



Detailed Learnings from Phase One Pilot Projects

The Phase One pilot projects received support and resources from People & Equity to collect and analyze data appropriately and effectively. The pilot projects were a key component of Phase One of the Data for Equity Strategy to test and learn from the application of the Data for Equity Guidelines in different program contexts. The pilot projects served as a demonstration of applying the Data for Equity Strategy to City processes. They also provided opportunities to enhance and learn from key processes including training and education, data collection, quality improvement, analysis, and use. The lessons learned from Phase One will inform the broader application of the Data for Equity Strategy across the corporation.

The Phase One pilot projects were selected based on potential equity impact, scale, readiness, capacity, and commitment to implement and sustain socio-demographic data collection and disaggregated data use. The pilot projects implemented in Phase One include:

- **Toronto Public Health:** During the COVID-19 pandemic, there were strong calls from community groups and advocates that data should be collected at an individual-level from COVID-19 cases to better understand the characteristics of those who were ill. Toronto Public Health (TPH) had to develop its own COVID-19 case and contact information system because the number of cases started to overwhelm the provincial database that had historically been used. In response to the community calls, it also included socio-demographic questions in the new system. The province later adopted a new information system for case and contact management, which also supported the collection of individual-level socio-demographic data collection. The new system's capabilities were essential in analyzing and reporting on factors and their relationship to population health.

Toronto Public Health (TPH) collected socio-demographic data on COVID-19 cases from May 20, 2020, to December 31, 2021¹, including First Nations, Inuit and Métis (FNIM) identity, racial group, income, and household size. This data was summarized and reported through a [COVID-19 Race and Income dashboard](#). TPH also engaged in consultations with FNIM partners as a component of FNIM-led uses and reporting of FNIM COVID-19 data.

The data collected through this initiative guided the City of Toronto, TPH, health care, and community partners in addressing COVID-19 inequities. Focused

¹ Starting Dec. 31, 2021, the province limited eligibility for publicly funded PCR tests to high-risk individuals who were symptomatic or at risk of severe illness from COVID-19. These changes resulted in data no longer being representative of those sick with COVID-19.

interventions were implemented in the most impacted neighborhoods and populations. These initiatives included:

- Strengthening partnerships with agencies, healthcare professionals, and community leaders serving racialized communities, particularly the groups that were identified as being over-represented in reported COVID-19 cases
 - Expanding vaccine access, reducing barriers, and deploying vaccination clinics in areas with low vaccine uptake and or high COVID illness rates
 - Expanding access to COVID-19 testing through mobile and pop-up testing, outreach, and promotion
 - Sharing public health information, and supplies and promoting vaccine uptake through outreach and engagement
 - Providing supports for isolation for those unable to safely do so at home
 - Addressing other socio-economic impacts of COVID-19
 - Bringing attention to the social determinants of health and how other levels of government can address them
 - Planning longer-term advocacy for a more equitable system of health and social services
- **EarlyON (Children's Services):** In 2019, Children's Services began the development of an electronic registration (E-Registration) system for EarlyON, which was used to collect program data including socio-demographic data. Children's Services embarked on the pilot project to capture program utilization rates and socio-demographic data to better understand who is accessing EarlyON programs. The intention was also to inform future planning, including outcome metrics and impact data, as well as equity and reconciliation objectives that will support children and families.

The first phase of the pilot project worked with community providers and collected socio-demographic data at 8 of the 250 EarlyON sites, which created an initial socio-demographic baseline. During the pilot, 65% of adults chose to complete the equity questions for their families, demonstrating the ability of staff to collect data, and the willingness of clients to provide their information. Working with third-party social service providers added complexities to this project due to the City's data security requirements. Based on learnings throughout the pilot, Children's Services is working to identify a new data collection mechanism that will meet security requirements and support the collection of robust data that can be used to inform planning and policy decisions moving forward.

- **Toronto Employment & Social Services:** Since 2019, Toronto Employment and Social Services (TESS) has collected socio-demographic data through the Province's Identity-Based Data Collection Initiative. Despite collecting this information at the time of application for social assistance, TESS experienced some challenges with data quality, response rates, and inconsistencies with the City's Data for Equity Strategy. TESS' pilot aimed to address these challenges as well as enhance service quality for clients and recipients of the Ontario Works program.

In preparation for the pilot, TESS completed a current state analysis, formed a Steering Committee, and engaged extensively with clients and staff. TESS also conducted a series of engagements with various committees and advisory groups including TESS' Confronting Anti-Black Racism Committee, the Indigenous Affairs Divisional Committee, and the Divisional Client and Job Seeker Advisory Committee. Feedback received has helped inform the development of strategies and approaches to increase the collection and quality of socio-demographic data. To support this pilot, TESS developed staff resources, materials and training, including collaboration with People & Equity to develop a virtual instructor-led training. A dashboard was also created to track data collection trends at the local office level.

Currently, external constraints limit TESS' continued implementation of this Phase 1 Data for Equity pilot. The Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) has paused the sharing of identity-based data with municipalities which impacts TESS' ability to thoroughly evaluate implementation outcomes against the objectives and to provide robust insights for program and policy development related to client identity. TESS continues to be committed to the principles of Data for Equity and will continue to seek out opportunities to forward this work through our service delivery including leveraging divisional trainings to integrate the Data for Equity principles and guidelines.

" I now have a better understanding of why we should be collecting this data and how to approach the questions with clients." - Front-line staff from Toronto Employment & Social Services

- **Community Funding Unit (Social Development):** The goal of the Social Development pilot was to use a community-based model, led by the non-profit sector, to enable equitable, ethical, strategic, and purposeful collection of social identity data by service agencies. Longer term, the goal is to create allies to equity-deserving groups, improving access, elevating trends, informing planning, measuring impact, and ultimately supporting social change.

The pilot worked with 53 community organizations in 3 cohorts, providing capacity building on data collection and the opportunity to test the survey tool developed across the community and social services sector. Since the implementation of the pilot, the socio-demographic data collected has helped both agencies and funders understand who is accessing services at an organizational level. The collected data helped agencies understand their service users better, dispelling assumptions about their demographics. For instance, one agency discovered more Black families using their service than predicted. In response, the agency plans to tailor their services to Black communities, including providing more culturally appropriate foods.

"Taking this data [...] and being able to figure out the why, and the impact the agencies are having in your community and using the data to support that, especially when [...], seeking funding or grants and in building out the case for

supports, this data helps to support that narrative.”– Agency that participated in BYSY from Community Funding Unit (Social Development)

“The data has helped to dispel some assumptions about who was using services. [...] The demographic data collected through this project showed that there are more Black families using services than predicted. The agency plans to tailor services to the Black communities they serve in [the] meal program by providing more culturally appropriate foods.” – Agency that participated in BYSY from Community Funding Unit (Social Development)

Key Successes, Equity, and Reconciliation Impacts from Pilots

The achievements from Phase One will be carried forward into the next round of implementation and should be applied as learnings for the City of Toronto more broadly.

Examples of such success can be seen through:

- **A More Accurate Picture of Service Users and Toronto Residents, Targeted Strategies and Initiatives, Working to Reducing Inequality:** Phase One of the Data for Equity Strategy has pushed initiatives and strategies to go beyond the traditional "one-size-fits-all" approach. The collection of socio-demographic data has allowed the specific needs and barriers faced by Toronto's diverse residents to be identified, considered, and addressed. It has also provided a better understanding of access, enrollment, experience, and outcomes.
- **Socio-demographic Data Collected and Used:** Data collection is not without limitations, risks, and challenges. Despite this, Phase One proved that high-quality socio-demographic data can successfully be collected and used. The City of Toronto is a leader in this field and is paving the way in terms of how socio-demographic data could be collected and used to develop evidence-informed policies, strategies, services, and processes that are relevant, impactful, responsive, transparent, and accountable to residents. Phase One also allowed divisions to consider whether the same socio-demographic data are already available in other government databases, and to explore data linkage opportunities.
- **Increased Staff Capacity:** Throughout Phase One, the participating divisions noted that their capacity to both collect and use data has increased. People & Equity has worked closely with the divisions throughout Phase One, including advising on how to frame demographic questions, administer data collection, manage honorariums, and how to approach and conduct data analysis. People & Equity offered additional support, resources, and training where needed. Increased capacity and knowledge are beneficial for both the participating divisions, but also the City of Toronto more broadly.
- **Increased Awareness and Dialogue About Data Equity:** Conversations around the use of data are becoming increasingly common, particularly for the use of planning, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating equity and prosperity activities. At both a team level and organizational level, meaningful conversations are taking place, advancing awareness and increasing the use of data for achieving equity goals. Conversations about Data Equity are also taking place in

the City's Community of Practice, which is a collaborative space for Pilot leads to learn and share with each other.

Key Lessons Learned and Challenges

The evaluation of the Phase One pilots uncovered several lessons learned, which will be carried forward into the broader implementation. The learnings will be used to further develop resources and supports that will help address challenges moving forward.

Analysis from the Phase One pilots highlighted the following lessons and challenges:

- **Staff Time Capacity:** Staff capacity was a significant challenge for participating divisions. The data collection process was often assigned to front-line staff who were already struggling to keep up with their main duties, while ongoing data analysis was another challenge to manage. Staff noted that they did not have time to attend capacity building and/or coaching sessions. Some divisions indicated that they did not have a dedicated person responsible for the data collection process, or ensuring their organization had the appropriate data infrastructure and privacy requirements.
- **End-to-End Data Skills:** Staff capacity also extends to data collection, sharing, analysis (including equity analysis), applying, and reporting skills. Staff needed to learn about the importance of data collection and become comfortable with the process, as well as answering respondents' questions and concerns as they arose. Some divisions noted that they did not have staff with the required skill set to meaningfully aggregate or analyze the data. This impacts the utility of the data and the validity of the results.
- **Lack of Consistency:** While some divisions have staff with advanced levels of data skills, there is a lack of consistency in approach. This results in ad hoc efforts and a lack of oversight, leaving the City vulnerable to compliance and regulatory risks. Beyond this, data is not neutral and the impacts of inequitable data practices are significant and can create further harm. Other risks include the potential to create barriers to service, perpetuate stereotypes, stigmatize groups of people, or lead to mistrust among residents and service users.
- **Data Technology and Process:** A key learning from Phase One was related to organizational readiness and having the technological infrastructure in place to collect, store, and analyze the data.
- **Change Management:** As with any large-scale organizational change, the implementation process is lengthy and complicated. This has reinforced the need for a flexible and iterative approach, as well as the need for Champions in divisions to be identified as new projects begin.
- **Relationships With Communities/Clients and Building Community Governance Models:** The voluntary nature of data collection and the different comfort levels of clients can also lead to challenges in collecting the data, and in some cases can even pose a barrier to receiving City services. Particularly, First Nations, Inuit and Métis (FNIM) and Black communities have endured racism and inequities with government systems which has resulted in mistrust around data collection. Robust data collection requires relationship building and trust between service providers and recipients.

Phase One also underscored the need to create frameworks for community governance models, particularly FNIM and Black data governance frameworks. This is necessary to ensure that data is owned, shared, and ethically used to benefit respective communities.