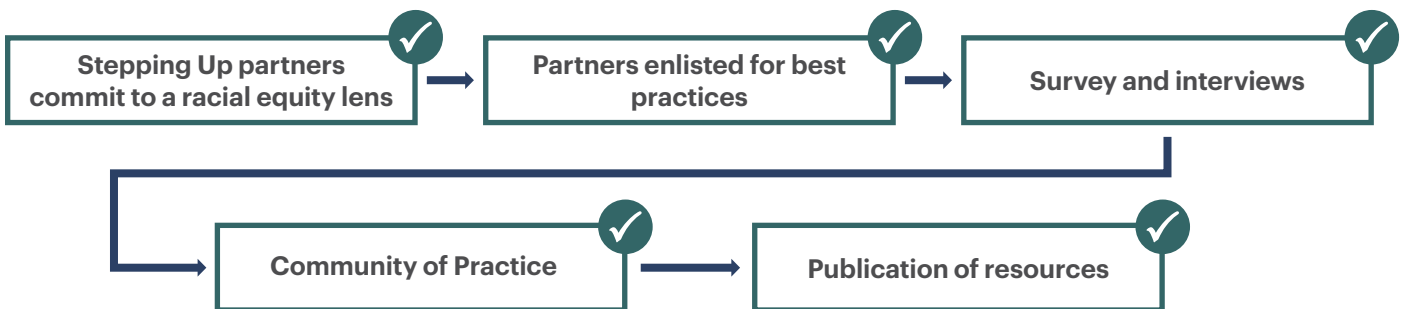


# Stepping Up to Advance Racial Equity: Lessons Learned and Implications for the Field

Since the launch of Stepping Up in 2015, the goal of the initiative has been and continues to be to reduce the overincarceration of people with behavioral health needs. However, the societal reckoning that followed the murder of George Floyd in 2020 underscored the need to explicitly center racial equity in criminal justice initiatives.<sup>1</sup> Several counties participating in Stepping Up started to lead efforts to address the dual disproportionality experienced at the intersection of the behavioral health and criminal justice systems by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) individuals.<sup>2</sup> Inspired by the work of trailblazing counties and in response to the need for guidance in this area, the Stepping Up partners—The Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center, National Association of Counties, and American Psychiatric Association Foundation—committed to a plan to apply a racial equity lens to the Stepping Up initiative. The Blackprint Institute, The Center for Effective Public Policy, and C4 Innovations were enlisted to identify best practice guidance in advancing equity and including the voices of people with lived experience. Initial work included conducting a survey and interviews with seven sites identified as early leaders in addressing racial equity, followed by gathering additional information from Stepping Up Innovator counties and creating a fieldwide Community of Practice focused on implementing equity-centered policies and practices. The CSG Justice Center published the [Applying the Stepping Up Framework to Advance Racial Equity](#) guide and adapted the foundational [Stepping Up framework](#) to incorporate racial equity as a pillar of the initiative.



Through these efforts, the Stepping Up team has worked closely with multiple counties striving to advance racial equity and identified key strategies and opportunities for growth in this work. Informed by these initial efforts, this brief provides Stepping Up counties with six lessons learned from the field to offer both practical strategies and a hopeful reminder that small steps can turn into strong strides.

# 1. Determine where your county falls along the spectrum of efforts to advance racial equity.

Racial equity efforts focus on strategies that address racial disparities and center equity for people experiencing disproportionalities at this critical intersection. These efforts fall along a spectrum as counties continue to grapple with the prevalence of racial disparities in their systems while adapting to political climates and priorities. Determining where your community falls along this spectrum, based on the descriptions provided below, provides a baseline from which to begin or further your efforts.



## **a. A set of Stepping Up counties are hitting their stride, centering equity and addressing racial disparities experienced among people of color with serious mental illness in the criminal justice system.**

Stepping Up counties that have demonstrated progress embraced and implemented strategies incorporating racial equity into policy, programs, and practices. Following Stepping Up's [Set, Measure, Achieve guidance](#), these counties developed targeted data analysis to measure the number of people with serious mental illness (SMI) in their local jails disaggregated by race and ethnicity. They're also working with behavioral health leaders and community partners to improve connections to care and referral practices for BIPOC individuals. **The most significant target areas for racial equity efforts are diversion and deflection opportunities at key intercepts in the criminal justice system.** Some counties are using racial equity assessment tools to evaluate critical program operation practices and policies, determine structural changes, and properly apply a racial equity lens.



## **b. Some counties are tackling racial equity with other justice reform efforts with varying degrees of success due to siloed efforts.**

Along the spectrum, counties are developing and incorporating racial equity efforts as part of broader criminal justice reform efforts and existing behavioral health initiatives. Stepping Up counties are applying a racial equity lens to target the overrepresentation of people of color with SMI at crucial intercepts to reduce jail overcrowding, the SMI population at bookings, and the average length of stay in the criminal justice system for individuals with behavioral health concerns. However, counties face challenges when racial equity efforts are siloed, resulting in a decrease or lack of leadership support, limited resource allocation, and challenges with long-term sustainability when the political will does not exist to make such efforts in a stand-alone approach. Counties facing these challenges can access technical assistance, confer with peer counties who have navigated similar situations, and build or strengthen relationships with county and agency officials through the [Stepping Up information request line](#).



## **c. Other counties need support in advancing such a large-scale change.**

Overall, counties recognize the need to center racial equity, and a majority acknowledge the overrepresentation of the BIPOC population in arrest, booking, and jail data.<sup>3</sup> Despite these insights, many counties need help navigating political climates and shifting priorities, securing leadership support, engaging system and community stakeholders, and accessing resources such as data, funding, staffing support, or authority to make policy, practice, or program changes. Counties facing these challenges may feel overwhelmed or unequipped to advance racial equity or address disparities. Stepping Up recommends a “one step, one policy” approach in which counties identify one task, policy, or practice that impacts racial equity as an essential first step.<sup>4</sup> Approaching this work one step at a time makes the work more manageable and allows small “wins” to build over time.



**One Step:** When facing difficulties in aligning stakeholders to advance racial equity, a “safe” first step for counties is to access a sample of data and analyze for any disparities that might come to light. This first dive into data does not need to be a comprehensive effort. Instead, it serves as an indicator for whether a need for racial equity efforts exists. The data can be specific to a program, such as the number of people participating in a mental health court. Alternatively, it can be a bigger picture look at jail bookings and underlying charges. Breaking out the data by race, ethnicity, gender, and age provides the opportunity to determine whether diversion opportunities are equitably available across populations and can point to improvements in policy and programming that may require a community to work across siloes and build more widespread support. If this early data is not available, counties can refer to data that is based on national averages or examples from similar communities demonstrating progress.

## 2. Establish leadership support, which can make or break racial equity efforts.

Successful racial equity initiatives require committed leadership and support from organizations and stakeholders with decision-making power to ensure that policy, practice, and programming changes are implemented. Key leaders, such as county commissioners, judges, jail administrators, and behavioral health directors, can endorse and participate in the planning process, providing leaders an opportunity to better understand the needs of the community and participate in the prioritization of next steps. In counties with broad support, agencies and organizations have a formal definition of racial equity, create comprehensive strategic plans, facilitate conversations among key system stakeholders and community partners, and incorporate the voice of community engagement. Unfortunately, many jurisdictions face challenges in obtaining strong commitment from leadership due to barriers such as competing priorities between programmatic and operational needs, lack of resources, reluctance to define and elevate racial equity efforts,<sup>5</sup> a lack of consensus on the scope of the problem and the approach needed, or a lack of buy-in due to historical and cultural factors.



**One Step:** One strategy to earn buy-in is to assemble a Stepping Up planning team or task force with cross-system partners and community representatives. Implementing this structure better positions a community to push racial equity work forward by demonstrating thoughtful planning, organization, and strong endorsement for racial equity efforts from key community stakeholders, including leaders of organizations that may be impacted by changes (such as an agency that runs a diversion program) and people with lived experience in the justice system.

## 3. Build capacity for data collection and analysis to center racial equity.

Applying a racial equity lens to Stepping Up efforts requires a data-driven approach to reduce bias and disparities. Analyzing data disaggregated by race and ethnicity helps counties identify the overrepresentation of racial and ethnic groups and differences in experience, access, and outcomes within their criminal justice and behavioral health systems. Counties have noted the importance of consistent data collection and access, the need for user-friendly data systems, and staff with the expertise

to analyze data and present findings that demonstrate equitable access to services and improved outcomes in a way that is relatable to county decision-makers.<sup>6</sup> Engaged community members may also have helpful insights on which data to analyze and be helpful in providing context to interpret data as it becomes available. Stepping Up counties that are tracking the four key measures should establish data tracking protocols that embed disaggregating data by race and ethnicity to allow for analysis of racial disparities and inform counties to pinpoint decision points where inequities can be reduced.



**One Step:** The Stepping Up [Set, Measure, Achieve \(SMA\) guidance](#) assists counties in establishing a methodical process for data collection and analysis. For example, a county may track the jail population first by the population that has screened positive for a SMI and then break down data on that population by race to determine whether racial and ethnic disparities exist and, furthermore, if the disparities are greater among the population with SMI. The SMA guidance includes steps for tracking other populations, including by gender and age. Stepping Up also provides a user-friendly progress tracking [tool](#) to assist sites. Additionally, Stepping Up staff can be available for assistance via the [Stepping Up information line](#), and sites are encouraged to sign up for a Community of Practice that brings together multiple sites needing assistance in data tracking and analysis.<sup>i</sup>

## 4. Invest resources in measuring the outcomes and impact of implemented policies and programming.

Despite the prevalence of racial equity efforts, the field has few examples of measurable success at this critical intersection. Just as it is important to invest in strong planning and implementation, it is equally important to measure for the intended outcomes. Counties run the risk of investing time, resources, and goodwill in racial equity efforts only to struggle to measure the impact and quantify their success. Further, neglecting this focus area can result in counties missing adverse effects and outcomes that unintentionally exacerbate disparities and inequity for BIPOC populations. Prioritizing data collection to measure outcomes during the planning and implementation process can help counties secure broader leadership support, ensure additional resources, and facilitate sustainability.



**One Step:** Establishing a relationship with a local university or outside data consultant can provide the needed support to counties that do not have the staff capacity to access and analyze critical data points to track for disparities and determine whether efforts to improve policies and programs are demonstrating positive outcomes. Additionally, a county can receive assistance by applying for a grant such as the Justice and Mental Health Collaboration Program (JMHCPC) grant, announced annually on the [JMHCPC website](#).

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i. Communities of Practice are periodically announced through the [Justice and Mental Health Collaboration Program website](#).

## 5. Engage community members and people with lived experience in the criminal justice and behavioral health systems.

“Nothing about us without us.”<sup>7</sup> This quote communicates that policies should not be decided on without the full participation of group members who would be affected. Community engagement is a crucial component to advance racial equity and eliminate racial disparities successfully. Behavioral health systems have long recognized the importance of including people with lived experience to support recovery, provide mentorship, and improve treatment outcomes.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, counties that are leading the way in this work understand the need to engage BIPOC communities impacted by the behavioral health and criminal justice systems in determining systems improvements to increase equity. Communities impacted at this intersection have a unique perspective and expertise that enhances problem-solving, identifies innovative community-level responses, and leverages networks that can increase the impact of racial equity efforts.



**One Step:** Ensuring that a planning team’s membership includes representation from people with lived experience is an imperative step. This representation may include people who have had direct experience with the criminal justice system, people with SMI and/or co-occurring substance use disorders, and BIPOC individuals. If this representation is missing, the planning team should recruit for this participation. In the case of more formalized planning structures, such as a Stepping Up planning team that reports to a [Criminal Justice Coordinating Council](#), the group’s by-laws should reflect this requirement.

## 6. Remember: Applying a racial equity lens at the intersection of behavioral health and criminal justice is a marathon, not a sprint.

Applying a racial equity lens and addressing disparities progresses along a continuum that includes progress and setbacks. It can be overwhelming to center racial equity in an environment in which resources are limited and stakeholders grapple with competing interests and the pressure of politically charged policies. At times, counties will have the elements needed to create momentum and progress, such as leadership support, stakeholder engagement, data access, and funding support. At other times, the components needed take time to marshal and coalesce. In some cases, racial equity efforts will stall due to loss of leadership support, shifts in priorities, lack of funding, resource constraints, and resistance due to prevailing culture. But at its core, racial equity efforts seek to improve the experience of BIPOC individuals, who are overrepresented and underserved in the criminal justice and behavioral health systems. This can range from small policy changes that open opportunities for deflection and diversion to more extensive additions to crisis response services, such as creating community responder and peer-led programming. No step is too small or insignificant if it moves the needle forward in providing equitable access, support, treatment, and justice regardless of race and with an understanding of people’s individual needs.



**One Step:** It is important for the planning team to develop short-term and long-term goals, recognizing that advancing racial equity and addressing disparities across the justice system is a long-term project. Planning teams may choose to start with identifying “low-hanging fruit” or easy wins. Tracking “process” outcomes in addition to “data-based” outcomes is important to demonstrating progress. For many sites, the establishment of a team or subcommittee focused on racial equity is in itself a worthy process measure. Building data capacity, adding staff, gaining the attention of decision-makers with time on agendas, and garnering support for policy and program changes are all examples of process outcomes to track. Tracking process outcomes will provide the momentum needed for the longer haul of demonstrating change through data.

## In Practice: Examples from Counties Advancing Racial Equity in Behavioral Health and Criminal Justice Systems

<b>Leadership Support</b>	<p>The Hennepin County, NC, Board declared racism a public health crisis in June 2020. The following year, the county board allocated \$240 million in American Rescue Plan Act funding across seven domains: health-based approaches, eviction prevention and intervention, bail reform, expungement, justice system diversion expansion, equitable victim support, and jury expansion.<sup>9</sup></p>
<b>Data Collection, Access, and Analysis</b>	<p>Charleston County, SC, developed and launched data dashboards that include race and ethnicity data to monitor trends in crime, diversion and deflection, arrests, and jail use activity in the community. The county also initiated a small-scale pilot program to engage jail-involved familiar faces in wraparound services with a focus on BIPOC populations to help improve outcomes and uncover system gaps.<sup>10</sup></p>
<b>Measuring Impact and Outcomes</b>	<p>Following <a href="#">a report</a> by the Center for Police Equity that identified racial disparities in their local jails, the City of St. Louis, MO, implemented two crisis intervention initiatives in 2021 funded with \$860,000 from their jail budget: a co-responder program between law enforcement and mental health clinicians and a crisis support 911 call diversion program. In the co-responder program's first eight months, the Cops and Clinicians teams responded to nearly 5,000 cases, diverting 95 percent of individuals from arrest and 87 percent from hospitalization. A study completed on the program estimates the community saved more than \$2.2 million in 2021.<sup>11</sup> Between 2021 and the end of 2022, the average daily jail population for Black individuals decreased from 561 to 463.<sup>12</sup></p>
<b>Community Engagement</b>	<p>St. Louis County, MO, created the Tap In Center in partnership with the county library and the Bail Project to serve the local community better. This community-based space helps justice-involved individuals handle legal matters, address outstanding warrants, and connect with much-needed local services and support.<sup>13</sup></p>
<b>Long-term Planning</b>	<p>Franklin County, OH, is leveraging its 2019 report, <a href="#">Rise Together: A Blueprint to Reduce Poverty</a>, to center equity, engage impacted communities, and reduce racial disparities for BIPOC communities at the intersection of behavioral health and the criminal legal system. The plan outlines short- and long-term goals and action steps that will be developed over the next 5–10 years.</p>

# Summary and Implications for the Field

Counties' racial equity efforts encompass a spectrum, as shown by the diversity of actions and progress made by Stepping Up counties across the country. While the process can seem overwhelming, counties should identify available resources and current needs to develop plans and strategies that address racial equity. Small steps can lead to significant strides, and tackling one step or policy to advance equity or reduce racial disparities can be an effective and successful strategy. Counties farther along in the process can provide information on lessons learned, share challenges, offer mentorship, and help identify early wins. Technical assistance, training, and other resources can help counties develop and advance racial equity efforts along the spectrum. Focusing on actionable steps with achievable goals is crucial, but the most essential part of advancing racial equity is starting the journey.

## Endnotes

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