



Developing an Equity Tracker for the Central Puget Sound Region

Challenge

The Central Puget Sound Region includes Seattle, Washington and the counties of King, Kitsap, Pierce, and Snohomish – a total of more than 4.3 million people.¹ The region is home to a diverse population; people of color make up 37 percent of residents, about 20 percent of the population is low-income, and 340,000 people have limited English proficiency.² Like elsewhere in the country, historical systems of inequality and structural racism have led to equity-related gaps and disparities among different groups of people and communities in the Seattle area.³ For years, individuals, community groups, local leaders, and practitioners in the Puget Sound region have been aware of these existing disparities and equity gaps but have lacked the data and analytical tools to fully and systematically address these issues and assess the efficacy of equity-related interventions.

The **Puget Sound Regional Council (PSRC)** serves as the Seattle Region’s Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) and is responsible for a broad portfolio for policy development and decision-making coordination for regional growth management, transportation, and economic development. This includes administering the long-range regional growth and transportation planning processes and supporting local governments in the region on economic development, short-term projects pertaining to transportation improvements, and more. As a result, PSRC is well positioned to effectively address interconnected issues and prioritize **equity** through long-range comprehensive planning and regional transportation planning.

Solution

PSRC is creating a data-driven Equity Tracker to paint a broad picture of well-being for different communities and to support regional planning for more equitable outcomes. The tracker is a key component of implementing PSRC’s VISION 2050 Regional Equity Strategy. The tracker’s main goals are to measure disparities between different communities, track and analyze the region’s performance in closing equity-related gaps and monitor progress of equity-related program and policy implementation. For example, this tool will measure transportation safety and access to transit, as well as analyze education and health outcomes. Partners and community members will be able to see whether the region’s efforts are effective at reducing disparities over time. Designed as a publicly available tool, the tracker’s insights will give community members and jurisdictions the opportunity to hold PSRC accountable and advocate for policy adjustments that could be more effective in creating a region with more equitable life outcomes.

Justice40 and the DOT Equity Action Plan

PSRC’s work on the Equity Tracker aligns with and supports:

- *The Federal government-wide **Justice40 Initiative**, which establishes the goal that 40 percent of the overall benefits of certain Federal investments flow to disadvantaged communities.*
- *The U.S. Department of Transportation (U.S. DOT) **Equity Action Plan**, which highlights work the Department is undertaking across five areas of focus or “pillars”: wealth creation; power of community; proactive intervention, planning, and capacity building; expanding access, and institutionalizing equity.*

¹ PSRC, *Vision 2050: A Plan for the Central Puget Sound Region*, October 2020

² PSRC, *Central Puget Sound Demographic Profile*, October 2021

³ PSRC, *Legacy of Structural Racism Interactive Report*, July 2023



The Equity Tracker will inform PSRC’s project prioritization process for distributing Federal funds. Including equity criteria in project prioritization processes allows MPOs to encourage equitable project applications and tie funding to these commitments. PSRC’s equity criteria will consider how potential projects address equity-related gaps, engage marginalized communities during project development, and avoid displacement of vulnerable populations. Jurisdictions will be able to use the Equity Tracker to provide the context and data needed for them to develop successful project applications that elevate social and racial equity. PSRC released the first version of the [Equity Tracker](#) to the public in April 2024 and will be making updates, adding new indicators, and doing other refinements regularly.

Policy and Planning Framework

The Equity Tracker is the result of years of effort to develop a method to prioritize agency actions to advance equity in the region. After an extensive update process and over two years of work, PSRC adopted [VISION 2050](#) in 2020, the newest update to the region’s long-range comprehensive plan articulating how the region will manage growth and development. [VISION 2050 integrates policies and actions related to equity](#) throughout the plan. With assistance from local governments and community stakeholders, PSRC is developing a Regional Equity Strategy to implement VISION 2050’s equity and social justice policies and coordinate the region’s planning and decision making in this space. PSRC published a [work plan](#) for the Regional Equity Strategy documenting outputs of early scoping activities and identifying key equity issue areas, including the use of data to highlight areas of concern and progress. The work plan identifies the Equity Tracker as one way PSRC will address equity issues.

Related Equity Work at PSRC

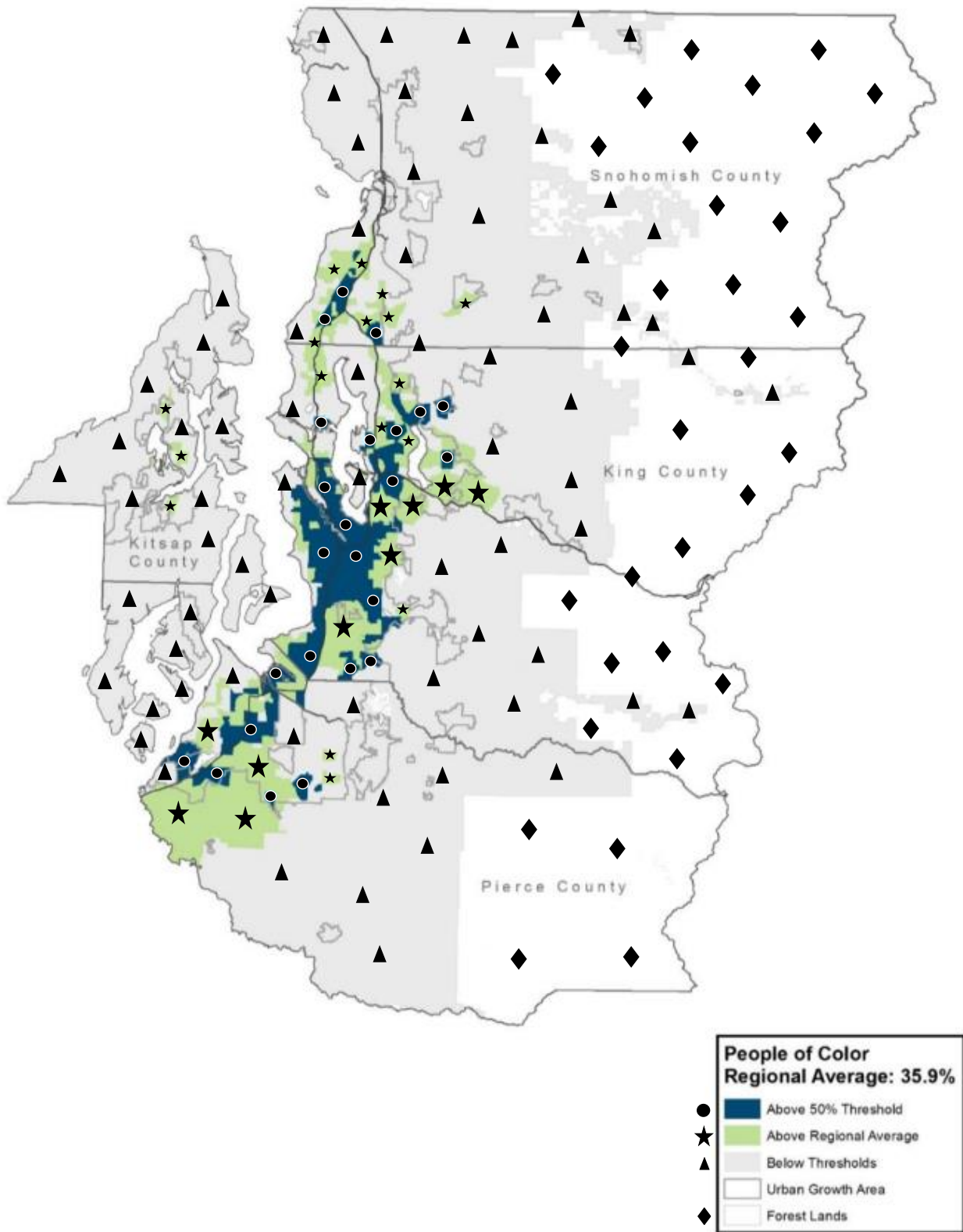
- [Opportunity Mapping](#)
- [Displacement Risk Mapping](#)
- [Creating and Sustaining Thriving Transit Communities](#)

In 2022, PSRC adopted the [Regional Transportation Plan](#) (RTP) to accompany VISION 2050 as the latest update to the long-range transportation plan designed to implement transportation-related investments to achieve a sustainable, equitable, affordable, safe, and efficient multimodal transportation system. The RTP includes an [equity analysis](#) that identifies six demographic groups that face disadvantages and experience legacy underinvestment and therefore have unique needs, including in the transportation arena. PSRC then

Identified Communities with Unique Transportation Needs

- *People of color*
- *People with low incomes (<200% poverty line)*
- *People with disabilities*
- *Older Adults (65+)*
- *Youth (5-17)*
- *People with limited English proficiency*

created Equity Focus Areas (EFAs), which have a higher proportion of the identified communities than the regional average (see map on the next page). PSRC compared RTP outcomes (such as transportation mode share, transit access, walking and biking, vehicle travel, and transportation affordability) between EFAs and the regional average. This approach enables improved understanding of how transportation investments may disproportionately benefit or burden different communities.



Equity focus area for people of color. Image source: PSRC



Approach and Stakeholder and Community Engagement

PSRC's development of the Equity Tracker builds on years of PSRC's external engagement. Informal groups, jurisdictions, and community members within the region have collaborated with PSRC to provide local context and raise awareness of equity-related community needs.

The success of these informal partnerships led PSRC's boards to request the creation of an [Equity Advisory Committee](#) (EAC) in November 2021 to enable a deeper integration of equity in PSRC's policies and programs across topics such as transportation, housing, and climate. The committee consists of about 20 members who are residents or staff of governmental and non-profit organizations representing marginalized communities throughout the region's four counties.

PSRC reviewed [peer regional planning organizations'](#) efforts to advance equity work, which informed the selection of specific metrics for the Equity Tracker. Using the VISION 2050 goals and policies as a guide, the team compiled over 150 potential metrics that could measure progress on how regional efforts promote equity. The selected set of metrics was not meant to be exhaustive, but rather to effectively capture diverse attributes of lived experiences. Engagement with the EAC was critical to identify data needs and appropriate metrics.

Initial engagement and collaboration with local jurisdictions in the Puget Sound region regarding equity-related data demonstrated that, although jurisdictions frame equity analyses differently, they largely rely on the same data sources (e.g., from the U.S. Census Bureau; National Highway Traffic Safety Administration; State of Washington; and regional transit, health, and educational providers). By developing a regional Equity Tracker, PSRC will help eliminate duplicative efforts, provide a centralized data repository, and enable consistent data analysis.

Conclusion

PSRC is one of a growing number of regional planning organizations demonstrating how strategic uses of data can identify and address disparities and equity-related gaps. PSRC's Equity Tracker is one example of [how MPOs are integrating equity in their transportation planning process](#). U.S. DOT has set a goal that all State DOTs and the top 100 MPOs adopt a quantitative equity screening process as part of Statewide Transportation Improvement Plan and Transportation Improvement Plan development by 2030. PSRC's Equity Tracker will give jurisdictions new data analytics at the regional and county level to measure and seek to improve life outcomes for its most vulnerable residents. PSRC's experience developing the Equity Tracker identifies takeaways for other organizations considering implementing similar projects, such as:

Leverage existing data to show value early and save organizational staff time and resources that would be needed to purchase or create new datasets. Identifying readily available datasets and developing the supporting automation pipeline will demonstrate proof of concept for the Equity Tracker while providing near-term benefits to PSRC, stakeholders, and community members. Future versions of the Equity Tracker may build on the current foundational effort to enable analyses at smaller geographies.

Assess data sources carefully. PSRC considers the following factors to analyze and vet existing data sources:

- Is the data from a reputable, trusted source and was it developed using sound methodologies?
- Are datasets open and easy to access?
- Is the data source updated regularly and frequently?
- Does the data contain appropriate sociodemographic information at the right geographic scales?



Manage project scope. Equity analysis may consider a broad range of quality-of-life factors and demographic groups. PSRC is using the goals and priorities of VISION 2050 and the RTP to inform establishment of relevant equity metrics. To further shape identification of equity indicators of interest, PSRC is prioritizing measures with a direct nexus to PSRC’s influence and impact. For example, PSRC considered then eliminated a metric concerning emergency assistance (which is delivered locally and coordinated through the State’s Emergency Management Division) as too far outside PSRC’s scope and control.

Build internal capacity and engage external expertise. PSRC has worked to cultivate an equity emphasis within its organization through trainings for staff from the [Local and Regional Government Alliance on Race and Equity](#). The creation and involvement of the EAC has brought local knowledge and priorities to the forefront, helping to create a relevant equity analysis tool that meets broader stakeholder and community needs.

Identify organizational leadership to champion equity and allocate adequate resources. PSRC is allocating resources to the Equity Tracker, in part, because many of the smaller jurisdictions with fewer staff and less capacity are unable to develop such a tool on their own. PSRC aims for every member jurisdiction, regardless of their size, to have resources necessary to make data informed decisions to improve the lives of their most marginalized residents.