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Championing Leaders of Color in Housing Equity and Community Development

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About Center for Community Progress

The mission of Center for Community Progress is to foster strong, equitable communities where vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties are transformed into assets for neighbors and neighborhoods. Founded in 2010, Community Progress is the leading national, nonprofit resource for urban, suburban, and rural communities seeking to address the full cycle of property revitalization. The organization fulfills its mission by nurturing strong leadership and supporting systemic reforms. Community Progress works to ensure that public, private, and community leaders have the knowledge and capacity to create and sustain change. It also works to ensure that all communities have the policies, tools, and resources they need to support the effective, equitable reuse of vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties. More information is available at www.communityprogress.org

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Cover Image: Terri Lee, chief operating officer of Atlanta Housing, at the 2019 Reclaiming Vacant Properties Conference in Atlanta, Georgia. Credit: Center for Community Progress.

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Foreword

Community development unites people to take collective action to build stronger, more resilient places to live. Its roots are embedded in the backyards, living rooms, and church halls of people who, out of sheer will and perseverance, found ways to advocate for change in their neighborhoods.

Over time, though, the field of community development has shifted from grassroots movements to the careers of specialized professionals. This shift has led to less racial diversity across the field and too few people of color in decision-making positions, leading to laws, policies, and practices that have perpetuated white supremacy—delivering excessive privilege to whites while disadvantaging Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities.

Championing Leaders of Color is a small part of the multigenerational struggle to actualize racial equity in America. The purpose of this work is to identify opportunities for the field of community development to be more accessible to, reflective of, and ultimately spearheaded by leaders of color. In recent years we've begun to see national housing and community development organizations elevate people of color to leadership positions, but we know that the field of community development must do more than hire directors and CEOs of color— we've got to create meaningful pathways for people of color to enter the field and build community. We must nurture their knowledge and growth, foster opportunities for them to serve as future leaders, and put together the systems of support to thrive in leadership roles.

In 2018, I and several other people of color assumed new leadership roles in national community development organizations. With this change came hard realities; many of us found ourselves facing challenges we simply did not expect. Some of us struggled to build fraternity with our boards of directors, while others found ourselves fighting for funding from supporters who had rarely questioned our organizations' missions in the past. Some of us found staff suspect of or unwilling to follow our directives. Others of us fought to justify our qualifications for these roles.

In short, we all felt the power struggle we recognized was a consequence of the same racial biases and inequities that—ironically—we all were committed to solving through our life's work in community development.

Recognizing the need to build community among ourselves, to build a foundation of support, and to share our unique experiences of leaders of color, we created the CEO Circle of Color. Through the CEO Circle, we provide counsel to one another, find opportunities to collaborate beyond the workplace, and uplift one another. It is not just an affinity group; it is a mutual support network focused on ensuring personal wellbeing while expanding collective success. I am proud to be one of the nine CEOs of national community development and housing justice organizations actively engaged in our circle and working to strengthen the leadership pipeline for people of color.

Our hope is that with intentional actions aimed at understanding and changing access to the field, and incorporating racial equity into our leadership programs, policies, and partnerships, we can collectively better serve vulnerable populations and accelerate the development of resilient, equitable communities. Progress will require personal and organizational self-reflection, humility, honesty, and continuous learning. It will also require you to hold us accountable and to share your wisdom.

We have a long journey ahead and we invite you to join us.

Dr. Akilah Watkins
President and CEO, Center for Community Progress
Founding Member, CEO Circle

Introduction

Housing equity and community development are built upon the values of diversity, social justice, human rights, equality, wellbeing, and opportunity. The community development movement as we know it today was founded by residents from disinvested neighborhoods who took collective action to bring about social change and address issues to improve the quality of life for their families and their neighbors.

These grassroots, locally driven actions especially took off in the immediate wake of the civil rights movement. For example:

- In 1968, Dorothy Mae Richardson, a Black woman living in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania led her neighbors in the Central North Side neighborhood to fight back against community decay. Through organizing her local block club, city leaders, banks, and a local foundation, Richardson effectively launched the first iteration of NeighborWorks America—now a congressionally appropriated, public nonprofit corporation supporting nearly 250 network organizations.[1]

- In 1970, the newly created New Communities Inc. effectively purchased over 5,000 acres of Georgia farmland under the leadership of Charles Sherrod, a Black man with deep experience in civil rights activism.

About This Report

This report presents findings from a national survey distributed to stakeholders in the community development field, provides insights into data and trends gleaned from responses, and deliberates implications for leaders in, funders to, and supporters of the community development field to consider in service of equitable results. This work takes a narrow focus specific to community development and identifies barriers to equitable leadership opportunities while offering reparative solutions.

Championing Leaders of Color reflects an effort to uncover and disrupt the systems that perpetuate racial inequity in the communities we serve and the organizations where we work. Through this work, we aim to identify tactical strategies to promote equitable leadership in the field of community development where leaders of color are welcomed, supported, and equipped to succeed in advancing their careers as well as their organizations' missions.

For over fifty years, New Communities has served as the inspiration for the now burgeoning landscape of over 200 community land trusts across the United States.[2]

- In 1973, a group of career bankers—including Milton Davis, a Black man from Alabama—founded the first community development financial institution (CDFI), ShoreBank, in Chicago. ShoreBank operated for nearly forty years, serving as a model for financial institutions that provide fair, transparent financing and financial education to people and communities underserved by mainstream financial institutions. Today more than 1,200 CDFIs make up a $222 billion dollar industry.[3]

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[1] "About Us – NeighborWorks America," accessed March 1, 2022, https://www.neighborworks.org/About-Us.; Isaac I. Wagner, "A Tale of Two Trusts: A Case Study of the Consolidation of Two Community Land Trust Affordable Housing Organizations in Vermont" (capstone paper, SIT Graduate Institute, 2013). *Capstone Collection*. 2600. https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/capstones/2600.

[2] John Emmeus Davis (Ed.). (2010). *The Community Land Trust Reader*. Lincoln Institute of Land Policy.; "Community Land Trusts – Grounded Solutions Network," accessed February 20, 2022. https://groundedsolutions.org/strengthening-neighborhoods/community-land-trusts.

[3] Clifford N. Rosenthal, (2018). *Democratizing finance: Origins of the community development financial institutions movement*. FriesenPress.; "Timeline - Opportunity Finance Network," accessed February 20, 2022. https://cdfihistory.ofn.org/timeline/ ; "Milton Davis – The History Makers," accessed February 20, 2022. https://www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/milton-davis-39.

These movements and others like them were spearheaded by leaders of color with deep roots in the very communities they served. Since their inceptions, however, these movements have transformed into specialized areas of practice in a broad field that bridges public, private, and nonprofit sectors. They straddle other fields which typically require extensive practice and training like law, planning, real estate, and finance. As proposed solutions for closing racial wealth and homeownership gaps, revitalizing vacant and abandoned neighborhoods, and catalyzing equitable opportunities for Black and Brown families became more technical and nuanced, the community development field became more professionalized. This has led to less racial diversity across the field, fewer grassroots leaders at the helm, and too few people of color at decision-making tables.

Recent studies have demonstrated that racial disparities exist in the nonprofit field, which includes a large number of community development organizations established as 501(c)3 companies. For example, original survey research by the Building Movement Project uncovered disparities by race throughout the nonprofit sector. These include persistent gaps between people of color and white respondents on the support they receive and challenges they face in their organizations, despite the growing desire of people of color to serve in leadership positions.[4] Other research has explored the state of equitable leadership opportunities in more specialized areas of not-for-profit work like education,[5] and in geographically bound regions.[6] Those studies, and others, corroborate widespread findings that racial disparities exist; power and privilege are concentrated among a select few, white people are overrepresented in positions of power, and people of color experience frustrations and burnout related to a dearth of meaningful diversity, equity, and inclusion actions.[7]

To date, only a few studies have looked specifically at race and leadership in the community development subsector at a national level. Existing work provides important context for how racial inequity within community development organizations impacts staff as well as the communities those organizations serve. For example:

- A 2021 report identified challenges and opportunities related to hiring and retaining skilled people to do community development work. The authors noted that barriers included limited knowledge of careers available in community development, a lack of programs tailored to advancing the skills and abilities of mid-career professionals, and personal and organizational biases that may prevent people of color from succeeding at the rate of their white peers.[8]

- A 2019 qualitative paper on CDFI leaders' approaches to race and equity in community development noted that, although some organizations have worked to embed more equitable practices within company policies and staff structures, there is a clear need for the field to "reengage with its activist roots, to reshape the programs we use and to find new partnerships with the rights and justice portion of the field." Leaders interviewed in the study broadly agreed that a more dedicated approach to grappling with the inequities of structural racism is imperative and involves internal changes within the walls of community development organizations.[9]

- A 2015 assessment of a LISC-Habitat partnership in Milwaukee found that organizational failures to recognize the centrality of race and equity in revitalization efforts may reproduce racial hierarchies. The authors argued that "nonprofit community development organizations and the implications of race and class in their decision-making process receive insufficient attention."[10]

Recognizing the lack of detailed information about potential leadership gaps in community development, *Championing Leaders of Color* builds evidence about the condition of leadership in the field and potential strategies to promote equity.

[4] Frances Kunreuther and Sean Thomas-Breitfeld, "Race to Lead Revisited: Obstacles and Opportunities in Addressing the Nonprofit Racial Leadership Gap," Building Movement Project, 2020, https://racetolead.org/race-to-lead-revisited/.

[5] Michael Corral, Lucerito Ortiz, and Xiomara Padamsee, "Unrealized Impact 2.0: The Hard Truth About Where We Are and Ways to Move Forward," Promise54, 2021, https://unrealizedimpact.promise54.org/.

[6] Luisa Boyarski, "Advancing Racial Equity Within Nonprofit Organizations," Georgetown University Center for Public and Nonprofit Leadership, 2018, https://georgetown.app.box.com/s/8o9a4xajp6pd1zkjujzi1xac4wmadakq.

[7] Promise54 (2020); Boyarski (2018).

[8] Ann L. Silverman and Paula S. Anzer, "Recruiting and Developing Leadership in Community Development: Key Ingredients for Success," NeighborWorks America, 2021, https://www.neighborworks.org/research/recruiting-developing-leadership-in-community-development-key-ingredients-for-success.

[9] Nancy O. Andrews, "Race, Gender, and Equity in Community Development: Ten Findings, Six Ways Forward," Urban Institute, October 7, 2019, https://www.urban.org/research/publication/race-gender-and-equity-community-development.

[10] Anne Bonds, Judith T. Kenny, and Rebecca Nole Wolfe, "Neighborhood revitalization without the local: Race, nonprofit governance, and community development," Urban Geography, 36(7) (2015) 1064-1082.

Methodology

Working in partnership with a multicultural team including staff from Grounded Solutions Network, NeighborWorks America, and the National Fair Housing Alliance, the Center for Community Progress created a survey focused on three categories:

- Background and Demographics
- Career in Community Development, and
- Leadership Development

The survey was distributed and conducted online via SurveyMonkey and promoted between September and October 2021 through Community Progress' email newsletter, outreach by partner organizations, and social media platforms including Facebook and LinkedIn. There were 134 unique respondents across 30 states in our convenience sample who began the survey, with a completion rate of 80% (n=108). Sixty percent of respondents represented towns and cities with less than 400,000 inhabitants, and 10% represented rural areas. Results are reported based upon responses to each unique question.

Following the analysis of survey responses, Community Progress held follow-up discussions with select respondents to garner feedback and consider implications for the field.

Key Terms Used In This Report

Our report uses terms related to diversity, equity, and community development. We recognize not all people use these terms in the same way. The language below is adapted from the Center for the Study of Social Policy.[11]

Community Development: A community-driven, participatory process to help neighborhoods and families thrive by bringing capital and other resources to historically underserved, segregated, or otherwise disinvested areas.[12]

Equity: The effort to provide different levels of support based on an individual's or group's needs in order to achieve fairness in outcomes. Working to achieve equity acknowledges unequal starting places and the need to correct the imbalance.

People of Color: Political or social (not biological) identity among and across groups of people that are racialized as non-white. The term "people of color" is used to acknowledge that many races experience racism in the US, and the term includes, but is not synonymous with, Black people.

Power: The ability to define, set, or change situations. Power can manifest as personal or collective self-determination. Power is the ability to influence others to believe, behave, or adopt values as those in power desire.

Racial Disproportionality: The underrepresentation or overrepresentation of a racial or ethnic group at a particular decision point, event, or circumstance, in comparison to the group's percentage in the total population.

Targeted Universalism: Setting universal goals pursued by targeted processes to achieve those goals. Within a targeted universalism framework, universal goals are established for all groups concerned. The strategies developed to achieve those goals are targeted, based upon how different groups are situated within structures, culture, and across geographies to obtain the universal goal. Targeted universalism is goal oriented, and the processes are directed in service of the explicit, universal goal.

[11] CSSP (2019). "Key Equity Terms and Concepts: A Glossary for Shared Understanding." Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Social Policy. Available at: https://cssp.org/resource/key-equity-terms-concepts.

[12] Alexander von Hoffman, "The Past, Present, and Future of Community Development," Shelterforce, July 17, 2013. https://shelterforce.org/2013/07/17/the_past_present_and_future_of_community_development.
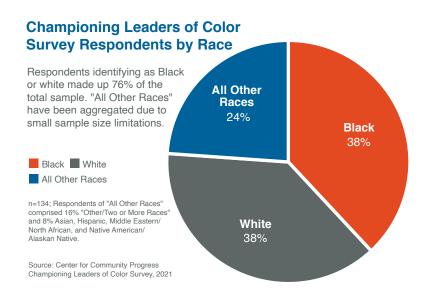
Survey Findings

Respondents were asked to provide information about their background and lived experiences in order to gain a deeper understanding of the demographics of our participants. Questions in this section focused on information about race, gender, and socioeconomic background. The following results paint a picture of the sample of participants.
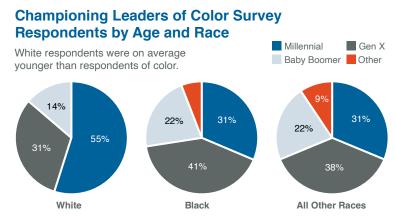
Background and Demographics

Respondents by Race

Respondents identifying as Black or white each made up 38% of the survey sample, or 76% of the total sample. Most of the other respondents (16% of the total sample) identified as "Other" or "Two or more races" with Asian, Hispanic, Middle Eastern/North African, and Native American/Alaskan Native respondents making up the remaining 8%. Given that we are limited in our ability to draw conclusions on the specific experiences of multiracial, Asian, Hispanic, Middle Eastern/ North African, Native, and other racial/ethnic groups based on this sample, we have aggregated their responses in an "All Other Races" category.

White respondents were on average younger (55% Millennial) when compared with respondents identifying as Black (31%) or All Other Races (31%).

Championing Leaders of Color Survey Respondents by Race

Respondents identifying as Black or white made up 76% of the total sample. "All Other Races" have been aggregated due to small sample size limitations.

■ Black ■ White
■ All Other Races

n=134; Respondents of "All Other Races" comprised 16% "Other/Two or More Races" and 8% Asian, Hispanic, Middle Eastern/ North African, and Native American/ Alaskan Native.

Source: Center for Community Progress Championing Leaders of Color Survey, 2021

Championing Leaders of Color Survey Respondents by Age and Race

White respondents were on average younger than respondents of color.

■ Millennial ■ Gen X
■ Baby Boomer ■ Other

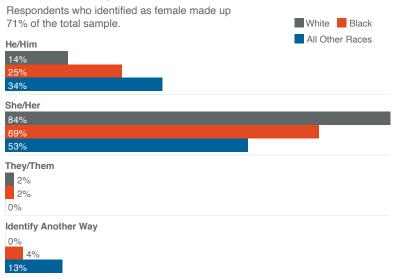White   Black   All Other Races

n=134   Source: Center for Community Progress Championing Leaders of Color Survey, 2021

Respondents by Gender

Female-identifying respondents made up 71% of the results. When disaggregated by race, a vast majority of women made up Black (69%) and white (84%) samples, respectively. Female representation also represented the majority for All Other Races, although by a slimmer margin (53% female, 34% male, 13% other).

What was the gender makeup of respondents?

Respondents who identified as female made up 71% of the total sample.

Legend: White · Black · All Other Races

He/Him
- White: 14%
- Black: 25%
- All Other Races: 34%

She/Her
- White: 84%
- Black: 69%
- All Other Races: 53%

They/Them
- White: 2%
- Black: 2%
- All Other Races: 0%

Identify Another Way
- White: 0%
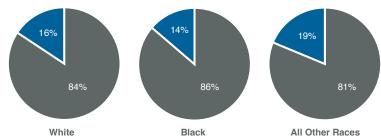- Black: 4%
- All Other Races: 13%

n=134   Source: Center for Community Progress Championing Leaders of Color Survey, 2021

Respondents by LGBTQ+

Respondents self-reported aligning with the LGBTQ+ community at rates nearly three times that of the general US population (16% of respondents, versus about 5.6% of US adults).[13] The percentage and counts of respondents identifying with the LGBTQ+ community was nearly even when disaggregated by race.

How many respondents identify with the LGBTQ+ community?

Respondents reported aligning with the LGBTQ+ community at rates nearly three times that of the general US population (16% of respondents, versus about 5.6% of US adults).

Legend: Not LGBTQ+ · LGBTQ+

White: 16% LGBTQ+, 84% Not LGBTQ+
Black: 14% LGBTQ+, 86% Not LGBTQ+
All Other Races: 19% LGBTQ+, 81% Not LGBTQ+

n=134   Source: Center for Community Progress Championing Leaders of Color Survey, 2021

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[13] Jeffrey M. Jones, "LGBT Identification Rises to 5.6% in Latest U.S. Estimate," Gallup, February 24, 2021, https://news.gallup.com/poll/329708/lgbt-identification-rises-latest-estimate.aspx.

Respondents by Socioeconomic Background

The sample represents an extremely well-educated group of individuals; 88% of all respondents held at least a bachelor's degree. Regardless of race, it was most common for respondents to hold a graduate degree, with 49% of all respondents reporting having earned a master's degree. Approximately 10% of respondents held an advanced degree such as a PhD or JD.

When considering neighborhood conditions, respondents of color were more likely to have grown up in segregated communities, utilized public transit options, and experienced more disinvestment within their communities. Black respondents (88%) were more likely to come from communities which were segregated by race and/or class, and 43% reported that their communities comprised mostly people of the same race and class. Black respondents (45%) and respondents of all other races (43%) depended on public transit more than white respondents (13%). The level of community investment was similar across racial groups; however Black respondents (16%) and respondents of all other races (21%) experienced higher rates of more concentrated vacancy and abandonment than white respondents (10%).

Respondents' Socioeconomic Backgrounds

	White	Black	All Other Races
Education level			
High School	0%	2%	3%
Some College	6%	10%	19%
Bachelor's Degree	27%	39%	16%
Master's Degree	55%	45%	44%
PhD	12%	4%	19%
Where they grew up			
Segregated; mostly people the same race and class as my family	40%	43%	14%
Racially diverse; families predominantly one class	13%	24%	11%
Diverse; families a mix of race and class	25%	12%	36%
Economically diverse; families predominantly one race	21%	12%	18%
Segregated; my family was an outlier in race and class	2%	8%	21%
Whether they used transit growing up			
Used public transit regularly	13%	45%	43%
Community offered public transit, but my family did not use it regularly	50%	37%	32%
Did not have public transit	38%	18%	25%
Whether their communities had high vacancy			
My community had a large number of vacant and abandoned properties	10%	16%	21%
My community had some vacant and abandoned properties, but they were not common	44%	39%	32%
My community had little to no vacant or abandoned properties	46%	45%	46%

n = 108 Source: Center for Community Progress Championing Leaders of Color Survey, 2021
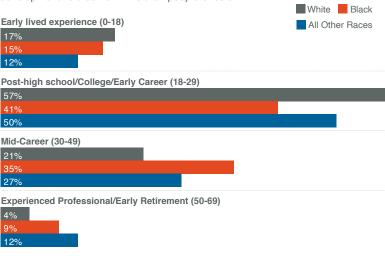
Career in Community Development

Respondents were also asked to provide details about their careers in the community development field. Questions in this section were focused on personal experiences related to entering the field, tenure, and ways in which respondents have been able to advance in the field or not. The following responses help to understand how different individuals, especially when disaggregated by race, have experienced change in the field.

Respondents by Career

Overall, white respondents reported being introduced to the community development field earlier in life than people of color. More white respondents learned about the field early in life (17%) compared to Black respondents (15%) and respondents of all other races (13%). Nearly 75% of white respondents had some exposure to the field before the age of 30, while 43% of Black respondents and respondents of all other races, respectively, learned about the field as mid-career or experienced professionals.

When were respondents first exposed to the community development field?

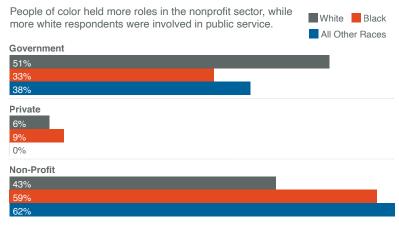White respondents reported being introduced to the community development field earlier in life than people of color.

Legend: White | Black | All Other Races

Early lived experience (0-18)
- White: 17%
- Black: 15%
- All Other Races: 12%

Post-high school/College/Early Career (18-29)
- White: 57%
- Black: 41%
- All Other Races: 50%

Mid-Career (30-49)
- White: 21%
- Black: 35%
- All Other Races: 27%

Experienced Professional/Early Retirement (50-69)
- White: 4%
- Black: 9%
- All Other Races: 12%

n=119   Source: Center for Community Progress Championing Leaders of Color Survey, 2021

Respondents by Sector

Respondents mostly reported working in the nonprofit sector; 53% of all respondents were affiliated with mission-driven organizations, while 41% were affiliated with government or public sector agencies, and 6% worked in the private sector. Disaggregated by race, people of color more greatly represented the nonprofit sector, while whites were more mostly involved with public service.

What sectors did respondents represent?

People of color held more roles in the nonprofit sector, while more white respondents were involved in public service.

Legend: White | Black | All Other Races

Government
- White: 51%
- Black: 33%
- All Other Races: 38%

Private
- White: 6%
- Black: 9%
- All Other Races: 0%

Non-Profit
- White: 43%
- Black: 59%
- All Other Races: 62%

n=119   Source: Center for Community Progress Championing Leaders of Color Survey, 2021

Respondents by Experience and Job Level

People of color responded as having more tenure in the community development field; most Black respondents had been involved for 5–14 years (36%), followed closely by 15–24 years (31%). Meanwhile, 44% of white respondents had 5–14 years' experience, followed by a near even split between 15–24 years (24%) and 1–4 years (22%). Yet, more white respondents reported serving in leadership roles (30%) than all respondents of color (27%). People of color reported holding senior staff positions at higher rates than whites, and whites reported holding middle management positions at higher rates than people of color.

Respondents by Job Transition

Across racial groups, respondents reported nearly identical answers when questioned about their last professional transition; 65% of white respondents, 64% of Black respondents, and 63% of respondents with all other races reported a positive transition that was an opportunity to advance their careers. However, when asked if the transition took place with the same organization, our data shows whites were more likely to have an opportunity to transition within the same organization (47%) than Black (32%) and other respondents (42%).

How many years of experience did respondents have?

Overall, white respondents reported having fewer years of experience than people of color.
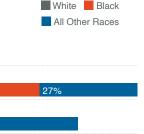
Legend: White, Black, All Other Races

1-4 years
White 22% | Black 20% | All Other Races 15%

5-14 years
White 44% | Black 36% | All Other Races 27%

15-24 years
White 24% | Black 31% | All Other Races 35%

25+ years
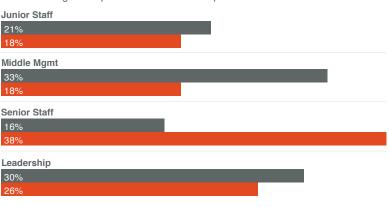White 11% | Black 13% | All Other Races 12%

n=119   Source: Center for Community Progress Championing Leaders of Color Survey, 2021

Black respondents reported holding more senior staff roles

However despite having fewer years of experience overall, more white respondents reported being in Leadership and Middle Management positions than Black respondents.

Legend: White, Black

Junior Staff
White 21% | Black 18%

Middle Mgmt
White 33% | Black 18%

Senior Staff
White 16% | Black 38%

Leadership
White 30% | Black 26%

n=108   Source: Center for Community Progress Championing Leaders of Color Survey, 2021

Do respondents have to leave their organization to advance?

White respondents were more likely to have an opportunity to transition within the same organization than Black or other respondents of color.

Legend: Different Organization, Same Organization

White: Same Organization 47% | Different Organization 53%
Black: Same Organization 31% | Different Organization 69%
All Other Races: Same Organization 42% | Different Organization 58%

n=108   Source: Center for Community Progress Championing Leaders of Color Survey, 2021
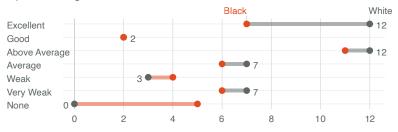
Leadership Development

Respondents were finally asked to provide details about their experience with leadership development opportunities. Questions were designed to be separate from the previous section around careers in community development to understand more about opportunities participants have had, or have not had, to advance within the field. These questions allowed us to understand more about what disparities may exist across race, and what organizations and stakeholders can do to close leadership gaps.

Respondents by Quality of Networks

Questions about the strength of respondents' professional and personal support networks yielded strikingly different results. People of color reported having fewer meaningful networks to rely upon for career counsel, while about 60% of white respondents reported having both professional and personal networks of at least 3–9 people who they can usually rely upon. Only 49% of Black respondents and 50% of respondents with all other races reported similar quality of professional and personal networks of support. Additionally, not one white respondent reported having no professional nor personal network to rely upon. Conversely, 12% of Black respondents and 13% of respondents with all other races shared that they have no professional network; and 7% of Black respondents and 8% of respondents with all other races shared that they had no personal network to rely upon.

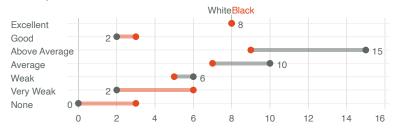### White Respondents Report Higher Overall Quality of Professional Networks

When asked about the strength of professional networks white respondents were almost twice as likely as Black respondents to say they had "excellent" professional networks. No white respondents reported having zero networks.

n=108   Source: Center for Community Progress Championing Leaders of Color Survey, 2021

White Respondents Report Higher Overall Quality of Personal Networks

When asked about the strength of personal networks white respondents were more likely than Black respondents to report above-average personal networks to lean on. More Black respondents reported weak and no personal networks.
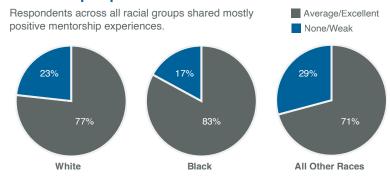

n=108   Source: Center for Community Progress Championing Leaders of Color Survey, 2021

Respondents by Mentorship Experience

Respondents across all racial groups shared mostly positive mentorship experiences; 42% of white respondents, 49% of Black respondents, and 41% of respondents with all other races responded that they have had lasting mentoring relationships which have produced some benefits. 77% of white respondents, 83% of Black respondents, and 71% of respondents of all other races at least had a limited mentorship experience that produced benefits. The experience respondents had with respect to coaching engagement was largely poor—respondents shared they mostly either never had a coaching engagement or had at most a limited engagement lasting less than one year.

Did respondents have access to positive mentorship experiences?

Respondents across all racial groups shared mostly positive mentorship experiences.

■ Average/Excellent
■ None/Weak

White — 23% / 77%
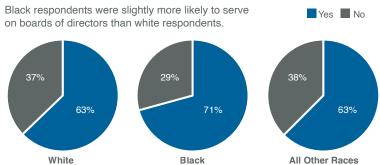**Black** — 17% / 83%
All Other Races — 29% / 71%

n=108   Source: Center for Community Progress Championing Leaders of Color Survey, 2021

Respondents by Service and Opportunities

Respondents shared very similar exposure to service on boards of directors and opportunities to collaborate with leaders of color: 66% of all respondents, including 63% of white respondents, 71% of Black respondents, and 63% of respondents of all other races currently serve or have served on boards of directors. Encouragingly, 90% of all respondents have had opportunities to collaborate with leaders of color, with white respondents (91%) reporting slightly higher rates of collaboration than Black (90%) and respondents of all other races (88%).

Do respondents serve on boards of directors?

Black respondents were slightly more likely to serve on boards of directors than white respondents.

■ Yes ■ No

White — 37% / 63%
Black — 29% / 71%
All Other Races — 38% / 63%

n=108   Source: Center for Community Progress Championing Leaders of Color Survey, 2021

Discussion

The survey results paint a compelling picture of the makeup of the community development space, as well as some striking similarities and differences in peoples' career paths and opportunities for advancement.

Future research is needed to generate responses from a broader audience. This survey reached an audience deeply attuned to the technical work of Community Progress and its partners; there should be intentional efforts to hear from more people who are active in their communities but haven't yet been recognized. Reaching a broader audience would undoubtedly help gain more clarity on other populations not Black or white. Given the size of our sample, this study could not effectively disaggregate for Hispanic, Native American, Asian, and Middle Eastern populations, for example. Still, findings reveal important trends to consider the condition of leadership in this space and offer opportunities to craft intentional strategies to provide supports to leaders of color and build a robust pipeline for professional growth and equitable leadership.

It is important to call attention not just to observed disparities, but to the similarities. Perhaps the most striking finding from the demographic portion of the survey is education; there is an extremely high percentage of professionals in community development holding graduate degrees. When only 32% of all Americans over 25 hold a bachelor's degree, our results among community development professionals suggest a rate nearly three times the national rate in the field.[14] This may imply that organizations value academic training over lived experiences, a phenomenon which, coupled with racial gaps in wealth and educational opportunity, could easily prevent people of color from entering this field, let alone advancing to positions of leadership.

Universally, there is a demonstrated need to present community development as a legitimate and worthwhile career venture to young people at an earlier age. Over three-quarters of all respondents were first introduced to the professional community development sector after high school, including 28% who first became aware of the field in the middle of their careers. This trend skews in favor of whites being exposed to the field at an earlier point—perhaps tied to the rate of continued education—which suggests that people of color may be at a disadvantage by learning about the field later.

Despite different levels of experience, and a much lower average age among white respondents, we found higher levels of white respondents holding leadership positions. This begs important questions about bias in the field. As presented, people of color in this field serve on boards of directors, participate in meaningful mentoring engagements, and have dynamic educations at rates that rival if not exceed that of white peers. With all else being equal, what can we point to as the deciding factor if not their race?

Common narratives expressed in follow-up conversations from the survey involve leaders of color facing disparate treatment from supporters within and outside organizational walls. For example, many leaders of color have experienced dramatic changes in funding situations or operationalizing their vision as an executive—especially when succeeding a white leader. Whereas a white predecessor may have secured general operating dollars or had the full-throated support of an established board of directors, leaders of color expressed often finding themselves having to give new justifications to the same goals and mission, or voted down on initiatives they were eager to lead. In short, leaders of color in the sector can be the victim of a biased misappropriation of risk.

Additionally, many mid-level and senior staff of color simply burn out when issues such as "white saviors" or "founder's syndrome" take root within an organization. People of color can become deeply disenfranchised in their ability not only to grow and advance as leaders, but in their ability (and desire) to do good work as well.

These experiences are worth exploring in greater detail in further surveys, interviews, and conversations with current and aspiring leaders of color.

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14 U.S. Census Bureau, "Educational Attainment, 2019," accessed November 15, 2021, https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=Education&g=0100000US&tid=ACSST5Y2019.S1501.

Recommendations

The *Championing Leaders of Color* survey points to potential solutions for the field to consider. These solutions and tactical, targeted universal strategies should work directly in service of closing racial gaps by paying particular attention to the situations of people of color.[15] With respect to building a robust pipeline of inclusion, nurturing, and growth for future leaders, community development organizations should take several actions at multiple junctures.

1. **Amplify community development as an opportunity for young people**

   To build a robust pipeline of future leaders, community development organizations should invest time and energy into sharing their work and impact with younger generations. Through classroom engagements, school partnerships, and other creative ways to expose young people to the work, community development organizations can plant the seeds for future leaders to grow.

2. **Confront bias in organizational culture**

   Organizations must take the time to not just participate in equity trainings but to embed equitable policies and practices in their DNA. Community development organizations should implement hiring practices that place more value on lived experiences than academic degrees, consider pay standards to remain competitive in the marketplace, and confront racially charged power dynamics that can exist between funders, boards, and staff. Organizations must also commit to deeper equity work to understand, contemplate, and reckon with implicit bias and structural issues, involving all stakeholders. Community development organizations should be unapologetic to funders, personnel, and partners about the necessity of this deep equity work.

3. **Build meaningful pathways for advancement within organizations**

   Talented people will leave companies if they do not see opportunities for growth, which threatens to leave existing leadership gaps in place. Organizations should provide clear trajectories for advancement, especially to mid-level staff, so they do not feel the need to leave a company or field to advance professionally. Organizations should commit to investing long-term in their staff and have clear plans for growth and succession in place.

4. **Cultivate and nurture networks of support at all levels**

   People of color face a particular challenge in lacking strong professional and personal networks they can lean on for advice. This rings true for people early in their career as well as senior executives. Organizations should dedicate resources to ensure that staff of color are able to have a sense of interpersonal community with others involved in community development, so they have trusting relationships with people who intimately understand the work.

At its core, the community development field works to advance equitable change for the people and places we serve. To do that work in an authentic way externally, we must act in accordance with those principles within our organizations, too.

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[15] John A. Powell, "Post-racialism or targeted universalism," *Denver University Law Review*, 86 (2009): 785.

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