

Forefr<sup>Ont</sup>

# RACIAL EQUITY COLLECTIVE

MAPPING SURVEY + ANALYSIS

## Findings Report

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**Prepared by:**

NORC at the University of Chicago  
Center on Equity Research

**Presented to:**

Forefront



# RACIAL EQUITY COLLECTIVE

MAPPING SURVEY + ANALYSIS

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### ILLINOIS DATABASE OF RACIAL EQUITY ASSET MAP

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### FOREFRONT'S MISSION

To build a vibrant social impact sector for all the people of Illinois. We provide education, advocacy, thought leadership, and facilitate collective action around issues that are important to our Members and to the sector.

# NOTE FROM FOREFRONT

Learning from and being led by communities across Illinois catalyzes Forefront’s ability to build trust and collective power. As the only nonprofit and philanthropy-serving member-based organization that works across the State of Illinois, Forefront is uniquely positioned to unite Illinois’ social impact sector to collectively solve society’s most intractable problems. Forefront commits to serving as a statewide advocate and thought leader that is dedicated to racial equity and diverse, intersectional representation. We believe that challenging historically harmful hierarchies and power dynamics – whether geographic or sectoral – results in meaningful collaboration, scaled impact, and thriving communities across Illinois.

In 2022, Forefront approved our three-year strategic plan centering racial equity in our programming and in our internal operations. The strategic planning process guided by community voices and Forefront’s State of the Sector surveys conducted in 2020 and 2021 indicated a strong interest from the sector to build internal organizational capacity and a desire to collaborate with others to advance racial equity. These priorities guided Forefront to establish the framework for the Racial Equity Collective (The Collective), a multi-sector collaboration of DEI practitioners, non-profit and private sector organizations, philanthropic funders, and legislators. The Collective will serve as a statewide brave space and hub that centralizes resources, expertise, programming, and relationships to sustainably advance racial equity across Illinois.

As a first step toward building the Racial Equity Collective, Forefront partnered with the Center on Equity Research at NORC at the University of Chicago to identify and publicly share statewide racial equity programs, policies, and practitioners. NORC is an objective, independent, non-partisan research institution that helps governments, nonprofits, and businesses make better decisions through data and analysis. This report is a result of that partnership and NORC’s work to design and disseminate a survey, analyze findings, and create a publicly available interactive asset map. These findings and tools will inform the structure of The Collective and provide transparency for the sector to avoid duplication of efforts and organically form partnerships. We thank the nearly 200 organizations who shared over 860 programs and policies committed to advancing racial equity in Illinois.

In addition to building this infrastructure, Forefront’s Racial Equity Collective will launch its inaugural cohort in 2024. The inaugural cohort will bring together regional and sectoral perspectives to commonly define and measure progress towards racial equity. It will build capacity across major regions of the state to support organizations in addressing the challenges that they highlighted in the survey and interviews. We hope you consider joining our cohort and our Collective.

We deeply appreciate the close to 450 individuals and organizations who are passionate about creating a more equitable Illinois and who took the time to share their invaluable work with Forefront. We recognize this does not encompass all those who are tirelessly working to dismantle racism in their communities. We thank our Board for elevating and prioritizing racial equity. We also thank our funders who facilitated Forefront’s ability to curate a data-driven publicly available interactive digital tool and findings report. We look forward to a continued partnership with you, creating a united and thriving social impact sector that has a transformative impact on the wellbeing and economic security of communities and promotes equity across the State of Illinois.

With Highest Hopes,



Monique B. Jones  
President and CEO  
Forefront



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# INTRODUCTION

The Center for Equity Research (CER) at NORC at the University of Chicago (NORC) is pleased to work with Forefront’s Racial Equity Collective team to conduct a landscape scan and analysis and produce an interactive digital asset map. NORC is an objective, independent, non-partisan research institution that helps governments, nonprofits, and businesses make better decisions through data and analysis. This project will identify and map organizations in Illinois with programs, policies, or practitioners that are working to advance racial equity. This was a yearlong project commencing in November 2022.

NORC began the landscape scan by searching for organizations in Illinois with active racial equity programs or policies. Drawing on this search list and a list of Forefront members, we designed and launched a survey to capture detailed descriptions of racial equity programs and policies led by a wide range of organizations in Illinois to appear on the map. A total of 164 organizations from the survey responses were eligible and consented to be featured on the Illinois Database of Racial Equity Asset Map.

Based upon the landscape scan and survey, we present analysis of findings related to:

- Programs and policies to address racial equity across Illinois.
- The topical and industry focus of racial equity work in Illinois.
- The geographic service area of organizations engaged in this work.
- The type of organizations currently engaged in this work, and the demographic characteristics of their leaders.
- Primary challenges of organizations seeking to advance racial equity.

In doing so, we present our methods, limitations, and recommendations for gathering further information that may inform the strategic direction of Forefront’s Racial Equity Collective.

Most organizations who participated in the survey and consented to appear on the map were from the Chicagoland area. Overall, this provided a detailed first look at the types of organizations working on racial equity and the different categories of racial equity work within and nearby the largest urban center in the state.<sup>1</sup> However, it did not provide a sufficient representation of other areas of the state where racial equity work is ongoing, such as Central and Southern Illinois or the Quad Cities. Therefore, Forefront and NORC embarked on a second phase of the study which was to conduct in-depth interviews to better understand regional approaches to advancing racial equity across Illinois.

In the beginning of 2023, NORC and Forefront conducted a statewide survey of organizations working on racial equity issues in Illinois. The survey asked organizations to provide some background information and to list and describe their racial equity work.

To guide our search, we *defined “racial equity” as the process of correcting historical or contemporary imbalances between racial and ethnic groups*. These imbalances may span across political, legal, social, and economic systems. Racism is defined as a rejection of fair treatment, and of the rights, needs, and

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<sup>1</sup> For further information on the 2023 Racial Equity Collective Mapping Survey + Gap Analysis, please see the following link: <https://myforefront.org/racial-equity-collective-mapping-survey-gap-analysis/>

value of specific individuals because of their inclusion (or perceived inclusion) in a particular racial group; specifically, a racial group that is thought to be inherently inferior. Anti-racism recognizes the above and seeks to identify, challenge, and undo racism where present. Because of this, anti-racism and racial equity go hand-in-hand. After all, racial injustice exists in all strata of society – from individuals to groups, organizations to institutions, and system to global structures. The most comprehensive forms of racial equity and anti-racism seeks to undo systemic racism, defined as “perpetuated discrimination within a system that was founded on racist principles or practices,” and structural racism, defined as “cultural values in a society [that] are so ingrained in daily life that they are seen as the way things are.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Source of definitions for systemic and structural racism: Being Antiracist, National Museum of African American History and Culture. <  
<https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race/topics/being-antiracist>>

# METHODS

In collaboration with Forefront, NORC engaged in three activities to identify racial equity programs and policies in Illinois:

- 1) an environmental scan of websites and grey literature to identify programs in Illinois focused on racial equity
- 2) survey of these organizations and Forefront members to gather details on their particular programs and policies and also obtain consent to feature their work on Illinois Database of Racial Equity Asset Map (iDREAM); and
- 3) qualitative interviews with organizations in major regions of the state outside of Chicagoland

Ultimately, the function of the environmental scan was to produce the sampling frame and contact list for the survey. The result was a purposive sample and is not representative of all organizations in Illinois engaged in racial equity work.

To gather greater information on the racial equity work being done across the entire state of Illinois, Forefront and NORC partnered on a qualitative study of organizations outside of the Chicagoland area. The qualitative study sought to learn about these organizations and the ways they define and pursue racial equity in Illinois. We also sought to gather firsthand feedback from these organizations on Forefront's initiative to map organizations doing racial equity work in Illinois, and their opinions on how useful such a mapping tool may be to their work. The interview sections of this report detail the summary findings of our analysis, the methods used to conduct this work, and a description of the two major themes covered.

**Racial equity work.** Questions investigated in this section include analyses of how they define racial equity, which areas of racial equity their work concentrates on (e.g., criminal justice, immigrant and refugee rights, reparations, etc.), and how they collaborate with other organizations. This theme also explores the regional differences organizations encounter while conducting their racial equity work, as well as a summary of the challenges and successes these organizations have come across when seeking to further racial equity in areas of Illinois outside Chicagoland.

**Feedback on Forefront's Racial Equity Collective Mapping Project.** We solicit their impressions of how useful such a mapping tool may be for racial equity work across Illinois, generally, as well as how useful they believe the mapping tool may be for their organization's racial equity work, specifically. We also examine how willing organizations were when presented with the opportunity to be featured on the map, and what possible concerns they may have in doing so. Lastly, we summarize the feedback organizations provided regarding any recommendations, additions, or critiques they had regarding the Forefront Racial Equity Collective Mapping Project.

## Criteria to Identify Organizations Working on Racial Equity

For the environmental scan, NORC and Forefront agreed to identify organizations in Illinois using the following criteria:



- Has headquarters/primary location based in Illinois or operates in Illinois
- Funds racial equity work in Illinois
- Was identified by Forefront or through referral by a Forefront member or Racial Equity Collective participant.
- Was identified by NORC through a search of grey literature or other publicly available information using search terms “Illinois nonprofit” + “racial equity programs,” “anti-racism programs,” “social justice” or “racial equity training” and reviewing organizations that emerge for the following criteria.
- Based upon a review of publicly available materials, has a self-stated mission of racial equity and/or anti-racism.
  - This can either be the primary mission of the organization/practitioner
  - Or this can be in the form of organization/practitioner program(s), activities, or products (i.e., resources) with racial equity/anti-racism aims
  - And the racial equity/anti-racism work is focused on systemic change in one or more topic areas (e.g., working with school systems to build capacity for racial equity and long-term planning for racial equity; improve reproductive justice and access to reproductive care for Black Indigenous Latino People of Color or BILPOC individuals).

We agreed that the landscape scan and subsequent analyses will not include organizations or practitioners with the following characteristics to narrow sample size and include those seeking systemic change over meeting immediate needs:

- Direct-service providers
- Government entities or organizations
- Educational institutions
- Does not have a self-stated primary mission of racial equity and/or anti-racism, and does not have program(s), activities, or products with racial equity/anti-racism aims
- Has had only a one-time focus, or an ad-hoc focus, on issues of racial equity/ anti-racism (e.g., single awareness raising event, or a public statement as an ally or support but no agenda or activity to back it up)

In addition, we made extra efforts to identify organizations outside of Northern Illinois, or in Central or Southern Illinois.

Based upon the initial scan, we identified over seventy organizations. We agreed that all Forefront members on their membership list would be considered in the initial sample for the survey, including corporations and contacts at government agencies and educational institutions. Beyond their membership lists, Forefront identified an additional 148 organizations to include in the sample. In addition, attendees at Forefront’s first Racial Equity Collective Meeting on Monday November 14, 2022, recommended 104 organizations for inclusion in the scan. Upon consolidating and deduplicating all lists, we generated a list of 14,002 contacts.

This list of organizations was not a representative list of nonprofits or grant makers in Illinois, let alone all those that are working to advance racial equity. Based on discussions with Forefront, we agreed to use

this initial list from the environmental scan as a starting point for a respondent-driven sample in which those on the list could refer other individuals or organizations, thereby increasing our pool of organizations likely to be involved in racial equity work.

## Design and Dissemination of the Survey

In collaboration with Forefront, NORC developed a web-based survey, the *Racial Equity Collective (REC) Mapping Survey*, to gather information from organizations working in Illinois about their racial equity programs, policies or practitioners and obtain consent to feature the information on the interactive mapping tool. Where possible, we drew on existing terms and definitions used in Forefront's membership database and Candid (a social impact data organization).

The basic structure of the survey was:

- Screener questions to determine, from the point of view of the respondent, whether their organization was engaged in racial equity work in Illinois and whether that work went beyond direct service.
- Organizational information: address, service area
- Program descriptions: name, industry, equity topic, description, length of time in operation.
- Policy descriptions: name, industry, equity topic description, length of time in operation.
- Other descriptions: name, industry, equity topic, description, length of time in operation.
- Description of organization's biggest challenge to advancing racial equity.
- Demographics about organizational leadership
- Contact information.
- Consent to appear on the map
- Referrals for up to three other organizations to complete the survey.

We programmed the survey in English using the Qualtrics software, and the length depended upon whether or not organizations were engaged in activities other than direct services, and how many programs or policies they reported.

The survey was intended for organizations, and not individuals. Multiple individuals in an organization received a single link and were encouraged to work collaboratively across the organization to assure their response was representative.

In addition to the original links we sent to individuals identified through the environmental scan, we developed a link for the general public to sign up to take the survey. Forefront disseminated this link through press releases, newsletters, and social media. NORC reviewed those who signed up against the original list to remove duplications, and then sent new organizational links to each.

We launched the survey on Tuesday January 17<sup>th</sup>— National Day of Racial Healing — and stopped sending reminders or invitations to complete the survey on February 27, 2023. Overall, we sent 58 invitations through referrals from the survey, and 107 through new sign ups. Forefront also identified seven more organizational contacts following the initial launch.

Additionally, we invited 75 organizations with educational and governmental affiliations to participate and share the survey with their networks. These contacts do not factor into the sample size as they were not the target of the survey but more of an avenue to solicit other organizations working on racial equity. Forefront supported the dissemination of the survey by sending personalized reminders to select organizations, including those that started and nearly completed the survey as well as organizations that were downstate.

NORC offered e-mail and some phone support to respondents, answering over 60 questions and requests, and followed up with about a dozen individuals who signed up for new surveys but already had links from our original outreach. Upon request, we offered a Word version of the survey so organizations could prepare their responses before entering them.

## Survey

At the completion of data collection, NORC cleaned and analyzed the data, and in the process, constructed an Excel database to populate the Racial Equity Collective (REC) map. The cleaning process included identifying multiple responses from the same organization and removing those that were incomplete. In addition, we identified incomplete data (e.g., missing addresses, or program names or descriptions), and duplicate names or descriptions in multiple fields. These issues were consolidated in an Excel spreadsheet and shared with Forefront for resolution.

Analysis involved calculation of totals and descriptive statistics of each question, aggregating topics and industries across policies, programs, and other activities, and reviewing open text fields to identify limitations of the study and conduct a thematic analysis of the challenges of doing racial equity work in Illinois. We also incorporated metadata, such as organizational type and industry, from Forefront's membership list.

## Survey and Scan Limitations

As the field of operationalizing the terms racial equity and measuring the impacts of efforts to advance racial equity are new, we chose to offer more theoretical definitions of racial equity and then allow respondents to determine whether their organizations' work is or is not seeking to achieve racial equity. This subjective perspective means that organizations that claimed to have racial equity programs or policies have not been verified or validated by NORC or Forefront at this time. In addition, we should remember that the findings were drawn from a purposeful and not a representative sample, and so do not represent the total number of racial equity programs and policies in Illinois at this point in time. Further, the findings present a snapshot of the racial equity programs and policies at this time and cannot be compared quantitatively with past measures. Future or repeated implementation of the survey should also be considered with caution as they may not reflect changes in volume over time, but changes in the reach and responsiveness of the survey.

## REC Mapping Survey Sample Size

Total sample size counts:

- Initial sample size: 9,376 individuals representing 1,402 organizations
- Number of invitations to referrals: 58 organizations
- Number of invitations to new sign-ups: 107 organizations
- New contacts identified by Forefront: 7 organizations.

**Total sample size = 1,574 organizations**

In terms of limitation with the survey questions, though most respondents offered the appropriate types of information for each field, some had difficulty with response options and with knowing how to complete the survey. First, respondents may have had difficulty knowing whether they offered more than direct services or felt that offering direct services was a racial equity intervention. Many determined they only provide direct services, which essentially ended the survey. Others reported engaging in “programs” that primarily offered direct services (e.g., medical care, counseling, food services), thereby completing the survey. In general, respondents had challenges with reporting things as programs versus policies (and some listed the same in both). Some programs or policies did not have discrete “branded” names and offered general types of services or activities as the name. Others offered descriptions of multiple programs under one program description (thereby offering more than five). While we generally deferred to respondents for how they would like their responses to appear—as the survey explicitly asked respondents to present details as they would like them to appear on the map—in some cases we have standardized naming conventions for comparability across programs, policies, and other activities.

The NORC research team, primarily NORC Senior Research Associate Alexandria Figueroa, subsequently analyzed the interview transcripts using the qualitative analysis software package NVivo. Upon completion of the project, NORC will destroy all copies of the interview recordings and transcripts to maintain confidentiality with interviewees.

## RESULTS

### Survey Results

A total of 437 organizations started the survey, and 333 of those completed it, with the remaining 104 starting but not finishing it. This is a response rate of 21 percent, and 47 percent of those that completed were Forefront members. Among organizations that completed the survey, 182 consented to appearing on the Forefront REC map. Exhibit 1 provides a breakdown of the characteristics of those who completed, consented to being mapped, and did not complete the survey.

**Exhibit 1.** Most Respondents were Affiliated with Forefront Prior to Taking the Survey

Forefront Status	Completers		Consent to Map	
	N	%	N	%
Salesforce ID* (N=383)	297	78	153	84
Members as of 1.1.23* (N=198)	158	80	79	43
New to Forefront (N=54)	36	66	22	40

\*Salesforce ID and membership are not mutually exclusive.

## Screening Questions

Exhibit 2 presents findings from the screening questions on whether organizations engaged in racial equity work in Illinois and whether that work was undertaken in ways other than through direct services. The survey terminated for those that did not engage in racial equity work in Illinois and only provided direct services. Only 22 organizations that started the survey did not work in Illinois.

**Exhibit 2.** Most Respondents Engaged in Racial Equity Work in Ways Other than Direct Services

Screener Questions	N	%
<b>Engaged in Racial Equity Work (N=437)</b>		
<b>Yes*</b>	397	91
<b>No</b>	40	9
<b>Type of Racial Equity Work (N=397)</b>		
<b>Direct Services Only</b>	104	26
<b>Policy Initiatives or Programs Only</b>	138	35
<b>Both Direct Services and Policies Initiatives or Programs</b>	134	34

\*Includes 115 that didn't complete the survey.

By using meta-data from Forefront's Membership List (dated 11/30/22), we learned more about 79 organizations that reported they offered direct services. Of those, most were operating non-profits (n=74) and they worked in the industries of human services (19%), education (10%), health (8%), and arts and culture (7%).

## Characteristics of Organizations Engaged in Racial Equity Work Beyond Direct Services

Among respondents that passed the screening questions, most worked in the Northern part of Illinois, were operating non-profits, and were engaged in racial equity programs (Exhibit 3).

**Exhibit 3.** Survey Included Mostly Non-Profit Organizations Offering Programs in Northern Illinois

Characteristics	N	%
<b>Service Areas (n=256)</b>		
Specific regions only	145	57
Statewide	111	43
<b>Service Region, (multiple choice) (n=145)</b>		
Includes Northern IL	133	92
Includes Central IL	14	10
Includes Southern IL	1	1
<b>Organizational Type (n=259)</b>		
Operating Nonprofit	189	75
Private Foundation	21	8
Consultant or Advisor	12	5
Other	11	4
Community Foundation	7	3
Corporation	4	2
Independent Foundation	2	1
Government Grant Maker	2	1
<b>Type of Racial Equity Work (multiple choice) (n=262)</b>		
Includes Programs	207	82
Includes Policies or Policy Initiatives	156	62
Includes Other	15	6

Respondents reported that just under half of their senior leaders were BILPOC, and less than half reported that most of their senior leadership positions (e.g., Chief of..., program directors, senior managers, etc.) were BILPOC. Only 22 percent of respondents indicated that their Board was over fifty percent BILPOC.

**Exhibit 4a.** Less than 50% surveyed organizations were led by BILPOC Boards and Senior Leaders

Organizational Staffing	N	%
<b>BILPOC Senior Leader (N=194)</b>		
Yes	92	47
No	102	53
<b>Percent BILPOC Leadership Team (N=193)</b>		
Under 25%	52	27
25% to 50%	54	28
51% to 75%	42	22
76% to 100%	45	23
<b>Majority BILPOC Board (N=192)</b>		
Yes	92	48
No	100	52

**Exhibit 4b.** Nearly Half of Organizations Surveyed Were Small and the majority of their staff were Black Indigenous Latine and other People Of Color.

Organization: Staff Size Range (N=195)		
Less than 10	76	39
10-50	80	41
51-200	24	12
More than 200	15	8
Entire Staff Percent BILPOC (n=195)		
Under 25%	31	16
25% to 50%	55	28
51% to 75%	55	28
76% to 100	54	28

## Number and Types of Racial Equity Programs and Policies

Overall, the organizations that completed the survey reported undertaking at least **600 programs** and **262 policies** that in part sought to achieve racial equity. This is an undercount as some organizations described multiple programs or policies under one name. Most reported more than one program (81%), which was defined as “a plan or system under which action may be taken toward a goal.” In addition, most reported more than one policy or policy initiative (61%), which was defined as “a set of ideas or plans that are used as a basis for making decisions, especially in politics, economics, or business.” Organizations were allowed to characterize their activity as “other” as well, and 15 organizations (6%) chose to do so. One such organization (Bold Agenda) described their work as consulting, whereas others could have reported their work as programs or policies. Among the reported programs and policies, one other organization (America Indian Association) presented information about a practitioner in the racial equity field.

Among the reported programs and policies, most existed for less than five years, followed by those that have been operating for more than 10 years (Exhibit 5). Many organizations reported that their racial equity was central to their mission and purpose, which may explain the length of time of reported activities.



**Exhibit 5.** Most Organizations Reported that their Racial Equity Programs or Policies have been Operational for Less than Five Years, Followed by Ten or More Years

Length of Time Operational	Program (N=538)		Policy (N=242)	
	N	%	N	%
1 - 4 years	273	51	150	62
5 - 9 years	96	18	38	16
10 years or more	165	31	54	22

Organizations were asked to choose all the industries and topics of focus for their programs and policies and could choose more than one. Across both, the most common selection was “other”, but without a field to explain this response, we cannot say what was meant. Exhibit 6 lists the top five most reported industries and equity topics among organizations that responded to the survey. While not identical in rank, most selections are shared. The full list of industries and topics can be found in the Appendix.

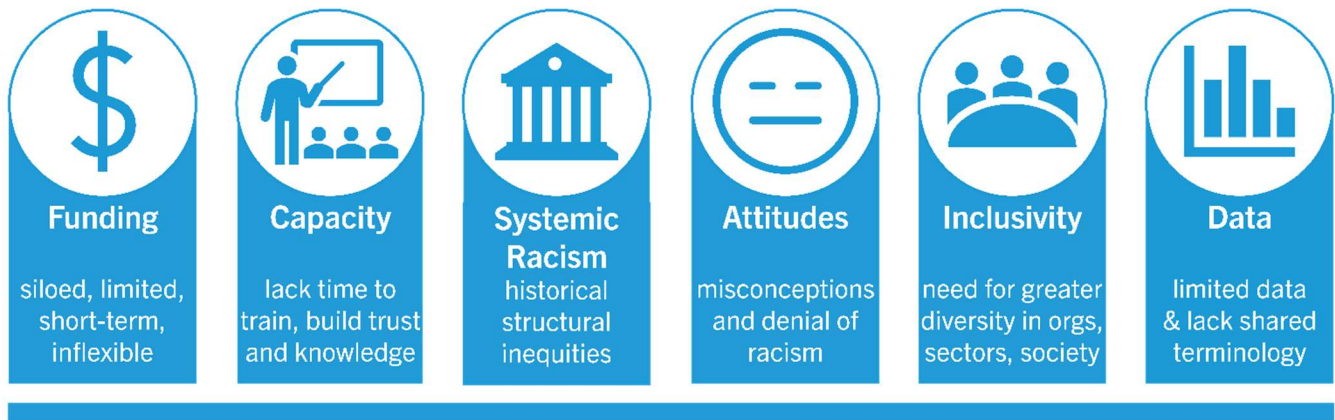
**Exhibit 6.** The Top Five Industries and Equity Topics Among 600 Programs and 262 Policies

Programs		
	<i>Industries (N=576)* (n, %)</i>	<i>Equity Topics (N=2217)* (n, %)</i>
1	Human services (74, 13)	Children, Families, & Youth Development (249, 11)
2	Education - K-12 (71, 12)	Policy & advocacy (215, 10)
3	Community improvement (70, 12)	Trauma, violence, & healing (203, 9)
4	Health & healthcare (58, 10)	Health & Healthcare (172, 8)
5	Arts & culture (48, 8)	Employment & Labor (151, 7)
Policies		
	<i>Industries (N=243)* (n, %)</i>	<i>Equity Topics (N=756)* (n, %)</i>
1	Human services (34, 14)	Trauma, violence, & healing (76, 10)
2	Community improvement (29, 12)	Employment & labor (75, 10)
3	Health & health care (27, 11)	Children, Families, & Youth Development (74, 10)
4	Education - K-12 (23, 9)	Health & healthcare (67, 9)
5	Arts & culture (13, 5)	Housing (63, 8)

\*Not mutually exclusive.

## Biggest Challenges To Engaging In Racial Equity Work Identified in the Survey

In response to an open-ended question about the organization's biggest challenge with doing racial equity work, 174 organizations cited one or more of the following interrelated types of challenges:



Funding, or lack thereof, was the most cited challenge. Respondents described issues with funding being siloed and/or limited to topics or issues, particular approaches (i.e., advocacy and/or direct services) or racial equity in general. Further, they noted issues with funders being flexible about funding, funding new approaches, or making long-term commitments. One respondent cited a report *Mismatched: Philanthropy's Response to the Call for Racial Justice*<sup>3</sup> which involved a detailed analysis of funding from 2015-2018 and preliminary analysis of 2020.

Respondents reflected this challenge in their responses to the REC Mapping survey, and cited lack of collective will to fund racial equity work and even hostility to funding such work. Some called on education for funders about the importance of this work, and described the ways that funding limited their operations due to constraints on the number of staff, staff time, number of partners, office space, and overall operations.

Capacity issues related to funding, and included training needs of staff and community members, and organizational stability. Time was frequently mentioned, including time to build capacity, trust, knowledge, and the will to create change. Respondents recognized that achieving racial equity requires long-term commitment from staff, funders, and community, as well as having the time and space to have difficult and challenging conversations.

In working to achieve racial equity, many respondents cited structural inequities and systemic racism as their biggest challenge. As dismantling racism and inequity is the ultimate goal of racial equity work, this challenge is essentially the impetus for the work itself. This was reflected in general comments about the

**“In 2018, the last year for which fully complete grants data are available, only 6 percent of philanthropic dollars supported racial equity work and only 1 percent supported racial justice work.”**

<sup>3</sup> <https://racialequity.org/mismatched/>

complexity and scale of the problem and the volume of inequities as well as comments directed at specific populations and the systems of inequity that affected them (e.g., tax-based education systems resulting disparities in educational resources). This ranged from the unhoused and children in public schools to mental health clinicians and prisoners.

Respondents often cited challenges with balancing interest in addressing systemic challenges with addressing immediate needs. Some phrased this as harm reduction versus eliminating root causes of systemic oppression or White supremacy culture. Tracing back to the issue of funding, some found it difficult to find funders willing to look beyond support to address immediate needs.

In terms of attitudes, many cited challenges in their communities and/or organizations with changing patterns and ‘old ways’ of going about their work. They described constant unlearning White dominant behaviors and approaches and learning more inclusive ways, resistance to changing the status quo, complacency, misconceptions, unwillingness to see racism as a problem. Respondents cited challenges with attitudes in particular communities (e.g., farming communities, immigrant communities) or people’s attitudes toward particular populations (e.g., unhoused, formerly incarcerated). They noted a need to shift focused attention on changing individual behaviors and to addressing root causes of structural or systemic oppression. They also recognized challenges engaging partners due to fear/stigma, one explaining, “We recognize that many partners perceive the current political and social climate as a threat if they were to publicly name their efforts to advance racial equity.” Along these lines, some cited challenges with legislators and/or politicians in racial equity work.

On inclusivity, respondents cited challenges related to their organizations (e.g., diversity of staff, volunteers, or boards), their fields (e.g., ballet, environmental movement, anti-nuclear movement, financial services), of the racial equity movement (e.g., engagement with American Indians), or society at large (e.g., needing welcoming spaces). Some of them referred to inclusivity in terms of increased engagement of those typically disenfranchised from power and centering voices of people of color.

Finally, several focused on the importance of having more inclusive data or data that is disaggregated by race/ethnicity so that needs of racial and ethnic minoritized groups are better identified and documented. Better, more inclusive data was linked to opportunities with attracting funding. Related to data, a couple respondents pointed out the need to come to consensus on optimal goals for racial equity work as well as operationalizing racial equity work. They noted limited data, and “limited shared terminology, language, definitions and approaches across sectors to continuously advance racial equity impact.”

## Interview Summary

Most organizations who participated in the survey and consented to appear on the map were from the Chicagoland area. Therefore, Forefront and NORC worked to gather additional information on the racial equity work being done across the entire state of Illinois by embarking on a qualitative study of organizations outside of Chicagoland. The qualitative study sought to learn about these organizations and the ways they define and pursue racial equity in Illinois. We also sought to gather firsthand feedback from these organizations on Forefront’s initiative to map organizations doing racial equity work in Illinois, and their opinions on how useful such a mapping tool may be to their work.

In 2023, Forefront and NORC conducted 10 qualitative, one-hour, interviews for this study with organizations at each major region of the state. Organizations served Northern Illinois Quad Cities area,

Champaign area in Central Illinois, Carbondale and Grand Chain in Southern Illinois, and Edwardsville and East St. Louis in Western Illinois. Neither the interviewees nor anyone else from their organizations had completed the Racial Equity Map Survey prior to the interview. All interviews were conducted via Zoom with Sharmin Shahjahan, Director from Forefront’s Racial Equity Collective and one NORC researcher (Maysoun Freij or Eduardo Salinas) as discussion leaders. All interview discussions were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed for accuracy and reference. NORC houses all data within NORC secure servers and only select authorized staff have access to interview data. Interviewees were offered compensation for their participation, which all but one interviewee accepted.

## Interviewees’ Racial Equity Work

Organizations described a range of racial equity work in their communities, definitions of racial equity, partners for collaboration, regional factors, and facilitators and barriers to the racial equity work they do.

### Definitions of Racial Equity

Organizations defined racial equity in various ways, and four organizations we interviewed noted that *data was a main catalyst in determining what equity issues to address in their respective communities*. Those organizations explained that data on the highest need individuals led to discussions on how to improve and support systems and solve problems within their communities. An organization in Southern Illinois noted,

*“So, our mission is to say that we do have to pay attention to the data and the evidence, because oftentimes when people think about diversity, it’s like, how do you serve everybody? How do you do everything? The way I see it my role is a problem solver. So, I try to look at the data and think about, within those ethnic groups, what data leads us to solve what problems?”*

Organizations across the board mentioned that their organization defined equity by ensuring equal opportunities for all residents; ensuring community members were aware of their rights as it relates to housing, education, and work; reducing harm of violence; and leveling the playing field for all residents to achieve the same outcomes.

Many organizations described an internal component to their definition and worked to ensure that their staff was appropriately educated in how to address these issues. An organization in the Quad Cities explained that they are:

*“...always looking at how we can be more knowledgeable, more educated, how we can be sure that we understand how people want to interact and things. That things that maybe might be normal or feel normal for me but might be offensive to somebody else.”*

This was echoed across the organizations we interviewed.

## Regional Differences

The organizations we interviewed are all based outside the Chicagoland area and face different local and regional contexts that drive how they prioritize racial equity issues and how they approach their work. A few of the main factors that influence the racial equity work of these organizations are the historical

legacies of exploitative and segregationist policies toward African Americans, the present-day political climate, the presence of pre-existing BILPOC-led racial equity work, the population size and level of development in which they operate, the proximity to state borders and to other major cities within surrounding states, the level of support received from existing institutions in their areas (e.g., universities, local governments, chambers of commerce, etc.), and the amount of “buy-in” from local actors such as schoolteachers and/or the police.



An area with notable influence from historical legacies of exploitation and segregation is around old Carbondale Koppers railroad tie plant. The Carbondale Koppers railroad tie plant operated from 1901 – 1991 and concentrated on recruiting African Americans for work involving daily contact with toxic chemicals such as dioxin and creosote. Workers and their families were largely concentrated in ghettos near the plant, where contamination was highest. Because of this history, organizations working on racial equity near this region focus the majority of their efforts on advancing environmental justice. Other racial equity efforts in the Carbondale area have focused on education and policing, with mixed results due to resistance from teaching and police staff.

Additionally, East St. Louis, Illinois, experiences the effects of the nearby presence of St. Louis, Missouri, in its racial equity work efforts. The St. Louis area houses the most diverse population in Illinois outside of Chicago. However, a local organizer noted that this area likely exceeds the Chicagoland area in terms of polarization on racial equity issues. Despite their community being nearly entirely African American (98%) and majority poor (65%), one interviewee explained:

*“[This is] the home of the Ferguson uprising. Just literally miles from where we are... [Yet] that bridge, that Mississippi River is like a continental divide in terms of cultural and everyday experience that the Ferguson uprising wasn’t felt here and wasn’t responded to in the same way.”*

Newer organizations that focused on racial equity work in East St. Louis have also noted some tensions with pre-existing racial equity work led by the African American community in the area, indicating a local struggle over the ownership and legitimacy of racial equity efforts. Though not explicitly linked by our interviewees, this distrust may stem from a sense of abandonment in the area regarding racial equity issues. One interviewee noted:

*“Since the late 1940s early 1950s, the composition of East St. Louis has changed. And a part of that transition was when SIUE moved to Edwardsville and established its sort of campus in Edwardsville, Illinois. We still have a center in East St, Louis, but a part of the narrative has been essentially the university kind of left the community. And so what does it mean to heal that relationship and rebuild that relationship?”*

This sentiment was echoed by another interviewee who described East St. Louis as follows:

*“We are a desert in every way you can talk about. Food desert. But part of that is a philanthropic desert...and so we are continuously struggling on the resources and trying to tackle generational deep poverty. Cities like East St. Louis and our surrounding communities were designed for commerce, not for people. And so, we don’t have the regulatory conditions that support people well.”*

The East St. Louis area also exhibited a high degree of volunteer-led informal organizations working on racial equity in the region. In East St. Louis and in many other regions, interviewees were often a part of multiple organizations, whether it be on a board or as a volunteer and established those relationships internally. Many of these organizations also worked to integrate and uplift new groups being established in their communities, particularly if they were led by people of color. Interviewees mentioned the need for events and spaces to bring these groups together such as a community justice center, legislative summits, and symposiums.



In the Quad Cities region of Illinois, the present-day political climate and the proximity of the lowan state border have influenced some of the focus of the organizations working on racial equity towards reproductive justice, an issue affecting lowans much more so than Illinoisans. One interviewer summarized it in this way:

*“Iowa is getting more attention right now because the legislature has been very horrible, not necessarily in terms of racial equity, in terms of public education, book banning, LGBTQ. So, Iowa is going backwards. So, our organization seems to be a little focused on some of these horrible things in Iowa right now.”*

Organizations also emphasized the importance of support from larger organizations with presence in their communities, such as the NAACP, universities, Chambers of Commerce, community foundations, consultant organizations, and faith-based organizations. Collaborating or receiving support/legitimacy from local institutions has the potential to make organization’s racial equity work more impactful.

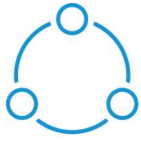


The organizations we interviewed collaborated with various partners across their region. Most interviewees mentioned that because of the size of their regions, collaborating with all the organizations in their area was beneficial in advancing their work. Interviewees emphasized the need for community building and relationships rooted in trust. One organization in central Illinois emphasized that:

*“Because of our size...we know everyone who’s doing the work. And if they haven’t started, they know that they probably need to come to us. Because we’re one of the main funding sources as well. So they’re going to come to us.”*

## Factors to Advance Racial Equity Work & Successes

The organizations we interviewed all had common factors to their work.



**Collaboration.** Organizations emphasized that collaboration was crucial to their work. One organization explained that it was able to:

*“create mechanisms for organizations to do collaborative budgeting that were equity based...it really means we are creating a movement that is collaborative at its deepest core”*

This was echoed by other organizations. Interviewees also saw success in collaboration by co-sponsoring events, helping to grow non-profits in their communities, establish relationships with policymakers to enact lasting change, bring in the younger generation as successors, and working across the same institution (e.g., campuses) to synchronize their work.



**Community building.** Local organizations sought to build equity in a variety of ways. Interviewees cited success in many community-building activities, including:

providing trauma informed care and trauma informed responses, transforming schools and detention centers through social and emotional health, educating individuals who are getting out of prison about their rights, holding a space for larger community conversations, investing in places that have a potential to grow, establishing a lifetime achievement award for longstanding organizations in their community, sending out climate surveys, and establishing an avenue for bias reports.



**Leadership support.** Some organizations we interviewed emphasized that leadership support and buy in was crucial to success. For the academic centers, leadership of senior administrators not directly involved in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) was essential for the work to progress. One organization mentioned needing the “*chancellor and...colleagues in senior leadership team*” to work together. Another organization

explained:

*“I don’t feel like it’s just that the DEI division and sort of me in this role sort of shouldering it all. I’m fortunate that certainly on the senior leadership team, our provost, the other vice chancellors, they’ve bought in...we are adopting kind of a shared equity, shared kind of leadership model around pushing these things forward. And so that’s been promising [and] I feel like we are starting to change course a bit.”*

Interviewees explained that these activities led to sustainability, as much of the existing work was institutionalized in the community or through policies.



## Barriers to Racial Equity Work & Setbacks

These barriers reflected similar challenges reported by survey respondents.

**Funding capacity.** Organizations often encountered a lack of funding capacity, leading to a lack of resources and forcing organizations to work with what they had. This led to slow transition periods when leadership changed, marketing issues, and a focus on direct services instead of larger systems change.

**Attitudes. Community partners'** attitudes around structural local issues were barriers in these organizations' work. Organizations felt that they were not listened to and stonewalled by officials in the city or county and continued to deal with the lasting effects of segregation. They lacked the resources needed to devote additional attention or funds to council meetings and commission boards; thus, they could not control policy implementation even if they were successful at policy making in these arenas. Further, the lack of racial diversity and the "Black and white" divide of many of these smaller, rural communities were barriers that seemed bigger than their organizations could manage. An organization in Central Illinois noted that these structural barriers are *"going to be hard to overcome with, like, a youth basketball program."*

**Systemic racism.** Organizations described navigating difficult historical and cultural contexts when addressing racial equity. Many organizations cited long standing tension between racial groups, lack of interest or fading interest in diversity work, and a lack of "space for all at the table." A few organizations mentioned the clash of cultures when discussing policing in their communities and how they needed to work to break through in a meaningful way. One interviewee noted,

*"I think that there are some people who are saying one thing and behind the scenes are doing another because maybe they feel a sense of loss or are threatened by some of the changes and things that are happening."*

**Inclusivity.** While collaboration and relationship building were often a facilitator, some organizations discussed building relationships as a barrier. One organization explained that there were similar positions to theirs amongst local groups, and this participant was careful not to step on the other's toes.

**Limited Capacity.** Another organization highlighted that building relationships with groups who were historically disenfranchised took additional time. There was also a high turnover of staff in these organizations due to burnout, and when staff leave, they take those relationships with them leaving a void in the organization. Siloing among organizations was also described as a barrier.

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**"We need to go beyond Chicago if we say we're Illinois. That is our experience. Dollars from Missouri don't cross the river enough or significantly. And the Chicagoland resource, where understandably 10 of the 12 million Illinoisans live in that area, doesn't trickle down. And so, we are continuously struggling on the resources and trying to tackle generational deep poverty..."**

## The Illinois Database of Racial Equity Asset Map Feedback

Overall, the organizations we interviewed were positive about the map and being featured on the map.

### Impressions of the Map

Organizations we interviewed found the map to be useful for bringing awareness to the work that all of the organizations across the state are doing. Many interviewees identified the map as a way to identify future partnerships and speakers, to connect their constituents with resources, or to find intersections or ideas from other communities on how to effect lasting change. One interviewee explained:

*I've often gotten calls from people that are like, I've got an idea; do you guys have money for that? And my first advice to them is like, why don't you find out who else is doing that work? Or talk to another agency that's doing similar work and you can talk to this other nonprofit about what it's like to open up your own nonprofit and giving them some places to go to do that. Because we often aren't funding someone off the street that hasn't really done anything yet. I guess that happens sometimes. But they need to kind of establish themselves and work with the existing partnerships. So that would be another good use of this.*

**Interviewees appreciated the Forefront Racial Equity Collective Map and did not offer any recommendations on how to improve it or any critiques.**

Generally, participants noted that the map would be useful to see who else “is at the table” and in the surrounding community doing the work already. One participant also noted that it is very important to emphasize that racial equity work is still being done, though it may not be at the front of everyone’s mind.

### Interest in Appearing on the Map

All participants were willing to appear on the map. After each interview, NORC e-mailed all participants a link to complete the survey in order to appear on the map, along with a thank you.

None of the interviewees cited concerns or issues with appearing on the map. One participant mentioned that they were in a time of transition and wanted to delay appearing on the map. When asked if such public attention to racial equity work would deter someone from appearing on the map, one participant noted that organizations not wanting to appear on the map “... would be very problematic for me, if anybody felt like they had to, you know, shy away from showing how they were... showing support for [Black] people.”

## CONCLUSION

The initial survey findings provide evidence of organizations with robust programs and policies to address racial equity in Illinois. We acknowledge study limitations about the purposive and non-representative sample and respondents' subjective choice in determining whether or not they are working to advance racial equity in Illinois. Yet, the survey gathered detailed information on 860 programs and policies led by organizations seeking to create systemic changes in Illinois. In identifying the industries and topics of their work, as well as their description of the biggest challenges, organizations often sought to address systemic inequities through direct services, such as programs for human services, education, community improvement or health and health care. Many organizations also seek to address attitudes and cultural perceptions of racism and racial inequities through arts and culture.

The survey drew few respondents serving central or southern Illinois, though given the non-representative nature of the survey likely reflects Forefront's and NORC's reach more than lack of work related to racial equity in these areas. The team engaged in in-depth interviews to identify and learn more about organizations downstate, their racial equity work, and their views on the REC Mapping survey. Respondents noted challenges with funding and capacity as well as attitudes and inclusivity as they pursue systemic change. Structural inequity and systemic racism are recognized as the impetus, yet biggest barriers to their work.

Our interviews with organizations and institutions outside of the Chicagoland area identified strong and longstanding efforts to address racial inequities in Central, Southern, and Northwestern parts of Illinois. The interviewees themselves showed deep personal and professional commitment and expertise in DEI and efforts to advance racial equity. They were eager to share information about both long and short-term work, as well as collaborations that they formed. Some cited recent senior leadership support for racial equity work as fundamental to building momentum, and other cited new funding sources to sponsor activities, including funding related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Interviewees were supportive of the map and indicated interest in participating in the survey in order to appear on it. Like Forefront, they saw the map as an opportunity to seek out organizations with similar interests in their area, as well as potential funding sources. Since completion of the interviews, fourteen more organizations completed the survey and will appear on the map.

Given the size of the state and the interconnectedness of local organizations and individuals working to advance racial equity, the interviews provided an opportunity for Forefront to reconnect with some organizations and meet others for the first time. Aside from generating more information for the map, these interviews provided opportunities for relationship building and strategic planning, including through potential participation in Forefront's annual meeting and Racial Equity Collective.

# APPENDIX

Exhibit A.1. Full list of Industries and Topics for 600 Programs and 262 Policies\*

PROGRAMS					
INDUSTRY AREAS (N=576)*	N	%	EQUITY TOPICS (N=2217)*	N	%
OTHER	76	13	Children, Families, and Youth Development	249	11
HUMAN SERVICES	74	13	Policy and Advocacy	215	10
EDUCATION - K-12	71	12	Trauma, Violence, and Healing	203	9
COMMUNITY IMPROVEMENT	70	12	Health and Healthcare	172	8
HEALTH AND HEALTH CARE	58	10	Employment and Labor	151	7
ARTS AND CULTURE	48	8	Housing	142	6
EDUCATION - OTHER	29	5	Addressing Hate and White Supremacy	124	6
EDUCATION - ADULT	26	4	Other	120	5
PHILANTHROPY	23	4	Workplace Culture	123	6
ENVIRONMENT	15	3	Criminal Justice	93	4
AGRICULTURE, FISHING, FOOD SECURITY, AND/OR FORESTRY	12	2	Food Justice	93	4
INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION	12	2	Immigration & Refugee Rights	78	4
PUBLIC SAFETY	11	2	Environmental Justice	74	3
STEM	11	2	Voting Rights and Democracy Building	73	3
EDUCATION - EARLY CHILDHOOD	10	2	Media & Technology	62	3
EDUCATION - HIGHER ED	9	2	Philanthropy	61	3
PUBLIC AFFAIRS	8	1	Community Planning: Land and Transportation	59	3
EDUCATION - VOCATIONAL	6	1	Language Justice	56	3
SPORTS AND RECREATION	4	1	Reproductive Justice	43	2
SOCIAL SCIENCES	2	0	Reparations	26	1
RELIGION	1	0			
HUMAN RIGHTS	0	0			
POLICIES					
INDUSTRY AREAS (N=243)*	N	%	EQUITY TOPICS (N=756)*	N	%
OTHER	38	16	Trauma, Violence, and Healing	76	10
HUMAN SERVICES	34	14	Employment and Labor	75	10
COMMUNITY IMPROVEMENT	29	12	Children, Families, and Youth Development	74	10
HEALTH AND HEALTH CARE	27	11	Health and Healthcare	67	9
EDUCATION - K-12	23	9	Housing	63	8
ARTS AND CULTURE	13	5	Workplace Culture	62	8
ENVIRONMENT	10	4	Criminal Justice	44	6
EDUCATION - HIGHER ED	9	4	Environmental Justice	34	4
PUBLIC AFFAIRS	9	4	Immigration & Refugee Rights	34	4
PUBLIC SAFETY	9	4	Language Justice	33	4
EDUCATION - EARLY CHILDHOOD	8	3	Other	30	4

<b>INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION</b>	8	3	Voting Rights and Democracy Building	29	4
<b>PHILANTHROPY</b>	8	3	Community Planning: Land and Transportation	27	4
<b>AGRICULTURE, FISHING, FOOD SECURITY, AND/OR FORESTRY</b>	4	2	Food Justice	25	3
<b>EDUCATION - OTHER</b>	4	2	Philanthropy	24	3
<b>STEM</b>	4	2	Reproductive Justice	24	3
<b>EDUCATION - ADULT</b>	2	1	Media & Technology	20	3
<b>EDUCATION - VOCATIONAL</b>	2	1	Reparations	15	2
<b>SOCIAL SCIENCES</b>	1	0	Policy and Advocacy	0	0
<b>SPORTS AND RECREATION</b>	1	0	Addressing Hate and White Supremacy	0	0
<b>HUMAN RIGHTS</b>	0	0			
<b>RELIGION</b>	0	0			

\*The N's reflect the number of industries or topics selected for a total of 600 programs and 262 topics, as organizations could select more than one. The percent is calculated out of the total number of industries or topics, and reflects the share out of all (100%) of industries or topics selected.