



# 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



## 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?