

Defining Equity in Federal Government Evaluations

Note: The Equity Evaluation Memo Series is intended to guide OES' commitment to equity in our evaluation process and efforts toward understanding and reducing barriers to equitable access to federal programs. This series is intended to be an internal guidance document for OES team members.

Definitions and operationalizations of equity vary across the federal government. During a December 2021 review of definitions of equity that appear on seventeen federal agencies' public websites, the OES Equity Working Group¹ found that definitions of equity fell into three categories: those related to diversity, equity, and inclusion in the public workforce; those related to non-discrimination and equal access; and those related to the reduction of disparities.

Different definitions of equity are useful in different contexts, and how equity is defined and understood will drive the design of an evaluation. For example, the terms “equity” and “equality” are often used interchangeably. While they have similar [connotations](#), the nuanced difference between these terms is crucial. Equality refers to uniformity in the type of input (everyone receives the same treatment), while equity refers to uniformity in outcomes, especially between groups (everyone receives the amount of treatment needed to obtain a desired outcome).

OES Example

In the spring of 2020, OES worked with the Small Business Administration on a [series of projects](#) related to equity in access to emergency funding. An emphasis on equality in this context might have focused on evaluating equal treatment in the application process for all applicants. Instead, an emphasis on equity focused on reducing inequalities in outcomes, by evaluating how well different programs addressed the needs of underserved populations through [different methods of distributing funds](#) or [reducing documentation burdens](#).

Defining the consideration of interest (i.e., equity or equality) for a given project involves identifying two key factors: the program or policy area and the group(s) for which the chosen considerations are relevant.

¹ The Equity Working Group is a multidisciplinary working group within OES, dedicated to formulating and implementing our internal approach to identifying and measuring equity-related outcomes in our evaluations.

Equity-Relevant Program or Policy Areas

Identifying the specific program or policy area of concern will help determine the data needed and the types of research methods that will be most appropriate to gather that data. One may want to consider equity with respect to program or policy inputs, processes, outputs (e.g. benefits and services), and outcomes (e.g. health or economic outcomes for individuals or groups); the table below outlines core questions in each area. It is often useful to examine more than one of these areas and to consider how they relate to each other. For example, one might explore how equity in implementation affects disparities in outcomes.

Focus Area	Inputs	Outputs	Processes	Outcomes
Core Question	Do groups have equal access to benefits? Do groups have equitable access to benefits?	Are benefits distributed equitable?	Are groups treated equitably in implementation?	Do groups have different or similar outcomes?

Equity-Relevant Groups

Identifying the groups of interest in a specific evaluation will make it easier to identify the best data sources and research methods for an evaluation. There are a variety of ways to identify the groups of people with shared experiences or demographic characteristics that might be relevant to an evaluation that includes considerations of equity. Two approaches may be most relevant to federal initiatives: groups that have shared historical experiences and groups that have shared relationships to specific programs or policies.

Groups	Shared historical experiences	Shared relationships to programs or policies
Core Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are there pre-existing barriers or challenges that people who have been historically marginalized or underserved might face in accessing resources, participating in programs, or achieving outcomes? Are there ways in which this program might address the effects of historical systemic discrimination, oppression, and exclusion of various groups? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do people from different groups have similar needs for and access to programs? Do they have similar experiences interacting with program or policy implementers? Do they have similar outcomes?
OES Example	This OES study with SBA focused on documenting challenges in obtaining working capital faced by historically underserved groups including racial and ethnic minorities and women.	This OES study with SSA focused on all individuals aged 65-80 who were potentially eligible for Supplemental Security Income (SSI).

Sources for Direction on Identifying Equity-Relevant Groups

There are many resources to look to for guidance in refining definitions of equity in the federal context. Recent Executive Orders on [Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government](#) (Equity EO) and on [Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in the Federal Workforce](#) (DEIA EO) list underserved communities that have been denied systematic, fair, just, and impartial treatment and call for efforts to assess the ways that programs and policies perpetuate systemic barriers and create opportunities for improvement. Neither EO contains an exhaustive list of all relevant attributes; however both extend to any person “otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality.” (see table below for a comparison of which groups are explicitly noted in which definitions).

Equity Relevant Group <i>[Italics indicate example groups not explicitly noted in the Equity EO]</i>	Equity EO	DEIA EO
Individuals who belong to communities of color, such as Black and African American, Hispanic and Latino, Native American, Alaska Native and Indigenous, Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, <i>Middle Eastern, and North African persons</i>	Y	Y
Individuals who belong to communities that face discrimination based on sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity (including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, <i>gender non-conforming, and non-binary (LGBTQ+) persons</i>)	Y	Y
Persons who face discrimination based on pregnancy or pregnancy-related conditions; parents; and caregivers.		Y
Individuals who belong to communities that face discrimination based on their religion or disability	Y	Y
First-generation professionals or first-generation college students		Y
Individuals with limited English proficiency		Y
Immigrants		Y
Individuals who belong to communities that may face employment barriers based on older age or former incarceration		Y
Persons who live in rural areas	Y	Y
Veterans and military spouses		Y
Persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty, discrimination, or inequality	Y	Y

In addition, agency guidance, such as this 2017 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services report on [identifying racial and ethnic disparities in human services](#), may also be helpful. In some cases, legislation may also provide guidance, as in [section 8 of the Small Business Act \(15 U.S.C. 637\)](#), which defines equity-relevant groups.

In combination with guidance from sources like these, it is important to carefully explore program and policy implementation processes and affected communities while clarifying the relevant definitions for a given evaluation. Note that definitions can also change over time, as policies and programs evolve.