



# Better Together

Research Findings on the Relationship between  
Racial Justice Organizations and LGBT Communities

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## Executive Summary



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**APPLIED RESEARCH CENTER**

*Racial Justice Through Media, Research and Action*

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# Executive Summary

In partnership with the Arcus Foundation, the Applied Research Center (ARC) has undertaken a study of the relationship between racial justice organizations and lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBT) constituencies and issues, with the understanding that communities of color themselves, including their LGBT members, have a good deal at stake in strengthening that relationship. The inquiry included a survey of 81 organizations of color and interviews with 32 leaders of racial justice and LGBT organizations.

The study was motivated by three aspects of the national political landscape.

First, racial justice groups and LGBT constituencies would seem to be naturally connected. Significant numbers of LGBT people are of color, thereby comprising an important part of the racial justice constituency. Second, despite these empirical connections, the political and popular linkages are not widely known or acted upon. Such distance reinforces widespread assumptions, noted by activists interviewed for this study, that LGBT identity and politics are for white people and that communities of color, housing few if any LGBT people themselves, are disproportionately homophobic. Third, LGBT people of color are harmed by the perceived split between communities of color and LGBT communities. Dozens of young, local organizations serving LGBT people of color do exist, but they are virtually invisible, poorly supported and often too busy providing critical health and human services to engage deeply in education and organizing for policy change. Likewise, inspiring relationships between racial justice groups and LGBT constituencies also exist but are so little known that their models see too few replications.

In this study, ARC set out to answer four questions:

- How do racial justice groups currently engage LGBT constituencies and equity issues?
- What are the barriers to strong engagement of racial justice groups in LGBT issues?
- Where are the opportunities for greater engagement?
- What changes can funders and people working in the fields of racial justice and LGBT rights pursue?

## Study Components

We answered these questions through two means. First, we surveyed 81 organizations, including 41 self-identified racial justice groups and 40 LGBT groups explicitly focused on people of color. We followed up the survey by interviewing 32 LGBT activists who are working to strengthen the connection.

## Key Findings

In national, state and local racial justice organizations, important work is already underway that engages LGBT people and issues. The best work emerges from strategic political analysis. Most projects start with internal discussion and political education, and develop through issue campaigns to change policies and institutional practices. Some of this engagement is quite mature. Furthermore, there is significant interest among racial justice organizations in integrating LGBT issues, but they cannot learn from others' experiences because these stories receive relatively little attention from the media and other institutions.

We found large numbers of local organizations working directly with LGBT people of color whose influence could grow with proper investment. Some racial justice organizations made explicit decisions to work on LGBT issues (even at the cost of religious funding), and there was a general openness to exploring how LGBT people

experience traditional racial justice issues such as police violence and workplace discrimination. These are some of the things that funders and activists can focus on in order to strengthen the constituencies for both racial justice and LGBT rights.

A number of barriers to effective engagement also emerged. First, study participants, particularly interviewees, noted a lack of strategic clarity—and tools for getting to such clarity—that would help groups identify and act on the many opportunities for applying a sexuality lens to racial justice issues and vice versa. Second, community resistance, either real or perceived, was mentioned with a great deal of nuance. These concerns included the role of religious institutions, the seeming lack of demand from communities of color themselves, and the fear of causing division within racial justice memberships. Although this study did not primarily address the role of mainstream LGBT organizations in reinforcing the community's supposed whiteness, it did arise enough that we included some thoughts from interviewees on this question. Finally, funding constraints arose as the most significant barrier for groups that do wish to engage.

None of these obstacles is insurmountable, and there are compelling reasons to address them explicitly over the long term. When racial justice groups, including those focused on LGBT people, take on the intersection of race and sexuality, they can build enduring political power to make the policy and practice changes that improve communities nationwide.

## Key Recommendations

### Recommendation 1: Increase support for groups of color

Funders should increase their support of LGBT organizations of color, as well as of collaborations between LGBT and racial justice groups.

- A. Fund and support LGBT organizations of color.
  1. Provide general support grants.
  2. Provide capacity-building grants.
  3. Raise the visibility of LGBT organizations of color in philanthropic and media venues.
- B. Fund established and emerging collaborations between racial justice and LGBT groups.
  1. Fund convenings, explorations and full-out collaborations.
  2. Bolster the evaluation and learning systems in the organizations that sponsor these projects to provide lessons for the field as a whole.
  3. Fill the gap for racial justice organizations that refuse funding from anti-LGBT religious institutions.

### Recommendation 2: Invest in tools for strategic clarity

Changing national policies like the Employment Non-Discrimination Act; Don't Ask, Don't Tell; or state policies around same-sex marriage is important. But these are not the only important issues, particularly for LGBT people of color, and there are compelling reasons to expand the list of issues and to strategize around the specific experiences of LGBT people of color regarding employment discrimination, military policies and marriage laws.

- A. Support the generation of data that specifically address the needs of LGBT people of color.
- B. Support partnerships between research intermediaries and community-based organizations.

## Recommendation 3: Lift up LGBT leaders of color

Clearly, the presence of LGBT leaders of color is critical to bringing these various constituencies, issues and movements together for authentic engagement. A full national needs assessment of these leaders would help the field craft interventions that ensure good succession systems, avoid burning out leaders of color and, ultimately, change the impression that LGBT means white.

- A. Support leadership development programs for LGBT leaders of color working in all kinds of organizations. Funders and field organizations might consider creating a fellowship for such leaders and supporting media projects that elevate the profile of these leaders.
- B. Assess the needs of LGBT leaders of color throughout social justice arenas.
  - How do these leaders get support in skill development?
  - How do they decide to come out professionally, and what form does that coming out take?
  - Who mentors emerging LGBT leaders? How can mentorship systems be strengthened?
  - What are the media skills of LGBT leaders of color in particular, and how can their media presence be strengthened?

## Recommendation 4: Build the media and communications infrastructure

Foundations can support increased media visibility of LGBT people of color and the intersection of race and LGBT issues.

- A. Publicize the experiences and work of LGBT people of color within the philanthropic press and other venues such as conferences and briefings.
- B. Build media and communications skills into initiatives that develop the leadership capacity of LGBT leaders of color.
- C. Use their own communications capacity to bolster that of LGBT organizations of color or racial justice groups that address LGBT issues.

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