

# RACIAL HEALING AND RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Policy and Practice Brief

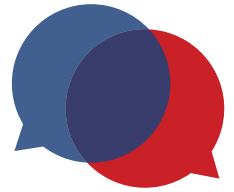
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# RACIAL HEALING AND RELATIONSHIP BUILDING



The Truth, Racial Healing, & Transformation (TRHT) framework defines “to heal” as to restore to wholeness, to repair damage, and to set right. Healing a societal racial divide requires acknowledging the wrongs of the past, while also addressing the consequences of those wrongs. Racial healing involves focusing on ways for all of us to heal from the wounds of the past, to build mutually respectful relationships across racial and ethnic lines that honor and value each person’s humanity, and to build trusting intergenerational and diverse community relationships that better reflect our common humanity. Racial healing is about building relationships, connecting people, and expanding the circles of engagement needed for overcoming racial hierarchy and building political will. It is a precursor to meaningful and sustainable policy change.

One of the [core principles](#) of our work is to bring people together and bridge divides. According to Dr. Shawn Ginwright, professor of Africana Studies at San Francisco State University, “healing-centered engagement uses culture as a way to ground people in a solid sense of meaning, self-perception, and purpose. This process highlights the intersectional nature of identity and highlights the ways in which culture offers a shared experience, community and sense of belonging. ...Healing-centered engagement embraces a holistic view of well-being that includes spiritual domains of health. This goes beyond viewing healing only from the lens of mental health, and incorporates culturally grounded rituals, and activities to restore well-being.”<sup>1</sup>

A key component of this process is building empathy and shared understanding. Research shows that intergroup dialogue can reduce prejudice and increase compassion and capacity for perspective-taking and empathy. In 1954, Gordon Allport created the intergroup contact theory, which aims to bring ingroups and outgroups together under circumstances that build tolerance and mutual respect. In a pair of studies, a group of Italian researchers led by social psychologist Dora Capozza repeatedly found that positive contact was linked with greater outgroup humanization.<sup>2</sup> Authentic connection is key to treating outgroups with respect and dignity and encourages us to take other people’s voices seriously, value them, and make

them feel understood. The researchers suggested a possible process at play: Participants may have reclassified the “us” and “them” of ingroup and outgroup into a larger “we.” Research done by Williams and Cooper found that the racial gap in empathetic brain activity can be reduced when people are instructed to focus on an individual’s suffering instead of their racial background (individuation), when people are on the same team with members of a racial outgroup, and when they are among persons who have experienced greater inter-racial interaction in their socialization.<sup>3</sup>

Communities are undertaking a variety of activities to advance racial healing, ranging from new practices, such as community racial healing circles, to new policies, such as making implicit bias training a requirement for

professional licensure. In some cases, cities or jurisdictions allocate funding to institutionalize racial healing processes, raising them to the level of policies. There are several policy and practice categories that are important steps on a continuum of racial healing, including:

- Resolutions, dialogue models, racial healing circles, and restorative justice practices aimed at understanding historical harms and repairing relationships.
- Training and capacity-building for leaders, practitioners, educators, and service providers around overcoming bias and healing.
- Local truth commissions that promote racial healing, public apologies, and commitments to redress by localities for their role in slavery and/or advancing systemic racism.

## KEY POLICY AND PRACTICE EXAMPLES

Examples follow of these practices and policies in action. The examples were selected to show how successful racial healing creates safe, substantive, and positive spaces for people to bridge

differences, gives people space for breaking down stereotypes, connects people from different backgrounds, and helps people find common ground and identify shared values.

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### **Resolutions, dialogue models, racial healing circles, and restorative justice practices aimed at understanding historical harms and repairing relationships**

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There is an emerging consensus across multiple caregiving and educational disciplines that safe spaces, affirmation, agency, and respectful engagements reduce stressful dynamics and improve positive outcomes. These core ideas are woven into many of the racial healing, trauma-informed, and restorative practices. Resolutions and other legislation can play a powerful role in creating new healing-based

relationships by interrupting negative patterns of engagement that traumatize communities. Research shows a strong relationship between exposures to traumas such as extreme economic hardship, a parent serving time in jail, or the death of a loved one, and the incidence of mental and physical health issues. Individuals with multiple Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are at an especially high risk for negative health

outcomes.<sup>4</sup> Baltimore City officials are hoping to change this with the [Elijah Cummings Healing City Act](#), which creates a citywide task force committed to ensuring that staff working in agencies that deliver services to children and families are trauma responsive. This legislation makes Baltimore the first city to embrace trauma-informed care through legislation.

Providing trauma-informed care in schools, courts, and other settings that family interface with has been shown to have positive effects. In Walla Walla, Washington, Lincoln Alternative High School, the first trauma-informed high school in the country, has seen positive outcomes<sup>5</sup> for its students. Within the first year of implementation of its model, the graduation rate increased by nearly 30% and suspensions decreased by almost 85%.

The school's success has led to the adoption of trauma-informed practices in the Walla Walla health department's division of children and family services and the police department. This work has been occurring for more than a decade. The trauma-informed Self-Healing Community Model implemented in Cowlitz County, Washington saw high school dropout rates decrease by 47%. It's estimated that the 15-year implementation of the Self-Healing Community Model saved \$3.4 million per year from reductions in caseload costs in child welfare, juvenile justice, and public medical costs associated with births to teen mothers.<sup>6</sup>

Safe Babies Court Teams bring together an interdisciplinary and cross-sector group of professionals to support families and improve outcomes for infants and toddlers in foster care at risk of removal. In San Diego, an evaluation found that

the kids whose cases were heard before trauma-informed judges in these Safe Babies courts reached permanency in their placements two to three times faster, left foster care a year earlier on average, and ended up with family more often.<sup>7</sup>

Talking circles, peacemaking circles, or healing circles, as they are variously called, are deeply rooted in the traditional practices of North American Indigenous peoples. Today, they are used to foster respect, model good listening skills, settle disputes, resolve conflicts, and build self-esteem.<sup>8</sup> They are a key element of TRHT. Several TRHT sites have used racial healing circles and related practices:<sup>9</sup>

- The [First Alaskans Institute \(FAI\)](#), the coordinating organization for the Alaska TRHT site, works to create a space for truths to be told and to make sure Native people and people of color receive justice and equity. FAI co-created the Alaska Native Dialogues on Racial Equity project, which has hosted dialogues with more than 15,000 people to date from a broad community spectrum. The dialogues ask people to talk candidly about the past and to propose what needs to happen from a social, institutional, and system perspective so that FAI can identify solutions. Out of these efforts grew a call for intergenerational healing and for a truth and reconciliation process in the state of Alaska.
- [TRHT Greater Chicago](#) has trained more than 100 community members from various racial and cultural backgrounds to host racial healing circles. Circles have taken place in an array of neighborhoods throughout the city and select areas of surrounding Cook County.

The healing circles are a vehicle for development and anti-poverty projects. The goal is to build and strengthen relationships and trust among community members, policymakers, and other institutions in support of transformation projects across the city and to ensure that community engagement and consultation are critical to any development project that happens in neighborhoods.

- The [Foundation for Louisiana](#), the coordinating organization for TRHT New Orleans, hosts dialogues about mindfulness, honoring ancestors, and supporting initiatives that promote people coming together to talk about race and racism. There is now a collective of people interested in making healing services, rituals, and practices accessible to the broader New Orleans community.<sup>1</sup>
- [One Love Global](#), the TRHT partner in Lansing, Michigan, is holding community healing circles. Their first healing circles on the National Day of Racial Healing in January 2020 had over 100 attendees. Each group was asked to reconvene, and they have since held virtual healing spaces throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. They also created learning communities with webinars about [healing racial violence and oppression](#), and newsletters on [art and activism for racial justice and healing](#) and [racism as a social determinant of health and healing](#).
- In response to the racial justice demonstrations and protests that occurred in the spring and summer of 2020, in Michigan, TRHT Kalamazoo [called on local officials to take a number of actions](#) to address policing in the city. [TRHT Kalamazoo](#) also launched a virtual healing project,

racial healing circles, and the Affinity Healing Series. This series creates safe spaces within various identity groups to build relationships, learn about personal healing practices, and discuss critical issues and visions for what people would like to see in the community.

Other local efforts like those in Austin, Texas ([Austin Health Commons](#)); Harrisonburg, Virginia ([Coming to the Table](#)); and Asheville, North Carolina (Office of Equity) have engaged hundreds of community members in healing circles. Localities such as Spokane, Washington, and its [Excelerate Success](#) initiative led by the local United Way, have introduced affinity groups and started caucusing to address potential harm to BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) individuals during multiracial and multiethnic trainings or convenings on how racism operates. Their BIPOC Affinity Group and the Male-Identified BIPOC Affinity Group are spaces that allows BIPOC to hold each other in solidarity during difficult times. In these spaces participants are allowed to grieve, to be angry, to experience joy, and to be heard. Participants also address internalized and horizontal oppression. In a complementary white accountability space, white people explicitly and intentionally work on developing understanding of whiteness in a space where their learning and unlearning will not burden or harm BIPOC. Excelerate Success views affinity groups and caucusing as a proactive anti-racism and anti-oppression tool that reduces harm to BIPOC, promotes healing, decenters whiteness and its toxic effects, and centers BIPOC.

The concept of restorative justice originally focused on the rehabilitation of offenders through reconciliation with victims and the community at large. Today, restorative justice practices are increasingly used in schools to empower students to resolve conflicts on their own and in small groups. The idea is to bring students together in peer-mediated small groups to talk, ask questions, and air their grievances with the goal of relationship-building, repairing harm, and creating more equitable environments. A 2015 study found that the more teachers immersed themselves in restorative practices, the better students rated their relationships with these teachers. The strong relationships in turn linked

to a greater sense of respect between teachers and students and fewer disciplinary referrals.<sup>10</sup>

To promote racial healing, restorative justice models and practices are being used in several school districts, including in [Baltimore](#), [Chicago](#), [Denver](#); [Fairfax County, Virginia](#); [Milwaukee](#); [Rochester, New York](#); and in multiple [California](#) schools. As a result of this work, school districts have seen reductions in suspensions and truancy rates. Still, it is important for districts to allocate appropriate resources and supports for implementation and offer alternative methods for accountability to ensure students and teachers feel safe.<sup>11</sup>

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### **Training and capacity-building for leaders, practitioners, educators, and service providers around overcoming bias and healing**

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Implicit bias describes the automatic association people make between groups of people and stereotypes about those groups. There is empirical evidence that training programs can mend the harm created by these stereotypes.<sup>12</sup>

In Michigan, [Executive Directive 2020-7](#) directs the Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs in Lansing to develop rules that will require implicit bias training as part of the knowledge and skills necessary for licensure, registration, and renewal of licenses and registrations of health professionals in Michigan. In Montgomery County, Maryland, the [Racial Equity and Social Justice Act](#) mandates racial equity training for more than 8,000 full-time government employees. A similar effort is taking place in Greensboro, North Carolina, where the Racial Equity Institute is hosting anti-racism trainings with government officials.

[In Fort Wayne, Indiana](#), the circuit and superior courts are providing implicit bias training to judges, magistrates, and staff from all divisions of the courts, the clerk of the courts, public defenders, guardians ad litem, Court Appointed Special Advocate staff, probation officers, and others in response to Indiana Supreme Court Chief Justice Loretta Rush's call for Indiana Courts to address bias and racial disparities. In California, Trauma Transformed hosted more than 300 regional, county, and organizational leaders for a day long session with Dr. Kenneth Hardy, professor of family therapy at Drexel University in Philadelphia, to explore their legacies and subsequent wounds of oppression, and skills and commitments leaders can take to enact practices and policies that heal more and harm less. Elsewhere, multiple jurisdictions, including Baltimore, Boston, and [New Orleans](#), have

implemented training for police officers using the Ethical Policing is Courageous (EPIC) program, which draws on the science of active bystanders and peer intervention to de-escalate incidents and prevent misconduct.

Local policies (such as those in the [Jefferson County Public Schools](#) in Kentucky and New York City Public Schools) are supporting implicit bias training in schools and robust training of educators in culturally competent classroom management. The goal is to improve disparities in academic outcomes and disproportionate rates of suspension and expulsion among students of color, which reflects a systemic bias in the educational system.

In 2019, [CBS News](#) interviewed 155 police departments across the country on their implicit bias training. Sixty-nine percent had implicit racial bias training and 57% of those departments said it was added in the five years

since Michael Brown was killed by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, sparking months of protests nationwide. Of the departments that reported having implicit bias training, 90% have mandatory training. The breadth of training has since expanded. [The Spokane Police Department in Washington](#) underwent mandatory training, resulting in “high rates of community satisfaction with police encounters. Of those respondents who interacted with officers, 81% were satisfied with how the officer treated them, 82% felt the officer treated them fairly, and 82% felt the officer was respectful.” In 2018, citizen complaints decreased by 68%. Training on implicit bias is an important first, but not final, step in the process. It is imperative that practitioners across sectors are trained to be interveners in the system so that they can spot policies, practices, and procedures that are inequitable and move to change them.

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## Local truth commissions that promote racial healing

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Local truth commissions are official bodies tasked with discovering and revealing past wrongdoing by a government in the hope of resolving and atoning for historical conflict and harm.

In North Carolina, the [Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#), the first such U.S. commission, was followed by the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 and the [Byrd Foundation for Racial Healing](#), which aims to promote racial healing, fight hate crimes of any kind, and facilitate widespread public dialogue on racial healing through educational programs. These efforts have expanded over

the last few years in light of increased attention to police brutality and racism.

[District attorneys in Boston, Philadelphia, and San Francisco](#) have partnered with the Grassroots Law Project to launch “Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation” efforts. Similar efforts are happening in [Charleston, South Carolina](#), [Metropolitan Detroit](#), and [Long Beach, California](#), as well as other cities including Chicago, New Orleans, New York City, and Washington, D.C., through the [Black Women’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#). There are efforts taking place between Tribal nations and the states with which

they share land, such as the [Wabanaki Tribes and the state of Maine](#). Truth commissions are also being established on college campuses. Examples include [Davidson College's Commission on Race](#)

and Slavery, [Binghamton University's Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#), and [Georgetown University's Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation work](#).

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### **Acknowledgement, public apologies, and commitments to redress by localities for their role in slavery and/or advancing systemic racism**

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Cities are formalizing their commitment to racial healing through resolutions. [Evanston, Illinois](#) passed a resolution acknowledging the city's history of racially motivated policies and practices and creating atonement. These include committing to eradicating the effects of systemically racist past practices from city government and city-affiliated organizations by participating in racial equity training and joining the Government Alliance for Racial Equity, a national network of government agencies working to achieve racial equity and advance opportunities for all. This resolution led to a public commitment to [reparations](#) and a second [resolution](#) in November 2019 to establish a \$10 million

reparations fund utilizing tax revenue collected from sales of recreational cannabis. The state has also created "[Healing Illinois](#)," a racial healing initiative of the Illinois Department of Human Services, in partnership with The Chicago Community Trust, designed to distribute \$4.5 million in grants to organizations across the state to begin, or continue, the work of racial healing.

Public apologies for wrongdoing have occurred in places as diverse as [Loudoun County Public Schools](#) in Virginia and the city councils of [Asheville, North Carolina](#); [Charleston, South Carolina](#); [Tampa, Florida](#); and [Tulsa, Oklahoma](#).

## **EVIDENCE FOR IMPROVING HEALTH AND RACIAL EQUITY**

Dialogue models, racial healing circles, restorative justice practices, and local truth commissions give people an opportunity to share stories and understand the way that policies, practices, and actions have shaped their current relationships and well-being. Although narratives have the power to trap us in hopelessness, they can also be used to heal. As Dr. Lewis Mehl-Madrona notes, clinical psychologists have successfully used narrative medicine to treat a variety of mental health disorders.<sup>13</sup>

Capital Public Radio in Sacramento, California's experience with "story circles" provides promising evidence for the effectiveness of racial healing circles. The six story circles, which were part of a "Place and Privilege" community engagement initiative, were designed to generate community conversations about the housing affordability crisis in Sacramento, create content that would inject new information and diverse community perspectives into these conversations, and spark meaningful, real-world change. Participants included a mix



of homeowners, developers, affordable housing advocates, and unhoused community members. Research from the story circles found that they were particularly effective in increasing the audience's empathy and intent to take action to counter homelessness. More than 80% of participants said they felt the event increased their empathy for others, which is associated with enhanced connection.<sup>14</sup>

In Seattle, the public radio station KUOW held intergroup sessions over a three-month period with a wide range of community residents. Their research revealed a positive relationship between attitude and empathy, and a negative relationship between nervousness to have the conversation and attitudes and empathy. Overall, they found that even when attitudes were somewhat low coming into an interaction, afterward there was a positive attitude change, even three months post-interaction.<sup>15</sup>

In partnership with BECOME: Center for Community Engagement and Social Change, the American Library Association evaluated a pilot TRHT project across 25 sites (libraries and partner organizations) to explore areas for improvement and determine the partnership's impact on racial healing, supporting narrative change of youth participants and building capacity within the sites to implement the program. The relevant finding was that youth participants in the program experienced moments where they saw the capacity for narrative change in their own lives as well as opportunities for building intersectional equity in their schools and communities. Racial healing circles also had the consequence of challenging adults' preconceptions about "high-need" youth and deepening their understanding of them.<sup>16</sup>

In Maine, Dr. Lewis Mehl-Madrona introduced talking circles into 10 primary health care clinics. He found that participating in at least four talking circles (n=415) [resulted](#) in a statistically significant improvement in reported symptoms and overall quality of life.

Research on public apologies conducted by Blatz, Schumann, and Ross suggests that a comprehensive apology that expresses remorse, acceptance of responsibility, admission of injustice, acknowledgement of harm and/or victim suffering, forbearance, or promises to behave better in the future, and offers of repair can serve important psychological needs when included in government apologies for historical injustices.<sup>17</sup> A statement of remorse indicates that a government believes that an apology is warranted and cares about the victims of harm. Their research finds that "an admission of injustice assures the victimized group that the current government upholds the moral principles that were violated and is committed to upholding a legitimate and just social system. By acknowledging harm, a government validates the victims' pain and corroborates their suffering for outsiders. A promise of forbearance can work to restore trust between groups and indicates that the government values the victims and their group and is willing to work to keep them safe. Finally, by offering repair, governments demonstrate the sincerity of their apology."

## FEASIBILITY

The experience in Greensboro, North Carolina, which in 2004 organized the first U.S. truth and reconciliation commission, illustrates some of the challenges of this work. The commission grew out of the 1979 Greensboro Massacre, in which five people were killed during an anti-Ku Klux Klan protest in a local housing project. The commission's mission was to bridge the "deep divides of distrust and skepticism" that appeared to run through the city. But later its report was accused of deepening those divides. Research on the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission found that truth commissions are useful for assembling comprehensive narratives, giving voice to people who have not previously had a public platform, and using historical inquiry to set concrete goals for public agencies to redress past wrongs. Though not as useful for true reconciliation, "facts can serve as building blocks for awareness, evidence in criminal trials, or talking points in debates about reparations."<sup>18</sup>

An exhaustive journalistic analysis identified an important lesson from the experience, namely that to be successful, commissions must "agree about whose actions and experiences, whose truth, should be part of a new historical record. They must share

a view of what a healed community would look like. And they must have a willingness to move beyond the short-term conflict and pain that uncovering truth often triggers."<sup>19</sup> It is not inevitable that this common ground will be established. Similar lessons likely apply to implicit bias training and restorative justice practices in schools, as coverage of implicit bias training finds that such training can be contentious,<sup>20</sup> and restorative justice models do not have equally positive effects on all students by race.<sup>21</sup> These practices cannot exist in a vacuum and must be accompanied by a shift in cultures and systems that created unequal conditions. These large-scale shifts require buy-in from all levels to succeed.

Although this work is often difficult, the many examples highlighted throughout this brief illustrate that this work is possible and is happening in both progressive and more conservative communities across the country. Various cities are demonstrating that commissions, implicit bias training, and restorative justice circles can use historical inquiry to set concrete goals for public agencies to redress past wrongs. In addition, commissions have demonstrated their ability to give voice to citizens who have never before had a public platform.

## RESOURCES FOR MORE INFORMATION

[America's Peacemakers: The Community Relations Service and Civil Rights](#)

[Illinois Department of Human Services and the Chicago Community Trust: Healing Illinois](#)

[W.K. Kellogg Foundation: "Restoring to Wholeness: Racial Healing for Ourselves, Our Relationships and Our Communities"](#)

[Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation Community Collaboration Sites](#)

[Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation Campus Centers](#)

## ENDNOTES

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