

Economic Mobility Catalog: Case Study

Using data to advance equitable decision-making: Tacoma, WA



MORE ABOUT THE STRATEGY USED IN THIS CASE STUDY: [Prioritizing equity in local decision making](#)

At-a-Glance



Summary

- Like all American cities, Tacoma (WA) has been shaped by systemic racism. Today, the parts of Tacoma that have historically received greater public investment continue to have the greatest opportunity for residents to enjoy a high quality of life, earn a living wage, have access to education, and help shape their neighborhood and city. The areas that were denied this investment – largely where low-income and residents of color live – largely continue to have worse social and economic outcomes. Recognizing this history of systemic racism, the City of Tacoma committed to advancing equitable outcomes for its residents. However, many city departments struggled to consistently operationalize equity across their programs and policies.
- In 2018, the City of Tacoma launched the Equity Index, a Geographic Information System tool used to map opportunity across the City of Tacoma. The [Equity Index](#) rates the level of opportunity in each of the city's Census [block groups](#) based on 34 indicators from five equally-weighted categories: livability, accessibility, economy, education, and environmental health. By providing actionable and relevant data, the Index supports city staff in incorporating equity into their regular decision-making processes.
- Keys to the Equity Index's success include the City of Tacoma's longstanding efforts to educate staff on issues of equity, the collaborative approach used to develop the tool, the robust educational resources developed to support staff in adopting the tool, and the strong backing local leaders have given to the City's equity commitments.
- Obstacles to the Index's success include early challenges staff faced in operationalizing insights from the tool, sustaining meaningful use of the Index through institutional changes, and barriers to rigorously evaluating and demonstrating the impact of the tool.

Results and Accomplishments

<h2>333%</h2> <p>After incorporating the Equity Index into a small business loan program, the number of Black-owned businesses receiving a loan increased by 333 percent.</p>	<h2>\$200K</h2> <p>The City of Tacoma used the Equity Index to incorporate equity into street light placement, resulting in the placement of more street lights in low opportunity neighborhoods than under the previous methodology.</p>	<h2>50</h2> <p>In 2022, the City funded 50 art wraps for utility boxes, and placed the wraps largely in areas identified as lower opportunity by the Equity Index.</p>
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- **Leveraging data to promote equity:** The Equity Index is a Geographic Information System (GIS) tool used to map opportunity across the City of Tacoma. Since its launch in 2018, the City of Tacoma has leveraged the Index to incorporate equity into how it allocates resources, conducts outreach and community engagement, develops policies, and more.
- **Achieving widespread adoption:** Designed to be actionable and relevant, the Equity Index is in use across the City of Tacoma. In recent years, nearly every city department has used the tool, from Tacoma’s Fire Department to its Environmental Services and Community and Economic Development Departments.
- **Serving as a model for other jurisdictions:** In recognition of the Index’s impact, the City of Tacoma has presented on the tool at multiple national conferences, including the Esri User Conference and New Growth Innovation Network’s Cityscapes Summit. Additionally, in 2022, the City of Tacoma partnered with its county government, Pierce County, to replicate the Equity Index at the county level.
- **Receiving industry-wide recognition:** In 2023, the City of Tacoma’s Information Technology Department, which supports the Index, received a Special Achievement in GIS Award from Esri Inc., an industry-leading GIS software company. The award recognized the City’s innovative use of the Equity Index to address the community’s pressing challenges. A year later, the City of Tacoma received New Growth Innovation Network’s Luminary Award for the tool’s role in advancing inclusive economic growth in the city.

Overview



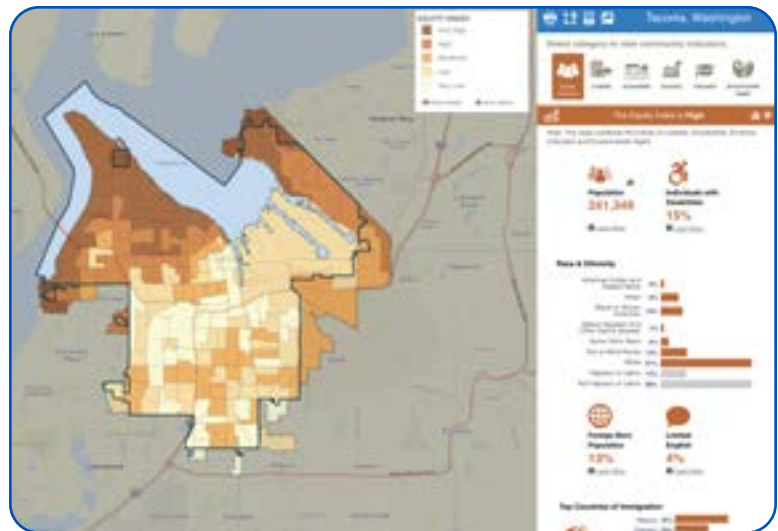
What was the challenge?

- **Public action creates inequitable outcomes:** Like all American cities, Tacoma has been shaped by systemic racism. Throughout much of its history, Tacoma was subject to, or itself adopted, policies and practices that produced inequitable outcomes for its residents. Among these practices was redlining, which led to stark racial and socioeconomic segregation in Tacoma.

- **Ongoing harm caused by systemic racism:** Tacoma's history of systemic racism lives on today. The parts of Tacoma that have historically received greater public investment –largely where higher-income and white residents live – today have greater access to opportunity. The areas that were denied this investment –largely where low-income and residents of color live –continue to have worse social and economic outcomes.
- **Community members call for change:** In 2014, recognizing Tacoma's history of systemic racism, residents highlighted racial equity as a key priority during the city's strategic planning process. Responding to this call, the City of Tacoma incorporated equity and accessibility as a cross-cutting goal in its Tacoma 2025 strategic plan. To support this work, the City established its Office of Equity and Human Rights.
- **Barriers to integrating equity across city functions:** While Tacoma made early progress toward its equity goals, many city departments struggled to operationalize equity across their programs and policies. Departmental leaders increasingly highlighted the need for actionable data on how access to opportunity varied across the city. To meet this need, the Office of Equity and Human Rights began developing the Tacoma Equity Index.

What was the solution?

- **Launching the Tacoma Equity Index:** In 2018, the City of Tacoma launched the Equity Index, a Geographic Information System tool used to map opportunity across the city. The Index visually highlights “opportunity” by measuring where residents have access to resources and amenities that are predictive of a high quality of life, such as public transportation, jobs, and healthy food. To achieve this, the Index rates the level of opportunity in each of the city's Census block groups based on 34 indicators from five equally-weighted categories from the City's strategic plan. These categories are: livability, accessibility, economy, education, and environmental health.



Tacoma Equity Index map with list of indicators

- **Highlighting disparities in opportunity:** The Equity Index classifies each block group as very low, low, moderate, high, or very high opportunity, allowing for easy comparison across different areas in the city. Demographic data, like race, gender, and language spoken at home, are also included, but they are not factored into the opportunity score itself. Instead, demographic data can be overlaid on the map to show which social groups are disproportionately impacted by the geographic inequities captured by the Index.

- **Enabling decisions that promote equity:** The Equity Index is used by multiple city departments for more than one hundred different applications. Often, city staff use the Index as part of analyses that inform one-time decisions, like where to allocate resources and how to conduct more effective community outreach and engagement. However, the Equity Index is also integrated into multiple ongoing city processes. Most prominently, as part of the city's legislative process, staff are required to use the Equity Index to describe how any proposed City Council action will promote equity, diversity, or inclusion. Notably, across these use cases, the Index is generally paired with additional data, community engagement, and other information. The Equity Index is used as a component of decision-making and is never used as the single determinant of a decision. (To access more examples of applications of the Equity Index, see the City of Tacoma's [Equity Index case studies](#).)
- **Emphasizing transparency and accountability:** The Equity Index is available [online](#) for public use. By making the Index publicly available, the City creates a shared understanding across residents, partner organizations, and city government of the geography of opportunity in Tacoma. As a result, residents, community groups, and partner organizations increasingly use the Index to inform their own work and to advocate for change.

Who were the key stakeholders?

- **Office of Equity and Human Rights, Information Technology Department, and Office of Strategy:** Tacoma's Office of Equity and Human Rights (OEHR) led the development of the Equity Index. The Information Technology Department and the Office of Strategy now work with OEHR to handle the day-to-day implementation of the Index (e.g., developing training materials and hosting workshops for city staff).
- **The Kirwan Institute:** The Kirwan Institute, based out of The Ohio State University, is an interdisciplinary research institute focused on advancing equity and inclusion. The Kirwan Institute supported Tacoma's Office of Equity and Human Rights in identifying the indicators that would be used in the Equity Index.
- **Senior city leaders:** Senior leaders within the City of Tacoma – such as the Mayor, City Council members, the City Manager, and the Chief Strategy Officer – emphasize the importance of the City's equity goals, creating greater accountability for city staff to use the Equity Index as part of their work.
- **City departmental staff:** Staff from across the City of Tacoma are ultimately responsible for using the Equity Index to advance the City's strategic goals. From the Department of Public Works to the Office of Management and Budget, city staff have developed innovative ways to integrate the Equity Index into their work.
- **Community members and external partners:** As the Equity Index is available for public use, various community groups and external partner organizations use the tool to inform their work and advocate for positive change in Tacoma.

What factors drove success?

- **Building on foundational knowledge about equity:** Before developing the Equity Index, the City of Tacoma had provided opportunities for its staff to learn about equity and how it applied to their work. As a result, when the Index launched, many city staff already understood the importance of equity and equitable decision-making. This foundational knowledge made training and building buy-in among staff easier, supporting the user adoption of the Equity Index.
- **Developing the tool in partnership with stakeholders:** During the development of the Equity Index, the Office of Equity and Human Rights collected feedback from community members on the design of the tool. OEHR also collaborated with city departments to identify data sources for each of the Equity Index's indicators. By meaningfully engaging both internal and external stakeholders during the development of the Equity Index, OEHR built buy-in leading up to the tool's launch.
- **Providing support to encourage adoption:** Since the launch of the Equity Index, the City of Tacoma has provided departmental staff with training and technical support to encourage the adoption of the tool. The Office of Equity and Human Rights, Information Technology Department, and Office of Strategy lead the development of general training materials and workshops. To supplement this work, the Information Technology Department's Geographic Information Systems team provides direct support to departments interested in using the Equity Index to execute more sophisticated analyses.
- **Strong backing from senior leaders:** Senior leaders within the City of Tacoma have consistently reaffirmed their commitment to advancing racial equity and improving outcomes for residents. Key milestones demonstrating this commitment include the integration of equity into the City's ten-year strategic plan in 2014; the establishment of the Office of Equity and Human Rights in 2015; and the adoption of Resolution 40622 in 2020, which acknowledged the impact of systemic racism on Tacoma and committed the City to addressing its harms. By showing support for the City's equity goals, senior leaders have increased the sense of accountability for city staff to use the Equity Index as part of their work.

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“Our collective efforts to refine the Equity Index since it was established have significantly contributed to the City of Tacoma's progress in addressing inequities.”

Elizabeth Pauli
City Manager, City of Tacoma

What were the major obstacles?

- **Learning to operationalize insights from the tool:** As the City of Tacoma rolled out the Equity Index, many departments initially struggled to translate the information they gained from the tool into concrete changes to their programs and policies. To support city staff in

operationalizing insights from the Equity Index, the Office of Strategy, IT, and the Office of Equity and Human Rights (OEHR) developed training materials and held workshops to help departments understand the tool's value and develop the technical skills needed to use it. To further mitigate the problem, the Office of Strategy led the development of a series of case studies to provide departmental staff with concrete examples for how the Equity Index can be used effectively.

- **Sustaining use through institutional changes:** The Equity Index is most effective when it is integrated into the core work done by each city department. However, institutional changes, like staff turnover, budget fluctuations, or changes in programmatic priorities, can threaten the ability of departmental staff to use the tool up to its potential. To support departmental staff in keeping the Equity Index integrated with their core work, the Office of Strategy, IT, and the Office of Equity and Human Rights continues to develop training materials and other resources to support the adoption of the tool. To further encourage widespread use, the Tacoma City Council requires that the Equity Index be used as part of an analysis that accompanies any legislative requests brought by city departments for Council's consideration.
- **Rigorously demonstrating impact:** When the Equity Index informs a decision, the City of Tacoma is often able to collect pre-post data, showing how the tool changed the way city services were provided or how resources were allocated. Additionally, the Office of Strategy, with support from IT and OEHR, has documented nearly two dozen use cases for the Equity Index, providing further qualitative evidence of its impact. However, clearly demonstrating the tool's impact on equity outcomes has proven challenging. As indicators, like median household income, are influenced by a range of factors, it can be difficult to isolate – and therefore demonstrate – how decisions informed by the Equity Index influence these outcomes.

Timeline



2024

City Completes Tacoma 2025 Strategic Planning Process

After robust public engagement efforts, the City of Tacoma adopts “Tacoma 2025,” its ten-year strategic plan. Tacoma 2025 incorporates equity and accessibility as a focus area.

2015

City Establishes its Office of Equity and Human Rights

The City of Tacoma launches its Office of Equity and Human Rights (OEHR). OEHR is tasked with improving the City's community outreach and engagement efforts, supporting more equitable delivery of government services, advancing the City's commitment to equity in policy decision-making, among other goals.

2018**Launch of the Equity Index**

With support from the Kirwan Institute, OEHR finishes development of the Equity Index, a tool used to map the geography of opportunity across Tacoma. Some departments begin using the Equity Index.

2020**Tacoma Passes Resolution 40622**

The Tacoma City Council passes Resolution 40622, which acknowledges the harmful impact of systemic racism on the community and recommits the City to becoming an anti-racist organization. The Equity Index becomes a mandatory component of the legislative process through “Council Action Memorandums.”

2020**Revised Equity Index Launches**

Incorporating feedback from key stakeholders, the City of Tacoma launches an updated Equity Index with seven additional indicators.

2022**Tacoma Passes Ordinance 28866**

The Tacoma City Council passes Ordinance 28866, which codifies responsibilities for advancing racial equity in the city. The legislation creates greater accountability for advancing the City’s equity commitments and ensures that these commitments will remain in effect across any future leadership changes.

2023**County-Wide Equity Index Enters Development**

Recognizing the value of Tacoma’s Equity Index, Pierce County Council passed Resolution No. R2021-108s, calling on the County Executive to develop a county-wide version of the Equity Index. In 2023, Pierce County partners with the City of Tacoma and other regional actors to develop the county-wide Equity Index.

2023**Tacoma Office of Strategy Launched and Aids Implementation of Index**

The City of Tacoma launches the Office of Strategy, which supports the implementation of the Equity Index and Tacoma 2025, the city’s strategic plan.



What were the key components of the program's design?

- **Highlighting differences in opportunity across the city:** The Equity Index provides an overall opportunity rating, ranging from “very low” to “very high,” for each Census block group in Tacoma. This rating is a composite of five, equally-weighted sub-categories: accessibility, livability, education, economy, and environmental health. Each sub-category also receives a rating, allowing users to conduct a more fine-grained analysis of opportunity in each block group. These sub-category ratings are themselves based on the 34 indicators (e.g., employment rate for the economy sub-category) selected for the Equity Index. Regardless of the level of analysis, all ratings are calculated using z-scores, which show how much higher or lower a block group performs relative to the average block group in the city.
- **Providing demographic data as an overlay:** While demographic characteristics, namely race, are predictive of access to opportunity, they are not the cause of it. Instead, racist policies and practices led to greater investment in white communities than in communities of color, which has in turn caused stark disparities in opportunity based on race and geography. As such, the Equity Index does not include demographic data as an indicator of opportunity. Instead, the Index includes demographic data –including race, ethnicity, gender, age, languages spoken, and more –as an overlay. This approach allows users to understand how the geography of opportunity in Tacoma impacts these communities differently. Additionally, the demographic overlay has proven useful as part of the City’s language access and community engagement work.
- **Reversing conventional color schemes:** Traditionally, maps have used darker colors to signify low-income areas and communities of color. When making comparisons, maps –like those created as part of redlining – typically stylized communities of color with “negative” colors, like red and yellow, while using “positive” colors, like green and blue, for predominantly white areas. The Equity Index reverses these conventions, using a single color scheme, with higher opportunity designated with darker shading. This approach emphasizes the City of Tacoma’s goal of equitable access to opportunity across the city.

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“The City’s dedication to formalizing equity in decision-making, as evidenced by its integration into City legislation, is commendable.”

Betsey Suchanic
Inclusive Economic
Development Advisor, NGIN

How were key stakeholders engaged?

- **Leveraging the strategic planning process:** As part of its Tacoma 2025 strategic planning process, the City of Tacoma conducted robust public engagement. Through this work, the City identified five focus areas for its strategic plan. Given the community’s support for these focus areas, the Office of Equity and Human

Rights (OEHR) worked with the Kirwan Institute to identify indicators for the Equity Index that would reflect these priorities.

- **Listening to community members in their own words:** To supplement the community engagement done through Tacoma 2025, OEHR conducted significant face-to-face outreach at community events. OEHR staff asked residents to describe in their own words what they wanted to be true in their community. This feedback was analyzed for key themes, which informed both the categories that were selected and the initial indicators that were used in the Equity Index.
- **Conducting early and ongoing outreach to staff:** As the OEHR began developing the Equity Index, it conducted focus groups with city staff to understand the challenges they wanted to address using the new tool. OEHR also worked closely with departments to incorporate data sources into the Index that staff already used or that staff identified as more accurate than those initially proposed for the Index. After launching the tool, OEHR, IT, and the Office of Strategy continued its outreach to city staff, with a particular focus on the challenges that staff encountered and how their departmental priorities were shifting. This information informed both the types of training opportunities developed and the adjustments made to the Equity Index when it was revised in 2020.

How did this program consider racial disparities?

- **Making a clear commitment to reducing racial disparities:** The City of Tacoma has continually committed itself to becoming an antiracist organization and to promoting racial equity throughout the city. This commitment is included as part of the City's Tacoma 2025 strategic plan and has been reaffirmed through multiple legislative actions by the Tacoma City Council. The Equity Index was designed specifically to operationalize these commitments by providing city staff and community partners with a tool to identify and analyze racial disparities in Tacoma.
- **Focusing on racial disparities:** By collaborating with city staff and leaders, the City of Tacoma created an Equity Index that reflects the City's priorities. As a result, city staff continue to integrate the Equity Index into their everyday decision-making processes. For example, city staff use the tool to inform decisions around resource allocation, where and how to conduct community outreach, as part of scoring grant and permit applications, among other use cases.

What were the key activities leading up to and following launch?

- **Identifying indicators and data sources:** Informed by its outreach efforts, the Office of Equity and Human Rights (OEHR) partnered with the Kirwan Institute at The Ohio State University to select the Equity Index's indicators. After reviewing the social science literature, the Kirwan Institute recommended a set of indicators that were meaningfully predictive of individuals' quality of life. With the support of multiple city departments, OEHR then refined the proposed data sources to ensure they aligned with the operational needs of city departments. These steps ensured that the Equity Index would be a data-driven tool that was both defensible and replicable.

- **Building the Equity Index:** The City of Tacoma contracted with Community Attributes Inc., a firm focused on data analysis and storytelling, to develop the public-facing Equity Index. Concurrently, city staff created an internal-facing variant, which used the same indicators as the public-facing tool, but added the additional analytical functionality, such as the ability to overlay land use zoning information and stormwater structures.
- **Encouraging uptake and ongoing usage:** With the Equity Index launched, a cross-departmental implementation team created training materials and workshops to introduce city staff to the new tool. Over time, the City of Tacoma revised its training materials and developed new ones, like case studies illustrating use cases for the Equity Index, to support continued adoption of the tool. In addition to these supports, the City of Tacoma introduced measures to require the use of the Equity Index in certain contexts. Most prominently, Tacoma City Council required that the Equity Index be used as part of an analysis that accompanies any legislative requests brought by city departments for Council's consideration.
- **Maintaining relevance and buy-in:** To maintain the Equity Index's relevance, the City of Tacoma regularly updates the indicators used in the tool to reflect any new departmental priorities. The data used for each indicator is also updated to ensure the Index reflects current conditions in the city as closely as possible. In addition, as elected and other senior leaders change, OEHR, IT, and the Office of Strategy engage these officials to ensure they understand the purpose and impact of the Equity Index.

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“In my conversations with other leaders across the nation, I have heard a need for adaptable and scalable equity strategies for their own communities. [The collection of case studies on the Equity Index] demonstrates how the City of Tacoma and its community partners are advancing Tacoma's shared objectives and experiences with others to expand these efforts.”

Victoria Woodards
Mayor, City of Tacoma

How was the approach funded?

- **Covering dedicated operational costs:** To support the Equity Index on an ongoing basis, the City of Tacoma covers website hosting and maintenance fees and periodically contracts for additional website improvements. In recent years, hosting and maintenance costs have run approximately \$15,000 per year, with website improvements costing up to \$70,000 per year. The City also dedicates a portion of an FTE to perform coordination and education duties. All of these costs are paid through the City's General Fund.

- **Leveraging existing staff capacity:** The City of Tacoma also leverages its existing Geographic Information Systems (GIS) capacity to support the Equity Index. GIS staff perform periodic updates to the Equity Index, support workshops and other staff learning opportunities, and work with city departments when they need support with more sophisticated analyses. These costs are included as part of the GIS team's regular operations.

How was the approach measured and refined?

- **Documenting successful use cases:** The Office of Strategy developed a series of case studies documenting nearly two dozen projects or processes in which city staff have used the Equity Index to promote more equitable outcomes. These case studies use a combination of qualitative, outcome, and pre-post data to demonstrate the tool's impact on decision-making. For example, after incorporating the Equity Index into how it scored applications for its Revolving Loan Fund, the City's Community and Economic Development Department saw a 333 percent increase in awards to Black-owned businesses.
- **Challenges conducting rigorous evaluation:** The City of Tacoma is building a strong evidence base for how the Equity Index contributes to more equitable programmatic and policy decisions. However, demonstrating how these decisions impact access to opportunity in the broader community has proven difficult. As indicators of opportunity, like high school graduation rate, are influenced by a range of factors, isolating the impact of decisions informed by the Equity Index is generally impractical.
- **Updating indicators and data:** The Office of Strategy and the Information Technology Department regularly review the Equity Index to ensure it incorporates indicators that are relevant to city departments' changing priorities. For example, as the Department of Public Works increased its focus on traffic safety, crash data for pedestrians and bicyclists was added as an indicator in 2020. With support from IT, Community Attributes Inc. also updates the data behind each indicator as new data are available (e.g., every two years for Census data).
- **Improving the user interface:** Through its contract with Community Attributes Inc., the City of Tacoma works to make the public-facing Equity Index more accessible and useful to users. An example of a recent website improvement is the inclusion of a "learn more" tooltip for each indicator. The "learn more" allows users to easily reference additional information about the indicator, including its definition, the data source it is based on, a justification for why that indicator is included, and more.

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