



California Mobility Justice Advocates

Guiding Principles



Introduction

In January of 2018, CalBikes, California Walks, PolicyLink, and MultiCultural Communities for Mobility co-hosted a BIPOC Mobility Justice Lab, where advocates and leaders came together to discuss the challenges that Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) face when biking, walking, rolling, and busing around their neighborhoods. The group workshopped potential solutions and identified policy opportunities to tackle these challenges. A series of these labs took place over the next two years and became a launching off point for the California Mobility Justice Advocates Network. Since 2020, the group has expanded into a network of over 20 organizations and individuals across the state that are committed to advocating for policies and initiatives that advance transportation equity and mobility justice.

What Is Mobility Justice?

As a network, we subscribe to the definition of mobility justice put forth by The Untokening Collective: “Mobility Justice demands that we fully excavate, recognize, and reconcile the historical and current injustices experienced by communities — with impacted communities given space and resources to envision and implement planning models and political advocacy on streets and mobility that actively work to address historical and current injustices experienced by communities.”¹ We acknowledge that mobility can be interpreted in a multitude of ways, but at its core, mobility (as defined by Oxford University Press, [lexico.com](https://www.lexico.com)) is “the ability to move or be moved freely and easily,” and we believe all people have the right to mobility. This includes disabled folks, migrants, people experiencing homelessness, youth, elders, and other groups who have been historically confined in their mobility for a variety of sociopolitical reasons.

A person’s ability to move around freely is directly tied to their access to opportunities, such as jobs, education, affordable housing, and affordable health care. If a person cannot physically get to their appointments, attend school, and connect to the important assets in their community, then their mobility is constrained. If an individual has limited or no access to transportation and mobility options, they will also likely have less access to power and decision-making processes. Mobility and transportation are the lifelines of healthy communities of opportunity.

Purpose

In this document, the California Mobility Justice Advocates put forth a set of principles that guide our work as a network, in the hopes of encouraging decision makers to center community voice and wisdom in mobility and transportation programs and projects. The purpose of our mobility justice principles is to respond to a growing cry for deeper, more genuine, equitable, justice-based, and community-led approaches to city planning and the design of our built environment. While it is universally agreed that racial equity and justice must be cornerstones to this work, what these principles mean in practice is often less coherent. These principles are not all mobility-specific, and some can be applied to other policy areas. These principles aim to provide guidance to residents, community organizers, activists, city planners, researchers, and policymakers as we design and build our neighborhoods. Furthermore, these principles serve as a lens for how the California Mobility Justice Advocates Network weighs in on advocacy efforts, research, implementation, and other avenues.

While government, academia, and the private sector are awakening to racial equity issues today, it is critical to lay out rules of engagement with BIPOC communities who have been disproportionately harmed by racist policies and disinvestment. Without clear guidelines, practices, and accountability measures, efforts to operationalize racial equity have the potential to cause more harm than good. This list of principles below is by no means exhaustive, and specific rules of engagement will vary depending on individual community needs and decision-making.

Broadly speaking, our principles fall into three major categories:



Community

1. Local BIPOC Communities Shape, Define, and Lead Best Practices
2. Community Voices Are Essential Data in Decision-Making
3. BIPOC Are Leaders, Decision Makers, and Have Authentic Power
4. Accessibility Is Intersectional
5. BIPOC Communities Develop Their Own Solutions for Street Safety



Capacity

6. Systems, Processes, and Structures Are Unequivocally Accessible and Reflective of BIPOC Communities
7. BIPOC Communities and Their Trusted Organizations Have the Capacity and Resources to Shape Outcomes
8. Government Must Build Its Capacity to Acknowledge and Reconcile Past Harms



Cash

9. BIPOC Communities Receive Meaningful Investments from Progressive Revenue Sources
10. BIPOC Communities Receive Meaningful Compensation as Professional Experts
11. Participatory Budgeting Is Standardized Across California
12. All Mobility Investments Provide Multiple and Intersectional Benefits and Must Avoid Harms

Historical Context

Indigenous California

Up until 1848 the region now known as the State of California was inhabited by hundreds of thousands of Indigenous people who spoke over 300 different dialects and 90 languages.² Spanish colonization, the American pursuit of Manifest Destiny, and the Mexican-American War massacred the majority of these Indigenous groups. Spanish colonizers and missionaries enslaved and forcefully converted Indigenous people on ranches and missions. By the end of the 1800s, the US government had forcibly resettled most of the First Peoples onto reservations in order to remove them from the land they, the government, wanted to colonize.³

The impacts of these horrendous events still show up today. “As a result of historical trauma, chronically underfunded federal programs, and policies of the US government, Native Americans experience many health, educational, and economic disparities compared to the general population.”⁴ With higher poverty rates, less access to safe and affordable drinking water, and higher arrest and suicide rates than the general population, Indigenous folks suffer some of the worst disparities in the country.⁵ Additionally, as a result of poor infrastructure investments, reservations and rural Native communities have limited transportation options, which result in some of the highest rates of pedestrian mortality. Unfortunately, planning processes continue to exclude Native people from the design and management of the lands they have a right and responsibility to steward. Until this is remedied the invasion and injustice remains unaddressed.

As we look to the future of mobility and transportation, it is imperative that we remember our history and prioritize the communities that have been not only neglected, but intentionally virtually destroyed by discriminatory policies and practices. For example, the practices of cultural burning, reclaiming traditional foods, and Native medicinal practices can help guide decision makers to prioritize practices that center the environment, human health, and cultural traditions.⁶

Redlining, Segregation, and Highways

Redlining was the institutionalized and systemic practice of government partnering with realtors and banks to draw red lines around communities of color and deny them loans to buy homes, open businesses, and build intergenerational wealth. While redlining was eventually outlawed in 1968, the impacts of this racist policy have enduring health and wealth impacts in communities of color today.⁷

Across the country, highways were constructed directly through these redlined communities of color, which worsened air pollution and caused detrimental health impacts.⁸ This neglect and disinvestment of the urban centers across the US only further disenfranchised communities of color and worsened access to good jobs, housing, education, and transportation options. Despite the numerous challenges these communities have endured, they have also managed to find resiliency and cohesion through creative and cultural practices. Neighborhoods like the Mission in San Francisco, Echo Park in Los Angeles, Fruitvale in Oakland, and Barrio Logan in San Diego have all weathered disinvestment and gentrification, and still manage to be cultural hubs for their residents.

Covid-19 and the Current Moment

The Covid-19 pandemic and the economic fallout has shed light on the vast social and economic racial disparities that continue to plague our country. Black and Brown people and Pacific Islanders are dying at disproportionate rates,⁹ facing housing challenges¹⁰ and losing jobs at disproportionate rates, while also making up a disproportionate number of essential and frontline¹¹ workers who are required to physically go into work and risk their health and lives in order to receive a paycheck. Transit workers are facing some of the worst challenges, with limited resources to protect themselves. The current situation is exposing the negative impacts that the lack of a strong social safety net (e.g., universal basic income and access to affordable health care for all) can have on low-income families and communities.

As the pandemic forces us to shift every aspect of our lives, our transportation systems have had to adjust to the new reality. Already underfunded and underprioritized, transportation systems across the country are now having to deal with decreased ridership, decreased funding, and decreased capacity to run, maintain, and improve their services. Despite a decrease in miles traveled during the early months of the pandemic, society is attempting to return to some semblance of normalcy. However, rather than working to get things “back to normal,” we should leverage this new landscape as an opportunity to reimagine what our transportation systems look like. We should prioritize walking, biking, rolling, and transit options for a more sustainable, safe, and efficient way of getting around. As mobility justice advocates, our priority is transportation equity insofar as it relates to these intersectional issues that impact our communities every day.

These contextual frames are what drove us to craft the principles below.

Mobility Justice Principles and Rules of Engagement

Community

Nothing about us without us. In order for BIPOC residents to achieve full self-determination, they must be fully empowered at all levels of decision-making. Community members should lead any and all processes that directly and indirectly impact or benefit them. Their voices and agency should drive planning, design, and implementation processes, and they should be regarded as experts in their own communities.

1. Local BIPOC Communities Shape, Define, and Lead Best Practices

What is often recognized as “best practices” within transportation planning, engagement, and research are often narrowly based in a Eurocentric, [privileged](#) mindset that fails to account for local needs and does not utilize accessible language or equitable processes.¹² Impacted BIPOC communities must define and lead the development and implementation of the appropriate “best practices” for the project at hand. To facilitate this, government agencies should:

- Partner with community leaders to design culturally relevant, community engagement events in a way that reduces barriers to access.
- Co-design equitable transportation planning, decision-making, and implementation processes with community partners¹³ (e.g., [South San Francisco](#), [Oakland](#) and [TransForm’s](#) programs).
- Invest in participatory budgeting and planning processes.¹⁴

2. Community Voices Are Essential Data in Decision-Making¹⁵

Data collection often prioritizes the experiences and perspectives of White, privileged populations and devalues the expertise and wisdom of BIPOC communities. Additionally, data collection can often feel extractive or irrelevant to a person’s lived experience. Practitioners should deploy participatory and inclusive data collection strategies that:

- Empower marginalized communities to select the equity indicators and metrics that are relevant to their needs.
- Employ the community in the metric selection, data collection, and review.
- Measure data beyond just mobility—such as health and economic opportunities (e.g., [The Bay Area Equity Atlas](#)).¹⁶
- Emphasize qualitative data that seeks to understand the impacts on the lives of the community (e.g., resident-powered platforms like [Streetwyze](#)).
- Create accountability and communicate the impact of the data collection back to the community in an accessible way.

3. BIPOC Are Leaders, Decision Makers, and Have Authentic Power

People of color, low-income communities, and other marginalized groups often bear the negative impacts of decisions that are made by those who hold the most power. It is imperative that we create spaces where leaders of color are able to make decisions, drive positive change, and hold authentic power within their communities and beyond. We must cultivate and co-create BIPOC and inter-community voices, data, and power in decision-making processes. Mobility options must meet the community-identified needs in an equitable way that centers community decision-making.¹⁷ Residents know their communities best, therefore we should listen to and trust their opinions, decisions, and wisdom when solving their biggest challenges. Policymakers and other government leaders should:

- Require there to be BIPOC and community resident representation in all city planning decisions.
- Fund and resource community-driven planning projects and processes.
- Evaluate projects on their potential for equitable processes and outcomes.

4. Accessibility Is Intersectional

Accessibility is often only thought of through the lens of physical accessibility, in the context of people with disabilities. However, with new forms of mobility services such as scootershare, bikeshare, and ridesharing, there are new access barriers for people without smartphones, bank accounts, who do not speak English, or who live in neighborhoods that are deemed “un-profitable” and are not served by companies providing transportation services. Agencies must design and create systems that are truly accessible to everyone in every sense of the word. To do this they should:

- Push mobility services (private or public) to be physically, financially, technologically, logistically, and culturally accessible to low-income communities of color and other marginalized groups, regardless of their race, income, gender, age, ability, or location.¹⁸
- Hire and include disabled and other marginalized groups throughout each phase of any planning process.
- Plan and design projects for the MOST vulnerable in a way that ensures that everyone will benefit. (See, for example, the “curb-cut effect”—which is the notion that laws and programs designed to benefit vulnerable groups, such as the disabled or people of color, often end up benefiting all of society.)¹⁹

5. BIPOC Communities Develop Their Own Solutions for Street Safety

Policing has long been used as a tool to criminalize and oppress BIPOC communities in public spaces and often comes in the form of fare enforcement, targeting transit riders who are experiencing homelessness, the disproportionate ticketing of BIPOC bicyclists and pedestrians, and other injustices. We must reframe the narrative that law enforcement is a solution for street safety,²⁰ and instead invest in community-based violence prevention and intervention strategies that aim to reduce the likelihood of violence.²¹ To do this, decision makers should:

- [Defund transit police](#) and instead invest in community infrastructure and human services.
- Support and lift up the Movement for Black Lives including the Los Angeles chapter’s list of [demands](#).
- Decriminalize fare evasion, biking on sidewalks, jaywalking, and address the burden and inequities associated with traffic-related fines and fees.
- Employ popular education and culturally relevant methodologies to shift and create a culture of safety for everyone (e.g., [Temple Street Slow Jams](#)).

Capacity

Local Indigenous groups carry ancient knowledge in stewarding California lands. Additionally, BIPOC long-term residents have expertise in our own communities. What is often missing is the capacity to meaningfully engage in political and planning processes. In addition to building and maintaining the capacity of BIPOC communities, we must redesign processes to be more accessible and streamlined. Accountability is also a key component of capacity—if government processes and policies were actually reflective of and co-designed by the communities they served, there would be less need for residents and advocates to spend all their time on keeping agencies and officials accountable. In the meantime, we should set aside funds for BIPOC and EJ communities to take on processes of accountability (e.g., watchdogging).

6. Systems, Processes, and Structures Are Unequivocally Accessible and Reflective of BIPOC Communities

The way current political and social systems are set up is in a top-down manner, where government agencies hold the power, decide processes, and occasionally invite the public to comment or provide feedback on initiatives that are already underway. These systems and processes are often confusing and hard to navigate, which makes it difficult for the average resident to participate. We need a system where communities get to shape how processes work. Being able to co-design and engage meaningfully in a process ensures community voices are driving decisions. Ensuring decision-making processes are not only accessible to and reflective of, but driven by BIPOC communities and other marginalized groups is an important step toward mobility justice and equity. To do this, government agencies should:

- Invest in communities and their residents to be able to meaningfully engage in policy planning and decision-making processes.
- Make policy and planning processes more accessible to residents (e.g., less wonky language, more streamlined applications, less bureaucratic processes, meeting communities where they are, etc.).
- Invest agency staff and resources into long-term community engagement and away from short-term, project-centered conversations.

7. BIPOC Communities and Their Trusted Organizations Have the Capacity and Resources to Shape Outcomes

In recent years there has been a concerted effort to direct more programs, grant funds, and public engagement processes to benefit BIPOC communities. Yet the reality is that many BIPOC communities, and the organizations that represent them, often are unable to take advantage of these opportunities because they do not have the capacity or technical expertise to win grants or meaningfully participate in these processes. To build community capacity, government agencies should:

- Listen to and support the needs of grassroots organizations to reduce barriers to access and incorporate their needs into capacity building and technical assistance offerings.
- Continue to build technical assistance into grant programs like [Clean Mobility Options](#) and the [Sustainable Transportation Equity Project](#), and [Transformative Climate Communities](#).
- Fund technical assistance and capacity-building programs like the [Regional Climate Collaboratives](#) (SB 1072) to provide technical assistance for rural and other vulnerable communities when they're applying for grant funding.
- Engage BIPOC communities on a sustained, long-term basis by committing more staff and city resources to such collaborations rather than on a project-by-project basis.

8. Government Must Build Its Capacity to Acknowledge and Reconcile Past Harms

Government agencies must systematically reflect on and acknowledge their historic power and privilege. It is time we face the past harms committed at the hands of the government, by acknowledging those harms and making intentional changes to repair and rebuild the communities that have suffered as a result. Government agency staff typically do not have backgrounds in equity or social justice, which means they do not bring that lens into their work. Agency staff should be required to take equity trainings and workshops, and conduct equity readiness self-assessments.²² Agencies should conduct assessments of hiring practices, funding allocations, and of their rules of engagement with communities to ensure equitable processes are being implemented. This will help to ensure government agencies and their staff are fully educated and bought into equity before actually doing the work (while respecting the varying levels of equity readiness and understanding). As a result, agencies will have a better understanding of their communities' vulnerabilities and therefore will be more compassionate and willing to support them. Government agencies should:

- Engage in a truth and reconciliation process where they acknowledge and address the history of traumatic transportation practices (e.g., eminent domain, exacerbating poor air quality, and harming public health in the name of more freeways and freight through already disadvantaged communities).
- Provide mandatory equity trainings for all new government agency staff members.
- Hire individuals from the communities they will be serving (e.g., invest in education and training programs that foster jobs in advocacy and government).
- Require agencies to undergo equity assessments to evaluate their funding allocations, hiring practices, and other equity measures.
- Require government agencies to invest their own resources and build their own capacity to engage diverse communities, rather than relying on communities to utilize their limited time and resources to build their capacity to meet the needs of policy and decision makers.

Cash

There is a history of disinvestment in our BIPOC communities. Meaningful change will require thoughtful and robust resources and funding to repair the harm that has been caused over centuries. Resources should be allocated to involve community in decision-making and planning processes, and should come from progressive revenue sources.

9. BIPOC Communities Receive Meaningful Investments from Progressive Revenue Sources

Communities of color have historically been disinvested in, which has led to the undeniable inequities that clearly exist today. As part of the restitution process, government agencies should prioritize investments in communities they have historically neglected. This means investing in infrastructure, parks, housing, transit, education, public health, food access, and all the other things that make communities healthy and safe. It is also critical that these funds are not being sourced by programs that are in direct contrast to equity outcomes (e.g., Cap and Trade). Decision makers should advance policies that:

- Require transparency in funding methods and allocations to ensure the public knows that their dollars are being spent in an equitable manner.
- Implement and invest in participatory budgeting processes throughout the state (see Cash #11).
- Establish a funding pot dedicated to investments in BIPOC and other historically marginalized communities as part of a broader restitution initiative.

10. BIPOC Communities Receive Meaningful Compensation as Professional Experts

As government agencies, researchers, and companies are beginning to see the value of seeking input from community residents and stakeholders, there has been a shift in the concept of community engagement. While some agencies and programs do compensate community residents for their time and effort,²³ meaningful compensation must be a top priority for funding allocation when budgets are drafted. Instead of paying large sums of money to consultants to do community engagement, agencies should be funding community leaders and residents directly to be engaged in planning and decision-making processes. Residents must be valued and treated as experts of their own communities' challenges and needs. Decision makers should advance and be supportive of programs that:

- Allocate dollars to fund meaningful community collaboration and co-design in all relevant projects and programs.
- Leverage philanthropic funds and community resources to empower residents to advocate for and advance their own interests and needs.

11. Participatory Budgeting Is Standardized Across California

In participatory budgeting, community members democratically decide how to spend part of a public budget.²⁴ The process facilitates residents brainstorming project ideas to address their needs and then voting on which projects to fund and implement. Participatory budgeting represents one of the most comprehensive and equitable approaches to identifying community needs and potential solutions and has empowered BIPOC communities to lead transportation planning and decision-making processes.²⁵ To ensure that participatory budgeting becomes a standard equity-centered approach, agencies should:

- Require some form of community-based mobility needs assessments (e.g., participatory budgeting, surveys, workshops, etc.) to be implemented in every transportation planning process.
- Ensure all state transportation planning grants highlight participatory budgeting processes as a best practice that is eligible for funding.

12. All Mobility Investments Provide Multiple and Intersectional Benefits and Must Avoid Harms

Due to decades of disinvestment across sectors, BIPOC communities not only need mobility investments, they also need a wide variety of other connecting needs to be met, such as clean air and good jobs. Each investment must be carefully targeted to have the largest possible impact—and what that impact looks like must be shaped by the community. Furthermore, we must guarantee that new mobility investments do not increase harmful impacts to communities, such as contributing to additional congestion, pollution, or displacement. To ensure intersectional co-benefits and harm reduction, decision makers should advance policies that:

- Require mobility investments to include health, anti-displacement, climate resilience, workforce development programs, and more (e.g., CARB’s [Sustainable Transportation Equity Program](#) & [Clean Mobility Options in Disadvantaged Communities](#), and the Strategic Growth Council’s [Transformative Climate Communities Program](#)).
- Encourage mobility investments to go beyond meeting basic human needs and help to create a sense of community, arts, and culture.²⁶ (See also [Moving From Engaging to Organizing with Arts and Culture Strategies](#).)
- Empower BIPOC communities to develop and design these mobility investments and their intersectional benefits.
- Conduct an in-depth co-benefits and co-burden analysis. Local BIPOC communities must be involved in selecting the appropriate benefits and burdens to be analyzed, based on their needs.
- Ensure that California adopts rigorous funding mechanisms and policies to fight climate change (such as Governor Newsom’s [executive order to protect lands and oceans](#)).
- Ensure that California adopts and integrates the Universal Declaration of Rights of Mother Earth led by the global Indigenous communities.

Conclusion

Having multiple safe, affordable, efficient, and accessible mobility options is a key indicator of a healthy community of opportunity. As Mobility Justice Advocates, we are fighting for the rights of low-income communities of color to live in neighborhoods where this aspiration is a reality. It is with that objective that we are calling on policymakers and implementing agencies to collaborate meaningfully with the communities they serve by adhering to the principles laid out in this document. We believe those who are closest to the problems are closest to the solutions—listening to communities’ needs and letting their residents take the lead on solutions will get us on the path to achieving mobility justice for all.

Endnotes

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