

Applying Equitable Grantmaking Practices to Address Funding Disparities in Gun Violence Research

Gun violence is the leading cause of death for youth in the United States and has disproportionately impacted communities of color for decades. In response to this public health crisis, the [Kaiser Permanente Center for Gun Violence Research and Education](#) funds equity-centered research, educates the public on gun violence causes and solutions, and embraces community knowledge to address gun violence and firearm suicide.

In establishing its processes as a funder, the Center collaborated with the Grantmaking Department at [Health Resources in Action \(HRiA\)](#) to leverage its expertise in applying equitable grantmaking practices to advance health equity. The goal was to ensure fair and inclusive grantmaking that bolsters the expertise of scientists and leaders from the most impacted communities in researching, implementing, and scaling interventions to reduce gun violence.

The Problem: Funding Disparities

The Center began by engaging the Research and Evaluation Department at HRiA to conduct a funding landscape study that revealed deep disparities:¹

- **Smaller, community-based organizations have been largely excluded.** Less than 25% of gun violence research funding goes to non-academic nonprofit organizations – and most of those nonprofit recipients are larger, reporting annual revenues of at least \$100 million.
- **There appear to be further disparities by race of primary investigators,** with few grant recipients reporting their identity as Black or Latinx – even though Black and Latinx communities disproportionately experience community gun violence.
- **More than 8 out of 10 grant recipients have doctoral degrees,** limiting opportunities for those who may not have an advanced degree but do have lived experience to drive gun violence research.

¹ HRiA conducted a search to identify federal and philanthropic grants awarded between 2020 and 2022 to conduct gun violence research. The names and contact information of the principal investigators were extracted, and an online demographic survey was administered. These findings are based on the responses of 67 investigators who responded to the survey.

The Solution: An Equitable Grantmaking Framework

Equitable grantmaking works to intentionally include people and organizations traditionally excluded from funding opportunities by taking specific measures to break down barriers to eligibility. It utilizes practices designed to ensure that the funding mechanism as well as the processes for determining funding and engaging grantees reflect the needs of the population that the funding intends to serve.

To support this goal, the Center gathered input from researchers, community members, and community-based organizations that have historically been excluded from gun violence research funding. Alongside the funding landscape study, this feedback was used to inform the development of an equitable grantmaking framework that is more accessible, flexible, validating, and engaging. Based on the actions the Center took to reflect these core values in its framework, we offer the following recommendations:

Accessible

- **Democratize the opportunity** by employing both wide and targeted outreach strategies. Distribute the funding announcement not only through traditional channels such as well-known grant databases, but also through nontraditional channels such as collectives that support underrepresented researchers and contact lists curated specifically to reach underfunded organizations and individuals.
- **Expand eligibility** to include fiscally sponsored organizations so that small, grassroots, community-led organizations – often those who need funding the most – are not excluded from applying.
- **Empower applicants** to develop strong proposals by organizing and marketing informational sessions and office hours to ensure ample opportunity to receive clarifying information and support.
- **Simplify the application process** to enable more organizations to apply. For example, consider a two-stage application process: applicants first submit a 2-page letter of intent, then a subset is invited to submit a full proposal.
- **Support fair and equitable application review** by assembling a diverse review committee reflective of the populations the funding is designed to serve, including experts across disciplines and communities, as well as people with lived experience.



We know that more insightful and meaningful research emerges when academic institutions partner with and center the wisdom of the most impacted communities. The Center's grants play an essential role in preventing gun violence by supporting community-led research and demonstrating that equitable grantmaking is possible.

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Flexible

- **Vary award amounts** to match applicant needs and stages of development. For example, a community-based organization new to conducting research could greatly benefit from a smaller grant to build capacity, while a long-standing program could use a larger grant to conduct an evaluation.
- **Allow funding for general operations**, understanding that smaller organizations need capital to increase capacity and engage in research.
- **Avoid excessive funding restrictions**. Allow grantees to allocate funds as they see fit to best meet the needs of the project.

Validating

- **Honor the wisdom of lived experience** by including questions on the application that reveal how the project is informed by insights from those closest to the issue.
- **Ensure that application reviewers recognize lived experience** as expertise by establishing a proposal review rubric that minimizes bias and assigns significant value to this knowledge and the skills that come with it.
- **Allow and encourage funds to be used to compensate partners/participants** with lived experience and operationalize this in budget guidelines.
- **Recognize the value of non-traditional research dissemination methods** – for example, formats and channels that extend beyond publication in academic journals (e.g., videos/short films, podcasts, or social media content).

Engaging

- **Provide tailored technical assistance and wraparound support** post-award to provide ongoing capacity-building and to foster ongoing grantee success.
- **Proactively disseminate grantee achievements and amplify their voices** by spotlighting them and their findings in a variety of formats and channels, from press to social media to website.
- **Foster connections with other funders**. Invite grantees to engage in collaboratives that expose them to additional funders and invite grantees to join you for speaking opportunities and media interviews, especially when the audience is other philanthropic entities.
- **Facilitate learning collaboratives** to build a robust network among grantees and promote a collective for peer learning, resource sharing, and camaraderie.

The Outcomes: Equitable Grantmaking Works

As a result of applying an equitable grantmaking framework in its first competitive funding opportunity (grants awarded in spring 2024), the Center received an impressive 260 applications. Ten projects, highly representative of communities most affected by gun violence, were selected for grants:

- 100% of funded projects focus on populations that are disproportionately affected by gun violence (i.e., Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, or Alaska Native)
- 90% of projects either employ community-based participatory research methods or meaningfully engage those most impacted by violence in the development of interventions
- 80% of projects are led or implemented by community-based organizations
- 70% of project teams are led by people of color
- 100% of projects focused on community gun violence have at least one team member with lived experience with gun violence

Conclusion

Many scientists and organizations representing communities most impacted by gun violence are conducting research into its causes and solutions or are building capacity to do so. However, they are woefully underfunded, often due to inequitable funding practices. Funders can disrupt the status quo by implementing equitable grantmaking processes that intentionally include those traditionally excluded from funding opportunities so they can research, implement, and scale solutions that effectively address this public health crisis.

Applying an Equitable Grantmaking Framework

Make it accessible.

Ensure your process is not overly complex and laborious and that it does not unintentionally exclude small organizations with small budgets.

Build in flexibility.

Avoid rigid funding amounts and excessive funding restrictions. Be nimble in meeting organizations where they are and open to supporting capacity building.

Validate those traditionally excluded.

Actively recruit individuals and organizations that have been marginalized in the funding landscape by operationalizing appreciation of their experience in the application and review process.

Engage grantees post-award.

Learn about their needs, provide opportunities for growth and support, and connect them with each other for peer learning.