
HOW CAN WE AVOID “BLAMING THE VICTIM” WHEN WE PRESENT INFORMATION ON POOR OUTCOMES FOR DIFFERENT RACIAL, ETHNIC, LANGUAGE OR IMMIGRANT GROUPS IN OUR COMMUNITY?

Groups working to eliminate or reduce differences (often called disparities) in how racial/ethnic groups fare compared to other racial/ethnic groups on important outcomes (education, wealth accumulation, health, etc.) need to report the differences to make their case for change and to track the progress of their work. For example, they may need to show the different rates of graduation from high school for white, African-American, Latino/a, Asian and Native American students (and they may also need to show differences in rates of graduation within these groups as well – by school, gender, language primarily spoken in the home, etc.) Groups use these kinds of data to raise awareness and concern, mobilize supporters, call officials and institutions to account and, to provide baseline (starting) and follow-up information for evaluation.

In addition to the difficulties in finding accurate and comparable information about outcomes for different racial/ethnic groups, there is another major challenge. This is the challenge of making sure people who view the data understand your group’s analysis of why these differences exist in your community and how they might be corrected. The reason this is so important is that, without a context for viewing the data, people will create their own explanations. And people without an understanding of the cumulative effects of institutional and structural racism will tend to look for individual, rather than institutional or structural, explanations that end up “blaming the victim” for poor group outcomes.

“Blaming the victim” is the phenomenon of people seeing persistent and large group differences as being solely the result of attitudes, actions and inherent abilities of the individuals in the group or of a group “culture” and discounting or ignoring the role of government policies (like redlining), mechanics of resource allocation (like basing school resources on local property taxes), intergenerational opportunities for wealth accumulation (linked to educational opportunity) and cultural norms that reinforce disparate outcomes by race/ethnicity (national ideas such as meritocracy and individuality).

- For example, lower graduation rates for black and Hispanic teenagers compared to their white counterparts could be seen as a failure on the part of the school system to meet the educational needs of all students. They could also be seen as low interest in school by certain groups of students.
- The lack of Hispanic-owned businesses in predominantly Hispanic neighborhoods (or in the community as a whole) could be interpreted as evidence of institutional lending policies that do not take into account the commitment of “free” family labor as an asset. They could also be viewed as evidence of a low value placed on entrepreneurship in the Hispanic culture.

When presenting data that demonstrate differences in outcomes among groups, particularly those that illustrate poor outcomes (such as school dropout rates or business failure rates), it is important to put this information into context. Specifically, it is helpful to provide data supporting an understanding of differences as a result of policies, practices and decisions that are the target for change – consistent with your group’s understanding.

- For example, high school graduation rate data could be accompanied by information on the number and percent of black and Hispanic teachers, particularly in the upper grades, and on the availability (or lack) of opportunities for students to pursue their studies on an alternative schedules that accommodates work

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- Information on small business start-ups and failures for Hispanic-owned enterprises could be accompanied by summaries of the policies of lending organizations on how potential assets and costs are considered in making loans

It can be important to “test-market” your presentation of data (report cards, evaluation reports, summary data tables, etc.) to understand the conclusions that key audiences are likely to draw from the data, from how different data are displayed or grouped on a page (for example, showing rates of graduation by school and resource allocation to schools on the same page) and from the surrounding text.

To be most effective, you need to test your materials with people who are likely to think like you and people who are likely to think very differently. Focus groups, one on one interviews, sharing materials and talking about them at various group meetings around town and even informal conversations with neighbors and co-workers can be very helpful.

Those whose experiences are reflected in the data – members of different racial, ethnic, language and cultural groups – need to be involved in developing ways to present information in respectful ways, ways that provide evidence of how disparities may have come about in your community and that highlight solutions addressing the underlying factors producing these differences.