



Centering Race and Structural Racism in Immigration Policy Research

Considerations and Lessons from the Field

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The normalization of racist anti-immigrant rhetoric, racial profiling and detention of Latino residents, an epidemic of anti-Asian violence, and manifestations of anti-Blackness, such as recent expulsions of Haitian asylum seekers, are consonant with the racist historical legacy of US immigration policy. They spotlight the deep intersections between the US immigration system and racism—a reality that has been neglected in both policy and policy research circles.

This critical issue was explored in a September 2021 virtual workshop on centering race and structural racism in immigration policy research. The workshop was intended to sharpen our own understanding to inform our research and articulate gaps to support change in the field more broadly.

Before the workshop, we conducted a preliminary scan of recent policy research—research conducted at think tanks and policy-focused research institutes—to assess the extent of the gap in the policy research space and identify organizations that stood out for leadership in this area.¹ The scan demonstrated that the immigration policy research field is still in the early stages of analyzing the intersection between race and immigration, although some organizations and individuals stood out for their advanced work.

Workshop participants came from leading policy research and advocacy organizations that represent a variety of immigrant communities and experience researching topics related to this intersection. We intentionally kept the group small to facilitate a rich and open discussion, with the understanding that many additional perspectives and group identities are important for understanding the nuances of these complex issues (see box 1 for a list of workshop participants).

The workshop discussions focused on how race and structural racism influence the experiences of immigrants, *who* policy research has left out, and *which* policies and issues demand research attention. In addition, the workshop discussions focused on *how* immigration policy researchers can work with community partners and address data limitations to advance immigration research that meaningfully engages with issues related to race and structural racism.

BOX 1

Workshop Participants

We are grateful for the participation of, and the rich insights shared by, the following participants in the workshop:

- Shena Ashley, Urban Institute
- Hamutal Bernstein, Urban Institute
- Randy Capps, Migration Policy Institute (MPI)
- Marita Etcubañez, Asian Americans Advancing Justice (AAJC)
- Claudia Flores, Center for American Progress (CAP)
- Charles Kamasaki, UnidosUS
- Kica Matos, Vera Institute of Justice
- Sara McTarnaghan, Urban Institute
- Abraham Paulos, Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI)
- Sruti Suryanarayanan, South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT)
- Kim Tabari, University of Southern California (USC) Equity Research Institute (ERI)

Although participants had an opportunity to review this brief, it may not fully reflect all of their views.

Foregrounding race and racism in immigration research is a critical priority because the majority of immigrants in the US are people of color.² Conceptions of race intersect with the lived experiences of immigrant communities at multiple levels, from how people identify in relation to US racial categories to how their race is perceived or assigned by others to the power and access ascribed to those racial identities (López et al. 2018). Historical and structural racism have also shaped immigration policies and other policies that lead to disparities in outcomes. This is critical for understanding the experiences of all immigrants of color and their descendants, including Latino immigrants, whose identities have been racialized, as well as Black, Asian and Pacific Islander, Indigenous, and other immigrants who have received less attention in policy research but constitute a rising share of new immigrant arrivals.

Although cross-disciplinary academic literature on these issues has existed for decades (Aranda and Vaquera 2015; Armenta 2016; Asad and Clair 2018; Hamilton 2020; Ngai 2004; Provine and Doty 2011; Sáenz and Douglas 2015; Viruell-Fuentes, Miranda, and Abdulrahim 2012; Waters 1994), think

tanks and policy-focused research institutes, including our own, have lagged on integrating an explicit race lens in their work. Although some recent progress has been made and some attention has been paid to the issue, in general, research studies focus on reporting data by nativity status, language, or country or region of origin rather than reporting analysis or interpretation by race, and they have not addressed how policies and programs are shaped by racism. Racism and the connections between immigration status and race are often invisible in such work. Researchers can also lack awareness and understanding of how central race and racism are to the experiences of the communities they are studying and may not acknowledge the historical and persistent systemic factors tied to structural racism that underlie their findings. Although gaps in commonly used data sources—race data in immigration administrative data, immigration status in census data, and granularity on key groups—are a serious constraint, these challenges can be surmounted with creative efforts and with input from the communities that daily live at the intersection of racialized identity and immigration status.

The intentional, historically situated, nuanced treatment of race and racism in immigration policy research would shed light on racial disparities and equity problems that otherwise would remain unexamined. It would avoid homogenizing the diverse immigrant population in the US. And it could open new opportunities for connecting different movements and change the way immigration policy is discussed.

This brief provides key priorities and themes discussed during the workshop and identifies promising practices, ideas, and considerations for better addressing the intersection between immigration, race, and structural racism in a way that is grounded in community voices. Key takeaways include the following:

- Significant gaps exist in current policy research when it comes to recognizing the centrality of racism to immigration policy and to the experiences and outcomes of immigrants in the US, and in particular, the distinct racialized experiences of diverse segments of the immigrant population who have not received enough attention.
- Leaving race and racism out of immigration policy research is harmful because immigrants are then treated as a homogenous whole despite their racial diversity, key groups and issues are made invisible or obscured, and the structures and systems generating racialized outcomes are hidden. The data and evidence from research then misinform or leave unaddressed critical policy debates.
- Immigration policy researchers have a responsibility to intentionally address race and how structural racism shapes immigration policies and individual outcomes, and to highlight racial equity issues that may be hidden in standard data sources or ignored in policy debates. This includes foregrounding the racialized experiences of all immigrants who are people of color, paying special attention to anti-Black racism, highlighting connections between the immigration enforcement and criminal justice systems, and acknowledging the historical context of exclusionary immigration policies. Disaggregating data, being attentive to differences across places and communities, and avoiding narrow issue framing are key strategies for stronger research.

- To avoid perpetuating these blind spots, researchers can work to integrate immigrant community voices in the design, collection, interpretation, and communication of research through community partnerships that prioritize trust building, the valuing of community expertise, authenticity, ongoing relationships, early partner involvement, clear identification of success, and recognition of partner contributions.
- Research should make careful consideration of the limitations in commonly used data sources, such as administrative records and Census Bureau data, and collect complementary data to capture experiences and groups that would otherwise remain invisible with standard analytical approaches.
- Communication of research findings should be accessible to and target the communities directly affected by study topics and it should be done in collaboration with community partners.
- Several recommendations for the field to advance on these goals were identified through the workshops, including addressing gaps in data sources, building capacity for multilingual data collection, elevating immigration and language concerns in equity measures, analyzing structures in addition to individual outcomes, cultivating trained research teams, and creating more collaborative tables to set research agendas.

The shared interest, commitment, and urgency to understand and elevate the intersection of race, structural racism, and immigration was evident during the workshop. This initial set of discussions calls for additional and more in-depth conversations to explore specific policy areas, immigrant group experiences, data sources, and research strategies. Although it is not the intention or in the scope of this specific brief, actionable instructions to guide researchers seeking to do rigorous research centering race would also be valuable for future development. This brief, however exploratory, aims to contribute to the field by articulating challenges and insights and stimulating questions for policymakers, policy research organizations, philanthropies interested in supporting immigration research, and advocacy organizations that partner with researchers or conduct their own research.

Framing the Intersection between Race, Structural Racism, and Immigration in Policy Research

Policy research on immigration and immigrant integration frequently does not include explicit references to race or how structural racism shapes outcomes and experiences. Participants strongly agreed that researchers and policymakers have often failed to address race and structural racism, and many are advancing efforts within their organizations to bring more attention to these issues. The workshop elevated several justifications for, and benefits of, bringing more attention to the intersection between race, structural racism, and immigration in policy research.

Pursue research that is responsive to how people experience the intersection of race and immigration. First, and perhaps most critically, research should respond to the lived experiences of

immigrant groups during the process of migrating to the United States and building a life and community here. Participants emphasized how racism has historically shaped the US immigration system, both admissions and enforcement. In addition, immigrants' social and economic opportunities in the US vary by race, and more study is needed to understand the differences that racial groups experience based on their immigration status. One participant noted that in this context, we can understand racism as the single biggest barrier to integration for immigrant communities because it limits prospects for well-being and mobility and impacts not only the first generation, but also children and descendants born in the US.

Address gaps in immigration research that result from a failure to understand specific racialized experiences. By focusing on race and racism, immigration research will also be better positioned to address the gaps in research that have historically excluded or insufficiently studied segments of the immigrant population and left out critical voices, and thus potentially have led to a misunderstanding of the issues faced by immigrant communities. Historically, the field has focused a great deal on the experiences of Latinos, who make up almost half of US immigrants. Focusing primarily on this group, which is dominant numerically, risks homogenizing a diverse immigrant population and overgeneralizing the experiences of different immigrant groups. At the same time, the racialization and experiences of racism by Latino immigrants have also been insufficiently recognized and studied in immigration policy research (UnidosUS 2021). A growing body of work, often led or done in direct collaboration with advocacy groups, has aimed to shed light on the experiences of Black, South Asian,³ Indigenous, and other immigrants of color.

Be intentional about exploring the challenges that Black immigrants face in the US. Participants emphasized the experiences of Black immigrants given their exposure to structural racism in the US criminal justice system. Whereas there has been research on how Latino immigrants have been affected by the connection between the criminal justice system and the immigration enforcement system and the resulting "deportation pipeline," less attention has been paid to Black immigrants who are criminalized by a racially biased justice system. As one participant noted, Black immigrants integrate into "Black America" and "race is centered in [Black immigrants'] experience because of the carceral state in the US." The participant emphasized that entanglement with the criminal justice system creates fundamental barriers to citizenship and integration.

Explore the intersections of immigration and the criminal justice system more broadly, across diverse racial and ethnic immigrant groups. Several recent publications and blogs have addressed the intersections of the immigration enforcement system and the criminal justice system.⁴ For example, a recent South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT) report focused on South Asian, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, Middle Eastern, and Arab communities explored how the racial profiling of these communities by law enforcement further entrenches anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiment and sets a foundation for institutionalized discrimination against those communities (Modi 2018). Research from the Vera Institute of Justice has focused on how Arab American communities were affected by increased policing post-9/11 (Henderson et al. 2006). Research on racial profiling and entanglement in the immigration

enforcement system has spotlighted the racialized experiences of Latino communities (MALDEF, NDLOJ, and NHLA 2014).

Acknowledge the historical context of exclusionary policies. Another reason for elevating the intersection of race and immigration is to better understand the impact on immigration policies and regulations, as well as on safety net and other policies. It is important to acknowledge how racism and white supremacy have shaped our immigration system historically and to do contemporary analyses of immigration policy and the enforcement system itself. The history of immigration policy in the US has had a consistent thread of racial exclusion: from policies in the 1880s that excluded Chinese nationals to the national origins quotas of 1924, which were explicitly designed to exclude people based on their racial and ethnic background, to the enforcement-focused 1996 Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act and ongoing enforcement and deportation practices. Looking at the historical origins of a policy and identifying whether it was designed to produce inequitable outcomes was raised by a workshop participant as a key analytic step for researchers; this participant pointed out how historical scholarship on the racist motivations of the 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act played a key role in a recent court ruling on the unconstitutionality of a key enforcement policy criminalizing unauthorized entry after deportation.⁵

What's at Stake: Benefits and Potential Harms

Workshop participants agreed that policy research on immigration and immigrant integration must go further to include attention to race and structural racism because centering race and structural racism can help to identify shared solutions that move toward immigrant and racial justice.⁶ One challenge cited is the lack of a coherent narrative around race and immigration akin to the narrative of race and civil rights, which has led to less power and visibility, especially for Black, Asian, and Latino immigrants. Without explicit attention to race in immigration policy research, participants cautioned that certain groups and issues will continue to be made invisible and the structures and systems generating racialized outcomes will continue to be hidden.

Participants' views on gaps in recent policy research were consistent with findings from our scan. Many immigration policy analyses we reviewed did not engage with race at all. Publications that meaningfully addressed race fell into two categories: those that analyzed data about immigrants by race and, much less commonly, those that extended the analysis to discuss structural racism and/or racial equity.⁷ Publications that reported on outcomes by race typically highlighted racial disparities. Publications that analyzed structural racism or racial equity went further—they either contextualized the disadvantages or strengths of immigrants of color within the racist policies and practices that created them or they presented solutions with the explicit goal of racial equity.

Participants argued that policy research has an opportunity and responsibility to move from simply describing characteristics by race to engaging with structural racism and the policies and practices to address it. In recent publications reviewed in our scan, it was somewhat common to see data on immigrants by race and ethnicity, for example, via a specific focus on one racial or ethnic group or via comparison across groups. There was some attention given to unequal treatment by immigration laws

and policies through historical analysis of US immigration policy. Some publications discussed experiences with discrimination, the impact of discrimination on mental well-being, racial profiling in immigration enforcement, or racial and ethnic self-identification among immigrant communities. These analyses bring visibility to how race and racism influence immigrant experiences. There is an opportunity to deepen analysis on these and other issues.

However, workshop participants raised several potential harms or risks that research efforts seeking to center race and structural racism should consider. Several participants noted—especially for immigrant groups whose racial identity and vocabulary about race may be different in the United States versus in the context of their home country—that how people identify by race, their attitudes on racial justice, and their engagement in discussions on race or racism are complex. For example, one participant noted how structures of caste and colorism shape South Asians’ perspectives on racism. There was also concern about how attention to racial identity could lead to further divisiveness between groups rather than leading to coalition building among and between different immigrant groups. Several participants noted that to advance these dialogues it will be critical to acknowledge that the current system benefits some populations while it hurts others; for example, one participant reflected on colorism within the Latino community. Finally, participants cautioned that this line of inquiry is not new, and there is a cyclical nature to the policy and advocacy conversations on race and immigration. Whereas racism was previously emphasized within the immigrants’ rights field, the field shifted to avoiding it in the early 2000s because of prevailing norms, and now it has circled back into focus.

Partnering with community groups, advocates, and immigrant communities to design immigration research agendas that speak specifically to race and structural racism can help researchers understand the nuances of the potential benefits and harms of such work.

Forming a Future Research Agenda

Specific research agendas and questions of policy interest should be codeveloped between different constituent groups, including researchers and immigrant advocacy organizations and other groups led by or working with specific immigrant populations. Several general principles and ideas, however, were discussed by the workshop participants.

Disaggregate data. First, participants agreed that increased disaggregation of factors and outcomes of interest by race is critical to understanding trends, especially to highlight disparities for specific groups. This analysis is important for bringing visibility to differential experiences and outcomes for issues such as economic mobility, deportation, and pathways to citizenship. For example, the USC Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration (now the Equity Research Institute) focused on three main axes of immigrant integration in its 2012 *California Immigrant Integration Scorecard*: economic mobility, civic engagement, and warmth of welcome (Pastor, Ortiz, et al. 2012). One participant noted that for each of those pillars, an opportunity exists to add the layer of race and gender to analyze how different racial groups are affected and allow for detailed analysis of the well-being and trajectory of particular groups; this disaggregation is implemented in the National Equity Atlas⁸ from the USC Equity Research Institute (ERI) and PolicyLink, as well as the California Immigrant Data Portal.⁹ In the latter,

most of the indicators are disaggregated by race, ancestry, and immigration status, and often by gender. It is important to prioritize disaggregation by categories that are salient to people's self-identification—the categories they use to make sense of their identities—though these identities may not align with readily available data. For example, members of the Indo-Caribbean diaspora may identify as Black and South Asian but not Asian American. Similarly, people with Middle Eastern or North African origins may not find a racial category in current Census Bureau surveys that aligns with their racial identity (Kayyali 2013).

Be aware of differences across groups and places. Participants discussed the importance of being sensitive to variation across groups and places. One participant emphasized how geography in the US matters enormously, pointing out that on the West Coast the demographics of immigrant communities are disproportionately Latino and Asian, while the East Coast has more Black immigrants. Others shared their perspectives on their constituent groups and the challenge of misalignment between commonly used racial categories and self-identification by different groups. One participant emphasized the racialization of Latinos and the lack of understanding or appreciation of those processes. Another pointed out that South Asians may identify more by religion than by race and noted the complexities of discussing US notions of race and racism in South Asian communities. The participant emphasized that the “Asian” or “Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI)” category encompasses a vast array of experiences and identities and being specific about the group being discussed is critical to avoid inaccurate homogenizing. There are similar considerations for Black immigrants with African versus Caribbean origins. The insight that mainstream society treats Black immigrants first as Black, while it treats Asians and Latinos as immigrants (i.e., as “perpetual foreigners”) highlights both the shared and disparate experiences of race and racism across different immigrant groups.

Avoid relying on narrow issue framing. Participants also raised the importance of an asset-based lens in immigrant research (Pastor, Ito, et al. 2020). One participant emphasized the importance of understanding issues around family and peer resources and support in understanding immigrant families and immigrant integration. Another offered the example of the community cultural wealth frame from academic research (Yosso 2005). This idea was suggested as a counterpoint to the frequent focus on economics and the common policy research request to demonstrate the positive economic impact or contributions of immigration—although several participants noted the ongoing importance of such evidence for policy dialogues and audiences. Some participants cautioned that the economic contributions frame is a “slippery slope” because of the history of labor migration of people of color in the United States and the treatment of immigrants as a labor supply rather than through a rights-based framework.

Research Approaches and Methodological Considerations

To move the immigration research field toward stronger capacity to address these longstanding gaps, researchers can build on best practices from leaders in the field. Researchers should authentically partner with community voices and organizations to ensure work is grounded in community needs and lived experiences. Researchers must creatively engage in data collection, analysis, and communication of findings, and “be bolder about [their] hypotheses” to intentionally address race and racism in their immigration work.

Building Authentic Community Partnerships

One key strategy for researchers wanting to advance race-centered research is to engage in community partnerships to ensure that the voices of the community being researched are shaping the research questions, data collection process, interpretation of results, and dissemination (Sacha et al. 2013; Shakesprere et al. 2021). This engagement is important for effective research because many traditional research institutions are likely to have teams with relatively few people of color, and partnerships with communities can chart new research agendas that capture essential lived realities that may be overlooked if researchers remain in their “ivory towers.”

Workshop participants discussed prior experiences on both sides of such community partnerships—as both researchers and as community group members—and highlighted the following key considerations for effective partnerships:

- **Trust-building:** Researchers should bring an attitude of humility to community partnerships, and they should make an effort to leave their “ivory towers” and their comfortable work settings and be physically present in community spaces. To dispel mistrust, researchers should provide tangible benefits for immigrant communities through research, and they should acknowledge harms associated with prior research conducted. Researchers need to be attentive to the traumas experienced by the communities and avoid retraumatizing people in the process of conducting research.
- **Respect for community expertise:** It is critical for researchers to be humble and treat community voices as expert voices and sources of wisdom, rather than follow the traditional researcher/interviewee model. Their lived experiences provide valuable expertise that can and should inform research design and analysis as well as data collection.
- **Authenticity:** Researchers should bring their whole selves and their unique identities to conversations and exchanges with community partners. One participant emphasized how different personalities and knowledge bases can come together in an effective partnership, highlighting the value of authenticity and friendship in what can become enduring and meaningful relationships between collaborators.

- **Ongoing relationships:** “One-and-done” exchanges that can be seen as extractive of community knowledge or resources for the purposes of an individual project must be avoided. With genuine collaboration and fostering of relationships over an extended period, partnerships become fruitful and productive for all members. Participants emphasized that people appreciate genuine interest and collaboration, and they will continue ongoing partnerships and communication if care is given to cultivate relationships and make them productive—“do right by your partners” and they will reciprocate. One participant described ongoing relationships by which organizations reach out for data points when they need them for their own advocacy or organizing; and the researchers can reach out freely to learn about emerging issues and needs to inform new research efforts.
- **Integration of partner insights early in the research process:** It is important for community voices to inform the identification of research questions and research approaches—that they shape the research agenda and not just react to decisions already made by research teams. Several organizations highlighted the importance of integrating community voices at every stage of the research process, from the conception and design of the project to data collection and interpretation to dissemination.¹⁰ One organization shared how it has intentionally brought community voices and perspectives to researchers to ensure there is a feedback loop by which community perspectives shape the conception of research projects rather than merely being a sounding board, consumer, or disseminator of completed research products.
- **Clear identification of success for all partners:** Shared and aligned definitions of success are important to identify at the outset of a partnership. There should be discussions early on about what success looks like so that all partners get what they need and expect from the collaboration. Centering the community’s needs and hopes for the outcomes of the research is critical.
- **Recognition of contributions and sharing credit and visibility:** Partners must work together to fully acknowledge all partners’ contributions to research, both in providing appropriate financial support to community partners and in acknowledging ownership and credit in final products. It is crucial to honor people’s time through the payment of consulting fees, hiring, or other mechanisms to recognize and compensate people for their labor. One participant shared a disappointing experience when his organization’s key contributions to a piece of research were not acknowledged in the final product or in high-profile press coverage on the research findings. After that, the organization opted to take more of a lead role in dissemination and work with other partners that appreciated and acknowledged the organization’s role in research projects.

Several participants highlighted the value of shifting the research work directly into the hands of the community members and local community-based organizations that serve them and are closest to their needs and experiences. Several examples were discussed in which national research or advocacy organizations chose to decentralize research efforts to local community-based organizations. This included directly channeling research funding to local partners so they could implement research

themselves, rather than having a national partner lead all research efforts. The importance of funding getting to community partners and the role of philanthropy in ensuring this takes place were highlighted.

Building Research Teams

A key strategy to enhance capacity to effectively conduct race-conscious immigration research is to expand the diversity of research teams to include more researchers who have lived experiences in immigrant communities of color to reflect the enormous diversity of immigrant groups and experiences in the US. A parallel strategy is to invest in training and capacity building of research teams, which is needed for them to engage effectively in race-conscious work. One organization described how it is building a dedicated Race and Justice team and how it is seeing value in bringing researchers together on crosscutting topics. This organization highlighted how given the intersectionality of the issues, recent work on violence experienced by AAPI communities has benefited from bringing in colleagues who are focused on race and racism. The organization also discussed the development of a checklist for all research publications to ensure that materials are meeting equity standards. For example, the ERI uses a racial justice tool to ensure projects are executed with a racial justice and intersectional lens and that communities are represented as accurately as possible.

Another participant urged researchers to “be bolder about your hypotheses”; if researchers do not ask questions about race, gender, or power distribution, they will not find any evidence of these important dynamics for understanding immigrant experiences.

Data Gaps and Challenges

Limitations in secondary data—in particular, in large-scale government surveys and administrative records—pose a significant challenge for researchers who are working at the intersection of immigration and race. Participants highlighted the importance of recognizing these gaps in information and collecting additional targeted data to shed light on smaller linguistic, national-origin, and ancestry groups.

Consider the lack of data on race in immigration administrative data. A critical challenge is that race and ethnicity are not recorded in federal immigration and enforcement administrative data. Country of origin is universally captured, but it does not align one-to-one with race. In practice, researchers often must use country of origin as a proxy for race for immigrants, assuming in essence that “these are black countries,” as one participant put it. Participants highlighted that the use of country of origin as a proxy for race is acceptable for some regions; for example, many African and some Caribbean countries have predominantly Black populations. Other regions, however, have populations that are very racially mixed, and therefore they are difficult to classify in this way; for example, the Dominican Republic and Cuba have large Black populations, but very few immigrants from these countries identify as Black on Census Bureau surveys. Using country of origin as a proxy for race in such cases is particularly problematic.¹¹ Even though the racial category “AAPI” can be applied across a

multitude of countries, a participant emphasized that the racial diversity and experiences of racism across AAPI ancestry and socioeconomic contexts vary widely.

Not having race data is harmful because it means that racial disparities are obscured or rendered invisible—or distorted and mismeasured by the use of proxies. One participant noted that the collection of race data in the criminal justice system is critical for measuring racial disparities; and the absence of these data in immigration records makes assessing disparities even more difficult. This participant observed that “immigration status is fluid, but race is not,” noting the irony that immigration enforcement administration data capture immigration status, which from their point of view is changeable, but not race, which is permanently ascribed by the systemic social context. As an illustration of this dichotomy, they noted that when they as a Black immigrant were “stopped and frisked” by police, they were treated as Black and were never asked for their immigration status.

Acknowledge the complexity of race identification and understanding across immigrant groups. Participants discussed the complexities of racial identification, with one participant briefly describing the discussions among demographers in relation to multiple race identification, the combination of race and (Latino) ethnicity identifications, and the dynamics of racial and ethnic identification across immigrant generations.¹² Participants also raised the question regarding what is more important when it comes to centering race in research work—racial identities as reported by individuals on surveys or race as ascribed to individuals by authorities. This is a critical consideration given the varying conceptions of race and racism across immigrant groups, the mismatch between race and racism frames in the US compared with those in countries of origin, and the challenge of bridging this gap. From a research perspective, participants reflected on how difficult it can be to discuss race and racism with people from different immigrant communities, given their culturally specific understandings of these terms and phenomena. The organization Asian Americans Advancing Justice (AAJC) has been conducting leadership work to raise race consciousness in different AAPI communities, grappling with the difficulty of communicating these concepts across diverse groups. South Asian communities bring their own conceptions of race and caste from their countries of origin, and bridging the gap to the US narrative on race and racism is a challenge. In the same way, the lack of a narrative on racism targeted at the Latino community was highlighted, despite the racialization of Latinos in the US (UnidosUS 2021).

Recognize the paucity of immigration information in census data. Another significant gap in commonly used data is the lack of information on immigration status in commonly used census data sources such as the American Community Survey or the Current Population Survey. Data on citizenship and nativity are available, but details on admissions pathways and current immigration status are missing. This gap means that researchers cannot identify people who entered the US, for example, through family-based admissions versus employment-based admissions pathways, or whether residents are undocumented immigrants, green card holders, or temporary visa holders. Researchers have developed well-established imputation strategies for some key categories, such as undocumented immigrants¹³ or refugees (Bernstein 2018), but many other details are not possible to identify in these data sources. How people enter the country and their current immigration status strongly affect their access to citizenship and pathways to economic and social integration and the likelihood of their

exposure to the criminal justice system and the deportation pipeline. These factors can intersect with race in determining life outcomes for immigrants. One participant emphasized, for example, how valuable it would be to have more information on family-based immigration, given the importance of that pathway to the AAPI community.

Disaggregation is important. Another major challenge in quantitative data is the need to disaggregate specific language and national groups to understand unique experiences and quantify disparities between groups. This need is often raised in the context of AAPI communities, which encompass many languages and many different socioeconomic and other experiences. Also highlighted were Indigenous groups from Latin America that—like specific AAPI ancestry groups—are too small in number to be identified in national surveys or to have their language needs covered in national data collection. Workshop participants identified positive examples such as AAPI Data¹⁴ and the PolicyLink/Equity Research Institute’s National Equity Atlas as models for effective disaggregation. Participants also discussed strategies to oversample small groups and increase language coverage in surveys.

Collect additional primary data to overcome limitations in secondary data sources. Qualitative and quantitative strategies to supplement large-scale survey work offer a route to capture the experiences of smaller groups that would not be visible in a standard national frame. Participants discussed multilingual data collection and the issues that researchers face when their staff members lack diverse linguistic and cultural skills. One participant noted that thinking flexibly about research methods is needed to capture those group perspectives that may otherwise remain invisible; and raised the potential of synchronous interpretation of multiple languages in a single focus group with diverse language speakers.

Communication Strategies

It is critical that research findings are shared with the communities most affected. Participants discussed the importance of local partners owning and implementing that communication process to reach communities and convey messages effectively to the relevant stakeholders.

Local community partners can communicate research findings to target audiences. Dissemination by local community partners was emphasized as a key alternative to researcher-centered efforts. AAJC offered an example in which it provided grants to local community partners to identify priority research questions for their own communities and also be dissemination leaders in their local areas. Each partner took a unique approach to dissemination, with some organizing at their state capitals and others tapping into candidate fora for a local election. The customized dissemination strategies were specific to local areas and ultimately promised more value for the research findings to have some local impact. The importance of local dissemination by local partners was noted by another participant, who emphasized that at the local level, partners can target their audience and purpose and determine whether they are affecting county policy, state policy, or other points of impact. The participant also emphasized the model of joint dissemination, highlighting the value of a national partner, with its credibility and

reputation, working together with a local partner that can target the message to suit local interests; inviting local partners to speak at joint research presentations was offered as a promising strategy.

Use communication channels that affected communities can access. Thinking about target audiences for dissemination efforts is also important. For example, one participant described how research coverage by the *New York Daily News*, which is free and accessible to people with low incomes, was far more effective in reaching affected communities compared with placement in a more traditional outlet for researchers like the *New York Times*. Developing materials not only in community languages, but also in formats that are safe and accessible (such as adding images, supporting different abilities, and not assuming digital literacy or technology access), were all ideas raised by participants as considerations for making materials available to communities who are the subject of research studies.

Recommendations for Advancing Research at the Intersection of Immigration and Race and Racism

The insights and perspectives shared at the workshop highlighted key lessons and priorities for advancing knowledge and practice to enable and build immigration policy research that takes a race-conscious perspective.

Address Gaps in Data Sources

The lack of systematic information on relatively small groups led to suggestions to target improvements in national Census Bureau surveys, such as oversampling key groups and adding more data collection languages. There was agreement that investments from philanthropic or government sources to expand such inclusion would be extremely useful for improving the knowledge base and elevating equity concerns that would otherwise remain invisible. Expanding the number of languages for data collection, to include for example more Indigenous languages for Latin American immigrant groups,¹⁵ was highlighted as a priority.

The lack of race data in immigration admissions and enforcement data also requires attention and action by the Department of Homeland Security. Addressing this gap is a priority for stakeholders who are interested in understanding racial inequity for the communities most affected by the intersection of the immigration enforcement and the criminal justice systems.

Build Capacity for Multilingual Data Collection

In some cases, the gaps in data, especially for specific subpopulations, exist because of limited language(s) used in data collection. To better reflect the realities of specific subpopulations within the immigrant community, survey-based and qualitative research should expand languages and dialects used in data collection methodologies to reach immigrants with limited English proficiency, especially those immigrants who do not speak Spanish. Languages will vary based on the geography, subpopulation, or research question of interest, and the research design process should include a

thorough analysis of English language proficiency and native languages. An opportunity exists to improve language access for large-scale government surveys and increase use of multilingual researchers or professional interpreters for focus groups, interviews, and other qualitative data collection tools. Researchers can also improve the quality of multilingual data collection efforts by ensuring that the researchers have sufficient language skills and cultural competencies to conduct the research and that they are using clear and legible language in the process. This effort may require developing data collection tools in the source language rather than translating from English to improve comprehension. When expanding tools to include the relevant languages needed for the populations and questions of interest is not feasible because of time or resource constraints, researchers should be explicit about the limitations of the data collection because of language and which populations may be un- or underrepresented in the data as a result.

Elevate Immigration and Language Concerns in Equity Measures

Addressing systemic racism and advancing racial equity are at the forefront of current policy discussions, especially following the national conversation on racism after the 2020 events of racist police violence and in the wake of the Biden administration's commitment to advance racial equity. The January 2021 "Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity and Supporting Underserved Communities through the Federal Government"¹⁶ calls on all federal agencies to address systemic barriers faced by people of color and other underserved groups. The Equitable Data Working Group was established by the executive order with the charge of improving equitable data practices throughout the government.¹⁷ Participants in the workshop highlighted the absence of attention to immigrant community concerns by the Equitable Data Working Group. They emphasized the lost opportunity it would be, given this unusual federal investment in data improvement, to overlook the immigrant-specific concerns and data gaps highlighted above.

The discussions on measuring equity taking place in government, philanthropic, and private sectors can acknowledge the intersectional issues around race and immigration status and nativity. Focusing on racial inequities without acknowledging groups of people of color and underserved groups that have been made invisible by current data practice—for example, small national-origin or linguistic groups, undocumented immigrants, or other subgroups with unique experiences—would be a significant oversight and a disservice to the ultimate goal of mitigating racial disparities. Such data equity efforts must at minimum recognize the intersection of immigration with many people of color. A better understanding of the dynamics of racial identification in immigrant and second-generation communities could inform such efforts.

Analyze Structures and Individual Outcomes

To better center race and structural racism in analyses, research teams should be prepared to expand the aperture of research questions to analyze the structures and systems in which individual or community outcomes are situated. Often, attention to race at the individual level through disaggregation and descriptive studies does not shed light on how or why such racialized outcomes

exist. This can have the unintended consequence of normalizing outcomes along racial lines and perpetuating negative stereotypes and putting the onus on the individual, rather than on institutions or structures, to change. Researchers should focus on structures to better capture the root causes and potential solutions and move beyond describing problems. Some ways to do this are by incorporating historical and contemporary context in their analyses of policy issues, as well as by using an asset-based approach in place of a deficit approach to identify more effective solutions that build on the capabilities and strengths that already exist in communities of color. Understanding structures makes researchers better-positioned to develop solutions that can close racial equity gaps—rather than expanding or simply maintaining them.

Cultivate Trained and Prepared Research Teams and Partnerships

Policy researchers who want to begin race-conscious work may have good intentions, but they must be equipped to engage in this work productively. Prioritizing community partnerships and elevating the wisdom of communities is one part of the puzzle, along with staff recruitment and training on racial justice practices. These elements are critical to ensure researchers have knowledge of the historical and methodological considerations, internalize the values, and can responsibly conduct such work. Research organizations seeking to build their readiness can begin by expanding the diversity of research teams to have representation of lived experiences, providing training and support, and getting involved in local community events and organizations.

Create More Collaborative Tables to Set Research Questions and Agendas

Workshop participants appreciated the unusual opportunity to bring together research and advocacy voices to articulate challenges and opportunities in the immigration policy field. Given the broad range of topics discussed, participants highlighted the need for more conversations, more sharing of best practices, and more opportunities to articulate urgent research questions. Future discussions could explore specific policy areas, data sources, research approaches, racial justice applications both internal and external to organizations, and additional immigrant group perspectives. The inclusion of local community-based organizations and locally targeted discussions requires resources and time, and researchers have a role to play in communicating these needs to funders and allocating appropriate resources to such partnerships.

These strategies can help build on the progress made by organizations that are leading in this space: by articulating justifications for the centering of race, overcoming challenges by thinking creatively about analyzing secondary data and collecting primary data, incorporating excluded voices in research processes, and pointing research toward racial equity goals.

Notes

- ¹ We reviewed recently published (2019 to summer 2021) research reports, briefs, and blogs for 24 organizations in the immigration research policy field for content on explicit centering of race, racial equity, or structural racism.
- ² Most immigrants in the US come from the regions of Asia (28 percent), the Caribbean (10 percent), Central America (8 percent), South America (7 percent), the Middle East and North Africa (4 percent), or sub-Saharan Africa (5 percent), with 25 percent from Mexico and an increasing share from Asia. See Abby Budiman, “Key Findings about US immigrants,” Pew Research Center, Aug 20, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/08/20/key-findings-about-u-s-immigrants/>.

Although racial self-identification provides an incomplete picture, in 2019, 45 percent of immigrants reported their race as single-race white, 27 percent reported their race as Asian, 10 percent reported their race as Black, and 15 percent as some other race. About 2 percent of immigrants reported two or more races. Across all immigrants, 44 percent reported Hispanic/Latino ethnicity. See Jeanne Batalova, Mary Hanna, and Christopher Levesque, “Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants and Immigration in the United States,” Migration Policy Institute, February 11, 2021, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/frequently-requested-statistics-immigrants-and-immigration-united-states-2020>.
- ³ BAJI’s “The State of Black Immigrants” or “Our Stories and Visions: Gender in Black Immigrant Communities,” and SAALT’s “Communities on Fire: Confronting Hate Violence and Xenophobic Political Rhetoric” are examples of such targeted research work shining a light on specific immigrant groups. See BAJI’s full list of research publications at <http://baji.org/resources/> and SAALT’s full list of research publications at <https://saalt.org/resources/reports-and-publications/> (accessed November 24, 2021).
- ⁴ See, for example, Solomon, Jawetz, and Malik (2017); Joan F. Neal, “Being Black and Immigrant in America,” Center for Migration Studies, August 3, 2020, <https://cmsny.org/being-black-and-immigrant-in-america/>; Muzaffar Chishti and Jessica Bolter, “As #DefundThePolice Movement Gains Steam, Immigrant Enforcement Spending and Practices Attract Scrutiny,” Migration Policy Institute, June 25, 2020, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/defundthepolice-movement-gains-steam-immigration-enforcement-spending-and-practices-attract>; and Lipscombe, Morgan-Trostle, and Zheng (2019).
- ⁵ This was in reference to a recent Nevada District Court ruling on the unconstitutionality of Title 1326, which makes reentry after deportation a felony. See Hassan Kanu, “Courts Are Beginning to Admit That Some Immigration Laws Are Racist,” Reuters, August 23, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/legal/litigation/courts-are-beginning-admit-that-some-immigration-laws-are-racist-2021-08-23/>.
- ⁶ For examples of research that are explicit on this, see Pastor, Thomas, et al. (2020) and Pastor, Hondagneu-Sotelo, et al. (2016).
- ⁷ A few publications in our preliminary scan stood out for their use of a structural racism or racial equity framing: Kim Tabari, “Understanding Immigrants with a Racial Equity Lens,” USC Dornsife Equity Research Institute, May 19, 2020, <https://www.ilctr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Strength-in-Numbers-Understanding-Immigrants-with-a-Racial-Equity-Lens-Kim-Tabari.pdf>; Lee (2020); Pastor, Thomas, et al. (2020); Pastor, Hondagneu-Sotelo, et al. (2016); Neal, “Being Black and Immigrant in America”; Charles Kamasaki, “U.S. Immigration Policy: A Classic, Unappreciated Example of Structural Racism,” Brookings Institution (blog), March 26, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/how-we-rise/2021/03/26/us-immigration-policy-a-classic-unappreciated-example-of-structural-racism/>; and Kica Matos and Nana Gyamfi, “Centering Black Voices in the Struggle for Immigrant Rights,” Vera Institute of Justice (blog), September 9, 2020, <https://www.vera.org/blog/centering-black-voices-in-the-struggle-for-immigrant-rights>. One contemporary analysis raised by a workshop participant was a 2021 report highlighting the racist underpinnings of immigrant eligibility rules produced through 1996 welfare reform legislation that excluded many from federal safety net programs; see Minoff et al. (2021).
- ⁸ To view the National Equity Atlas, see <https://nationalequityatlas.org/> (accessed November 24, 2021).
- ⁹ To view the California Immigrant Data Portal, see <https://immigrantdataca.org/> (accessed November 24, 2021).

- ¹⁰ For an example of a tool highlighting these research step processes, see DEI Council Working Group on Content and Communications (2020).
- ¹¹ Another challenging case where country of origin as proxy for race can present challenges is the Middle East and North Africa region. Racial classifications often reflect Middle Easterners and North Africans as white.
- ¹² See Hugo Lopez, Jens Manuel Krogstad, and Jeffrey S. Passel, “Who Is Hispanic?,” September 23, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/09/23/who-is-hispanic/>.
- ¹³ MPI Methodology for Assigning Legal Status to Noncitizen Respondents in US Census Bureau Survey Data,” Migration Policy Institute, accessed November 22, 2021, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/about/mpi-methodology-assigning-legal-status-noncitizens-census-data>.
- ¹⁴ To view AAPI Data, see <https://aapidata.com/> (accessed November 24, 2021).
- ¹⁵ Odilla Romero and Xiomara Corpeño, “How Philanthropy Can Help Stop the Invisibilization of Indigenous Migrants in the U.S.,” National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, June 17, 2019, <https://www.ncrp.org/publication/responsive-philanthropy-june-2019/how-philanthropy-can-help-stop-the-invisibilization-of-indigenous-migrants-in-the-u-s>.
- ¹⁶ Joseph Biden, “Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities through the Federal Government,” White House, January 20, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/20/executive-order-advancing-racial-equity-and-support-for-underserved-communities-through-the-federal-government/>.
- ¹⁷ Alondra Nelson and Clarence Wardell, “An Update from the Equitable Data Working Group,” White House, July 27, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/blog/2021/07/27/an-update-from-the-equitable-data-working-group/>.

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