

Letter: What is Equity and Why Does it Matter?



A benefit of introducing Easton's Resolution on Racism and Public Health is the many conversations we've had with friends and neighbors about race, discrimination, and well-being. I, for one, have learned a lot from listening to other peoples' ideas and perspectives. A theme among them is conflicting thoughts on how the terms equality, equity, and equal opportunity intersect and factor into our individual and collective thinking.

It has been noted that these terms have distinct meanings, and it has been implied that they are, in some sense, competing with one another. While we all carry sensitivities to language, these terms ought to be thought of as cooperative and our evaluations of equality and equity initiatives can, in fact, be situational.

In brief, equality is about comparing quantities: a state where quantities are (literally) equal, equity is about a different sort of balance—one that acknowledges need, and equal opportunity refers to policies and practices aimed at increasing equality and/or equity in certain types of scenarios. But absent a context for their application, these terms lose much of their meaning.

In other words, what quantities are we comparing? How do they relate to our

sensibilities of fairness? And what interventions should we consider in order to increase access to opportunity? In this way, our thinking about equality and equity can be fluid, though they are consistently labeling distinct things: an equal state and a measure of fairness.

Take, for example, 1-to-1 laptop initiatives. Let's say our schools are assessing such a policy and have two students to consider: Student A is from a wealthy family and she gets a new laptop every year; Student B is from a poor family where nobody owns a laptop and there are no funds to purchase one. The initial state is short of equality since Student A has one laptop and Student B has none.

Perhaps the school supplies a laptop to the poor student in order to move forward with the initiative. Is that equality or is it equity? One might think of it as equality because the initial state is imbalanced and the end state is even, but because the intervention is means-tested this is an example of equity. Here, equity is employed in pursuit of equality. (Simple equality would be if every student was given a laptop, irrespective of need.)

It is important to recognize that all options impose a cost on society. Delivering equality without means-testing will be much more expensive for the town and taxpayer since the number of laptops supplied is far greater. While the equity solution puts more burden on households who a) have children in the schools and b) can afford it, there is still a public cost for families who cannot.

Dropping the initiative altogether also has a cost, as it abandons a strategic learning objective that may impact college preparedness, job readiness, and even property values. In any case, there is no expectation that every student will graduate with the same G.P.A. simply because all students have a laptop; they aim only to deliver more level access to learning.

Now, let's zoom out a bit and factor in race. A recent study sponsored by the U.S.

Department of Commerce concluded that “African Americans and Hispanics were 7 percentage points less likely to use the Internet, and Asian Americans were 4 percentage points less likely to do so, compared with white non-Hispanics.” This is an example of systemic disadvantage. And, as you may suspect, these gaps correlate with income.

So, you might ask, why are we talking about race if the issue is wealth? The unfortunate answer is: if it’s about wealth, it’s about race. That is because there is a glaring racial component to the wealth distribution in our state and country. For example, if you scale our laptop initiative, people of color will receive a disproportionate share relative to population size. This does not mean whites are excluded; it means only that equity outcomes related to race are observable, even if poor whites receive the majority of laptops distributed.

Successful public health interventions do not disregard critical information about the people they serve; to the contrary, they craft interventions that acknowledge those populations in order to improve efficacy and lower costs. I voted to approve Easton’s Resolution on Racism and Public Health because I care deeply about struggling Americans of all races, but we know from the science that race is still very much a part of the equation—no matter how much we’d like that not to be the case.

Some have suggested that there is no systemic racism in Easton, but that claim is fundamentally flawed. Systemic and local are antonyms, so one cannot be measured by assessments of the other. Consider this: how has it come to be that our town has roughly three times the median household income of our neighbors in Bridgeport with less than a quarter of the poverty rate? Is it our position that historic racism played no role in this sobering juxtaposition?