without an adequate way to determine if social equity outcomes have improved. The definitions presented above represent an evolution of the field’s understanding of social equity. Each iteration is more insightful and inclusive of the factors related to social equity, yet they do not meet Bowen and Bowen’s (1999) criteria as operational definitions. Refining how administrators understand and measure social equity comes with an evolved definition of the concept. We offer the following
operational definition that incorporates terms that aid in the development of social equity measures:

*Social equity, in public administration, refers to policy formulation and implementation, public management practices, the provision of public goods and services, and administrator/resident interactions that reduce (and ultimately eliminate) disparity, marginalization, and discrimination while increasing social and political inclusion.*

This definition intentionally avoids terms that are difficult to measure like “fairness” and does not support an ideology grounded within equality. It does, however, incorporate measureable concepts like disparity, discrimination, marginalization, and inclusion. When assessed, these concepts aid agencies and administrators in the determination of policy, program, behavioral and organizational impact as it relates to issues of equity.

**Why we measure social equity**

**The importance of measurement**

Extensive work has been dedicated to defining social equity and describing when it does and does not exist, there has, however, been a slower progression toward its conceptualization and measurement. Gooden and Portillo (2011) substantiate this point by arguing that the advancement of social equity in public administration scholarship and practice would be enhanced by “the need for conceptual clarity of the term social equity, the need for increased attention to social equity in the public administration curriculum, and the need for further methodological development in social equity research” (p. i63). Without such holistic consideration, the operationalization and measurement of social equity will continue to be piecemeal across the spectrum of scholarly research, pedagogy, and practice. Ultimately,
impeding administrators from understanding and effectively measuring social equity.

Frederickson argued, “the growing acceptance of social equity in public administration over the past thirty-five years has occurred during a time when the actual status of social equity in America has been in steady decline” (p. 33). Acceptance, in this case, refers to theoretical and conceptual considerations of social equity measurement, rather than its practical application in the profession. A lack of attention and commitment to addressing issues of inequity has created an environment where organizations symbolically emphasize social equity. In these cases, public administration talk social equity but does not walk the social equity walk.

Measuring the performance of government is more important now than perhaps at any other point in public administration’s history. Nearly 20 years ago, Perrin (1998) asserted that performance measurement is the new way of focusing on the results of public programs. Currently, public administration’s focus on measuring performance, in general, has not waned but grown, while challenges with the measurement of social equity persists.

Increasingly, all levels of government have aimed to improve engagement with the public by reporting on the services it delivers. Governments choose to utilize performance measures because its use often reflects the desire to find better ways to serve the public (Kelly and Swindell, 2002). Public reporting is an attempt by government to ensure residents are provided with access to information in a manner that is easily retrievable, accurate, and timely. An established body of literature demonstrates how measurement can improve organizational performance (Moxham, 2010; Ammons, 2007; De Lancer-Julnes, 2006; Berman, 2002; Kennerly and Neely, 2002) in areas including decision-making, service performance, and public accountability (Epstein, 1984). Additionally, the use of performance measures and the sharing
of outcomes helps to demonstrate the effectiveness of government work and the application of scientific methods "promises to further professionalize the field of public administration" (p. 611).

However, before reporting performance information to the public can occur an effective performance system must be implemented. The development and management of valuable performance measurement data is often difficult and may not simply be achieved by mimicking what another jurisdiction does. Charbonneau and Ricucci (2008) state that performance measurement seeks to achieve results based upon a development of quantifiable indicators to track program achievement and outcomes. As the primary focus of performance measurement is achieving specified goals, its success hinges on developing measurable indicators to track program performance and, ultimately, results (Callahan, 2007). Implementing performance measures that focus on outcomes, and not just on outputs, have the potential to simultaneously improve efficiency and equity. Thus, one goal of performance measurement is to establish a system that can measure the results of indicators and use the information to improve management and democratic governance (Yang and Hsieh, 2007; Moynihan, 2006; Hatry, 2002; Wholey, 1999).

Managers that choose to adopt and implement performance measures may do so for a variety of reasons. Poister (2003) states that performance measurement initiatives are utilized by management for monitoring and reporting, strategic planning, financial management, program management and evaluation, contract management, benchmarking, communicating with the public and managing performance. Public managers choose to utilize performance measures in a variety of ways including: formulating and justifying budget requests; making
internal resource-allocation decisions; examining in-depth performance issues; motivating personnel to make program improvements; formulating and monitoring contracts to grantees; supporting strategic planning; evaluating programs; communicating with the public to improve trust; and to provide improved services more efficiently (Hatry, 2007).

Overall, when considering the implementation of a performance measurement system key questions must be answered (Hatry, 2007). Administrators can ask questions like, *why are we developing performance measures, what measures do we want to track, how will we manage the information, and what do we ultimately wish to achieve?* Answers to these questions help determine the specific reason(s) the organization is interested in measuring performance. Once determined that social equity is the interested measure, administrations should then identify the indicators associated with determining whether the organization is meeting its goals and objectives. Similarly, if the organization is not achieving equitable outcomes the causes for failure should be explored. These are important considerations for administrators because the organization must determine who will collect the data and information, how it will be collected, and who conduct analysis, and how will the results be disseminated. Performance measures are seen as an instrument that can increase the accountability of public managers (Hatry, 2007) and address existing disparity.

**The impact of poor measurement**

Barriers to improve equity exist at varying levels. Amongst the challenges adversely impacting the successful implementation of performance measures are inconsistent awards systems, fragmentation of local government, and an absence of cost accounting systems (Ammons, 1985). Other obstacles such as a lack of creativity and innovation by public
managers, consideration of the interests and ideas of stakeholders, the high cost of implementation, and valid and reliable data and goal-congruence between the organization and the public have consistently been identified as challenges associated performance measurement (Holzer & Yang, 2006; De Lancer-Julnes, 2006; Coe, 2003; Hatry, 2002; Perrin, 1998; Ammons, 1985). Overcoming public-sector barriers to social equity measurement requires building support and collaboration from both organizational leaders and front-line employees (Holzer, 2004). To do so, the public manager must first facilitate the belief that a change is indeed needed to improve performance and reduce disparity. Therefore, social equity must be recognized as an organizational value and administrative priority.

An organization’s values are directly linked to its mission, which espouses the purpose and directives of the agency. As the ASPA Code of Ethics elevates social equity as a professional standard, organizations and administrators have a responsibility to raise issues of equity to a level of priority. The role of leadership to elevate social equity as a priority and support initiatives to reduce discrimination, marginalization, and disparity is key! Secondly, managers and front-line employees must be made aware of the advantages linked to equitable outcomes. In this case, the manager must be prepared to answer the question, in what ways does providing equitable services to constituents improve the quality of life of residents and enhance organizational effectiveness? Relatedly, the organization should be interested in increasing its understanding of what demonstrates success and shortcomings. However, even when considering the above, the complex structure of government organizations and its responsibility to multiple (internal and external) stakeholders adds to the complexity of social equity
measurement and may be a prevailing reason why equity measurement is not done consistently and with frequency.

Compounding to the complexity of social equity measurement (or the lack thereof) are factors related to race. Gooden (2014) poignantly argues that considerations of race within public administration lead to a “nervous area of government” (p. 4). A nervousness or fear that is not only problematic, but interferes with the daily task of public agencies to provide governmental services in ways that align with our guiding democratic principles as set forth in the U.S. Constitution (Gooden, 2014). For example, Ward and Rivera (2014) thoroughly examine organizations and public policies in the areas of housing, education, employment, criminal justice, and even religious institutions. Through their analysis, they identify key factors that were foundational in perpetuating the institutionalized racism that plagues public agencies, political rhetoric, and public discourse even now (Ward & Rivera, 2014). Policies like racially restrictive covenants, redlining, mortgage lending practices, and racial profiling severely contributed to the adverse realities people of color face in U.S. society. Such practices were sanctioned by the state and the use of administrative discretion resulted in burdensome and exclusionary practices on many individuals, families, and communities. Therefore, to discuss social inequity, discrimination, marginalization, or disparity without prioritizing the role of the state in sponsoring racist practices is disingenuous. Injustice needs to be situated within its proper context, if equity and inclusion are to ever be fully realized for all groups.

Equity measures must be clearly communicated from the organization’s leaders to key stakeholders, including elected officials with whom support for such an important initiative is vital. Understanding how organizations effectively or ineffectively provide public justice
requires an examination of the external environment, senior public administrators, public servants, and organizational values (Gooden, 2014). Ultimately, these areas contextualize the nervousness associated with attempts to achieve racial equity. Asking and answering questions implies a certain level of communication between front-line employees, managers, and decision-makers. Without explaining the benefits to personnel ultimately responsible for data collection, entry, and the management of statistics and information, it can be difficult to begin a performance measurement initiative, let alone a performance initiative that involves social equity. Poor communication can ultimately lead to top-down pressures from management thus resulting in decreased employee morale, poor service delivery, and distrust and apathy among citizens (Kim, 2005). Kim (2005) suggests tensions with internal stakeholders may arise as some organizations attempt to remain responsible to political and legal stakeholders outside the organization. To overcome this, managers can seek support by forming informal groups that discuss methods to improve social equity by surveying stakeholders and/or researching best-practiced examples from other local government agencies.

Representation, diversity, and cultural competence are a few objectives that managers must acknowledge and address if their goal is improved social equity. Van Wart (2004) asserts that values determine the very definition of productivity as well as the definition of an appropriate organizational culture, structure, and process. Thus, the implementation of a social equity measurement system must not only meet the goals of the organization; but also weigh the values and opinions of various stakeholders.

The unsuccessful implementation of performance measurement strategies often leads to negative resident perceptions of government. A lack of trust and decrease in public
participation are both potential results of an ineffective performance measurement strategy. Performance measurement, particularly those focused on issues of equity, can serve as an effective way to strengthen trust, if innovative measurement practices are developed to embrace factors such as organization-wide evaluation, institutional arrangements, resident involvement and enhanced communication strategies.

The current emphasis on performance measurement is the result of residents demanding that governments offer evidence of program and organizational effectiveness (Wholey and Newcomer, 1997). Since, an essential reason to measure performance is to make program improvements to public services (Hatry, 2007), it is vital that public organizations work to engage residents in measurement initiative(s). While it may be more difficult to ascertain the ideas of residents, it is nonetheless significant to include their perspectives when considering methods to improve organizational performance and program effectiveness. By not engaging resident constituents, government organizations run the risk of decreasing the willingness and interest of residents to be engaged in future participation efforts. Unproductive government performance adversely impacts resident trust in (Yang and Holzer, 2006) and willingness to engage with government. If methods to assess government performance are ineffective, public agencies will experience continued trends in dissatisfaction. Ultimately, government organizations must commit themselves to develop infrastructure designed to eliminate inequities.

Collectively, existing barriers have the potential to halt equity measurement initiatives prior to their start. These barriers are especially important to note when discussing a new program that is likely to cause a shift in organizational culture (e.g., assessing cultural
competency among employees). In this case, it is imperative for management to clearly define what it aims to accomplish, the overall benefits, and how staff and managers will contribute before beginning the process.

**Meaningful Social Equity**

**Using choice points**

Fostering equity, as a concept and empirical measure, is the responsibility of public servants and organizations. Individually, administrators must be cognizant of the various ways she or he can contribute to inequitable outcomes for traditionally marginalized groups. Decision-making processes are therefore; fundamental opportunities to influence outcomes toward achieve equity and decrease disparity. As society continues to evolve and change, social equity must be prioritized as a value along with the professional considerations of effectiveness, efficiency, and economy. It is important for administrators to embody the necessary knowledge, skills, and behaviors to elevate the importance of equity, foster a culturally competent workforce, and advance an idea of diversity and inclusion that encompasses thoughts, perspectives, and actions within and across public organizations (Blessett & Gaynor, 2017).

Choice points is a decision-making framework that can be used to advance equity and counteract the implicit and explicit biases that negatively shape decisions made within public bureaucracies. For example, conscious decision-making, in other words, can be likened to a fork in the road, whereby public administrators find themselves standing in the middle of the fork considering which path or decision to follow. The administrator must consider the impact of each decision, whether the decision fosters or obstructs inequity. The point at which the
administrator finds themselves needing to make a decision is a choice point. In this space, decision makers can critically evaluate their own biases, how those biases directly influence the existence of inequities, and how their decisions can shape equitable outcomes. Such an approach recognizes that each small choice may produce cumulative effects more profound than one large decision. Administrators must be equipped with the skills and abilities to interrogate the short and long-term consequences of public policy decisions or program objectives, particularly as disparities experienced by underserved groups can be exacerbated without such considerations.

The use of choice points promotes the institutionalization of equity within the administrative decision-making processes of public organizations because it raises the level of consciousness with respect to the needs of vulnerable groups (Blessett & Gaynor, 2017). The approach also brings mindfulness to decision-making, which elevates social equity into the forefront of administrative practices and behaviors. Broome and Murray (2002) state

We do not make decisions randomly, but as calculated responses to what we perceive as relevant conditions at the point of choice. Recognizing the close relationship between these conditions and our responses to them may be a step toward improving...decision-making (p. 76).

Keleher (2014) recognizes that to advance equity and decrease discriminatory treatment, individuals in organizations must focus on the following questions:

1) What are the decision-making points that affect outcomes?

2) What decisions/actions may be reinforcing the status quo, implicit bias, and
inequities?

3) What alternative action options could produce different outcomes?

4) Which actions will best advance equity and inclusion?

5) What reminders, supports, and accountability systems can be structured into routine practices to keep equity a high priority?

Embedding these questions into the administrative decision-making structure will initiate the process to institutionalize social equity within and across public organizations.

Criteria for social equity

In 2004, Svara and Brunet offered four criteria of social equity for systemically measuring its achievement. NAPA, in 2005, institutionalized these criteria as a way to measure social equity. Procedural fairness, quality, access, and outcomes were identified as specific social equity criteria administrators should consider when conducting an equity assessment.

Procedural fairness involves the examination of problems or issues related to procedural rights (due process), treatment in a procedural sense (equal protection), and the application of eligibility requirements within policies and programs (Johnson & Svara, 2011). In health care, disparity in procedural equity is evident in the “separate and unequal” (Smith 2005, as quoted in Hug, 2011) primary care provided to Blacks by managed care facilities. Within criminal justice, judicial systems have been used, as is the case with Ferguson, Missouri, to afford White offenders with opportunities to reduce or expunge minor violations, while simultaneously forcing Black offenders to be either financially responsible for their offenses, maneuver the court system, or both (DOJ, 2015).
Quality and process equity involves a “review of the level of consistency in the quality of existing services delivered to groups and individuals” (Johnson & Svara, 2011, p. 288). Perhaps the clearest example of inequities in quality is the Flint, Michigan water crisis. Due to city government’s decision to switch Flint’s water source and Michigan’s willful ignorance to remediate, Flint residents (61.5% of who are members of underrepresented racial/ethnic groups) now have public water with unsafe levels of lead and bacteria (Lin, Rutter, & Haeyoun, 2016). In this example, there is vast disparity in the quality of service offered to Flint as compared to other communities in Michigan.

Access or distributional equity involves a review of current policies, services, and practices to determine the level of access to services/benefits and an analysis of reasons for inequitable access. Johnson and Svara (2011) suggest “several alternative distributional principles” (p. 288) that can be used in promoting equity: simple equality (same level/amount of service), differentiated equality (based on higher need or selection criteria), targeted intervention (concentrated on a target area), redistribution (redress unequal resources), and distribution to achieve equality (equal results). Public education activists and scholars argue that every school-aged child in the United States has the right to access a quality public education. However, according to the U.S. Department of Education (2016), Black and Latino students have less access to high level math and science courses, gifted and talented programs, and advance placement courses. These data demonstrate that students of color, across the United States, do not have equitable access to high-level academic programs.

Finally, outcomes involve an examination of whether policies and programs have the same impact for all groups and individuals served (Svara and Burnet, 2004). Johnson and Svara
(2011) state “the analysis should include consideration of how social conditions and individual behavior affect outcomes or limit the impact of government services, that is, what underlying conditions contribute to the differences in outcomes?” (p. 288). Administrators must be critical in their assessment of equitable outcomes in such a way that they examine and understand the contexts that created (in)equitable outcomes. According to a 2006 report by United Cerebral Palsy and Children’s Rights, children with special needs (e.g. mental and behavioral health problems, fully handicapped, receiving special education services) experience disproportionately poorer outcomes while in the foster care system. Children who are differently abled “are less safe, and more likely to be maltreated, are more likely to be on psychotropic medications, have poorer educational experiences and outcomes, are more likely to be institutionalized, experience more placement instability, and have longer lengths of stay” (p. 5). Administrators should use equity assessments to review the policies, programs, and decisions that lead to disproportionate outcomes and work with organizational leaders to remedy them.

The consideration of history and context is equally as important as establishing clear methods to meaningfully measure social equity. Gooden (2015) argued, “social equity recognizes the historical, political, and economic influences that structurally influence the prospects for access, opportunity and outcomes” (p. 213). When assessing social equity, administrators must understand history and context and recognize how and in what ways public policies and administrative decisions have created and sustain discrimination and disparity (Johnson & Svara, 2011). Having a clear understanding of how social construction - the characterization of people and place based on arbitrary factors of worth and deservingness
(Schneider & Ingram, 1993, 1997) - influences implicit and explicit biases, and consequently, shapes the development of program and policy decisions to aid in the establishment of programs and practices that foster equity and reduce disparity. Without such an understanding, disparity persists.

For example, an assessment of access and distributional equity of public water in Flint, Michigan would determine that simple equality (equal receipt of services) has been achieved. In this case, all Michigan residents have equal access to public water services. Important to this assessment however, is history and context. Understanding how Flint’s twentieth century segregation and housing policies created marginalizing and socially exclusive environments that have shaped the current water crisis offers administrators a greater understanding of the role public administration has played in the persistence of inequities across time (Michigan, 2003; Highsmith, 2016). Without such a focus, an administrator may simply choose to acknowledge the achievement in equal service delivery or downplay the severity of the contaminated water issue.

Collectively, the four criteria aid in the measurement of organizational performance, program/policy effectiveness, and management strategies around the issues of disparity, marginalization, discrimination, and social and political inclusion. These criteria offer a solid foundation toward the development of specific indicators to initiate accurate measurement of social equity and align with the measureable concepts offered in the evolved definition of social equity.

Classifying Approaches in the Measurement of Social Equity
Approaches that seek to measure and evaluate social equity are vast in their breadth, depth, and scope. Some approaches identify specific indicators, while others are comprehensive in their consideration of contextual factors that may impact social equity. In this study, social equity approaches have been classified in ways that allow communities and local governments to fully consider the value social equity has on organizational operations, programs, and policies.

**Model of social equity**

The Model of Social Equity, developed for this study, recognizes the varying approaches for the measurement and evaluation of social equity and progresses from least to most comprehensive (see Figure 2). Therefore, given the context, priorities, and resources available to an organization or community, social equity can always be an achievable goal.

**Figure 2. Model of Social Equity**

Figure 2. The Model of Social Equity depicts a progression of approaches currently used for equity assessment. These approaches range from the least comprehensive – indicators to the most comprehensive – frameworks.
Indicators. GAO (2011) defines an indicator as “a quantitative measure that describes an economic, social, or environmental condition over time” (p. 57). Social equity indicators operationalize social equity and are considered to be the least comprehensive approach because they do not allow for an understanding of context (e.g. social, political, economic, or historical) or include feedback loops. For example, unemployment or poverty can be measured over time, but that measurement does not contextualize how or why change has occurred. In this regard, a focus on indicators is simply to measure the performance of key variables of interest. Measurement in any capacity is an important consideration for researchers and practitioners. Hu and Olshfski (2008) suggest the portion of the work that is measured is the portion of work that gets attended to; therefore, what we chose to measure illustrates what is valued in a particular situation.

As previously noted, social equity has not been prioritized in a comprehensive manner across local, state, and federal governments due to a lack of conceptual clarity and the use of inadequate measurement indicators to monitor and track success. Previously defined constructs of social equity (e.g. justice, fairness, equality) do not easily lend themselves to specific and measurable variables, which is partially why social equity has never been fully implemented across government organizations or programs. Identifying and measuring meaningful goals can aide public administrators in moving beyond a symbolic acknowledgement that recognizes social equity toward empowering the field to walk the social equity walk through real-world engagement. Such engagement recognizes that measuring social equity requires and awareness of the environmental context. Concepts like poverty, unemployment, or infant mortality are relatively stable and can be applied across a variety of
contexts, whereas terms such as sustainability, trust or success require a more in-depth consideration of the social, economic, cultural, and political contexts in order to develop meaningful indicators.

Although social equity is difficult to measure, it must be done if advancements are to be made with respect to social equity outcomes. Moving forward, more attention is needed to appropriately conceptualize and operationalize variables related to social equity because it is not a one-size-fits all approach. In all respects, accurate operationalization linking constructs to performance indicators is an important first step and requires a commitment of time and resources if progress is ever to be made. For example, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) (2011) conducted a study of national and international key indicators systems for the purposes of developing a key system for the United States. Such a comprehensive study was commissioned to investigate (1) how indicator systems were being used; (2) how indicator systems are designed and measured; (3) factors necessary to sustain a system; and (4) potential implications for the development and use of a U.S. system (GAO, 2011). Key indicator systems can help to “…identify a country’s significant challenges and opportunities, inform choices regarding the allocation of scarce public resources, assess whether solutions are working, and make comparisons within the country and to other countries” (GAO, 2011, p. 11).

The identification of disparities.

Despite being the least comprehensive approach to social equity measurement, the use of indicators are an important first step because it allows public organizations to identify existing disparities within communities and amongst stakeholder groups. If administrators do not collect data, how will organizations know to adjust the expectations, priorities, and
objectives of policies and programs? Minimally having baseline information about a population or community can illuminate the ways in which government officials can proceed to produce the best outcome for its constituents. During the Obama administration, the Department of Justice (DOJ) investigated several jurisdictions, most recently Ferguson, MO (2015), Baltimore, MD (2016), and Chicago, IL (2017), which revealed patterns of practice that violated the United States Constitution and its laws. These investigations specifically were in response to deadly interactions between Black residents and law enforcement officers. While many incidences were caught on camera, video evidence (body camera or cell phone) did not result in widespread accountability for harassment, brutality, or even death. In fact, video recordings authenticated realities long experienced by people of color. However, without uniform data collection about the pervasiveness of deadly interactions residents generally, but Black people specifically, have with law enforcement officers, it is difficult to discern the depth of disparity.

In response, websites like The Counted by the Guardian and Killed by Police developed infrastructure to keep a running tally of deadly resident-police interactions. The methodologies for each site differed, but similar data was collected such as: race, gender, age, state, and whether the person was armed or unarmed. These databases provided the public with data that was either not collected or shared publically by law enforcement agencies. The availability of such data resulted in widespread public outrage by communities of color and calls for accountability with respect to the implementation of just policing practices.

When indicators are used, disparities are known and strategies can be identified to reduce harm. The DOJ reports revealed that where data was collected, it was uncovered that police officers were engaged in discriminatory policing practices that resulted in
unconstitutional searches, seizures, and arrests, which disproportionately targeted people of color. For example, Blessett and Box (2016) examined the practices of Ferguson, Missouri’s City Hall, Police Department, and Municipal Courts in using the justice system as a revenue tool. In other words, Black residents were threatened with fines, fees, and jail time for minor offenses, resulting in dependency and financial indebtedness to local governments. Ultimately, the City of Ferguson used its Black residents as a revenue source to fund local government. Collectively, these actions affect the perception and legitimacy of law enforcement agencies to serve and protect all factions of the public. At the end of each investigation, the DOJ offered dozens of strategies to remediate wrongdoing and build bridges between communities of color and law enforcement agencies.

**An indicator system: Virginia Performs.**

Virginia Performs is a “performance leadership and accountability system” for the Commonwealth of Virginia that includes a system of “social indicators” designed to provide citizens and policymakers with a high-level assessment of Virginia’s conditions and progress for better strategic thinking and performance-driven decision making (GAO, 2011, p. 77). Virginia Performs was identified as a Comprehensive Key Indicator System by GAO and was highlighted in the case study profile part of a 2011 report. Virginia Performs (2017) aligns specific state government outcomes with larger statewide goals and partners with offices and agencies, such as the Governor of Virginia, the Virginia General Assembly, the Council on Virginia’s Future, the Department of Planning and Budget, and the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service. This is a collaborative endeavor with input from diverse stakeholders, who contribute to the strategic vision and priorities of the Commonwealth. The Virginia Performs (2017b) website identifies
indicators for several areas: Economy, Education, Health & Family, Public Safety, Natural Resources, Transportation, and Government & Citizens. Virginia Performs is a well-developed indicator system that also includes a scorecard that enables a quick overview of progress in each area by indicator (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Virginia Performs Scorecard

In the area of Government & Citizens, Virginia Performs identifies and defines a number of important variables designed to increase the social and political inclusion of its residents. For example, Virginia Performs (2017c) provides definitions and data sources for all indicator variables; definitions are listed below:

- Voting Age Population (VAP) is the estimated number of people 18 years of age or older in an area. The VAP estimate includes people who are ineligible to vote (e.g. non-
citizens, felons), but excludes resident voters living abroad, such as for military or work reasons.

- Citizen Voting Age Populations excludes non-citizens, but does include others who are ineligible to vote, such as felons whose voting rights have not been restored and persons who are incarcerated.

According to Virginia Performs (Virginia Performs, 2017c) “voter registration is a strong indicator of citizen commitment to their communities,” which is why the state wants an informed and engaged citizenry.

Using this data, graphs have been generated to compare voter participation by state and by region (Virginia Performs, 2017d). Although such voter information is important, a limitation of Virginia Performs is the lack of demographic data available related to voting registration. Virginia was one of the nine preclearance states identified in the Voting Rights Act of 1965. “Preclearance” refers to a mandate that requires states to seek federal approval before changes are made to voting procedures. This requirement was put in place based on the history of institutionalized disenfranchisement of Black voters by state legislatures. Blessett (2015) argues from 2001-2010, Virginia, Texas, and Louisiana adopted the largest number of disenfranchisement policies during the designated timeframe at 31, 27, and 22 respectively. While Virginia Performs can be applauded for its efforts to measure performance across a number of different social factors, without demographic considerations, specifically race, disparity will never be fully understood and therefore, social equity never meaningfully addressed. Additionally, without baseline demographic data with respect to voter registration and turnout, it is difficult to know if disparities exist or the pervasiveness of dissimilarity for
people trying to access the ballot by race, gender, or class differences. This is especially true for issues like voting, where systemic discrimination by administrators has resulted in Black communities being intentionally targeted for disenfranchisement.

The evolved definition of social equity argues for social equity to increase social and political inclusion, therefore race indicators are foundational variables of inquiry to effectively discern the level of disparity, marginalization, or discrimination that exists in a community. Disaggregated demographic data is needed to highlight factors that inhibit social and political inclusion and minimize social equity altogether. Ultimately, measurement is a process of observing and recording observations collected as part of a research effort (Trochim, 2001). Yet, effective measurement requires contextual considerations and opportunities to implement feedback, alongside well-developed indicators. It is important that the theoretical constructs of a policy or program are aligned with the observable indicators to measure performance. Virginia Performs reflects the conceptual clarity and use of indicators to collect and analyze state level performance measures. **Outcome assessments.** The next step in the progression of social equity measurement is the use of outcome assessments. Indicators enable organizations or communities to adequately measure performance, while outcome assessments are used to evaluate if equity goals have been achieved. In other words, outcome assessments do more than describe disparity, it also examines the causes and consequences of disparity in order to identify and advocate for the appropriate solutions to be pursued. Such tools are wide-ranging in scope and include a feedback loop, which allow communities and organizations to learn from previous activities in order to make the appropriate adjustments for action. Social equity assessment tools evaluate the progress of specific areas of interest, such as environmental
justice, policing, access to health care – issues that also reveal a racially disproportionate effect on communities of color.

The National Equity Atlas (2016d), is an assessment tool from Policy Link, is “...a comprehensive resource for data to track, measure, and make the case for inclusive growth in America’s regions, and states, and nationwide” (para 2). The Atlas contains data on demographic change, racial and economic inclusion, and the potential economic gains for racial equity for the largest 100 cities, largest 150 regions, all 50 states, and the United States as a whole (Policy Link, 2016d). Additionally, indicators are specifically identified for demographics, economic vitality, readiness, connectedness, and economic benefits (Policy Link, 2016e). Using data from the National Equity Atlas, Ross (2017) argued the aggregation of race specific data is important for local government officials and planners to understand, track, and address disparities in their communities. For example,

Poverty looks different for White people than for people of color because people of color as significantly more likely to live in high-poverty neighborhoods even if they are not poor. This not only highlights the long history of federally supported racial residential segregation but it also underscores the importance of informed data-driven planning and policymaking (Ross, 2017, para 3).

The development of race-based indicators to measure performance is essential for policy makers to understand and address the disparity that endures within racial and ethnic communities.

“An Equity Profile of New Orleans” is a recent study published by PolicyLink and the Program for Environmental and Regional Equity (PERE) at the University of Southern California.
The report uses the equity indicators framework for communities, as developed by PolicyLink and PERE, to understand and track the state of equity and equitable growth locally. Indicators and data sources are provided for the areas under investigation, such as: demographics, economic vitality, readiness, connectedness, and economic benefits (Langston, 2017). Data and analysis is presented to help local leaders develop solutions given the specific environmental context of their local community. The New Orleans Equity report is comprehensive and offers useful statistical analysis regarding the ways to achieve equitable outcomes across the community. In the implications part of the report, several observations are made to help organizations achieve equitable outcomes: grow good, accessible jobs that provide pathways to the middle class; increase the economic security and mobility of vulnerable families and workers; cultivate homegrown talent through a strong cradle-to-career pipeline; create healthy, opportunity-rich neighborhoods for all; build resilient connected infrastructure; increase access to high-quality; affordable homes and prevent displacement; and expand democracy and ensure just policing and court systems.

Given all of the information provided in this report, local stakeholders have an opportunity to develop meaningful interventions to address the various challenges identified. “Business, community, and political leaders can build momentum by working to connect communities of color to jobs, business opportunities, quality education, and career training” (Langston, 2017, p. 94). Over time, the baseline data can be used to compare and contrast progress made on any or all of the identified issues. According to this report, The Office of the Mayor has launched an #EquityNewOrleans strategy designed to embed equity throughout government (Langston, 2017). Therefore, whatever collaborative interventions developed by
local stakeholders can be assessed to determine if New Orleans is moving toward an equitable city.

The National Equity Atlas is cutting-edge because of its comprehensiveness, but also due to the explicit nature that race is addressed throughout the model. Race, unfortunately is inextricably tied to social inequity, as witnessed across any number of quality of life measures. Gooden (2014) concedes that structural racism (e.g. policies, cultural/norms, laws, social acceptance, and organizational practices) is at the core of racial inequities in the areas of health, education, criminal justice, economic well-being, housing, and the environment. Structural racism recognizes the collaborative and cooperative ways institutions work together to produce racial group disparities (Gooden, 2014). These collective actions demonstrate how government at all levels has contributed, unconsciously or consciously, to the disparity that exists and persists in racial and ethnic communities. Structural racism is, therefore, embedded in the practices of public institutions and reinforced by public administrators using public resources. Consequently, the lack of conceptual clarity and empirical quantification comes as no surprise considering that social equity, as a strategy, has yet to become a top priority in public administration. Arguably, the hesitation to support issues of equity relate to the creation of equal playing fields and vast benefits that empower communities of color at the expense of those privileged by the current context.

With respect to the evolved definition of social equity, Policy Link’s equity tools can be used to help reduce disparity, marginalization, and discrimination across a number of quality of life issues. PolicyLink’s work comprehensively seeks to improve the health outcomes, economic status, and infrastructure access for underrepresented communities, while attempting to
improve the quality of engagement that occurs between residents and the institutions that serve them, such as law enforcement agencies.

**Frameworks.** Social equity frameworks represent the most comprehensive aspect in the progression of social equity measurement. Frameworks represent a fully integrated approach to social equity measurement because it recognizes the importance of environmental context, understands the measurement conditions, sets policy priorities, builds assessment into policy proposals, requires administrative changes to sustain efforts and uses a feedback to adjust to policy and program outcomes. True change happens when all of these factors are acknowledged, considered, and unified as strategies to effect change.

The Sustainability Tools for Assessing & Rating (STAR) Communities Rating System (2017) is recognized as “the nation’s leading comprehensive framework and certification program for evaluating local sustainability, encompassing economic, environmental, and social performance measures” (para 1). STAR Communities empower local governments to determine their current level of sustainability by setting targets and measuring progress along the way (STAR, 2017). Within the STAR Communities Rating System, there are eight goal areas of consideration with each having specific measurement indicators: Built Environment; Climate and Energy; Economy & Jobs; Education, Arts, & Community; Equity & Empowerment; Health & Safety; Natural Systems; and Innovation & Process. Each goal area is equally weighted at 100 points, with the exception of Education, Arts, & Community (70 points) and Innovation & Process (50 points). Indicators within each goal area also have a specific number of points associated with them, therefore, a community can strategically focus its efforts on objectives...
that offers the biggest return on investment (see Figure 6). Ultimately, communities want to score as close to the maximum of 720 points as possible.

Figure 6. STAR’s Objectives.

![Table of STAR Goals and Objectives](image)


STAR Communities offer two types of evaluation measures: the community-level outcomes and local actions. Community-level outcomes are measureable, contextual-level indicators that show community progress on a STAR goal area, while local actions focus on the steps taken to move toward achieving desired community-level outcomes, such as the range of decisions, investments, programs, plans, and codes a local community puts in place (STAR, 2017). While having goal areas and specific indicators for measurement is a wonderful first step...
in any evaluation program, the actions of the local actors are critical with respect to sustaining change over time. Therefore, STAR Communities also assigns a portion of the points within each category to those initiatives that focus on implementation-based actions – actions or activities that demonstrate a commitment to improvement and progress over time (STAR, 2015).

Additionally, STAR’s evaluation measures must meet the following criteria: relevant, feasible, timely, useful, systemic, reliable, and valid. As previously mentioned, the appropriate operationalization of variables is critically important to ensure performance is being measured accurately. Evaluation measures that meet STAR’s criteria helps communities be thoughtful, inclusive, and strategic about ways to improve for short- and long-term planning considerations. Overall, local officials are not left to figure out how STAR can be used in their communities because there is an abundance of resources available, such as advisory assistance, toolkits, case studies, and webinars.

Similar to the National Equity Atlas, STAR Communities has a specific focus on equity. Measurement indicators focus on civic engagement (15 points), civil and human rights (10 points), environmental justice (15 points), equitable services and access (20 points), human services (20 points), and poverty prevention and alleviation (20 points) (STAR, 2015). The last three objectives are worth the most points allowing communities to prioritize efforts in an attempt to secure the most points available for this goal area. Access is one of the 4 criteria for social equity with Equitable Services & Access specifically recognizing “...equitable access to foundational community assets within and between neighborhoods and populations” (STAR, 2015, p. 77) are important in the development of a sustainable community. For example, within this area communities should
demonstrate increased access and proximity by residents of diverse income levels and race/ethnicity to the following community facilities, services, and infrastructure: public transit facilities and service levels; public libraries; public schools; public spaces; healthful food; health and human services; digital access or high speed internet; urban try canopy; emergency response times (STAR, 2015, p. 84).

Low-income persons and families, along with racial and ethnic groups are oftentimes adversely impacted by not having access to quality services due to proximity or the lack of availability. Such issues compound disparity in ways that may be difficult to overcome. STAR Communities offers local officials suggestions for a variety of actions that can mitigate disparity and increase equitable access and empowerment for all residents. Recommendations include, constructing new facilities and infrastructure to reduce existing disparities, providing equity and diversity training for local government staff, and adopting an equity plan that establishes a clear commitment to equity in local government decision-making, activities, and investments (STAR, 2015).

Social equity indicators and assessment tools allow organizations and communities to essentially pick and choose where they want to focus their attention. STAR Communities, on the other hand, is a comprehensive and integrated approach that requires communities (e.g. town, city, or county governments) to fully commit to all aspects of the program if benefits are to be gained. An additional benefit to participation in the program is the STAR Certification, which demonstrates that a community has implemented credible and transparent progress toward the sustainability goals outlined by the STAR Community Rating System (STAR, 2017b). As of 2017, there are more than 40 communities across the U.S. with STAR Certification: 29
communities with a 3-STAR certification level (200-399 points); 24 communities with a 4-STAR certification (400-599 points); and 4 communities with a 5-STAR certification (600+ points) (STAR, 2017c). Ultimately, STAR Communities represents a comprehensive model that enables measurement, analysis and evaluation, which empowers local governments to enact policies and protocols to achieve long-term change. Communities committed to the STAR Communities Framework will arguably decrease disparity, marginalization, and discrimination, thus consequently increasing social and political inclusion of underrepresented groups.

The City of Seattle has been identified as an exemplar with respect to how it has integrated an equity lens to its mission in serving its residents. “The Seattle Race and Social Justice Initiative (RSJI) is a citywide effort to end institutionalized racism and race-based disparity in City government” (as quoted in Gooden, 2014, p. 79). RSJI has been in existence for over ten-years and has worked diligently to bring about systemic change in the city. In 2014, Seattle’s Mayor signed an executive order affirming and expanding RSJI, which will require City staff to establish new goals, track outcomes over time, and report on the City’s progress (RSJI, 2015). Seattle’s success stems from an understanding that institutional racism and race-based disparity are not quick fixes, but rather require thoughtful action and a long-term commitment to alleviate the inequities that exist throughout the city. This approach recognizes that such institutionalized discrimination did not happen over night and will require time, resources, and energy to undo the systemic injustice that have burdened communities of color for generations. Oftentimes, communities want to jump into solutions without doing the very difficult work to connect past (institutional and administrative) practices to contemporary forms of marginalization, disenfranchisement, and disparity. An interrogation of policy, practices, belief
systems, and bias (conscious and unconscious) are key factors to move toward equitable outcomes in local government.

For example, the City of Seattle explicitly acknowledged the role institutional racism in creating and perpetuating disparity; citywide trainings on race and racism were instituted; agency plans were updated to reflect a race conscious lens; and a major publicity effort ensued to inform the public of new initiatives, programs, and policies designed to reduce inequity in the city (Gooden, 2014). Thirty-seven listening sessions with City employees and community members were conducted to learn about the racial equity issues that were most pressing for people and to encourage ideas for the best way RSJI should address them (RSJI, 2015b). Lessons learned and strategic steps forward suggested for RSJI included, but were not limited to: ensuring racial equity in City programs and services to make tangible differences in people’s lives; working with community-based organizations to support the movement to end structural racism; and helping to lead regional and national networks for racial equity (RSJI, 2015b).

Seattle’s approach toward extending equity has resulted in a 5-star rating from the STAR Communities Framework – recognition shared with only 3 other cities.

The progression of social equity measurement is an evolution of the least to most comprehensive approaches. Indicators operationalize social equity, but does not offer context to consider the impact of measurement. Outcome assessments evaluate the progress of social equity measurement because it not only recognizes context, but makes adjustments based on feedback that is tracked over time. Finally, frameworks are the most comprehensive because of its focus on the use of indicators and its systemic data collection processes. Additionally, there is a focus on building relationships, engaging stakeholders, and creating actionable plans for
policymakers and administrators for accountability. The STAR Communities Framework is definitely an overwhelming process if one looks at the program in its entirety. However, incremental approaches to equity can help improve opportunities for success. As mentioned, Seattle’s Racial and Social Justice Initiative has been on-going for over ten years, which demonstrates a full commitment by community leaders to create a more equitable city, thus serving as models for its regional neighbors and the nation as a whole. If social equity is to ever be achieved, it needs champions who are committed to the process for the long haul.

**Social Equity Resources**

Social equity repositories are think tanks and research consortia designed to gather information and offer best practices for social equity measurement. Repositories are resources for communities and local governments interested in learning about social equity, becoming social equity conscious, and developing indicators and performance measurement tools. Within this context, repositories cultivate collaborative relationships amongst communities and local governments interested in various topics across any number of areas, including social equity. Several useful social equity resources are highlighted in this section.

The Community Indicators Consortium (CIC) (2017) is classified as a repository because it recognizes that the development of performance indicators is not a one size fits all approach and works with communities to develop indicators and measure performance. “The Community Indicators Consortium advances and supports the development, availability and effective use of community indicators for making measurable and sustainable improvements in quality of community life” (CIC, 2017b, para 4). While CIC does not develop measures, it has created a collaborative environment where community-based practitioners, academicians, planners, civic
leaders, community leaders, and many other stakeholders are able to engage with each other to brainstorm and develop best practice strategies and indicators to improve community outcomes. CIC provides webinars, offers consulting services, and has supplemental resources available to help communities develop sound indicators to accurately measure performance.

CIC has a resource page that is an accumulation of all of the Indicator Projects submitted to the site. Information is available by geographic location and issue area. Users are also able to disaggregate projects that are still active or have been completed. Collectively, these reports enable communities to identify best practices, consult with practitioners and community leaders about challenges and successes of their respective projects, and ultimately build relationships and share resources related to their specific areas of interest. The aforementioned Virginia Performs is one of the Indicators Projects recognized on the CIC website.

The Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society is a repository of information grounded in a belief that U.S. democracy is in need of a social compact based on a core set of inclusive values (Haas, n.d.). Furthermore,

The compact recognizes that we may have many different strategies for achieving our goals, but we are united by common values that guide our actions. The values in this compact are nonpartisan and reflect our grounding in a morality that recognizes the worth of all people. We believe these values are central to any legitimate democratic government (Haas, n.d., para 3).

Housed at the University of California Berkeley (UC Berkeley), the Haas Institute is a hub for engaged scholars, researchers, and community partners working to advance belonging for all members of society (Haas, n.d.). This work is conducted across 6 faculty research clusters
(aligned along demographic factors, such as a race, religion, disability, and LGBTQ identity) and 11 areas of work including, but not limited to the: Inclusiveness Index, Racial Politics Project, Global Justice, and an Equity Metrics (Haas, n.d.b).

The Equity Metric, for example, uses research-based methodologies to investigate the intersection of space and racial/social inequities, develop diagnostic tools and other measurement indicators to understand “othering,” and provide policy recommendations to improve structures and institutions to reduce marginalities and improve inclusion and opportunities for all (Haas, n.d.c). Opportunity Mapping 2.0, the Inclusiveness Index, and Equity Indices Research are overarching projects within the Equity Metric designed to enhance the collective understanding of inequity using maps, indicators, and research focused on understanding and contextualizing equity and well-being.

The explicit and crosscutting focus on demographic issues and policy, engagement, and inclusion is important. The Inclusiveness Index is an annual publication, which includes a 42-page index of maps and infographics, designed to capture the degree of group-based inclusion and marginality experienced across the world and in the United States (Haas, n.d.d). The goal of the Inclusiveness Index initiative is to identify policies, interventions, and other factors that have proven to be effective at ameliorating marginality and promoting inclusivity, belonging, and equity (Menendian, Elsheikh, & Gambhir, 2016). Within the U.S., indicators focus on areas such as income inequity, political representation, incarceration, and anti-discrimination laws (see Figure 4). While Figure 4 does not have measures for each of the areas identified, it is a good starting point to begin linking data points with relevant data sources for equity considerations.
The Haas Institute has a plethora of resources available for organizations and communities interested in issues specific to equity. The Institutes affiliation with UC Berkeley ensures that the publications, presentations, reports, and webinars offer insight grounded within current research on equity and inclusion.

The Community Indicators Consortium and the Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society are both examples of repositories. The scope, breadth, and depth of these approaches to social equity vary. It should be understood that not all resources will address all aspects of marginalization that exists in a community. The Haas Institute is deeply focused on equity issues.
across all underrepresented groups and therefore, race consciousness is also understood as a key factor in minimizing the “othering” and the marginality experienced by underrepresented groups, globally and in the United States. Given the focus and tools of the Haas Institute, it has the ability to increase social equity through increased social and political inclusion, which contributes to a reduction in discrimination, marginalization, and disparity. Social equity considerations with respect to political and social inclusion are indirect considerations for CIC. In this regard, the ability to decrease marginalization, disparity, and discrimination is possible, but requires thoughtful engagement by practitioners to specifically address social equity. Such actions could be instigated by the specific areas of focus, the types of indicators identified or developed, and the conscious approach to address inequity, as it exists for underrepresented groups. Although CIC does not specifically focus on issues of race, it is still a useful resource for communities and organizations interested in performance measurement. The Communities of Practice facilitated by CIC enables groups to interact, collaborate, and learn from each other’s successes and failures. Both repositories have strengths and weaknesses given the needs, priorities, and resources available to create indicators and measure performance. Performance measurement, generally, and social equity, specifically, is not a one-size-fits all approach. Consequently, it is important for communities and organizations to be conscious consumers of the resources and tools at their disposal.

Policy Link (2016) is a “national research and action institution advancing economic and social equity by Lifting Up What Works” (para 1). Specifically, Policy Link acknowledges that those closest to the problem are central to finding solutions; therefore the wisdom, voice, and experience of local residents and organizations are foundational to their work (Policy Link,
By Lifting Up What Works, Policy Link focuses its attention on how people use local, state and federal policies to create conditions that benefit everyone. As a result, Policy Link’s work is grounded in the conviction that equity – just and fair inclusion – must drive all policy decisions (Policy Link, 2016). Policy Link is diverse in its approach (e.g. research, engagement, and analysis), which enable organizations and communities to consider social equity across multiple areas of interest and types of strategies. Using Policy Link’s Getting Equity Advocacy Results (GEAR) (2016b) model, organizations and communities begin by building the base; naming and framing equity solutions; moving the equity proposal; and building, advancing, and defending strategies to address equity (see Figure 5). Equity work is complex and requires organizations and communities to thoughtfully consider the ways in which all the gears move together. Consequently, the development of appropriate measures and benchmarks enable organizations and communities to determine the progress of equity initiatives over time. This feedback loop is a critical component of social equity measurement.

Figure 5. Policy Link’s GEAR Model
Equity is an important consideration in all aspects of life. Interactions with the criminal justice system reveal a disproportionate impact for Black and Latino men, women, and children.

Positive interactions between communities and police are fundamentally important to the safety and security of residents, officers, and society at-large. In this view, Policy Link has a set of equity tools for Community-Centered Policing, which was inspired by the aftermath of Michael Brown’s death by, Darren Wilson, a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. Policy Link (2016c), along with the Center for Global Policy Solutions, and over 1,400 social justice leaders, congressional members, faith leaders, artists, and activists signed an open letter to President Obama, urging federal action through the Justice Department to improve police-community relationship through seven principles. The principles are: Ensure Transparency and
Accountability; Invest in Training; Ensure Diversity; Proactively Engage in Communities; Reject Militarization; Examine and Implement Good Models; and Implement Technology and Tools for Oversight. Collectively, they are designed to build mutual trust and respect, increase safety in communities, and minimize senseless killings and excessive use of force by police (Policy Link, 2016c). Subsequently, these principles represent sound areas for assessment as they are conceptually clear and appropriate indicators can be developed to monitor performance over time.

As per the evolved definition of social equity presented earlier, investing in training, rejecting militarization, and cultivating a diverse work force has the potential to reduce disparity, marginalization, and discrimination. Law enforcement agencies actively engage in communities through the implementation of new models of policing and can increase the social and political inclusion of underrepresented groups in the development and implementation of new policies and programs. Ultimately, these principles work to improve the quality of service delivery in communities, which may produce relationships that are rooted in the reciprocity of trust and communication.

**Future Considerations**

This project thoroughly examined existing practices of social equity measurement by local government nonprofit organizations. The Model of Social Equity demonstrates the wide variety of assessment practices that are used to determine whether programs have made shifts to decrease disparity. Although varying in levels of comprehensiveness, each approach to assessing social equity includes clearly defined measures. As Bowen & Bowen (1999) surmised, “measurements begin with operational definitions” (p. 53). Imperative to the scholarship and
practice of social equity is an operational definition that has, embedded within it, clearly conceptualized concepts that can be used to aid in the development of specific indicators. The social equity definition presented at the beginning of this report - *policy formulation and implementation, public management practices, the provision of public goods and services, and administrator/resident interactions that reduce (and ultimately eliminate) disparity, marginalization, and discrimination while increasing social and political inclusion* – offers what Bowen and Bowen determine required for effective measurement. As shown in Figure 7, this operational definition presents disparity, marginalization, discrimination, and social and political inclusion as measureable concepts. When evaluating the impact an agency, its workforce, or associated programs and policies have had on social equity, administrators can use this definition to ground assessment measures within these concepts. The meaningful measurement of social equity requires the explicit connection between program goals, expected outcomes, and the operational definition.

Figure 7. Completed Relationship of Social Equity Definition, Conceptualization, and Measures
Figure 7. Relationship chart illustrating the importance of an operational definition in the assessment of social equity. The chart depicts how the evolved definition of social equity presents operationalized terms, which aids in the development of social equity measures.

The examination of current equity assessment practices confirms the overarching arguments presented within the body of social equity literature. The meaningful measurement of social equity is not widespread, in fact, it is quite limited to few organizations and governments. To effectively achieve meaningful social equity practices, administrators, in addition to the use of an operational definition, must consider historical and social context. Without the consideration of context, data collected lacks meaning. Historical and social context shapes assessment data and aids administrators in understanding what shifts in equity actually mean. An evaluation of data that excludes context is limited in its breadth and depth of understanding how and why change occurs. A contextual understanding of equity data strengthens administrators’ ability to make data-driven decisions that incorporate feedback loops.
Feedback rooted within the assessment process ensures the most comprehensive approach to social equity measurement. One of the most distinguishing aspects of Social Equity Frameworks is the inclusion of feedback systems that use equity data to impact future decisions and programs. To simply measure points of equity within a program, policy, or organization is not enough. The incorporation of feedback is what makes the assessment process an effective one. Using data to develop strategies, policies, programs, and internal procedures to support areas of growth and rectify areas of weakness ensures effective practices of social equity measurement.

Moreover, meaningful social equity measurement is not race blind. By most measures, race plays a significant role in degrees of disparity, marginalization, and inequity. A color-blind approach to social equity “fosters the systematic denial of racial subordination and the psychological repression of an individual’s recognition of that subordination, thereby allowing it to continue” (Gotanda, 2000, p. 35). By ignoring race in social equity measurement, administrators and organizations are consciously perpetuating systems and behaviors that sustain inequity and disparity. Vital to an effective measurement of social equity is an understanding of how public administrative actions impact different racial and ethnic groups. The most comprehensive approach to social equity measurement is missing the mark if it is not a race-conscious approach.

In order for the measurement of social equity to rise on the priority list of administrators specifically, and organizations generally, leaders of those organizations must develop a culture that values social equity (internally and externally). A culture that values issues of equity dedicates resources (human and financial) to develop sound strategies to
implement highly comprehensive approaches for social equity measurement and holds the entire organization accountable for the progression toward true social equity. Theoretically, accountability should be a significant component of social equity work. In order to ensure that administrators and organizations are effective in their social equity practices they should be held accountable for their behaviors and decisions and for program/policy outcomes. However, practically, accountability practices for social equity work is quite complicated. For equity to be an organizational priority, it must first be valued. Since the meaningful measurement of social equity is largely centered within value-based initiatives, organizations must embody an equity culture for accountability systems to work. If an organization’s culture does not value and consider issues of equity at the highest levels of priority, accountability structures (even if in place) would be symbolic at best and would not, necessarily be enforced, nor would equity practices would be more than superficial efforts designed to check off the equity box.

True social equity is reflected in the ideals of full social and political inclusion and the eradication of disparity, discrimination and marginalization of those most marginalized by public administration’s (in)actions and behaviors. It is only when equity is experienced by those who are most marginalized in U.S. society, that true social equity is achieved. For public organizations, the journey to true social equity begins with a strong commitment to the goal of promoting equity. Achieving social equity must be a collective effort of all individuals in the organization and be at the forefront of their actions. Most importantly, the journey towards achieving social equity embraces the development and implementation of policy, management, provision of goods and services, and behaviors that reduce disparity, marginalization, and discrimination and increase social and political inclusion. True social equity
can only be achieved, however, through the meaningful measurement of social equity. Once appropriate measures are identified, then determining the extent to which social equity is actually achieved, or not, will become easier to assess. This report serves to offer numerous approaches to understanding, measuring, and considering social equity.

References


