A Quick Guide to Data Equity
CDO Insights Brief

This document was written collaboratively by Beeck Center Fellow Milda Aksamitauskas and members of the State Chief Data Officers Network.

State governments collect massive amounts of data. Almost every program or service has an application, renewal, or other form that captures information stemming from an interaction between a state resident and the government service or action. In recent years several governors—including California's Gavin Newsom and Massachusetts' Maura Healey, among others—have issued executive orders calling for more equity in how their states analyze that data and use it to inform policies and programs, often assigning that work to state chief data officers (CDOs). In January 2023, the State CDO Network convened a working group of state CDOs and their colleagues to share insights and best practices that could help states respond to these executive mandates. After hearing from multiple states, the Data Equity Working Group compiled a practical guide to help government data leaders better understand and take action to improve data equity.

Data equity is a key component of designing public systems that work for all, but the term "data equity" is complex and can be used in various contexts. Instead of creating a single definition of data equity, the workgroup focused on collecting informative resources with definitions, background, and inspiring stories. In doing so, data leaders could form their own understanding about data equity and what elements they should consider for their own state and local governments.

Many state governments are already focused on collecting data and measuring equity. Some states have begun working on assessing disparities and improving evidence-based policy making for more targeted resource allocation. Since state budgets and program capacities are limited, it's important for state data leaders to know how to allocate help to those who need it most. However, without equitable data processes in place, understanding communities, allocating resources, and designing programs fairly can be difficult.

This guide contains insights that have helped state CDOs move their data equity initiatives forward. By better understanding the work and various strategies currently being employed, data leaders can gradually improve their public services by strengthening equitable data infrastructure in their states or agencies.

Contributing Author

MILDA AKSAMITAUSKAS
Fellow,
State CDO Network

Master the Basics: State Data Equity 101

Individual-level data collected by state governments is often aggregated to preserve individual privacy and confidentiality, it can and should be disaggregated by various characteristics to visualize patterns and tell stories about the experiences of specific communities or outcomes of specific programs. For example, if a data collection process offers only four broad categories for an individual to self-identify their race or ethnicity, it is not possible to disaggregate data and show totals for specific Asian or Native American communities. As a result, states operating without data equity can miss opportunities to understand how programs or services are delivered to populations which may have different needs, worsening structural inequities in important policy making and delivery of public services.

To focus equity efforts within states and address structural problems, many states and state agencies have created equity offices, sometimes helmed by CDOs who can be great partners and co-champions for equity and diversity. Many of these offices aim to define statewide equity measures and begin collecting the data to track those measures. Equity offices usually employ an operating framework that helps stakeholders visualize the larger goal of equity in how governments operate, while keeping track of incremental progress. Washington State's Office of Equity, which was established by law in April 2020, developed a Pro-Equity Anti-Racism (PEAR) plan and playbook for its agencies, which was authorized through a governor's executive order. Currently, the office is building their and other state agencies' capacity by actively consulting agencies on the PEAR implementation, emphasizing a thorough self-evaluation of agency culture, accountability, and meeting the intersectional needs of employees and customers.

Finding and partnering with staff, programs, or external partners that champion data equity in your state can be both beneficial and necessary to advance and apply equity lessons to data. You may also want to begin recruiting partners from state agencies focused on delivering health or education programs and services due to the intersectional nature of these policy areas. For example, many states have built educational longitudinal data systems to track student achievement and workforce outcomes alongside other important demographic information. Similarly, many public health agencies measure disaggregated health outcomes of vulnerable populations alongside various economic or environmental factors to address disparate impacts of public health challenges.

Local governments can also be strong partners in supporting state data equity reforms. They are likely already working on defining equity and measuring outcomes for local residents and can be excellent champions in statewide conversations.

Executive recommendations

Data equity work is easier when leaders partner with one another and consider sustainability from the beginning. State executives from the Data Equity Working Group offered the following recommendations for other public-sector data executives to consider.

1. **Prioritize State Leadership**

   Federal executive orders issued in the past few years have galvanized planning and actions at federal agencies around advancing equity. Similarly, states are turning to executive orders to change their practices and find new ways to deliver results to constituents.

   Having a state CDO position can help support agencies in their goals to meet a number of executive policy priorities for data equity, as well as other statewide data and technology reforms. Consider recent examples from California and Illinois:

+ **California's** [executive order](#) N-16-22 specifically requested that the Office of Data and Innovation—which is the home agency for California's CDO— develop a statewide set of equity standards to guide agency implementation. These standards would be used to support agencies, giving them tools and processes for identifying and addressing disparities in public services.

  "By June 30, 2023, the Office of Data and Innovation, in consultation with agencies subject to my authority, shall develop a set of statewide data and Service standards and practices to support agencies and departments to identify and address disparities in government operations and services, including but not limited to, standards for collecting and managing race and ethnicity data, metrics for measuring and tracking equity in state services and programs, and service delivery standards to support equity. This will include best practices to address sensitivities around data collection." – California Governor Gavin Newsom

+ **Illinois** [statute](#) 20 ILCS 65 assigned the Department of Innovation and Technology—which is the home agency for the Illinois CDO—to assist state agencies in establishing common technological processes and procedures around data management activities to support equity. The statute's goal is to "*ensure that all major programs can report disaggregated data by race, ethnicity, age, sex, disability status, sexual orientation, and gender identity, and primary or preferred language.*" Concurrently, the state's [Office of Equity](#) was also asked to "*develop statewide diversity, equity, and inclusion benchmarks and measures of progress.*"

2. **Share Data Equity Knowledge and Practices**

Advancing equity in any state policy area—from education to transportation to the environment—requires attention to detail, historical context, and data. State data leaders benefit from **partnering with agencies that have more mature data practices** for various populations. Larger state agencies—such as those administering health, human services, education, workforce, transportation, and criminal justice programs, in addition to those registering vital events—often have more robust data collection systems due to data digitization efforts and because the federal government often requires disaggregated (or more granular) data reporting into their systems as a condition of the use of certain agency funds.

Consider the effects of data equity in agencies that deal with vital records:

+ Public health agencies have been engaged in [health equity](#) conversations for the past 35 years due to significant racial and economic disparities in health outcomes. Maternal and child health disparity measures, such as Black infant mortality rates, are reported by state health departments and originate from birth certificate data. These data are essential for understanding varying health outcomes for people of different racial or ethnic backgrounds.

  The first document assigned to a person is a birth certificate. When someone is born, a plethora of information is recorded before they leave the hospital. Typically, a baby's information is entered into several administrative systems by the end of their first day alive. These include medical records, the vital records registration system that issues birth certificates, state laboratories that test for rare genetic disorders, hearing screenings, and immunization registries. Depending on the state and hospital, there may be registries tracking birth outcomes, rare heart conditions, or birth defects.

Since 1989, the vital records system has assigned each newborn a race or ethnicity based on the mother's race. (This is because a child's father is not always known or listed and more information about the mother's health history and prenatal care is captured on the birth certificate worksheets.) Unfortunately, there is no scientific measurement to assign race to a baby when parents identify with different groups. Instead, race is boiled down to a social construct that stems from check boxes on a form.

Black and White infant mortality disparities are calculated using this collected information, so if processes to collect the data are not well understood—for example by having hospital staff complete vital records without parents' input or by failing to give people pathways to correct information on their vital records—these processes can directly impact public health program delivery. Since vital records data is used for healthcare resource allocation and creation of programs aimed to improve healthy birth outcomes, the way data is collected can play a significant role in determining who gets help and who doesn't.

3. **Balance Privacy with Visibility**

Creating practices that consider privacy and confidentiality is an important step in establishing trust in the government. **Consider incorporating your state's privacy laws** and partnering with its state privacy officer (if you have one) or the state's legal counsel when creating data-related privacy practices. Health and education agencies may already have such roles in house and are likely to be more familiar with what is often a tangled web of applicable laws and regulations.

Each of these agencies have established robust processes to comply with privacy requirements. CDOs should partner with privacy officers to create best practices around how sensitive data can be disclosed in a disaggregated format while preserving privacy and trust. State CDO Network members recommend being clear and transparent about the need for data collection and all planned use of the data.

Many state agencies have experimented with collecting more detailed demographic and identity information from constituents. Examples include:

+ **Oregon** is working to increase and standardize race, ethnicity, language, and disability-related data collection across its Department of Human Services. The state is also working on increasing and standardizing sexual orientation and gender-identity data collection. Through its work, Oregon has uncovered several important observations, including how minors may not be willing to disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity on a form in the presence of others such as parents or guardians

4. **Improve Your Data Inventory**

States that want to improve data equity can start by **taking an inventory or creating a catalog of the data that's already being collected in the state**. Creating a data catalog is often a laborious task, but it's a crucial step and one that may be instrumental in helping you find data champions and sources of data at state agencies. The federal Chief Data Officers Council Data Inventory Working Group issued a report highlighting the value proposition of data inventories.

Another practical step that can demonstrate data's potential is sharing disaggregated information publicly. Consider two examples from Indiana and New York City:

+ **Indiana's** Management Performance Hub—created in partnership with agencies across state government—houses the state's Equity Data Portal. This resource functions as "a public disparity data dashboard," giving constituents a way to track the state's progress in closing equity gaps. It includes high level views of equity "related to health, public safety, social services, education, and workforce." Karrah Herring, the state's chief equity, inclusion, and opportunity officer along with others in the state's government want this tool to "open up conversations" regarding providing everyone in the state with the best quality of life.

+ **New York City** created EquityNYC, which is an interactive, digital version of the City's Social Indicators and Equity Report, and reflects the City's commitment to transparency and accountability. The reporting on the data is charter-mandated and explained in the city's Executive Order 45. Data tracked and disseminated includes 45 social indicators that include "who the City serves, where services are located, who the City employs, who receives City contracts, and how the City promotes equity internally."

5. **Find Funds to Sustain Efforts**

In order to produce data products or answer data questions, state resources—including staff and tools—are needed. As such, data leaders should advocate for executive orders and state laws that include budget appropriations. To increase capacity further, consider federal grants or public-private partnership grants to support your state's strategies on data equity. It can also be helpful to advocate that your state's budget is equity-inclusive. Some examples include:

+ The **Department of Labor** (DOL) issues **data equity grants** to improve equitable access to unemployment insurance systems. In February 2023, for example, $16 million was earmarked for equitable unemployment benefits work in Connecticut, New Jersey, and Oklahoma. DOL's summary report about the grants issued to 41 states and jurisdictions details how states geocoded applicant addresses to analyze patterns, summarizing unemployment insurance outcomes by race and ethnicity to increase outreach activities or chose to analyze youth workers.

+ **Arkansas'** CDO uses a spreadsheet that tracks upcoming grant opportunities related to data equity. A list of the currently approved unemployment insurance equity grants and applications can be found here.

+ **Connecticut's** budget process is equity-based. The state law requires that the governor's budget documents include an explanation of how its provisions further the governor's efforts to ensure equity across the state. Connecticut law defines equity as *"efforts, regulations, policies, programs, standards, processes, and any other government functions or legal principles intended to do the following:*

  1. *Identify and remedy past and present patterns of discrimination or inequality against, and outcome disparities for, any protected class under the state's anti-discrimination laws;*

  2. *Ensure that these patterns, whether intentional or unintentional, are not reinforced or perpetuated; and*

  3. *Prevent the emergence and persistence of these patterns in the foreseeable future."*

6. **Advocate For and Be Aware of Federal Changes**

Recently, the **federal government** launched a number of initiatives aimed at data equity. These include:

+ Two executive orders related to equity that include specific actions for federal agencies.

+ A report produced by the White House's Equitable Data Working Group about equitable data.

+ Proposed changes to race and ethnicity definitions. The Office of Management and Budget collected comments during the first half of 2023 and plans to issue a final rule in summer 2024.

+ The LGBTQI+ equity executive order, which was recently summarized by the National Health Law Organization.

All these initiatives and changes mean that once federal rules are adopted and implemented they will translate into federal guidelines or requirements for data collection at federal and likely at state levels. States may have different standards, however, using the same standard helps them compare themselves to national numbers or to neighboring states.

Resource Recommendations

We have assembled a list of resources for anyone working on data equity issues, which will be updated as more resources are created and uncovered. Please email us at statecdonetwork@georgetown.edu with any additions or suggestions.

Federal resources used by CDOS

+ Executive Order on Further Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government

+ Progress report on Implementation of the Equitable Data Working Group

+ The Equitable Data Working Group Report and recommendations

+ White House Blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights

Specific state or city resources used by CDOS

+ San Francisco demographic research and recommendations

+ Oregon has a proposed standard for SOGI data collection mostly applicable to healthcare

+ Additional materials about the work of Oregon's Equity and Inclusion Division

Training resources and written documentation and articles recommended by CDOs

+ Arizona recommends a Data Ethics & Responsible AI Training and a video about decolonizing data.

+ Oregon has an extensive list of recommendations including organizations, books, articles, and frameworks on data justice and data equity.

+ The Actionable Intelligence for Social Policy (AISP) hosts a community of practice on data equity. AISP has recently published a report on legal and ethical considerations for data sharing. They have also issued a report on racial equity in data integration.

Taking the Next Step: Assessing Your State's Data Equity Journey

The State CDO Network is interested in understanding the data equity landscape across the states. The workgroup developed and piloted a survey about data equity. The Beeck Center invites you to take the survey. The results of the survey will be summarized by the Beeck Center and will be shared in aggregate form.

The online survey is available here. Please note we will not provide your data, answers, or information to any entity. Your responses will be confidential.

Table: Data equity survey instrument questions and response options

Theme	Actual survey questions
Responder	+ What state do you represent? + Name (optional) + What is your role? (CDO, data equity program, data analyst, policymaker, etc.)
Data equity leadership	+ Does your state have an Office of Equity or equity-related leadership team? Yes No Not yet/it is being formed/don't know + Does the state CDO office formally collaborate with this group? Yes No Not sure + Is the state CDO office charged with leading or supporting any equity-related projects or programs? Yes No Not sure + What current equity-related projects or programs is your state CDO office charged with leading or supporting? *For the questions below please include names of or links to executive orders, bill numbers, and any other publicly available links or information you are able to share.* *If yes* Is there a budget for these programs or projects? + What is the funding source of the allocated budget? Budget appropriation Revolving fund Federal or private grant Special purpose fund Other

	+	What is the annual budgeted amount?(Fill in number or write N/A
Data equity practices	+	Does your state have an equity-based budgeting practice or does it follow "budgeting for equity, which is defined as 'allocating local government resources in a way that is intended to address unfair disparities between different groups of people, such as racial groups or income groups?'" *If you selected yes,* please detail the practice here:
	+	Does your state have standard project evaluation criteria that includes equity questions for evaluations of state-level programs or projects? *If you selected yes,* please describe here:
	+	How does your state measure equity-related projects or programs? Please detail the types of metrics your state uses.
Data equity measures	+	How do you measure equity-related projects or programs grants? Please list any statewide created measures, key performance indicators (KPIs), etc: I am not aware of equity metrics Yes, my state has already developed equity metrics My state is currently developing equity metrics My state is using American Rescue Plan Act funding *Please list equity metrics, if you are able:*
Data strategy	+	Do you have specific data equity goals in your overall data strategy for the calendar year 2023? *Please describe your projects* If your answer is no: is your state considering adding such goals for the 2024 calendar year?
Other	+	What data-related topics interest you? Data standards Bias in data Data education and training programs Bias in application or algorithms Culture shift in government Community engagement Data security and privacy Other
	+	Do you belong to any groups or have resources you consult with regularly that you can share with us? Please share websites, reports, research, LinkedIn or other social media groups, etc.