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Attitudes Toward and Knowledge Gaps about Equity Among Practicing Planners
Part II

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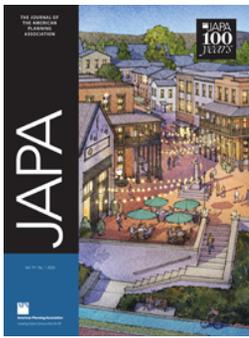Wayne State University

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Implementing Equity: Planners, Officials, and Equity Policy

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ABSTRACT

Problem, research strategy, and findings: The professional and academic associations that shape the practice of urban planning encourage equity planning in both their stated goals and provided resources. Despite this emphasis, planners in both private and public sectors struggle with defining equity and prioritizing it in their work. We set out to identify attitudes toward and knowledge gaps about equity among practicing planners through an online survey distributed to Michigan Association of Planning (MAP) members. The results indicate that most planners believe the officials they work with think equity is an important planning goal, Michigan municipalities are already adopting a wide range of equity-focused policies, and planners may be advancing equitable policies without explicitly calling them that. Yet a large percentage of planners do not discuss equity with their appointed and elected officials, and significant barriers to equitable planning remain. Our survey respondents included some planning officials who are not planners. We did not survey planners in Michigan who are not MAP members.

Takeaway for practice: Planners could be including equity in conversations with their elected and appointed officials. Planners also have an opportunity to implement equitable practices that do not have big price tags but help increase opportunity and access for disadvantaged residents. Professional associations, like MAP, also have a role to play through conducting research that produces the kinds of data planners asked for in the survey, leading to further technical assistance for practicing planners.

Increasing social equity in urban and regional planning is a core goal of both professional (APA and AICP) and academic (Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning) planning associations. The *AICP Code of Ethics* calls upon all practitioners to "incorporate equity principles and strategies as the foundation for preparing plans and implementation programs to achieve more socially just decision-making" (APA, 2021). Along with economic development and environmental protection, social equity is a critical part of the planner's triangle (Campbell, 1996). However, planning with equity in mind is complicated. Some planners work in communities that broadly support equity goals; others do not. Some planners work in communities with the resources to create major public investments, whereas other planners must try to improve equity in underresourced communities. Some communities incorporate racial equity planning, whereas others refuse it entirely or employ a more expansive definition of equity. Planners in private practice must

balance planning ethics with the need to retain clients, who have their own priorities.

This research, conducted in collaboration with the Michigan Association of Planning (MAP), the state APA chapter, builds on a 2019–2020 study sponsored by the MAP Social Equity Committee, which created a publicly available plan equity evaluation tool (Loh & Kim, 2021). Working together, researchers and volunteer practicing planners applied the tool to 48 Michigan comprehensive plans. Comprehensive plans in Michigan that successfully addressed equity made equity a cornerstone of the plan itself, analyzed community demographics and identified vulnerable and/or underserved groups, increased public participation, addressed affordability in relation to housing, examined equitable transportation access, and identified natural and human-caused threats to the community.

Our research extends the committee's earlier work in a few ways, with the intent of exploring some questions that could not be answered with

the previous study's methodology. First, the earlier study looked only at comprehensive plans. Comprehensive plans underpin and recommend but do not set policy. In this study, we asked what equity-related policies Michigan municipalities have actually adopted. The authors of the first study received many comments after its publication from planners who expressed frustration with the officials they worked with about a lack of understanding of or support for equity planning. So in this study we investigated whether planners believe they and the officials they work with have different views about equity. We also asked about other major barriers to implementing equitable planning policies. Finally, at the behest of the MAP Social Equity Committee, we intend this work to help start a larger research agenda to support planners with the high-quality research they need to advocate for equitable planning with officials, constituents, and even colleagues. To that end, we sought to identify major knowledge gaps around equity policy among practicing planners in Michigan. For the purposes of the survey, and based on our readings on equity, we defined equity as *access to resources, opportunities, and planning processes for all, especially those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and those who have historically lacked such access.*

We found that planners and the leadership they work with largely value equity as a planning goal. The availability of sustainable funding, supportive officials, and community resistance comprises a few of the major barriers to equity planning, and a significant number of planners are not discussing equity with their officials. Even with these barriers, equitable planning interventions are happening in Michigan; from projects that center nonmotorized transit to expanding affordable and workforce housing, Michigan planners are, for the most part, attempting to plan with equity in mind. They seem to be largely focusing on interventions that do not require substantial funding. Planners would like to have more data available to them, especially about workforce/affordable housing demand forecasts and assessments of housing accessibility to jobs.

Literature Review

What Is Equity?

History of Equity as a Planning Goal
Social equity in planning is a critical priority (APA, 2016; Campbell, 1996), yet pinpointing a shared definition and practice of equity in urban planning is

not an easy task. Equity as a planning goal emerged in the 1960s as part of a response to urban renewal, which had decimated inner-city Black neighborhoods. Some planners, particularly those working in the administrations of progressive Black mayors, began to work to direct resources toward the disadvantaged (Metzger, 1996). Norman Krumholz, an early champion of equity planning, directed the publication of the *Cleveland Policy Planning Report* and defined equity as "promoting a wider range of choices for those Cleveland residents who have few, if any, choices" (Cleveland [Ohio], City Planning Commission, 1975, p. 9). A contemporary of Krumholz, Paul Davidoff argued for planners to challenge traditional technical-rational planning methods and work directly with marginalized groups to produce plans that were redistributive and participatory (Reardon & Raciti, 2019).

Equity eventually became a mainstream planning goal: The 1991 version of the *AICP Code of Ethics* stated, "A planner must strive to expand choice and opportunity for all persons, recognizing a special responsibility to plan for the needs of disadvantaged groups and persons" (APA, 1991, p. 1). The 2016 *AICP Code of Ethics* went into more detail, stating,

> We shall seek social justice by working to expand choice and opportunity for all persons, recognizing a special responsibility to plan for the needs of the disadvantaged and to promote racial and economic integration. We shall urge the alteration of policies, institutions, and decisions that oppose such needs.

The APA currently defines equity as follows: "Just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential" (APA, 2019b). Though AICP mentions aspects of equity (racial and economic), APA is much more general and does not mention disadvantage at all.

As the concept of equity has moved into the mainstream of planning practice, its scope has expanded (Campbell, 1996). Originally focused on race and class, we now think of equity as also inclusive of gender, age, disability, sexuality, and immigration status, among others. Beyond identity, equity is a main component of climate justice. Planners in practice today are sometimes tasked with sustainability planning, and equity is often a major theme in their local climate plans (Angelo et al., 2024; Cowell & Cousins, 2022; Liao et al., 2019). The idea of planning for equity, then, has evolved from its roots in the 1960s and 1970s to enter the mainstream of planning practice, to

include an awareness of the disproportionate impacts of climate change, and to encompass many other potential barriers besides racial and economic ones. This expanded scope can mean a dilution of equity planning's sense of urgency about racial discrimination and residential segregation (Angelo et al., 2024, Arroyo et al., 2023; Zapata & Bates, 2017).

The Tripartite Framework of Equity

Although multiple definitions of equity exist, two key themes emerge: the distribution of resources and services contributing to access for those who are disadvantaged (distributional equity; see Fainstein, 2010) and access that addresses how decisions are made and who is making them (procedural equity; Grabowski et al., 2023; Israel & Frenkel, 2018; Myrdahl, 2023). The tripartite framework of equity adds a third dimension, recognitional equity, which acknowledges and respects different groups' histories and needs (Meerow et al., 2019). Equity and equality are sometimes used interchangeably by planners, but they do not mean the same thing: *Equity* means addressing systemic barriers to opportunity, whereas *equality* means striving to provide the same opportunities for every person (Myrdahl, 2023).

How Important a Priority Is Equity to Planners?

There is considerable evidence that equity has become an increasingly important priority to planners in the past decade (Myrdahl, 2023). Studies have shown that newer plans are more likely to at least mention equity than older plans (Angelo et al., 2024; Cowell & Cousins, 2022; Loh et al., 2022; Loh & Kim, 2021). The APA has adopted equity-focused policies and produced major equity-focused publications in the past several years, such as the *Planning for Equity Policy Guide* (APA, 2019b), the *Equity in Zoning Policy Guide* (APA, 2023), and the *Housing Policy Guide* (APA, 2019a). State APA chapters have collected and produced their own equity resources as well (Michigan Association of Planning, n.d.).

At the same time, there is also reason to think that the talk about equity is not as effective as it could be (Jackson et al., 2018; Zapata & Bates, 2015). Even plans that mention equity tend to be vague on the specifics (Grabowski et al., 2023; Loh et al., 2022; Loh & Kim, 2021). Planners and officials who advance policies that could increase equity (including racial equity) may do so more commonly under the guise of other goals, such as economic development (Fainstein, 2010). Equity remains an aspirational rather than an enforceable part of the *AICP Code of Conduct* (Garfinkel-Castro, 2023; Loh & Kim, 2021). Although APA has made significant efforts to bring planners' attention to equity issues and equip them with tools to address those issues, APA's influence is uneven among practicing planners: Membership can be unaffordable for some planners, even with APA's sliding scale, and different states and cities have different cultures of engagement with APA. So APA policy positions and recommendations do not reach all planners equally (Garfinkel-Castro, 2023). And in some places, progress on equity has been met with backlash (Cohen, 2024).

Planners now seek to incorporate equity across a range of urban planning sectors such as environmental and resilience planning, economic development, regionalism, neighborhood planning, planning pedagogy, and health (Zapata & Bates, 2015). Though urban planning directly interacts with other disciplines, there is evidence that suggests urban planners and academics may be unclear which profession is responsible for equity goals in the physical environment. In a survey from 2014, both practicing planners and academics surveyed recognized that considering disability in planning outcomes is important; however, there was less consensus when deciding whether the topic is better suited for building professionals and architects versus urban planners (Moon et al., 2014). Grant (2024) hypothesized that planners may absorb theories in their education, such as equity and collaboration, but then find them less useful or more difficult to implement in practice and so may subtly reject them for a paradigm that generally reinforces the status quo. One analysis found cities with climate resilience officers who have social science backgrounds were less likely to emphasize equity; the authors speculated this result is due to the ways in which equity is embedded in the fields of social sciences and thus the concept of equity is implied rather than directly specified in resilience plans (Cowell & Cousins, 2022). We also know that private-sector planners have unique considerations in balancing client relationships with professional planning ethics (Linovski, 2019; Loh & Arroyo, 2017; Sturzaker & Hickman, 2024). However, in the next section, we present significant evidence that planners are in fact moving toward more equitable planning, in large and small ways.

Assessing Progress on Equitable Planning

Participation by the community frequently advances equity. In Canada, a comparative study of community-led versus public agency engagement in transportation planning found that community-led engagement had greater representation of the city's demographics—especially in lower economic and disabled communities—but still did not fully reflect the entire city (Linovski & Baker, 2023). In research on local comprehensive plans, plans that prioritized equity were more likely to engage in public participation processes (Loh & Kim, 2021). Within the United States, there are not only comprehensive plans but supplemental plans (transit, sustainability, bike, pedestrian, etc.). This creates multiple entry points for public participation and engagement, thereby creating a more equitable and participatory planning process (Teklemariam, 2022).

Moving toward equity requires an appraisal of equity within a community. Planning scholars have been developing new evaluation tools for this purpose, including for comprehensive plans (Loh & Kim, 2021), health impact assessments (Besser et al., 2023), urban climate planning (Angelo et al., 2024), transportation planning (Linovski & Baker, 2023), and university strategic planning (Gough et al., 2023). Though many of these studies have found significant room for improvement, there are some exemplars. For example, an analysis of social equity within Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant proposals found that some plans (especially that for Boston [MA]) were explicit about equity issues present and provided detailed proposals about what to do about it (Meerow et al., 2019; Zapata & Bates, 2017). Cities that have identified threats in the form of either climate and natural hazards or infrastructure and nonenvironmental issues are more likely to prioritize equity (Cowell & Cousins, 2022). There is evidence that equity has become a more salient issue in comprehensive plans over time (Loh & Kim, 2021).

Communities have used a range of tools to incorporate equity within their planning practices. Municipal planners in one city advanced equity by developing an equity-based approach to capital improvement plans and initiating a 6-week citizens' planning academy; however, they still struggled to get applicants from certain neighborhoods (Garfinkel-Castro, 2023). Equity maps, which visualize and measure spatial equity and opportunity, provide more nuanced interpretations of data and can be useful tools for the public but have mixed results in

moving equity-based policy forward (Finio et al., 2024). The City of Vancouver (Canada) sought to make city services, activities, and public spaces accessible and welcoming for transgender and gender-diverse users; their process included co-design of the policy, which meant that people affected by the policy were part of the process from the beginning (Myrdahl, 2023). Planners have been progressively more responsible for climate, green infrastructure, and resilience planning in the communities that they serve, and equity has been increasingly referenced in climate action plans (Angelo et al., 2024; Liao et al., 2019). Policies and plans to advance equity do not necessarily need to be new planning tools. Planners can modify existing tools to facilitate equity within their practice.

Planning academic and professional organizations can foster spaces for planners to advance equity. The Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning (ACSP) has several interest groups that advocate for equity from particular perspectives. These include the Planners of Color Interest Group, which aims to promote POC interests and concerns in both academic and professional contexts (ACSP, n.d.; García et al., 2021), as well as Faculty Women's Interest Group, Queers & Trans in Planning Interest Group, and Global Planning Educator's Interest Group. The APA provides a planning for equity policy guide and social equity knowledge base collection (Kwon & Thi Nguyen, 2023).

Despite the strides that have been made to advance equity in planning, planners face significant barriers when attempting to address equity in process, policy, and implementation. In the next section we discuss the common political, professional, and academic barriers planners face.

Barriers

A common theme in equity planning literature is the disconnect between stated intentions in planning activities and how planning interventions are carried out. This gap could be explained by the political barriers to practicing equity in planning. For instance, the usual top-down approach within planning is not aligned with "grassroots perceptions of equity" (Avni, 2019, p. 489). It could also be the case that the political terrain planners operate within does not support operationalizing equity in planning interventions or that planners need a greater suite of tools to counter policies that are antithetical to achieving equitable outcomes

(Aldred, 2022; Brand, 2015). Related, much of the literature analyzing equity in planning discusses the difficulty planners face when attempting to challenge the status quo under a neoliberal agenda (Brand, 2015; Grant, 2024; Harvey, 2007). Doussard (2015) identified two main barriers to equity planning. The first barrier, which is well known, is the difficulty in placing activist planners into leadership positions. The second is that activist planners, once in positions of power within the limited authority of local government, must address social and economic issues induced at regional, state, and national scales. Doussard suggested "scale-jumping" as a solution to these political barriers, in which policy is pushed to higher levels of government to adjust sites of struggle where social movements and advocates have greater influence and negotiating power (Doussard, 2015, p. 298). Other explanations for a gap in stated equity goals versus results could be generational differences among planners, race neutrality, lack of equity training in formal education, political and financial barriers, and staff capacity in local government (Garfinkel-Castro, 2023; Kwon & Thi Nguyen, 2023; Loh & Kim, 2021; Lung-Amam et al., 2015).

In addition, planners who are not part of marginalized communities may not fully be able to understand the experiences of people in those communities and therefore struggle to plan effectively for and with them. In part, this is because planning curricula may not provide sufficient tools and models to plan with and for diverse constituencies (Jackson et al., 2018). For example, planners who are White can decide whether they want to think about race and how it affects people's daily experiences of the city. Planners of color do not have that luxury. Centering the White perspective is so normalized that it is difficult if not impossible for White planners to fully understand how communities of color experience planning interventions and policies (Garfinkel-Castro, 2023).

Planners are also navigating equity issues in their workplaces and scholarship. In 2020 the theme for the annual ACSP conference was "Racial Equity and Justice in Urban Planning Research and Education in the Face of Racialized Inequality" (ACSP, 2020). Despite this increased focus on equity in planning scholarship, the diversity of faculty and students in planning programs has not advanced (Kwon & Thi Nguyen, 2023). In 2017, the Planning Accreditation Board (PAB) adjusted its accreditation criteria, eliminating standards related to equity and diversity. As

of summer 2024, PAB proposed to change accreditation standards to only evaluate individual programs on their own internal definitions of diversity, with the aim of avoiding lawsuits in states where having diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) standards has been made unlawful (PAB communication to member schools, January 17, 2024. https://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/20703/urlt/7-1.pdf). For example, following the passage of an anti-DEI bill in the Florida State Legislature in 2023, the Florida State Board of Education adopted a new rule that "affirmatively prohibits [Florida College System] institutions for using state or federal funds to administer programs that categorize individuals based on race or sex for the purpose of differential or preferential treatment" (Florida Department of Education, 2024). In response, the major Florida public universities dismantled their DEI offices and programs and terminated staff positions and faculty administrative appointments (Betts, 2024). The result of the 2024 presidential election will likely give this backlash against DEI initiatives increased momentum.

Michigan Planning Context

Michigan has many local governments and a diversity of community types that are advantageous for study through an equity planning lens. For total local government units, Michigan ranks 13th in the nation with more than 1,800 cities, counties, townships, and villages, as well as more than 900 school and special-purpose districts and authorities (Michigan Legislature, 2009). Community sizes range from as small as nearly 100 residents to Detroit's population of almost 700,000 (Draheim & Hartley, 2018). Michigan possesses one of the largest Black-majority cities, the largest concentration of Arab Americans in the United States, and 12 tribal governments, as well as many communities that are almost totally White. The state has economically distressed regions where industry has left or diminished, but also continues to hold on to areas of economic growth and prosperity. It includes areas with economies focused on tourism, resource extraction, manufacturing, and the knowledge economy. Its physical geography includes coastal areas along the Great Lakes, farmland, forests, and urbanized areas. Michigan is a weak mandate planning state (communities meeting certain criteria are required to plan, but plans are not legally binding), and because the state has many low-capacity

communities, it has many planners in private practice (Loh & Arroyo, 2017). In addition, we had an existing relationship with MAP, a high-capacity state APA chapter, which made the planning population accessible for study.

Methodology

Our research aimed to identify attitudes toward and knowledge gaps about equity among practicing planners who are MAP members. To achieve this, we surveyed MAP members about planning equity knowledge and practices. The research team worked in collaboration with the MAP Executive Director and members of the MAP Social Equity Committee to create an online survey. The survey questions had several rounds of review by the research team and was sent to members of the MAP Social Equity Committee for pilot testing. The survey was created and hosted within Qualtrics (2003) and structured to ensure the anonymity of the respondents. The MAP director of information and programs sent the survey to the entire MAP membership email listserv three times in June 2024. The email contained a link to the Qualtrics survey, a brief description of the study, and a research information sheet.

The survey consisted of up to 22 questions based on the respondents' answers. It was dynamically structured and offered tailored questions based on the respondents' sector (i.e., public, private, nonprofit, or other) and whether they selected that they were aware of equity resources (if so, it then asked whether they had used it in their work). The survey asked general background and demographic questions. In addition, it asked respondents to reflect on whether they and, separately, their leadership/clients think equity is important; what types of resources would be helpful to recommend equitable planning decisions; what type(s) of equitable planning their community is undertaking; whether they use APA equity resources; and what challenges they face in regards to equitable planning. Building on the previous research by the MAP Social Equity Committee and our reading of the literature, we provided respondents the following definition of equity to keep in mind while answering the survey: *access to resources, opportunities, and planning processes for all, especially those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and those who have historically lacked such access*. In the next section, we report descriptive statistics from the Qualtrics survey data with the aim of identifying knowledge

gaps that could be addressed by future research by the MAP Social Equity Committee and academic partners, leading to further technical assistance for practicing planners.

Results

Survey Distribution and Response Rate

The distribution was restricted to the MAP listserv to limit responses to MAP members. The listserv had 4,356 members; about 25% of that number (1,089) were professional planners, meaning that planning was their job, rather than planning officials. Because the study was aimed at practicing planners, rather than planning officials such as planning commission or Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) members, the first question on the survey was intended to narrow the pool to planners. We made this distinction because we wanted to understand how working professionals in the planning field were thinking about equity.

We recorded 360 responses in total, with 189 respondents completing the entire survey. This last number potentially represents around 17% of the MAP members who are practicing planners, although we cannot know for sure how many officials took the survey. We also do not know how many practicing planners there are in Michigan who are not MAP members and therefore did not have the opportunity to be included in the survey.

Respondent Characteristics

We began the survey with an initial question asking the respondents in what sector they were employed ($n = 313$). This helped us to understand the overall context of the responses. Most identified as working in the public sector (70%), 13% within the private sector, 13% as other, and 4% as nonprofit. The most common *other* response was planning commission or board members. There were also a small minority of *other* respondents who identified as retired or part of academia. We did not exclude *other* sectors from our analysis.

All geographic regions of Michigan had responses, with the southeast being the most represented (Table 1 and Figure 1). This was to be expected because the southeast has the largest population density in the state and holds the three most populous counties (Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb). The geographic distribution of respondents closely matches the overall MAP membership

Table 1. Region of Michigan in which respondents primarily worked.

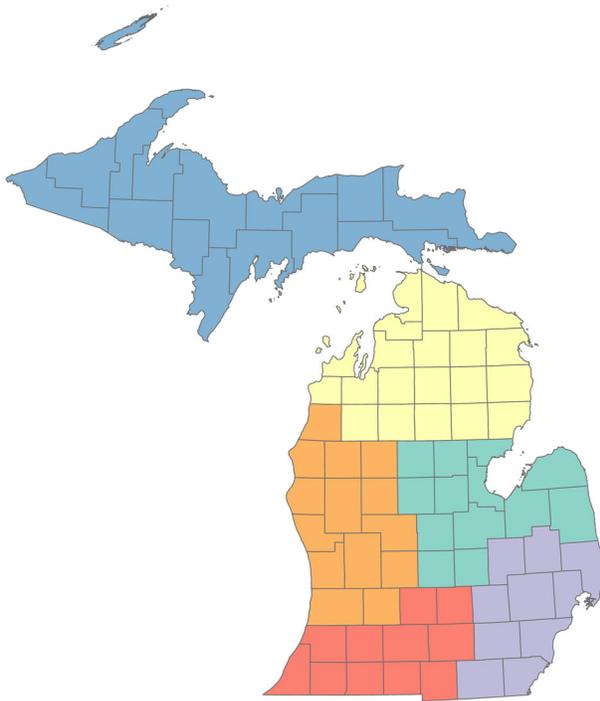| Region	Respondents (%)	MAP membership (%)	Difference (%)
Southeast	43	44	1
Southwest	12	18	6
West central	12	14	−2
East central	11	11	0
Northern lower peninsula	10	10	0
Multiple regions/statewide	7	N/A	N/A
Upper peninsula	4	4	0

Note: $n = 189$.

Figure 1. Michigan regions.
Source: Map by Kelsey Maas based on regions from the Michigan Public Policy Survey (University of Michigan Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP), n.d.).

Table 2. Size of community in which respondents primarily worked.

Community size	Count	%
Under 5,000	50	26
5,001–10,000	55	29
10,001–40,000	74	39
40,001–100,000	46	24
>100,000	40	21

Note; $n = 190$.

Table 3. Respondent race.

Race	Count	%
White	152	81
Black	12	6
Other	7	4
Asian/Pacific Islander	5	3
American Indian/Alaska Native	3	2
Native Hawaiian	1	1
Prefer not to answer	14	7

Note: $n = 187$.

distribution. The respondents' ages leaned toward older. Most were 51 years or older (22% were 51–60 years and 32% were older than 60 years). Mid-range respondents were the next largest population, with 20% aged 41 to 50 and 15% aged 31 to 40, whereas only 8% were younger than 30. This suggests a respondent sample with a large population that may be leaving the workforce within the next decade or less. Although ANOVA tests showed no statistically significant differences in beliefs about equity (Table 4) by age, one respondent reported "significant generational difference in opinions" as a barrier to adopting equitable policies. That observation may be more perception than reality, however.

The planners who took the survey worked in communities of a variety of sizes, as shown in Table 2. Michigan has more than 1,800 units of local government, many of which are townships with

small populations, so it is not surprising that 50% of respondents primarily worked in communities of 10,000 or fewer people, yet larger cities were also well represented.

Respondents were overwhelmingly White (Table 3). In addition, five of our respondents identified themselves as Hispanic/Latino and five identified as Arab American. Our respondent pool was not very racially diverse but likely reasonably representative of the actual population of planners in Michigan. We did not explicitly ask whether a respondent had a planning degree; however, nearly half replied that they had at least a master's-level education (49%), and another 29% had a bachelor's degree. Participation within a planning specific educational program, generally, would imply greater exposure to the concept of equity within planning as well as potential tools to address it.

Attitudes Toward and Knowledge About Equity

We wanted to not only understand what equity in planning meant to MAP members but also comprehend how the leadership they work with felt about it (Table 4). Leadership could include elected and appointed officials, such as planning commissioners, city council members, or township board members;

Table 4. How strongly do you think the officials/leadership you work with agree that equity is an important planning goal?

Answer	Count	%
They strongly agree	35	15
They agree	89	39
They neither agree or disagree	34	15
They disagree	8	4
They strongly disagree	6	3
Their opinions about equity vary too widely for me to categorize them	28	12
I don't know how they feel about equity as a planning goal	26	12

Note: $n = 226$.

Table 5. Public-sector planners: Do you feel that you and the officials you work with basically agree on how much to prioritize equity as a planning goal?

Answer	Count	%
For the most part, we do not discuss equity as a planning goal	46	32
Yes, we mainly agree it is an important priority	45	31
No, I think it is an important priority and the officials do not think it is as important	21	14
Yes, we mainly agree it is not an important priority	15	10
I work with many different communities/entities and it varies too much to say	11	8
Other	8	5

Note: $n = 146$ (public-sector planners only).

executive directors of Downtown Development Authorities (DDAs), regional organizations, and non-profits; and planning firm owners or partners. Overall, most respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their officials or leadership thought equity in planning was an important goal (54%). Another 24% were not sure or had too varying of opinions to categorize. This indicates a positive attitude toward planning equity and that in little more than half of respondent work environments, leadership is not a barrier and can be or is an asset to implementing equity. We conducted chi-square tests to see whether there were regional differences or differences between sectors in planners' perceptions of officials' priorities, but those differences were not significant.

We also sought to see whether public-sector planners ($n = 146$) agreed with their officials or leadership regarding prioritizing equity as a planning goal (Table 5). Nearly one-third of respondents rarely discussed equity with officials, and 10% agreed with their officials it was not an important priority; however, 31% had discussed it and thought it was an important priority. There is an opportunity with the large group of planners who rarely discuss equity with their officials to bring it up to first understand whether they agree, which can then help a planner understand whether officials will be a potential challenge or an asset for implementing equity planning.

We asked private-sector planners how often they discuss equity with their clients. There was a smaller respondent population for the private sector ($n = 42$). Nearly a quarter said they frequently had discussions (24%), and 19% occasionally did. Thirty-one percent rarely, very rarely, or never discussed equity with their clients.

Equity Policies Adopted
We not only wanted to understand how relevant stakeholders thought of or discussed equity in planning with the survey respondents—We also wanted to hear from MAP planners what type of equity policies their communities were adopting (Table 6). In addition, we inquired whether they were aware of the existing APA *Planning for Equity Policy Guide*. Forty-two percent of respondents were familiar with it ($n = 189$), and 31% had used it in their work. An additional 51% planned to use it. Eighteen percent did not plan to use it. Private-sector planners were significantly more likely to have heard of the APA *Planning for Equity Policy Guide* (at the .01 level) and significantly more likely to use it in their work (at the .1 level).

Respondents were asked to indicate different types of equity actions or policy changes that had been implemented within their community. They were able to select multiple answers. Investment in nonmotorized transportation and making public participation more inclusive had the highest response rate (47% for both). One respondent said, "While we haven't done a lot of the items on the list, we have invested in nonmotorized transportation [and] try to include the public in our master

Table 6. What kinds of equity actions/policy changes has your community undertaken?

Policy/action	Count	%
Invested in nonmotorized transportation	91	47
Made public participation processes more inclusive	91	47
Increased affordable/workforce housing	59	31
Updated or ADU ordinance	59	31
Invested in transit	49	26
Adopted equitable environmental/climate change/hazard planning policy	36	19
Implemented equitable hiring practices	33	17
Increased affordable housing funding	30	16
Adopted policy to increase accessibility for people with disabilities (beyond Americans with Disabilities Act requirements)	29	15
Made other zoning changes	26	14
Made land use changes to increase accessibility to goods and services for low income (LI) residents	22	11
Documented historic contexts of underrepresented communities	22	11
Adopted equitable economic development policy	21	11
Adopted policies related to racial equity	20	10
Adopted equitable energy policy	14	7
Adopted digital equity policy	13	7
Set up a resiliency hub	8	4
Adopted equitable food systems policy	6	3

Note: $n = 192$.

planning process." Another regional planner reported that their agency had "strongly advocated for, built special-interest groups around, and built funding for nonmotorized infrastructure." Adopting accessible dwelling unit (ADU) ordinances and increasing affordable/workforce housing were also common choices. Investing in public transit rounded out the top five most reported actions or policies. Twenty-six percent of respondents said their communities invested in transit but not necessarily with the specific goal of advancing equity. One respondent said,

> It's something of a loaded question. Our community has undertaken several improvements on the list, such as investing in nonmotorized facilities and public transit. But we do so not in pursuit of *equity* but in pursuit of advancing public health and safety.

Another respondent reported that the community was "allow[ing] for transit stops as we work on getting public transportation to our community [and] working on a more robust nonmotorized plan to continue facilitating walking and biking options. Promoting bike racks and also [electric vehicle] stations."

Challenges and Data Needs

To better understand barriers to equity in planning, we asked respondents to elaborate on what data might make it easier to recommend more equity-based planning decisions (Table 7). This list had set answers, so there are likely additional data needs that planners have that were not captured in this survey. A significant majority wanted data that showed the accessibility of affordable/workforce housing to jobs (61%) and, related, a 10-year

forecast on demand for affordable/workforce housing (58%). Affordable/workforce housing data was a frequent request. In addition to the previously mentioned housing data needs, accessibility of affordable/workforce housing to public or nonmotorized transportation (48%) and accessibility of affordable/workforce housing to shopping (43%) were commonly selected. There is a clear desire for more data regarding the systems and markets that influence affordable/workforce housing.

Despite planners' asking for data on accessible affordable/workforce housing, ADUs and affordable/workforce housing ranked high in equity action/policy change that planners have already taken. These results might suggest that planning interventions related to affordable and workforce housing are proving to be successful and planners want additional data to further work in this area or that planners are making policy in these areas without being confident of their knowledge base and/or outcomes.

In addition, we asked about the challenges respondents experienced when attempting to adopt or implement equitable policies and planning (Table 8). Unsurprisingly, lack of funding had the highest response rate (46%). Resources for equity policies and planning are often competing against other community needs. A planner wrote, "All of these require [money]. I think our City/government [has] bigger issues than this." The second most common challenge was lack of knowledge about equitable policies (42%), which suggests an opportunity for professional development and education by professional associations like MAP to provide useful equitable policies for their different communities. One respondent stated that the "lack of a pure

Table 7. Would having more data about any of the following issues in the community or communities in which you work make it easier to recommend more equitable planning decisions?

Data need	Count	%
How accessible affordable/workforce housing is to jobs	119	61
Ten-year forecast demand for affordable/workforce housing	114	58
How accessible affordable/workforce housing is to public or nonmotorized transportation	94	48
How representative participants in local planning processes are of the broader community	93	48
More detailed community demographics	87	45
How accessible affordable/workforce housing is to shopping	84	43
Geographic distribution of community facilities	78	41
Geographic distribution of community services	79	40
Ways to diversify the planning workforce	53	27

Note: $n = 195$.

Table 8. What challenges have you experienced in adopting or implementing equitable policies or planning?

Challenge	Count	%
Lack of funding for implementation	86	46
Lack of knowledge about equitable policies	79	42
Lack of community support	72	38
Lack of support from officials	68	36
Lack of funding for public participation	54	29
Other	39	21
Lack of support from colleagues	29	15
None of the above	28	15

Note: $n = 189$.

definition of equity" was a challenge. A large percentage indicated that they lacked community support or support from officials for equitable policies and planning.

"Other" answers were often related to the preset categories, including funding and resistance from community and local stakeholders. Funding was the major theme in the specific responses, which showed up both in responses about lack of funding and/or lack of staff capacity, for example, one respondent said, "Funding may be available: it is not allocated." Others said challenges included "lack of paid staff with expertise" or "staff capacity, ability to commit adequate sustained attention."

Given the issues private-sector planners encounter balancing client service with the public interest, we performed one-way analysis of variance to see whether there were significant differences between planning sectors in reported challenges. Private-sector planners were significantly more likely to report challenges with lack of community support, lack of support from officials, and lack of funding for public participation compared with planners in other sectors. There were no significant between-group differences for other reported challenges.

Discussion

In conversations over the years, and in conducting previous research on planning ethics and planning for equity, we have commonly encountered stories of planners who are trying to nudge (or perhaps shove) the appointed and elected officials they work with toward more equitable policies but who are encountering resistance. These survey data tell a more complex story. Fifty-four percent of respondents thought the officials they work with either agree or strongly agree that equity is an important planning priority, yet 32% of public-sector planners and 31% of private-sector planners discussed equity with their officials rarely or not at all. We wonder why so many planners are not having these conversations. It is possible that the planners themselves do not place much value on equity (which we think is less likely); that they have tried to discuss it in the past with little to show, so they have given up (certainly possible); or they do not know how to talk about it. Given that 36% found lack of support from officials to be a challenge in adopting or implementing equitable planning policy, it seems in some cases there is a mismatch in priorities between planners and policymakers that makes advancing equitable planning policies difficult. In many cases, though, there may be missed opportunities for both private- and public-sector planners to educate officials and help change the policy trajectory.

Krumholz observed that

> nobody in City Hall, or few people in City Hall, really know what the planners are up to. So, to a large extent, I think planners can define their own work process, and that's something very few planners do, I'm sorry to say. At least, defining a way that's oriented toward equity. [McConville et al., 2009, p. 5]

Though we think planners get quite a bit of scrutiny regarding their work, at least from the general public, we believe the point about being bolder is worth considering. One other note is that our respondent pool likely overrepresents planners who care about equity because they would be more interested in the survey topic. However, our

respondent planners did not uniformly agree that equity is an important planning goal. Despite the unambiguous language in the *AICP Code of Ethics*, 10% of our respondents said they and the officials they work with agree that equity is not an important planning goal.

Many planners in our survey reported making progress on implementing equitable planning policies, however. Increasing equitable public participation was one of the two most often reported equity policies. We speculate that public participation processes may be the aspect of equity policy most directly under planners' control. Also, creating more inclusive public participation processes does not tend to raise politically thornier questions about distribution of resources. We want to call attention to the challenges in equity planning for private-sector planners, who reported significantly higher challenges with community support, support from officials, and funding for public participation. Private-sector planners must maintain client relationships while upholding their commitment to serving the public interest. Their interactions with community members are often temporary and mediated by officials, who have their own priorities. Private-sector planners are limited to whatever funding for public participation is in the project budget. If the process is inadequate, planning consultants would either have to advocate to be paid more to do additional outreach, which may be a nonstarter, or do extra outreach for free. These findings align with previous research that calls out challenges for private-sector planners (Loh & Arroyo, 2017).

The other most common equity-focused policy was nonmotorized transportation, which may be partly because there has been federal money available for these types of projects in the last few years. Investing in transit was also in the top five most reported actions. Nonmotorized transportation interventions can be relatively affordable, such as re-striping existing roads. In smaller communities, transit may be unaffordable or ultimately be under the control of outside agencies. Planners also reported housing as a frequent focus of equity policy efforts, with ADU ordinances and increasing the supply of affordable and workforce housing as the most common actions. Though building or adapting housing to be affordable is not cheap, creating policies that encourage this can be, such as an ordinance requiring affordable housing when local government subsidies are awarded to a project. This result aligns with previous research that indicated

racial equity and social justice appear in the literature as well as in plans most often in relation to housing (Kwon & Thi Nguyen, 2023; Loh & Kim, 2021; Meerow et al., 2019).

One of our original motivations for this study was to identify unmet data needs that would help planners more easily recommend and implement equitable planning policies. The results of the survey indicate that planners are indeed hungry for data: Almost half of respondents said a lack of knowledge about equitable policies was a barrier. Planners are especially interested in data about demand for and accessibility of affordable/workforce housing to jobs. These results indicate new opportunities for technical assistance from MAP or other government-supporting organizations such as the Michigan Municipal League and the Michigan Townships Association.

We suspect that planners are creating and advocating for policies that advance equity without explicitly calling them that. In written comments, one planner even said as much, explaining that the stated motivation for nonmotorized transportation options was health and safety, rather than equity. This comment aligns with Fainstein's (2010) observation that equity policies may need to be seen as serving other goals to gain support. In a 2008 speech at the University of North Carolina, Krumholz said, "Planners should focus on the basics: fixing cities' schools, services, and safety" (McConville et al., 2009, p. 4). It is hard to argue with investments in quality-of-life improvements like nonmotorized transportation. But without doing any kind of analysis or thinking about who does and does not have access to resources, this is an equality approach, not an equity approach, Finally, we note that policies that explicitly deal with issues of racial discrimination appear to be rare, which reinforces the findings of Arroyo et al. that both historically and today, planning is often "reticent to engage directly with race" (Arroyo et al., 2023, p. 452). The lack of such policies also aligns with our assessment that the most commonly adopted equity policies are either relatively uncontroversial, such as making public participation more inclusive, or good basics that are not necessarily branded as equity focused.

Conclusion

In this research, we investigated how Michigan planners think about and implement equity planning in

their work. In this study, we asked planners to consider how they and others in their communities handle issues of equity, defined as *access to resources, opportunities, and planning processes for all, especially those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and those who have historically lacked such access*. Given Michigan's (and the country's) political, racial, and socioeconomic diversity, different equity considerations may be most salient in different communities. However, we argue that whatever the community demographics are, when planning decisions are made or when public money is spent, equity should be top of mind. Planning for equity fundamentally starts with understanding who lives, works, and visits the community; what their needs are; who may lack comparative access to resources and processes; and the reasons for that lack. These examinations encompass distributional, procedural, and recognitional equity. Then the work can begin to break down barriers and provide resources to expand that access.

This work expands upon previous research by the MAP Social Equity Committee that examined comprehensive plans. Feedback from planners in that study stated challenges regarding a lack of understanding of or support for equity planning by officials. In this research, we specifically addressed this frustration. This research provides a valuable insight into Michigan planners' views of equity within their profession. We found that planners by and large value equity as a planning goal and have focused their equity planning efforts on nonmotorized transportation and lower-cost housing policy interventions. Yet we found that a significant percentage of planners were not talking about equity with their officials, and we do not yet know why. To address this gap, future qualitative research that dives into why these conversations are not happening and whether there are any resources to facilitate them could be insightful. Further, we did not specifically ask survey respondents whether or how they had been taught about equity within planning through their formal education or through professional development opportunities or whether they had graduated from a program accredited by the PAB. This additional data point may provide additional context for where a planner is starting and what tools and resources could be helpful to them within their practice.

When it comes to actual equity policy and implementation, affordability is a main driver. Not only were cheaper policy initiatives more popular in efforts already being undertaken, but cost was listed as a primary barrier to equity planning. Therefore,

communities should be looking for the low-hanging fruit of equity policy and implementation. Planning initiatives that overlap with other community goals, such as public health, sustainability, or safety, can be an entry point to equity by expanding not only the outcome but focusing on the barriers community members may face and expanding opportunities. What can they adopt and execute in the present that does not have a large price tag and can also help to increase opportunity and access for disadvantaged residents? These initiatives can span many ways of thinking about equity that are context specific: For example, one respondent proudly explained that their community had just purchased the first beach wheelchair in their county. Finally, planners should be leaders in conversations about equity with their officials.

We revised this article just after the 2024 presidential election, which also gave control of Congress to the Republican Party. Incoming federal officials, advisors, and elected officials have expressed their intentions to excise DEI, of which equity is a component, from public policy and public life (see Gonzalez & Tooloee, 2024, for an example of the rhetoric). We cannot know how these intentions will translate into policy in the next four years or how the way political decision makers think and talk about equity will change further into the future. Discussion of and policy regarding equity are subject to highs and lows depending on the political moment: For example, many DEI programs started or expanded in response to George Floyd's murder in 2020. In this case, it may become more difficult to talk explicitly about equity and, we suspect, especially about racial equity, about which plans were already often silent. However, we believe that at the local level, officials, planners, and residents are reasonably attuned to fairness and generally want their neighbors to thrive. Although the language planners use to talk about equity and the tactics employed may evolve, much of the equity work planners are doing right now is simply good planning practice, and we expect it to continue.

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