

2021 Call for Proposals

Brief Proposal Deadline: February 16, 2021

Full Proposal Deadline: May 11, 2021



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Equity-Focused Policy Research: Building Cross-cutting Evidence on Supports for Families with Young Children

BACKGROUND

Research shows that the earliest years of life are a critical period of human development. Young children's earliest relationships and experiences have a strong influence on brain development and future health and well-being ([Harvard University Center on the Developing Child 2016](#)). Young children's foundational relationships and experiences occur in the context of families and communities.

Yet, some families do not have access to the basic necessities and resources to foster the nurturing experiences and stimulating environments that young children need to thrive. These circumstances are especially likely to affect families of color, families living in rural areas, and other groups of families who experience gaps in access to supports and face disparities in outcomes related to health and well-being. What is needed are policies that support low-income families to provide stimulating and nurturing environments to promote children's healthy physical, social-emotional, and cognitive development and their future success in school and life.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made clear that current policies and practices fall short in supporting and facilitating families' access to the social safety net system. Moreover, the pandemic has exacerbated the consequences of poverty, racism, and discrimination and exposed the health, economic, social, and other inequities vulnerable families experience. In the context of the pandemic, RWJF is taking steps to focus attention on and provide resources to families and communities facing the greatest strain. Newly emerging barriers to accessing essential supports are likely to exacerbate the health and economic effects of this crisis for families that already face inequities. The economic and social disruptions created by the COVID-19 pandemic also have the potential to draw more focused attention to the effects of historic inequities on communities of color and low-resourced communities. The disproportionate burden of COVID-19 on people of color, marginalized populations, and the low-wage workforce underscores the effects of economic and social conditions—including structural racism, segregation, and discrimination—on the physical, emotional, cognitive, and intellectual health of historically disenfranchised communities and populations.

The Equity-Focused Policy Research (EFPR) grant program seeks to fund a body of research that illuminates strategies and policies that enhance families' equitable access to key resources for supporting their children's healthy development. EFPR grants are guided by a research agenda that focuses on: (1) understanding the sources of inequities in families' access to and use of key resources; (2) identifying and testing innovations to advance equity; and (3) strategies for scaling up policies and approaches that are effective in advancing equity. The agenda addresses three policy areas as providing critical resources for families: (1) access to early care and education (ECE); (2) income supports (such as the Earned Income Tax Credit [EITC] and cash transfer programs) and income generation/replacement; and (3) nutrition supports (such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [SNAP]).

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Briefs summarizing the research agenda in each policy area and cross-cutting research questions are available [here](#). Applicants are strongly encouraged to review these briefs.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this funding opportunity is to support action-oriented research that advances health equity, builds the knowledge base, and informs policymaking. Evidence generated through funded projects should inform practice and policy, and guide practitioners and policymakers (federal, state, and local) in setting priorities and allocating resources. Through this call for proposals, RWJF intends to support research that advances policy and programmatic solutions to help families gain equitable access to needed supports during and after the current crisis and ensure that a Culture of Health with health equity for all families remains front and center in the national dialogue.

Research funded under this opportunity might clarify the drivers of inequitable access to supports; evaluate innovations that have the potential to improve access to supports and reduce disparities through policy change or implementation; assess or review strategies for scaling up effective policies and innovations; or explore new measures to monitor progress toward achieving equity in access to key supports.

Although we recognize the importance of identifying the magnitude of gaps in access to supports and disparate outcomes for families, for this call for proposals, we are prioritizing research that illuminates the structural *reasons for* or *drivers of* disparities and that has direct implications for policy or programmatic changes that will promote equity.

What We Hope to Learn and Share

We aim to fund a body of research that will illuminate strategies and policies that enhance families' access to key supports and that promote outcomes that are relevant to achieving health equity. **For this call for proposals, RWJF is particularly interested in research exploring issues that cut across policy domains.** RWJF seeks to support studies that reveal the ways that ECE access, income supports, and nutrition supports interact and potentially reinforce one another to promote families' well-being.

In addition, RWJF intends to fund studies that highlight cross-cutting policy and programmatic responses to the COVID-19 pandemic that have the potential to uphold or increase families' equitable access to ECE, income supports, and nutrition supports. **The Foundation is primarily interested in policy responses that may persist beyond the immediate crisis.** RWJF hopes this research will draw attention to the ways that innovations at the federal, state, and local levels can sustain or expand families' access to supports, promote the healthy development of young children, and prevent deepening of inequities, especially in the context of a public health and economic crisis and in its aftermath.

Research funded under this opportunity may focus on questions suggested in this CFP **or related questions that applicants propose, including questions about how to address inequities in access to supports as a result of structural conditions exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.** Researchers may use a variety of designs to address these questions. Proposed projects may incorporate quantitative analyses and/or qualitative methods that bring forward the voices and experiences of families affected by inequities.

Table 1 presents examples of research questions that address the intersection of policy domains that are of special interest to RWJF: access to ECE, income supports, and nutrition supports. The table also presents potential methods for addressing each question. As noted above, the questions below are *examples* and applicants *may propose other*

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questions that are relevant to the purpose of the research agenda and funding opportunity and the policies and programs of interest.

Table 1. Examples of questions for equity-focused policy research on cross-cutting topics

Research questions	Potential methods
<p>What policies have enabled changes in access to and use of key supports during the COVID-19 crisis? Has the crisis introduced new drivers of inequitable access to family supportive programs?</p>	<p>Conduct analyses of program administrative data to explore changes in program access or participation in various locations.</p> <p>Collect and analyze qualitative data on families' experiences attempting to access key supports to identify newly emerging barriers to access.</p>
<p>What federal, state, and local innovations have helped families with low income gain access to key supports during the COVID-19 crisis? Did these innovations address structural barriers to access? If so, how?</p> <p>What policies could be effective in maintaining or increasing equitable access to different supports for families with low income during the COVID-19 crisis and in its aftermath?</p>	<p>Conduct a policy scan to identify relevant policy and regulatory changes that federal, state, and local governments have adopted during the crisis.</p> <p>Interview families and service providers to explore the perceived effects of different policies.</p> <p>Analyze program administrative data to explore whether and how program participation changed in locations with different types of policies.</p>
<p>To what extent have individual states and localities adopted policies that address structural barriers and increase equitable access to family supports, such as EITCs, child care assistance, and nutrition assistance?</p> <p>How did policy making processes, advocacy, and policymaker mindsets contribute to the adoption of these policies, and what lessons can be applied to other states and communities with less generous family-supportive policies?</p>	<p>Conduct a scan of state policies related to multiple supports. Complete case studies of policymaking processes related to addressing structural barriers to equitable access to supports for families with young children.</p>
<p>What are the characteristics and experiences of families that access multiple supports, such as child care subsidies, TANF, and SNAP? Have the characteristics of families accessing multiple supports changed during the COVID-19 pandemic? If so, how?</p> <p>What lessons can be drawn from the experiences of these families, or the communities where they live, to inform policy or programmatic innovations to increase access to multiple supports for families and communities?</p>	<p>Analyze administrative or survey data to create a portrait of families who access multiple supports and the communities where they live.</p> <p>Analyze qualitative data on state and local policies and eligibility requirements to examine whether and how they facilitate access to family-supportive programs.</p>
<p>What are the characteristics of families with low incomes who do not access multiple supports? What policy or programmatic innovations could increase access to supports among this group of families?</p>	<p>Analyze administrative or survey data to create a portrait of families who access few or no supports.</p> <p>Analyze qualitative data on state and local policies, eligibility requirements, and administrative processes to identify structural or other barriers to access and potential strategies for removing them.</p>

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What are the characteristics of communities with limited access to supports? For example, do child care deserts overlap with food deserts? What policy or programmatic innovations could increase access to supports in these communities?	Analyze administrative or survey data to identify communities where few supports are available to families with low income. Analyze qualitative or quantitative data to identify the policy, economic, and structural barriers that contribute to limited access.
How does state and local <i>implementation</i> of supports for families with young children contribute to or reduce inequities in access or outcomes? How are service delivery systems being leveraged to increase access to multiple programs and supports?	Collect and analyze data on program implementation in various geographic locations to identify whether and how programs coordinate supportive services for families with low income. Identify policies or practices that support program coordination.
What is the relationship between policies related to access to ECE and children's access to nutrition supports? For example, how do subsidy, licensing, and eligibility policies for home-based child care affect children's access to the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) and other nutrition supports?	Analyze administrative or survey data to explore associations between policies that affect access to center- and home-based ECE and measures of food security for young children.

Equitable Evaluation

The Foundation is also committed to funding projects that apply [principles of equitable evaluation](#). Equitable evaluation is an approach that highlights the potential for research and evaluation to contribute to equity. Its core principles are that: (1) evaluation should advance equity; (2) evaluation should answer questions about contributors to inequity; the effect of a strategy or policy on different populations and drivers of inequity; and the role of cultural context in an initiative; and (3) evaluations should be multiculturally valid and encourage participant ownership ([Center for Evaluation Innovation 2017](#)). RWJF believes that applying principles of equitable evaluation will help leverage evaluation as a driver of health equity and build a cadre of researchers with diverse backgrounds and expertise who can illuminate the historical and cultural contexts that may be important for understanding and addressing inequities.

Successful applicants will be expected to produce research reports that are accessible to a broad audience, develop a dissemination plan, and participate in targeted dissemination activities.

TOTAL AWARDS

- We expect to make up to 20 awards through this funding opportunity. We expect that awards will range from \$50,000 to \$200,000 each.
- For projects that involve primary data collection through surveys, interviews, focus groups, observations, and other methods (or a combination of methods), applicants may request up to \$200,000, for a project duration of up to 24 months.
- Applicants should request amounts that are consistent with the scope and complexity of the research questions and methods they propose and for carrying out research methods aligned with the principles of equitable evaluation.

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ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

- Eligible applicant organizations include academic institutions, public entities and private nonprofit organizations, state and local government agencies, and for-profit organizations.
- All organizations must be based in the United States or its territories.
- Applicants also may represent partnerships between service providers or practitioners and researchers.

OUR EQUITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION COMMITMENT

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is committed to building a Culture of Health that provides everyone in America a fair and just opportunity for health and well-being. Achieving this goal requires focus on equity, diversity, and inclusion. To that end, we are committed to fostering diverse perspectives. We recognize that individuals' perspectives are shaped by a host of factors, such as their race, ethnicity, gender, physical and mental ability, age, socioeconomic status, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, familial status, education, religion, legal status, military service, political affiliation, geography, and other personal and professional experiences.

We know that the presence of diverse perspectives alone is not sufficient. Therefore, we also are committed to creating inclusive environments where all individuals are encouraged to share their perspectives and experiences. We believe that only through valuing our differences and similarities, and remaining vigilant in advancing equity, will we be able to maintain an equitable workplace and actively pursue equity in all aspects of our work. We commit to being continuous learners and working alongside others to cultivate equity, diversity, and inclusion.

SELECTION CRITERIA

We will evaluate proposals based on the following criteria:

- **Relevance to the research agenda and policy.** Although applicants may focus on questions not specified in the research agenda, proposed studies should align with the overall objectives of the research agenda and the policy areas and topics the agenda addresses. In particular, proposed studies should have clear implications for supports that advance health equity and should inform decision-making by policymakers and practitioners. Proposed studies may also address questions related to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on equitable access to key supports for vulnerable families with young children.
- **Focus on action-oriented research.** Proposed studies should produce results in the near term that can address key knowledge gaps and inform policymakers' and stakeholders' priorities and decisions. Proposed studies should not solely describe disparities or suggest a need for further research. Rather, the studies should add to the knowledge base on policies, programs, and strategies for increasing equity in access and outcomes related to key supports for low-income families.
- **Feasibility.** Applications should demonstrate that the proposed studies can be completed within the expected time frame and budget and should indicate reasonable timelines for collecting and/or analyzing data. Applications should demonstrate that data for analysis is accessible, particularly if secondary data analyses are proposed. If the proposed study focuses on an innovative intervention, the application should reflect reasonable assumptions regarding the time and effort required for both implementing and evaluating the intervention.

The application should demonstrate that teams have identified potential challenges to completing the proposed study and considered how they will be addressed.

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Applications that include partnerships among multiple organizations should provide evidence of the strength of the partnerships; for example, a history of successful collaboration.

- **Quality of the proposed design.** Applications should clearly state the research questions of interest and describe how they will be answered, including measures to be used; data sources; data collection methods and timeline; and analysis methods. The proposed methods should be well-matched to the research questions.
- **Alignment with principles of equitable evaluation.** Applicants should demonstrate that they intend to implement approaches that reflect the principles of equitable evaluation whenever possible, including approaches to defining research questions and conducting research.
- **Qualifications of the proposed principal investigator and other key personnel.** While the principal investigator is not required to hold an advanced degree, the proposed principal investigator and other personnel should have the research experience necessary to conduct the study successfully. Nonprofit and government entities that do not have in-house research capacity are strongly encouraged to partner with qualified researchers who have established track records in the topical area and research methods proposed. Members of the team should demonstrate expertise regarding the policy area that is the focus of the proposed study and the proposed research methods. Collaborations among organizations or researchers are encouraged as an approach to enhancing the qualifications of the proposed team and the inclusion and participation of individuals with deep knowledge of the populations and programs under consideration.

We encourage applications from early- and mid-career researchers who are from groups that are historically marginalized, underrepresented in policy research and/or researchers who are affiliated with institutions that serve underrepresented groups, such as historically black colleges and universities; academic institutions serving primarily Latino students such as the Hispanic Centers of Excellence; Tribal colleges; and other similar institutions.

We also encourage applicants from diverse geographic areas and a range of disciplines that are relevant to policy research, including public administration; sociology; psychology; economics; community development; public health; education; social work; and others.

- **Evidence of fiscal and project management capacity.** Applicant organizations and members of the proposed research team should demonstrate the capacity to monitor project budgets and timelines, manage fiscal resources, and meet funders' reporting requirements completely and on time.

EVALUATION AND MONITORING

Grantees are expected to meet RWJF requirements for the submission of narrative and financial reports, as well as periodic information needed for overall project performance monitoring and management. We may ask project directors to participate in periodic meetings and give progress reports on their grants. At the close of each grant, the lead agency is expected to provide a written report on the project and its findings suitable for wide dissemination.

APPLICANT SURVEY PROCESS

For selected programs, the project director of the proposal will be contacted after the deadline by SSRS, an independent research firm. The project director will be asked to complete a brief, online survey about the proposal

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process and applicant characteristics. This voluntary questionnaire will take no more than 15 minutes to complete. Responses provided to SSRS will not impact the funding decision for your proposal in any way.

SSRS will protect the confidentiality of your responses. RWJF will not receive any data that links your name with your survey responses.

USE OF GRANT FUNDS

Grant funds may be used for project staff salaries, consultant fees, data collection and analysis, meetings, supplies, project-related travel, and other direct project expenses, including a limited amount of equipment essential to the project. In keeping with RWJF policy, grant funds may *not* be used to subsidize individuals for the costs of their health care, to support clinical trials of unapproved drugs or devices, to construct or renovate facilities, for lobbying, for political activities, or as a substitute for funds currently being used to support similar activities.

HOW TO APPLY

Proposals for this solicitation must be submitted via the RWJF online system. Visit www.rwjf.org/cfp/efpr4 and use the “Apply Online” link. If you have not already done so, you will be required to register at my.rwjf.org before you begin the proposal process.

There are two phases in the competitive proposal process:

Phase 1: Brief Proposals

Applicants must submit a brief proposal that describes the project and include a preliminary budget. The proposal should be no longer than three pages, single-spaced, and use 11-point Arial font. References will not count toward the page limit and may be uploaded to the application system as a separate document or appendix.

Brief proposals should address the following elements of the proposed project:

- The research questions the project will address, their relevance to the equity-focused policy research agenda, and how project findings could be applied to advance equity.
- The design of the proposed research project, including expected data sources; plans for collecting or acquiring data within the grant time frame; analysis methods; and potential for implementing principles of equitable evaluation.
- Expected project timeline.
- Qualifications, roles, and availability of key personnel (in full-time equivalents).
- Expected project management and quality assurance procedures to ensure research rigor and quality, timeliness, and appropriate fiscal management.
- Amount of funding requested and an indication of whether RWJF would be the sole source of funding for the proposed project.

Applicants may include resumes of key personnel as an attachment to the brief proposal.

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Phase 2: Full Proposals

Selected Phase 1 applicants will be invited to submit a full proposal of no more than 10 single-spaced pages accompanied by a detailed budget and budget narrative. Full proposals should elaborate on the elements listed above and respond to any questions that applicants receive about their projects based on their brief proposals.

All applicants should log in to the system and familiarize themselves with online submission requirements well before the final submission deadline. Staff may not be able to assist all applicants in the final 24 hours before the submission deadline.

RWJF does not provide individual critiques of proposals submitted.

Please direct inquiries to:

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Late Submissions

RWJF will accept only those proposals that are completed/submitted at the time of the deadline. Because one of our Guiding Principles is to treat everyone with fairness and respect, RWJF's deadline policy applies to all applicants. If an applicant experiences a problem with the online application system that may prevent them from submitting on time, please notify the program administrator immediately. To do so, click on the "Contact Us" link found in the "Resources" area on the left side of most screens within the online proposal site. We encourage you to submit your proposal in advance of the deadline so that any unforeseen difficulties, e.g., technical problems, may be addressed well before the deadline.

PROGRAM DIRECTION

Responsible staff members at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation are:

- Gina R. Hijjawi, PhD, *senior program officer*
- Jennie Day-Burget, *senior communications officer*

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KEY DATES AND DEADLINES

- January 12, 2021 (3–4 p.m.)
Optional applicant webinar. Registration is [required](#).
- February 16, 2021 (3 p.m. ET)
Deadline for receipt of brief proposals.*
- May 11, 2021 (3 p.m. ET)
Deadline for receipt of full proposals.*

*All proposals for this solicitation must be submitted via the RWJF online system. Visit www.rwjf.org/cfp/EFPR4 and use the “Apply Online” link. If you have not already done so, you will be required to register at my.rwjf.org before you begin the proposal process. All applicants should log in to the system and familiarize themselves with online proposal requirements well before the final submission deadline. Staff may not be able to assist all applicants in the final 24 hours before the submission deadline.

REFERENCES

Center for Evaluation Innovation, Institute for Foundation and Donor Learning, Dorothy A Johnson Center for Philanthropy, Luminare Group. “Equitable Evaluation Framing Paper.” Equitable Evaluation Initiative, July 2017. www.equitableeval.org.

Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. *From Best Practices to Breakthrough Impacts: A Science-Based Approach to Building a More Promising Future for Young Children and Families*. Cambridge, MA: Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2016. <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/from-best-practices-to-breakthrough-impacts/>.

ABOUT THE ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON FOUNDATION

For more than 45 years, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has worked to improve health and health care. We are working alongside others to build a national Culture of Health that provides everyone in America a fair and just opportunity for health and well-being. For more information, visit rwjf.org. Follow the Foundation on Twitter at www.rwjf.org/twitter or on Facebook at www.rwjf.org/facebook.

Sign up to receive email alerts on upcoming calls for proposals at www.rwjf.org/manage-your-subscriptions.html.

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