



Caltrans Division of Research,
Innovation and System Information

Research



Results

Planning, Policy,
and
Programming

OCTOBER 2021

Project Title:

Assessing the Impact of Equity Work in Active and Sustainable Transportation

Task Number: 3421

Start Date: December 1, 2019

Completion Date: March 31, 2021

Task Manager:

Frank Law
Project Manager
frank.law@dot.ca.gov

Assessing the Impact of Equity Work in Active and Sustainable Transportation

A qualitative analysis of current and emerging equity work in sustainable and active transportation by using a combination of semi-structured interviews and ethnographic methods.

WHAT WAS THE NEED?

There is an increasing level of awareness of the role transportation systems have played in racial segregation and the disempowerment of low-income communities and communities of color. As cities have once again become more attractive to developers and more privileged populations, these communities have become the target of gentrification that now displaces the residents who have long been struggling to bring life and vitality to streets long neglected.

Transportation infrastructure, particularly related to active transportation, is sometimes seen as a handmaid to gentrification and displacement. Numerous efforts have been made to address these deep issues of injustice through the inclusion of equity and community participation within projects on active and sustainable transportation. New transportation projects seek to engage longtime residents in the planning and implementation process.

Research on equity within transportation advocacy and professional spaces is emerging. Cities and planning firms have begun to hire experts in equity, diversity, and inclusion, as well as change their recruiting tactics to hire more people of color. More work must be done to assess the overall impact of this work.



DRISI provides solutions and knowledge that improves California's transportation system

WHAT WAS OUR GOAL?

The goal of this research is to assess the status of transportation equity work in California by seeking the expert perspectives of transportation professionals who also identify as Black, Indigenous, or people of color.

WHAT DID WE DO?

We recruited 28 interviewees through transportation planning professional networks and referrals. Of those interviewed, 36% identify as Latinx, 21% identify as Black, 14% identify as Asian or Pacific Islander, 25% identify as mixed race, and 3% identify as Middle Eastern. Interviewees were asked questions about their career trajectory and their understanding of equity within transportation with specific questions on new mobilities. With the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and uprisings after the murder of George Floyd, we adjusted the script to ask about the impact of these phenomena on transportation equity work.

WHAT WAS THE OUTCOME?

Participants spoke of the need to create a consensus around a definition of equity. Without a clear, shared definition, they noted that it was difficult for organizations to do meaningful equity work. Participants offered definitions of equity that included a redistribution of resources and decisionmaking power to historically disinvested communities. They saw the goal of equity to be achieving parity between residents of disinvested community and privileged communities. Overall, they sought a transportation system that asserts dignity for people's humanity as a core value. They saw this definition of equity as foundational to informing goals and actions that are targeted, transparent, and measurable.

A lack of clarity around equity definition and goals can lead to a phenomenon known as "performative equity work." Performative

equity work describes practices that reinforce root systems of dominance and status quo, while claiming to promote inclusion. They found organizations are often under-investing in equity and failing to diversify leadership roles.

They wished to see transportation organizations recognize that equity work would be a long-term engagement, and let their agendas be guided by equity goals. Doing so would produce equity efforts that are both well-resourced and community-led with diverse leadership.

Examinations of micromobilities and policing offer case studies in how transportation work can be rethought from an authentic equity lens. In both cases, developing stronger relationships with communities offers innovative solutions to transportation challenges. Closing future visions offer ideas for how to create transportation systems that are people-centric.

WHAT IS THE BENEFIT?

This project helps to improve the mobility of people throughout California by identifying ways to improve mobility for disadvantaged populations. Black, indigenous, and other communities of color (Latinos, Asian-Americans, migrants and refugees) have suffered systemic disadvantage historically, which has limited their mobility and access to resources including jobs, educational opportunities, public resources, and leisure opportunities.

This project broadens the understanding of the successes and shortcomings of current equity work designed to assist disadvantaged populations, while also identifying new tactics and strategies to improve mobility and accessibility in a rapidly changing transportation landscape.