

Smart Growth and Equity:

Improving racial equity, economic inclusion and restorative justice through smart growth

The 2021 Smart Growth America Equity Summit

Smart Growth America (SGA) deeply believes that improving racial disparities is at the core of a smart growth approach. But what does that mean? How does it work in practice? And how can smart growth advocates do it better? **On January 26th-28th, 2021**, SGA held a three-day virtual summit to discuss how to center improving racial equity in smart growth work. The summit featured short keynotes explaining important basic concepts, and three separate deep dives on promoting more equity in housing and land use, why strong Black and Brown businesses are key to neighborhood vitality, and how to right the wrongs of past damaging transportation decisions and promote restorative justice. Watch the entire summit online here: <https://smartgrowthamerica.org/equity-summit/>.



Smart Growth America
Improving lives by improving communities

Smart Growth America's **Equity Summit:**

Improving racial equity, economic inclusion, and restorative justice through smart growth

January 26-28
<https://smartgrowthamerica.org/equity-summit/>



What are these discussion guides for?

We wanted to provide a way for smart growth advocates—whether you participated in the Summit or not—to take the Summit’s compelling content and turn it into action and tangible change in your community.

More than 3,000 people registered for the Summit, and considering that the overwhelming poll responses from respondents showed that the majority are relatively inexperienced with equity, we tried to calibrate these guides to be approachable. If your office, community, or friends have never walked through a discussion about equity, we hope this will provide a good starting point. If you have, we hope these guides will deepen your understanding.

I know that “I’m not an expert”



To view sessions and learn more about panelists from the 2021 SGA Equity Summit, visit <https://smartgrowthamerica.org/equity-summit/>



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Improving lives by improving communities

How to use these discussion guides

Consider the Summit's implications for your smart growth advocacy where you live or work.

You can certainly do this on your own, but to maximize the impact, we recommend doing this with a small group of colleagues, friends, or other trusted people in your community. Think of it like a book discussion group. Listen to the Summit's content, read the summaries of each session, and then think about the discussion questions together as a group—perhaps over a few weeks. For those of you that are ready to take the next step, put together a plan of action. Here are some specific tips for how to use these guides:

- **Start with Equity 101.** This primer guide is a great place to get introduced to some of the foundational concepts for the summit. Start there, but before you do, watch Calvin Gladney's brief opening remarks (~11:00 mark on day one) and Dr. Andre Perry's opening keynote (~20:00 mark on day one) before diving into this guide.
- **There is one guide for each of the three main panels.** Each guide relates to one of the three main panels. We recommend watching each panel, hopefully together with your group, and perhaps while you have the discussion guide open in front of you. *Tip: Write down questions you'd have for panelists as you go and ask them of each other.*
- **Review the summary points for each panel.** Each guide provides a few key summary points from each panel, synthesizing the hour-plus of great information into a few, key, digestible points.
- **Dive into the discussion questions for each panel.** On the second page, you'll find some discussion questions you can consider thoughtfully. Take your time here!
- **Put the material into action.** There are also a few example action steps for policymakers, planners, advocates, and others to put the lessons into practice.
- **Continue your education.** Lastly, there are a few other books and SGA resources mentioned by the panelists for further reading in each guide. These resources are just the tip of the iceberg.

Please do take these guides and share them widely! You can always find these guides on the Smart Growth America website here: <https://smartgrowthamerica.org/equity-summit/>.

Let us know how your discussions go—we'd love to see screenshots of your Zoom discussions or in-person discussions in small groups! Send us photos to info@smartgrowthamerica.org and we'll share them on our social media and website smartgrowthamerica.org/equity-summit/.



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Equity 101

How smart growth principles
increase equity in our communities

What is equity?

Equity is fair treatment for all individuals regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, disability, or identification with any historically underserved or marginalized group or community. Racial equity is focused on righting historic injustices toward Black and Brown communities. Many systems in the United States were designed with apparent racist intent at the systems level. Incorporating racial equity into policies and practices can remove barriers and create opportunity for Black and Brown communities.

Redlining: The systematic denial of services (e.g., mortgages) by governments and the private sector to residents of certain areas based on their race or ethnicity.

Why does equity matter?

Historic inequities in housing, transportation, and land use have led to large racial wealth gaps, health disparities, and environmental injustice in the United States. Black and Brown communities more often suffer from inequitable investments in infrastructure, green and recreational spaces, and climate resilience measures. Racial inequity is also bad fiscal policy for cities, artificially reducing overall tax revenues and wealth. The legacy of policies such as the Homestead Acts and redlining is unequal distribution of wealth, health, and economic opportunity. Housing valuation is just one form of these inequities, because financial equity in homes is a catalyst to creating wealth. The price of homes in a community determines the opportunities a community has available. Often businesses are started using the financial equity in the entrepreneur's personal home. When home values increase, communities see a new generation of wealth, but when Black homes and communities are undervalued, it fuels the racial wealth gap and Black-owned businesses face an uphill climb. *(See the separate discussion guide on supporting Black and Brown businesses.)*

“

We know that racial equity, economic inclusion, and restorative justice are not the default options of the system. We have to affirmatively fight for them if we are going to get to them.

—Calvin Gladney,
President and CEO, Smart Growth America

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What is equity in smart growth?

Smart growth is a map, mindset, and movement: a map because smart growth serves as a set of directions for practitioners to create unique, vibrant communities; a mindset because smart growth can be applied to many practices; and finally, a movement, built on the power created by engaged practitioners and communities to create equitable outcomes for all.

Equity in smart growth helps Black and Brown communities by dismantling the systems and policies in our government and communities that produce or exacerbate existing racial inequities. Policymakers, planners, and community coalitions should evaluate if their decision-making processes, policies, and decisions are equitable to all underserved communities. Equity in smart growth helps to create new maps and tools to serve our communities and utilizes the ideas and insights of new, different mapmakers to allow communities to thrive.

Equality vs. Equity

Equality is allocating the exact same resources for every person. Equity recognizes that each person has unique needs and resources are allocated based on needs in order to reach an equal outcome.

Key discussion points

- **Smart growth and equity are linked.** As we say in our principles, “smart growth is not possible without the perspective of everyone with a vested interest in a town, city, or neighborhood.” Smart growth without a focus on equity isn’t smart growth at all, and it can lead to displacement and the exacerbation of existing inequities in communities. A true, holistic smart growth approach helps everyone in existing communities thrive and build wealth.
- **We must remove systemic barriers to equity.** Discrimination and inequity are deeply ingrained in our laws and policies, often in invisible ways. To center equity in our approach, we must evaluate all planning, zoning, and other policies to ensure they do not create inequitable outcomes. When creating new policies, smart growth and equity must remain at the core of consideration.
- **One of the best anti-displacement tools is to invest in people, not just places.** Investing only in places—in the physical infrastructure—without investing in people leads to displacement. But investing in individuals—especially those that have been historically marginalized—can give them the tools to build and maintain wealth, building strong, resilient communities. Directing capital toward people and removing bureaucratic barriers helps communities and individuals invest in themselves and grow.

Discussion questions

1. What are some specific examples of land use, housing, transportation, or infrastructure policies where racism has been deeply embedded? How has this manifested in your community?
2. Can you identify land use, transportation or infrastructure policies in your community that appear race-neutral, but now serve to exacerbate existing racial inequities?
3. How can your community invest in people rather than only investing in places? What does that look like where you live?
4. Are there books you’ve read or heard of that discuss or explain some of these issues? Discuss some of the ideas you encountered in them. (We cite several in the other three discussion guides).
5. Racial inequity is not just the product of individual racism, it is present at the systems level. Can you identify systemic racism or the effects of systemic racism in your organization’s or your community’s practices and policies?



Supporting Black and Brown businesses is a key to smart growth

Equity is stimulus

Equity is a key, strategic factor in the overall success of our communities. This is why smart growth targets investment to Black and Brown-owned businesses, because they are vital to the vibrancy and authenticity of a place; making it a place where people want to live, visit, and work. To maintain that uniqueness through growth, anti-displacement strategies need to be employed to prevent the dislocation of Black/Brown residents, businesses, and culture. We also need to clear the structural obstacles to investment and growth so Black and Brown businesses can flourish.



If you want to grow the economy, if you want to improve conditions, build equity.

—Andre M. Perry,
Senior Fellow, Metropolitan
Policy Program, Brookings



3 key discussion points

- 1. Racial discrimination in housing has contributed to the racial wealth gap that has prevented investment in Black and Brown businesses.** This racial wealth gap is killing all of us economically at a global level. It's impacting what we could have. Discrimination in housing has impacted the ability of Black entrepreneurs to invest in their businesses. Most people start their businesses using the equity in their homes. Policies such as redlining and racial housing covenants have blocked opportunities for Black people to own their homes and build wealth and have, in turn, impacted the Black community's ability to invest in their businesses. The persistent undervaluation of owner-occupied homes in Black neighborhoods has amounted to \$156 billion in cumulative losses that could have been invested into building local economies ([Perry, 2018](#)).
- 2. Black and Brown communities have been denied the ability to secure investment themselves.** To close the racial wealth gap, we must be targeted in our approach and specifically support Black and Brown businesses. Black businesses have faced barriers to success, including being systematically denied access to investment. When Black and Brown businesses have investment they can hire more employees, providing employment for the community, and they can innovate, creating more dynamic and interesting places to live and work.
- 3. Existing policies have failed to overcome the challenges faced by Black and Brown businesses—bold, new policies are needed.** We cannot keep investing in the same programs. If investment is not targeted, well-resourced communities will have help they do not need, and policymakers will fail to bring benefits to the communities that have historically been harmed by past policies and programs. A history of discrimination and racism has manifested itself in the racial disparities that continue to exist today. We can choose to make investments that will either accelerate displacement or support the resilience of these businesses and help them grow. Black and Brown businesses need targeted support.





There is a tendency to fall back on this idea that if we just support small businesses, any small businesses, we are going to have thriving, interesting, and inclusive communities. We're not. And if policy makers and practitioners, people in positions like mine, continue to do that, then we are going to fundamentally miss the point. We know what the problem is. Let's call it out. Let's talk about it. Even if it makes us uncomfortable.

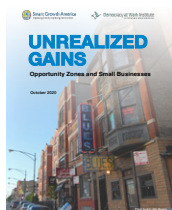
—Councilmember Kenyan R. McDuffie,
Washington, D.C. City Council



Questions to ask

1. Investing in places—infrastructure, buildings, etc.—while failing to invest in the people in them encourages displacement and the loss of the rich diversity that makes the place an attractive area to live and work. What are ways we can invest in people rather than just a place?
2. How can we bring more people who are critical to the success of our diverse communities to the table? What barriers to participation may they face? How can we remove those barriers?
3. What can you do in your role to act with the conviction, partnership, and courage that is required to implement the necessary policies?

Recommended reading



Unrealized Gains: Opportunity Zones and Small Businesses

Have investments in Opportunity Zones achieved the goal of place-based economic development and job creation? SGA summarizes key research and provides recommendations.



Know Your Price

by Andre Perry

Through an examination of six Black-majority cities whose assets and strengths are undervalued, Perry offers a new means of determining the value of Black communities.



The Color of Money

by Mehrsa Baradaran

Baradaran seeks to explain the persistent racial wealth gap and challenge the assumed causes by assessing the generators of wealth in the black community, black banks.

What to do next



Planners:

Carefully examine your zoning codes to understand their potentially racist history or how they contribute to continued discrimination, and update them to better target improving disparities.



Policymakers:

Find ways to embed equity language in your policies in order to make it a standard part of the planning process. For example, when crafting policy on environmental justice, include language that recognizes and addresses the historic discrimination of communities of color.



Community coalitions:

Identify ways community coalitions can catalyze their own revitalization. Black-owned community banks are important, but they often reflect the conditions in which they are found. These banks need support from larger banks and the business community. What kind of mentorship would be helpful? How can we build capacity to equip these businesses to take a central role in catalyzing their own revitalization?



Dismantling exclusionary power structures

Expanding our tables

Without truly hearing and responding to the voices of Black and Brown people with the lived experience who have traditionally carried the burden of inequity, those in control continue to promote the same policies that have enforced inequity and displacement in Black and Brown communities. To effectively dismantle exclusionary power structures, those with the power must follow the lead of those closest to the problems and invest in their success by actively supporting participation in political and economic decision-making.



Equity is healing and is essential for achieving liberation of all humans and our planet.

–Sekita Grant,
Vice President of Programs,
The Solutions Project



Discussion points

- 1. Innovation comes from the bottom up.** The people who experience environmental, racial, and economic oppression firsthand are in the best position to create the most effective solutions to inequity. To facilitate a bottom-to-top reset of who leads innovation, we need to invest in those with lived experience who understand the needs of their community.
- 2. Local governments have an obligation to expand participation.** In order to create and implement policies that serve all residents, city leaders should adopt participatory governance and budgeting processes. Elected officials should put community partnerships in place that allow residents to share ideas as policies are being formulated. To be productive, this form of governance will take time and education and requires elected bodies that are invested in improving community involvement. Participation from people across sectors and experiences broadens potential solutions and fosters support for policy implementation.
- 3. Equity requires accessibility.** Black and Brown community members need access to information about policies and procedures, accurate and trustworthy news sources, and the data and research needed to make informed decisions. A lack of accessibility creates (or exacerbates) further barriers to participation in policymaking and perpetuates the power imbalances between those who have access to information and those who do not.



Questions to ask

1. How do we best reach the voices that are not normally heard? And how do we instill a sense of trust between them and the systems that have historically failed them?
2. What would it look like for you/your office/your agency to cede some power to others who have historically had little?
3. A city's budget can illuminate where the city's values lie. How can we plan our budget to reflect the values of community members? How can our budget actively promote solutions offered by Brown and Black residents?
4. What standards do we have for how we share information? What is our role in correcting misinformation? How can we identify speakers or sources of information that community members trust, and how can we present information in the spaces where they feel most comfortable?

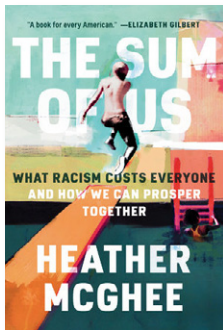
Recommended reading



The Great Real Estate Reset

by Smart Growth America

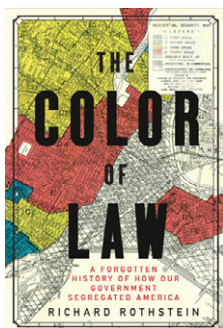
The real estate industry has failed to evolve with the communities it serves. SGA explains the trends that are causing the misalignment between the industry and what is actually needed to build an equitable society.



The Sum of Us

by Heather McGhee

McGhee traveled across the United States to collect stories about what we lose when we believe progress must come at the expense of others. She offers a poignant look at how racism is detrimental to us all.



The Color of Law

by Richard Rothstein

Through an exploration of modern American history, Rothstein provides a detailed report of how the government and court system have upheld and perpetuated racist policies that maintained segregation.

What to do next

☐ **Policymakers:**

Find ways to incorporate participatory governance into your policymaking. Write policies that require a variety of community members to have a seat at the table. Look to Seattle, Washington and Baltimore, Maryland as examples of cities that have had success with participatory governance and budgeting.

☐ **Planners:**

Reevaluate your budget priorities. Assess where money is currently going and look at the current outcomes. Are they enabling inequitable practices? Is there a way to provide solutions, like increasing access to land and capital, for Black and Brown residents through the budget?

☐ **Community coalitions:**

Identify ways community coalitions can share local news and policies. Find ways to make information readily available and understandable, especially when local officials do not make transparency a priority.



Repairing the harm caused by the interstate highway system

The interstate highway system ripped through the heart of many thriving Black and Brown communities, forever impacting economic and social opportunities for those communities and creating durable physical barriers that persist today. Policymakers must accept responsibility to repair the harm caused by the growth of the interstate highway system and prevent further damage by improving the decision-making process to bring all communities to the table to develop intra-community connectivity. We must work to rectify the past, rebuild connection and opportunity, and ensure that future transportation planning allows Black and Brown communities to flourish.



We need to stop thinking of transportation as a way to move people at a low cost and start thinking about this from an interdisciplinary perspective. If we are not investing in quality of life and in intra-community connectivity, everything else is fleeting. Maybe we stop looking at transportation from the business case and start looking at this as a public good.

—Dr. Destiny Thomas,
Founder and CEO of Thrivance Group



Key discussion points

- 1. We must learn from the past to make a vision for the future.** America's "urban renewal" policies often deliberately targeted communities of color and stripped vibrant neighborhoods of their economic and societal value. We must acknowledge this history, and that transportation planning primarily existed to first move cargo, including enslaved human beings, and much later to prioritize White commuters through these highways and the growth of suburban spaces. Without acknowledging our past, future infrastructure projects will maintain and exacerbate the generations of harm caused to Black and Brown communities by transportation and "urban renewal."
- 2. Infrastructure must strengthen local communities, not just regional connections.** Intra-community connectivity is vital, especially in neighborhoods that have been divided and torn apart by highway infrastructure projects. Many of these highways built to transport suburban (and most often White) commuters through neighborhoods of color eliminated pre-existing connections within a community, destabilizing neighborhoods and making valuable inter-community connections more difficult. An equitable approach to transportation considers the impacts on everyone, values local communities as much as regional connections, and has a mindset of bringing the opportunity to the people.
- 3. New tools are required for equitable decision-making.** Transportation planning continues to use decades-old models and tools, developed along with the interstate highway system, that continue to result in the destruction of Black and Brown communities. These outdated mechanisms are still being used to plan transit corridors, bikeways, and pedestrian pathways that continue to bisect Black and Brown communities rather than link them to smart, sustainable development. Racial equity impact assessment tools should be applied to transportation plans to ensure that policymakers and planners do not continue a legacy of harm.



4. **Create a system of community engagement that is compatible with real people's lives.** Participation in the public process must work for everyone and should prioritize listening to and engaging with the most underserved communities and neighborhoods. Policymakers and planners need to make participation accessible by holding public hearings in the evenings or in central locations. Engage the public in non-transactional ways by holding regular listening sessions, for example, by setting up a table on a specific street each month and engaging with passersby. By engaging regularly and maintaining long-term relationships with the community, there is less of a learning curve when the time comes to plan a specific project.

This is our moment to look at the impact of transportation on our communities.

Transportation is not a silo issue: it's about housing, it's about our schools, our stores. This is environmental justice.

— Minnesota State Representative
Rena Moran

Questions to ask

1. What are some specific transportation projects in your community's recent history that either created or exacerbated racial inequities? How so?
2. If restoring past injustices should be a key aim of future infrastructure investments, what kinds of projects should be top of the list where you live?
3. What are ways that the transportation planning profession can shift the focus from moving people out of "undesirable" places to bringing more opportunity to communities?
4. What mechanisms, models, or tools are at your disposal to assess the racial equity impacts of proposed infrastructure projects?

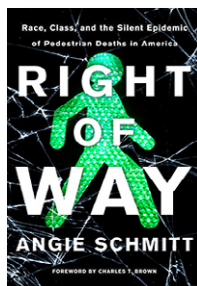
Recommended reading



A policy proposal to undo the damage of "urban renewal"

Third Way and Transportation for America

Third Way and Transportation for America recommend a suite of policies to undo the far-reaching damage of "urban renewal" projects to reconnect communities.



Right of Way

by Angie Schmitt

Right of Way unveils the inequality rooted in the undeterred reign of the automobile in cities and the rise in associated pedestrian deaths and energizes advocacy for road safety.

What to do next

☐ **Policymakers:**

Meet the community where they are to solicit input and participation in the governmental process. Consider holding meetings in the evening and in locations central to where community members live and/or work. Considering the racial equity impacts of potential legislation and how you can undo past harms.

☐ **Planners:**

Engage with communities every day to understand their lived experiences. Set up a table at a regular weekly time in a central location where you can meet and talk to community members meaningfully. Have dialogues with the community outside of major projects to better understand their needs.

☐ **Community coalitions:**

In seeking major changes, someone always feels like they have lost something. Help communities understand the wide-reaching benefits of making systemic changes to the transportation system by amplifying the voices of the people whose voices have been silenced.

