



Using demographic data to advance employment equity

This infosheet is part of a broader toolkit created by BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner (BCOHRC) to help employers learn how to improve employment equity within their businesses and organizations. It looks at the collection and use of demographic data in the workplace and how it can contribute to employment equity. The contents follow a three-part framework—drawn from our report, [*The Grandmother Perspective*](#)—related to working with such data responsibly: **purpose**, **process** and **tool**. It covers:

- Understanding disaggregated demographic data
- Identifying the purpose for collecting data
- Co-developing a data collection process
- Using and analyzing data appropriately as a tool
- Taking action after analysis



In 2022, BCOHRC conducted research on employment equity in B.C. through:

- Hosting focus groups on employment equity with employers from diverse sectors¹
- Conducting a poll of over 1,000 employed adults in the province

Findings from this research help to inform our employment equity toolkit.

Understanding disaggregated demographic data

What is disaggregated demographic data?

It's becoming common for employers and companies to ask people to share personal demographic information about themselves. They may ask anyone from workers, managers and job applicants to suppliers, customers or other groups. The data being collected may be on characteristics such as age, race, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability status and more.

Once names and other identifying details are removed, this demographic information can shine new light on an organization's body of aggregate data—data that is grouped together. When you break aggregate data down into sub-groups based on individual demographic characteristics, you get disaggregated demographic data that can help reveal hidden inequalities in the workplace.

Benefits and potential harms of demographic data

Disaggregated demographic data can help uncover nuanced findings about specific groups. It can:

- Be essential to advancing human rights and fulfilling your legal duty as an employer to prevent discrimination on grounds related to B.C.'s *Human Rights Code*
- Help you to identify ways your workplace is systematically excluding or discriminating against a certain group, including people with intersectional identities

However, if used in the wrong way it can also cause harm by reinforcing stigma and bias.

For example, data showing racialized women being passed over for promotions could reinforce pervasive stereotypes that women and racialized people are inherently less valuable workers.



Collecting and using demographic data

Many people think that collecting demographic data is not allowed, but it is not prohibited under B.C.'s *Human Rights Code*. However, it must be done in a way that respects the privacy rights of those whose data is being collected.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to collecting this data, but it should always be done in partnership with the people it is intended to benefit. Here we explain the steps you should take to find the approach that's right for your workplace. The steps employ a three-part framework:

1. A **purpose** grounded in addressing inequity
2. A **process** grounded in respectful relationship
3. A **tool and analysis** that is appropriate to the purpose and process

For federally regulated workplaces

If your workplace is federally regulated, the *Employment Equity Act* requires that you collect and report certain data on your workforce. More information and guidance is available from the [Canadian Human Rights Commission](#).

Identifying the purpose for collecting data

Why do you think you need to collect disaggregated demographic data?

Start with a clear answer to this question. You may, for example, want to:

- Understand the varied experiences of your workers, including whether or how they experience discrimination
- Measure gaps in representation, pay or other outcomes
- Identify and remove systemic barriers
- Evaluate the equity impacts of a specific policy or program

The end goal for your organization should be making changes that lead to greater equity in the workplace.

- For more information on how promoting equity is good for business, see our [Economic benefits of employment equity infosheet](#).

It's important to identify a purpose because disaggregated demographic data can cause harm. If not collected and used towards an equity goal, this data can reinforce stereotypes and stigmas or be seen as a tool of control and surveillance in the workplace.

For example, data showing one group of people earning lower wages on average can be misused or misunderstood as evidence of a poorer work ethic among group members.

That's why data collection must be paired with an examination of individual and societal biases and power imbalances that are reflected in the workplace.

Co-developing a data collection process

Collecting data in a good way often takes time and effort. How it's gathered is itself an opportunity to:

Build processes and cultures
grounded in respectful
relationships

Centre voices that are
often silenced

Involving your workers to co-develop the data collection process will make them more willing to participate. As experts in their own lives, they are best equipped to identify the priorities and risks of collecting and using this data.

Steps you can follow to co-develop the data collection process with your workers

Form a working group with members from your workforce

Make sure you have diverse representation

Your working group should have diverse representation and be empowered to co-develop your data project with you or other leaders in your organization. Ask the working group who may be missing from the conversation and adjust membership based on what you learn.

! Remember, no one individual can speak on behalf of a diverse community to which they belong.

Ensure the group is a proportionate size

There's no perfect size for this working group. It will depend on the size of your organization. Small workplaces may need a different approach such as staff surveys or regular discussions at staff meetings.

If your workplace is large, you may want to implement further tools beyond a working group to ensure everyone has a chance to contribute.

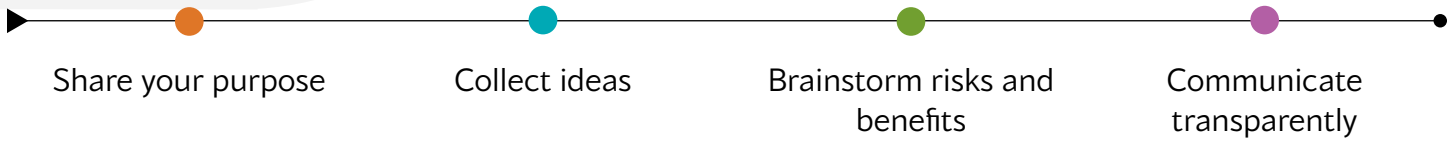
Offer compensation and support

Working group members should be compensated for their time or released from other duties in order to participate. Learning about and addressing equity issues in the workplace can be emotionally difficult, so make sure resources are in place to support participants.



Ask if your workplace is ready for disaggregated demographic data

If you had this data, what would your organization do differently?



1. Start by sharing your purpose for collecting this data with the working group, the organization as a whole, or a leadership team (if your leadership team is diverse and has lived experience of discrimination)
2. See what ideas come forward to improve it
3. Brainstorm the risks and benefits of collecting and using demographic data and how to address the risks identified
4. Be transparent across the organization about the purpose of collecting this data and the pros and cons of doing so

Together, consider whether your organization is ready to use this data appropriately. For example:

- Has your organization made a public commitment to equity in the workplace?
- Is your workforce aware of your anti-discrimination policies and procedures?
- Have you invested in staff training on equity-related topics?
- Do you regularly engage with your workforce on equity-related topics?

Your data strategy will be more successful if you have started to build a shared understanding in your workplace of the history, context, unconscious bias and structures of oppression that people face because of who they are.



The importance of workplace culture

BCOHRC's 2022 poll found that working age adults in British Columbia believe the most important practice for building an equitable workplace is a work culture that itself champions and cares about justice, equity, diversity and inclusion. Only one-in-four respondents said their current workplace has such a culture.



Determine what data you want to collect

Work together to figure out the identities among your workforce that you want to learn more about to help achieve your purpose for collecting demographic data. Make sure you are doing so inclusively.

Choose what characteristics you want to ask about

The protected grounds under B.C.'s *Human Rights Code* can be a helpful start. These include:

- Indigenous identity
- Race
- Place of origin
- Religion
- Family status
- Physical or mental disability
- Sexual orientation
- Gender identity or expression
- Age

You may consider adding more factors, such as:

- Education level
- First language
- Others you wish to understand

Decide how specific you want to be

The level of specificity is important. Using broad categories like “racialized person” might make data collection and analysis easier, but you will lose the ability to reveal barriers faced by distinct groups within them.

Often employers will start broad and get more specific over time as trust is developed with workers. In smaller organizations, privacy considerations may also lead you to make your categories broader to protect the identity of employees.

Ensure you are using inclusive language

Finally, identify inclusive terminology by looking at best practices recommended by communities themselves, along with feedback from your workforce. What is considered inclusive language will change over time.

Helpful resources for drafting questions and identifying inclusive language

- ▶ The Centre for Gender and Sexual Health Equity at UBC offers [guidance](#) on asking about and measuring data on genders and sexes.
- ▶ The Canadian Institute for Health Information offers [guidance](#) on race-based and Indigenous identity data.

Consider these promising practices

Participation in data collection should be voluntary

You can't force someone to self-identify as a member of a certain group. Always include a survey option such as “**prefer not to disclose**.” Make sure it's clear that workers can choose not to provide any information and that they're free to change or withdraw their information at any time.

The only exception is if there is a specific legal requirement the employer must fulfill.

Potential barriers to participation

If you don't have buy-in for the benefits you hope to achieve, it may be because:

- People from marginalized groups may think the collected information will lead to further discrimination
- People from privileged groups may not see the relevance of the exercise or may react negatively to a perceived threat to their power²

For example, some staff may be resistant to collecting and using demographic data for fear it will lead to discrimination against white men.³

Make your data collection process accessible to everyone

Consider multiple languages (if appropriate in the context of your workplace) and alternate formats for visual accessibility. Consult a resource on accessible survey design for more ideas.⁴

Have a plan to ensure privacy

It's your responsibility to find the least intrusive method for collecting data. Make sure it's stored securely and that you are compliant with any applicable privacy legislation. Be clear about who can access the data and why.

Remember, supposedly visible characteristics such as race or gender cannot be assumed and deserve the same privacy protections as other personal data.

- See the Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner for [guidance on compliance with privacy laws](#).

Consider the benefits and disadvantages of anonymity

Demographic data that is linked to individuals (while still kept private with restricted access) can be a more powerful tool for understanding equity in your workplace. Anonymity may make it more difficult to, for example, examine patterns of discrimination in hiring, promotion, retention and compensation. However, depending on your purpose for collecting data and the level of buy-in from your workforce, collecting data anonymously may be your best option.

Make sure you develop the capacity to use data effectively

Depending on your resources you may consider hiring an external consultant to collect, store, analyze and report back on results. However, it is important that you also develop internal skills and capacity in your organization to continue this work over the long term.

As one person noted during BCOHRC's 2022 focus groups: "We went and did all this work with consultants, but then nobody was competent to execute the plan internally."

Use transparency and action to increase participation

Make sure everyone understands why they are being asked to share their data so they can provide informed consent or refusal. Encourage all to participate without stigmatizing or singling anyone out. Don't just express your commitment to equity—build trust by taking actions that promote equity.

Continue to engage your staff as the process unfolds

Everyone in your workplace should be regularly updated on progress and findings.

If you have a working group, empower them to make sure data is interpreted and used appropriately.

When systemic issues are revealed through your data, you have a responsibility to address them as effectively as you can. Collaborate with staff to set goals for change and continue to use data to monitor progress. Future data collection may be less successful if workers aren't seeing increased equity in the workplace.

Using and analyzing data appropriately as a tool

Before moving ahead, circle back to your purpose. Are you confident disaggregated demographic data is necessary to achieve your objectives? Are you sure your approach won't create unanticipated harm? If so, it's time to consider how you will use and analyze your data and what you will seek to answer and understand with the information as a tool.



What some employers in B.C. use demographic data for

Many participants in BCOHRC's 2022 focus groups described the value of collecting data as part of monitoring and evaluating their employment equity efforts, including:

- To understand who is applying and who continues through different stages of the hiring process
- To track systemic differences in compensation, promotion and retention
- To understand feelings of inclusion and other workplace experiences

These efforts continue to evolve and improve.

As one focus group participant explained:

"I would love to do work that is more culturally inclusive and have more cultural humility and respect around data collection, so we understand different forms of sharing feelings and perceptions as well."

There are two types of data you may already have at your disposal that can help provide additional insights into the demographic data you have collected:

Quantitative data

Data in the form of numbers

Qualitative data

Data captured in words or another medium that's not numbers

Using quantitative data

If you have quantitative data that has already been collected across your organization, you can consider linking this to your newly collected demographic data where this doesn't undermine employee privacy. There are many ways you can explore data to learn about the state of equity in the workplace, for example:⁵

Data source	What you can learn about
Jobs, contract status and hours	Diversity in management or leadership roles and equity of access to work shifts and full- or part-time work
Pay and benefits	Pay equity, including bonuses if applicable
Job applicants and hires*	Diversity of applicant pools and equity in hiring decisions
Length of time in a job	Patterns in staff retention as well as equity in promotions
Engagement surveys and complaints processes	How identity impacts the experience of your workplace
Performance evaluations	Whether performance is evaluated equitably

*Requires collecting demographic data of job applicants

Considerations when analyzing quantitative data

A person's experience cannot be reduced to a single identity category

Factors such as our race, disability and gender create overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. New or deeper inequities may be revealed when you investigate these intersections and other identities.⁶

Data categories may not tell all

Data categories may give a false sense of uniformity because self-identification can be much more nuanced than a category option on a survey.

For example, if people with a range of disabilities are reduced to a single number then the diversity of experiences within that group are not captured.⁷



In addition, how a person identifies on a survey may not align with how others see them. The perception others have of a certain identity characteristic category may be influenced by stereotypes and bias that are misaligned with the self-perception of those self-identifying under that category.

Using qualitative data

Linking qualitative data to demographic data can reveal findings with deeper meaning and nuance, and new patterns in staff experiences.⁸ This is especially true for small workplaces or teams that may face the extra challenge of drawing meaningful conclusions from a small sample of quantitative data. Sometimes, qualitative data is all you need to act.

Data source	What you can learn about
Survey comments, exit interviews, focus groups and other feedback mechanisms ⁹	All aspects of employment equity

Taking action after analysis

Some of the findings from your analysis may raise difficult conversations for the organization. It's important that employers remain open and true to what has been learned through the data collection and analysis process. Data collection is only the first step and just one potential tool for promoting equity in the workplace. It must be accompanied by action.

Where do we go from here?

- ▶ The rest of our [employment equity toolkit](#) can help you take action in any areas where you may identify a need for it based on your data analysis.
- ▶ For a deeper dive into collecting disaggregated demographic data in British Columbia, read our full 2020 report entitled [The Grandmother Perspective](#).

Please note that this infosheet provides general information. It is not legal advice. We hope you find it useful but encourage you to seek legal advice about how to implement our guidance in your workplace, including how collective agreement terms or other legal obligations must inform your efforts.

There is no one size fits all approach to employment equity. As an employer, your organization's size, maturity, composition, challenges and needs will inform the strategies that will help advance equity in your workplace.

Notes

¹ BCOHRC's focus groups consisted of employers from five sectors—construction, retail and wholesale, education, health and social services, and scientific, professional and technical services. Participants were senior leadership as well as human resources and employment equity focused staff. For each focus group, we invited a mix of large and small organizations as well as employers from different parts of the province. We also tried to invite both leaders in employment equity as well as those at earlier stages of the employment equity journey.

² Black Health Equity Working Group, "[Engagement, Governance, Access, and Protection \(EGAP\): A Data Governance Framework for Health Data Collected from Black Communities](#)," *Black Health Equity Working Group*, 2021.

³ Ontario Human Rights Commission, "[Count Me In: Collecting Human Rights Based Data](#)," *Ontario Human Rights Commission*, 2010.

⁴ See, for example, [this guide from California State University, Northridge](#).

⁵ Iris Bohnet and Siri Chilazi, *Goals and Targets for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion*, Harvard Kennedy School, April 2020, 33.

⁶ For more on intersectionality, see [Intersectionality 101](#) by Olena Hankivsky.

⁷ Canadian Heritage, *Systemic Barriers to the Full Socio-Economic Participation of Persons with Disabilities and the Benefits Realized When Such Persons Are Included in the Workplace*, Literature Review, Canadian Heritage, December 2020.

⁸ Ontario Human Rights Commission, "[Count Me In](#)."

⁹ Equality Challenge Unit, "[Collecting Data on Non-Academic Atypical Staff](#)," *European Institute for Gender Equality*, 2013.

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