



**ASPE**  
ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR  
PLANNING AND EVALUATION



**BRIEF**  
November 2022

# Addressing Substance Use and Social Needs of People of Color with Substance Use Disorders

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## KEY POINTS

In this brief, we highlight the experiences and practices of substance use treatment providers and their human services partners when serving people of color. We selected providers who focused on serving people of color, and this study was not intended to assess outcomes or effectiveness of any of the practices highlighted.

- Treatment providers highlighted several practices that promoted active and positive participation in their programs by people of color:
  - Incorporate the community's cultural values into organizational structures and treatment models.
  - Engage the community in designing programs and services and hire staff that reflect the community.
  - Address the comprehensive health, social, and economic needs of participants.
  - Incorporate harm reduction services and healing-centered approaches in the continuum of care.
- Providers described several constraints when serving communities of color:
  - Structural barriers such as poverty, racism, and differential access significantly impede meeting clients' social and economic needs.
  - Challenges retaining program staff with the appropriate language and cultural skills.
  - A complex patchwork of funding streams.
  - A lack of data and limited internal capacity for data analysis and program evaluation.
- Providers emphasized that success required working with the strengths of the communities they serve and that every community has protective factors. More research is needed to understand how federal, state, and local policies and programs can maximize the strengths of communities of varied backgrounds, while also implementing evidence-based practices.

## INTRODUCTION

People of color have more unmet needs for substance use disorder (SUD) treatment services, and they experience worse outcomes when they access such services compared with non-Hispanic White people (Acevedo et al. 2012; Dickerson et al. 2010; Evans et al. 2012; Guerrero et al. 2013; Mulvaney-Day et al. 2012; Pinedo 2019; Yu and Warner 2013). Research identifies structural racism, poverty, and differential access to health care as some of the causes of these disparities, (Weinstein et al. 2017). Another major source of disparity is the inequitable ways in which substance use policies and treatment resources are designed (Government Accountability Office 2017; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 2019; Farahmand et al. 2020). In particular, the long-standing criminalization of substance use has unduly affected communities of color, primarily Black and Native American people (Farahmand et al. 2020; Kleinman and Morris 2021; Simon et al. 2020). Disproportionate to their numbers in the general population, individuals from communities of color have been arrested, convicted, and incarcerated more often for drug charges than their White counterparts (Fellner 2009; Meng 2015; Provine 2008). Moreover, SUD treatment systems and related human services programs are inadequately equipped to address the types of health and social needs that people of color are more likely to experience, such as the consequences of criminal justice involvement resulting from substance use (Cook and Alegría 2011).

Existing research suggests that multiple barriers contribute to racial and ethnic disparities in receipt and outcomes of SUD care (Cook and Alegría 2011). These barriers include but are not limited to, stigma, discrimination, limited availability or affordability of SUD treatment options, unmet social needs, and limited availability of culturally and linguistically effective providers. Many of these barriers are common for people with a SUD, but these obstacles have an outsized effect on people of color because of systemic and structural inequities. Little is known about the steps policymakers and programs can take to reduce inequities in treatment access and outcomes. For example, recent gains in health insurance coverage following health reforms, such as the Affordable Care Act, reduced the uninsured rate among non-Hispanic Black people and Hispanic people by about 5 percentage points, which is comparable to or greater than the reduction among non-Hispanic White people (Wehby and Lyu 2018). However, such gains have not been associated with reductions in SUD treatment disparities in some communities of color (Creedon et al. 2016). Relatively little research and policy attention have been devoted to identifying models of culturally and linguistically effective care that address SUD and social service needs among diverse people of color.

This study sought to understand more about the barriers people of color face when accessing SUD treatment. It also explores how integrating human services with SUD treatment and wraparound services affects engagement in and outcomes of such programs for people of color. To address current knowledge gaps, we interviewed representatives from 27 community-based substance use treatment and prevention programs serving predominantly people of color across the United States. In our interviews, we aimed to learn about care and services that engage and support people of color in treatment, as well as recovery support services for SUD. This brief summarizes common approaches the programs take and the challenges they face in their work.

## METHODS

Findings from this brief are based on qualitative data collected from May to December 2020 via semi-structured virtual interviews with staff at 27 community-based programs that deliver substance use services. We identified eligible programs through an environmental scan and our professional networks and used snowball sampling, whereby interviewees suggested other programs to include in the study. Program selection criteria included geographic variation, the inclusion of culturally and linguistically appropriate services, provision of or referrals to treatment for SUD, and a focus on racially and ethnically diverse populations. The programs served multiple racial and ethnic groups, and participants enrolled in their programs included: American Indian and Alaska Native people, Asian American people, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander people, Black people, Hispanic/Latino people, and White people. While programs were available to people of different racial and ethnic groups, many of the programs designed their services to meet the unique cultural needs of people of specific backgrounds. These programs' participants often faced other barriers to equitable treatment access because of life experiences or identities. For example, many were immigrants, were experiencing homelessness, or had some involvement in the criminal justice system.

The interview topics included programs' approaches to serving people of color, their outreach to the community, the ways in which programs integrate culturally and linguistically appropriate practices and address participants' social needs, funding streams, and policies or resources needed to support people of color with SUD in treatment and recovery. We recorded, transcribed, and analyzed discussions using NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Our study findings cannot be generalized to other communities and providers because we did not draw a representative sample of programs serving people of color. Our findings are limited by the lack of community engagement in guiding the research. In addition, in part because of program closures resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, we had limited participation among programs primarily serving Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander people; programs serving American Indian and Alaska Native people; and programs in the South. More details on the study's methodology can be found in the Methodological Appendix.

## COMMON APPROACHES TAKEN BY THE STUDY PROGRAMS

The programs we studied agreed on several key approaches to effectively engage and meet the needs of participants of color. The programs purposefully incorporated the culture of participants in their appropriate approaches to care. They were community-centered in how they structured and implemented treatment models. Further, the study programs sought to offer comprehensive and holistic care that addressed not only substance use but also the health and social needs of program participants and their families. The programs largely incorporated harm reduction and healing-centered principles, which is defined as "holistic[ally] involving culture, spirituality, civic action, and collective healing. A healing-centered approach views trauma not simply as an individual isolated experience, but rather highlights the ways in which trauma and healing are experienced collectively" (Ginwright 2018). We describe some of these approaches in greater detail in the following pages.

## Incorporating culture into organizational structures and treatment models

Several program managers highlighted that many current evidence-based and standard treatment models were not developed for the unique situations of people of color or tested with these populations. Therefore, in response to community and participant needs, program staff modified multiple aspects of their care, including the programs' organizational structures, treatments, and services, and how those services account for intersecting cultural identities and the historical context of substance use in a person's culture.

Interviewees shared that organizations must be built intentionally to provide culturally effective care, including the staffing, policies, and organizational culture. They also described offering training to continually equip their staff to serve participants from diverse cultures. However, they warned that cultural competency cannot be achieved through training alone; several interviewees discussed setting an expectation of cultural humility among their staff, in which staff observe how participants respond to them and adjust if they are not connecting or the participant seems offended (see Box 1 for definitions of cultural competency and cultural humility). This approach requires continual coaching, but it also allows conflict resolution and personal growth among staff as they work through issues to ensure they effectively serve participants.

Interviewees spoke about the importance of considering race, ethnicity, and language when matching program participants with providers and incorporating cultural preferences in their care. This often meant understanding participants' spiritual or religious beliefs, particularly in addressing how someone's culture might affect mental illness and substance use. Many study programs incorporated culturally significant activities in treatment, such as Indigenous healing practices. Program leaders also emphasized that when customizing care, providers must consider a person's multiple intersecting identities and the historical context of substance use in their culture, which is often rooted in disenfranchisement and trauma. The historical context of substance use differs by culture, often because of underlying differences in access to health care and health insurance coverage. Multiple interviewees spoke of the historical trauma faced by American Indian and Alaska Native populations, specifically, and its connection to their substance use and implications for their care. In addition, people with multiple marginalized identities can be subject to more stigma and discrimination (López and Gadsden 2016).

With respect to language, interviewees highlighted the importance of providing services and materials in participants' preferred languages. Programs understood which languages were used and preferred by the communities they served, and they were aware of cultural differences within a language. Bilingual and bicultural staff, including providers, case managers, and peer support

### Box 1. Cultural competency and cultural humility

*Cultural competency* is a “means for attending to the culturally diverse backgrounds of patients, providing person-centered care, and reducing health disparities” (Lekas et al. 2020). Cultural competency is a centerpiece of the National Standards for Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services in Health and Health Care, developed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Minority Health.

*Cultural humility* refers to “an orientation towards caring for one's patients that is based on: self-reflexivity and assessment, appreciation of patients' expertise on the social and cultural context of their lives, openness to establishing power-balanced relationships with patients, and a lifelong dedication to learning” (Lekas et al. 2020).

workers, were critical to being able to serve participants with limited English proficiency or preferences for non-English languages. When other services were needed, such as housing or family support services, programs tried to refer participants to organizations that could provide linguistically appropriate assistance.

### **Engage the community in program design and staffing**

Typically, programs used multiple strategies to engage the communities they served, including hiring from the community, continually seeking community members' input, and creating multiple low-barrier pathways to services and treatment. We repeatedly heard programs express the importance of employing staff at every level who reflect the community through their language skills, culture, and lived experience. Some interviewees found employing peers was the most effective way to reach and engage participants with substance use issues. Several organizations reported that they employed staff who were former program participants and who worked their way up to leadership positions.

Program staff also frequently sought input through surveys, focus groups, or community advisory groups to be flexible and responsive to the needs of participants and communities. This meant the programs were constantly adapting, expanding, or modifying services. For example, some interviewees described how demographic shifts in their participant populations required them to develop new capacities and partnerships, such as programming for children, adolescents, and youth.

Further, many study programs take a “no wrong door” approach to create multiple pathways to SUD treatment and supportive services. For instance, participants can access treatment by walking into a program's facilities; engaging with a community outreach team; or receiving internal referrals or referrals from other community-based organizations, social service agencies, or the legal system. Programs also tried to remove or minimize barriers to treatment, for example, by not requiring proof of health insurance or a picture ID. Some programs also used mobile clinics and employed community health workers in their outreach.

### **Addressing comprehensive health, social, and economic needs**

Many interviewees strongly emphasized the need to address not only the whole person struggling with problematic substance use, including their health, social, economic, and emotional needs but also the families in which they are embedded. Doing so can support a person's well-being in treatment and recovery, as well as while they are using substances. As such, many study programs tried to act as a one-stop shop, providing physical and mental SUD treatment and social services in one location. As one interviewee suggested, this was important for participants who might lack health insurance coverage; have difficulty navigating complex health care and human services systems; have comorbid physical, mental, and SUDs; or have unmet social or economic needs. Such participants might distrust health care and human service systems or might face barriers to accessing services (for example, lack of transportation, internet access, or language assistance).

During intake, program staff often assessed clients' health and social needs. Programs partnered with various mental health and SUD, physical health care, and human services providers to fill the gaps in services they might not offer in-house and help participants navigate services in the community. Programs worked to provide participants with or refer them to the full continuum of SUD services, from harm reduction and early intervention to treatment and recovery services. Some

programs incorporated family members in treatment, and several offered residential programming for parents with children. Participants' needs determined services and program offerings. For example, programs offering reentry services might have provided or coordinated access to legal assistance; job skills training; temporary housing; parenting, financial literacy, and other basic life skills training. Many programs had food pantries on site, offered child care and transportation assistance, and created opportunities for participants to engage in positive social interactions and recreational activities. Several programs supported connections to human services and benefits (for example, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program; Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children; and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.). Staff did this through direct enrollment assistance, case management, or referrals to other organizations. A few programs reported working with child welfare agencies—either receiving treatment referrals for parents or supporting the reunification of children with parents.

### Using harm reduction and healing-centered approaches

Interviewees reported that their participants faced considerable stigma in seeking help for SUDs and mental health conditions. In turn, that stigma negatively affected many aspects of their lives, such as their ability to find housing and employment. Interviewees described the importance of using harm reduction framing to help program participants overcome this barrier. Interviewees most commonly described harm reduction approaches as meeting people where they are in their SUD treatment journey. This involved listening to participants and respecting, supporting, and addressing their needs and goals, even those unrelated to substance use, which also helped cultivate trust. Several interviewees recognized that abstinence might not be a realistic goal, and many study programs allowed participants to reenter treatment or receive other services if they terminated treatment. The harm reduction services the study programs offered included wound care, syringe exchange services, overdose reversal training and medications, and testing and treatment for infectious diseases such as HIV and hepatitis C.

Many interviewees also recognized that people who have unhealthy substance use and are from communities with a history of systemic racism or other institutionalized barriers often have faced or are facing traumatic experiences. Such experiences might involve abuse, neighborhood violence, criminal justice involvement, racism and discrimination, and intergenerational trauma. Thus, programs we interviewed tried to implement healing-centered care by addressing trauma. They used asset-focused, strengths-based, and trauma-informed approaches, which they hoped would successfully engage participants in treatment and support their long-term recovery. Program staff also said supporting participants required pairing evidence-based therapies (such as cognitive behavioral therapy) with deep empathy and kindness. In addition, interviewees said many staff also had traumatic experiences and might be retraumatized through their work. Therefore, program leaders took a trauma-informed approach to engage with staff.

### CONSTRAINTS ON PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS

Interviewees described various challenges to achieving their objectives, including structural barriers limiting their abilities to address social needs, difficulties training and maintaining staff, program funding issues, and limited capacity to evaluate the effectiveness of program interventions.



## Structural barriers to addressing unmet social and economic needs

Interviewees reported that resources to address social and economic needs are limited and that a lack of investment in communities of color adds to participants' needs *and* limits community resources to address those needs. Interviewees commonly described the lack of affordable housing, public transportation, and economic opportunities in communities of color as primary challenges for people in treatment and recovery. Stigma around people who use substances was another barrier for some interviewees trying to secure the full variety of services their participants needed, as human services providers might be reluctant, or unable, to serve people who use substances. For example, almost all interviewees mentioned that, in their experience, obtaining housing is difficult for people who have a history of substance use, have been involved in the legal system, or are receiving medication for a SUD. Additional research from the HHS Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation found that only 22 percent of all eligible people in the United States received housing assistance of any kind in 2018 (Macartney and Ghertner 2021). Interviewees cited Housing First programming as critical to improving access to and outcomes of treatment for disadvantaged populations. But only a couple of study programs were able to offer Housing First units, and even then, the demand for housing far outpaced the supply. Interviewees also reported a lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate human services providers to which they could refer participants.

Though interviewees did not directly discuss other challenges, there are other common barriers that substance use and human services providers face in collaborating, which likely affect providers serving people of color. In other research, human services providers have reported difficulties sharing information about participant needs and progress because of privacy rules. Often, the priorities and objectives of substance use and human services providers might differ—such as a focus on the specific patient rather than the entire family—such that programs are unable to combine their services effectively (Waters et al. 2022a).

## Challenges maintaining staff with language and cultural skills

Interviewees had difficulties hiring, training, and retaining staff that reflected their communities. Their biggest challenge was their inability to offer competitive wages, particularly for bilingual and multilingual staff. Some interviewees tried to compensate for workforce shortages by providing training. One organization created a leadership training program to recruit young [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer \(LGBTQI+\)](#) professionals from communities of color to help them pursue professional credentials. Another organization provided training programs inside prisons and in the community to try to increase the availability of licensed drug and alcohol counselors with lived experience. However, most interviewees noted a lack of funding for staff training.

Several interviewees worked with state legislators and representatives to improve access to culturally and linguistically effective SUD treatment, promoting policies such as making clinician licensing and certification rules more flexible where appropriate, creating career pathways for community health workers, and allowing experience to substitute for educational credentials. Funding for peer recovery specialists was available in many states, though access could be challenging (Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services 2007). Peer support services encompass a variety of activities and interactions between individuals who share similar experiences of being diagnosed with a SUD. Among other services, peer support providers share their own lived experience of recovery along with practical guidance. As of 2019, Medicaid covered some types of

peer support in 37 states, though it was unclear whether the organizations we spoke with were able to take advantage of Medicaid funding for this purpose (Medicaid and CHIP [Children's Health Insurance Program] Payment and Access Commission 2019). Peer support workers are people who have been successful in the recovery process and who in turn help others experiencing similar situations. Through shared understanding, respect, and mutual empowerment, peer support workers help people become and stay engaged in the recovery process and reduce the likelihood of relapse. Peer support services can effectively extend the reach of treatment beyond the clinical setting into the everyday environment of those seeking a successful, sustained recovery process ([SAMHSA, 2022](#)).

### **A complex patchwork of funding streams, inflexible funding, and a lack of knowledge about existing funding**

Interviewees encountered various challenges with securing adequate funding to support the comprehensive, holistic care they endeavored to provide. The main challenges included managing a complex patchwork of funding streams and limited flexibility within that funding to provide necessary services.

Interviewees stated that there was no single funding source that could adequately cover the variety of services their participants needed. As a result, they had to piece together funding from federal, state, and philanthropic sources. The main sources of funding included Medicaid, grants from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, grants from other federal agencies (such as the Health Resources and Services Administration and the U.S. Department of Justice), and some private foundations. However, several interviewees noted few philanthropic organizations were interested in supporting substance use services. Most interviewees said Medicaid reimburses a large share of services for participants with SUD, including intensive case management services in some states. Interviewees from nearly all programs reported helping eligible participants apply for Medicaid if they were not already enrolled.

Even after obtaining funding, interviewees said they faced numerous funding gaps for certain services and populations. These funding challenges resulted in a constant need to fundraise and placed administrative burdens on the organizations. Interviewees reported managing 24 to 40 funding sources—each with its own objectives and requirements—and faced challenges blending and braiding multiple funding streams. Programs' patchwork of funding sources often hampered the creation and maintenance of fully integrated clinical and social services and supports, according to interviewees. Many interviewees, particularly those at organizations serving American Indian and Alaska Native, rural, and Hispanic participants, also commonly mentioned a shortage of behavioral health care providers.

In addition to being complex, the patchwork of funding for treatment and recovery services could be unstable. Many of the funding sources came from discretionary federal grants, which are often time-limited, must be implemented within a short time frame, and can unpredictably change amounts or purposes from year to year. The complex, unstable funding not only limited service provision but could also affect engagement with people of color. Some interviewees noted that short-term and inconsistent funding can perpetuate distrust in health care and other systems among people of color. Others viewed the lack of stable funding to address behavioral health and social services needs in communities of color as part of historical racism and structural oppression.



The second major challenge with funding streams was the limited flexibility to fund nontraditional services and support linguistically and culturally effective services, trauma-informed care,<sup>\*</sup> and basic life necessities. For example, some interviewees stated that their state Medicaid program did not reimburse community health workers and culturally specific services (for example, sweat lodges, traditional healing groups, and drum circles used by American Indian and Alaska Native populations).<sup>†</sup> Interviewees noted that funding was particularly limited for residential treatment support beyond the first 30 to 90 days,<sup>‡</sup> and comprehensive recovery supports such as housing (Domino et al. 2019). Further, some interviewees noted that Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration block grants or other local funding can be used to cover uninsured participants, including immigrants without documentation, but these grants often fall short of need. Finally, interviewees noted a lack of funding to provide needed support and care for their workforce, as staff often face mental health challenges related to their client's trauma. Though not discussed by providers we interviewed, funding sources might not cover efforts to transform organizations or institutions to help providers be more culturally responsive to the communities they serve.

The last issue programs faced is a lack of awareness of available funding sources and how they can use those sources. Some programs we interviewed were not aware that many federal funding sources allowed for overdose education, naloxone distribution, and certain harm reduction services, including wound care, syringe distribution, and overdose reversal training. It was unclear from our interviews the reasons for this lack of awareness. Notices of funding opportunities might not be distributed widely enough, through the right channels, or with enough response time to reach the providers we spoke to. Providers might not have the staffing or other capacity to seek out new funding sources, which could particularly be the case if existing funding is insufficient to pay for administrative costs. More research is needed to understand the extent to which providers serving people of color face greater barriers to accessing funds, or whether these barriers are common to all providers.

### Lack of data and capacity for analysis and evaluation

Interviewees reported having limited resources, bandwidth, and expertise to track metrics and evaluate program effectiveness. For instance, some interviewees noted that their organizations lacked the funding to hire staff with expertise in data collection, analysis, and evaluation. They were interested in tracking participant experiences, well-being, and outcome metrics (for example, recurrence of misuse, overdose, and cost of care) to create a feedback loop through which they could use results to improve services and build a business case for further funding. Program staff also wanted to demonstrate effectiveness in ways that promoted and expanded funding and reimbursement from mainstream payers. Though some interviewees reported that a state quality assurance department monitored their programs, few had been able to conduct robust formal

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<sup>\*</sup> The availability of funding for trauma-informed care varies by state, the service being provided, the type of provider, and other factors. See "Financing Trauma Informed Care," available at <https://www.thenationalcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Financing-Trauma-Informed-Primary-Care.pdf?dof=375ateTbd56>.

<sup>†</sup> In its most recent Section 1115 waiver extension application, Arizona requested an approval from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services to reimburse traditional healing services provided to tribal members. See Douglas A. Ducey's (governor of Arizona) letter to Alex M. Azar (secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), regarding renewing Arizona's Medicaid demonstration, December 21, 2020: <https://www.medicaid.gov/medicaid/section-1115-demonstrations/downloads/az-hccc-pa8.pdf>.

<sup>‡</sup> Funding for residential treatment also reportedly had limitations; program staff in some states reported they can only bill for one service per day for residential treatment participants.

evaluations that could be used to increase program fundraising, in part because these types of evaluations are not normally expected of such programs. Many interviewees were also interested in community-engaged and community-led research.

## DISCUSSION

The programs included in this study employed several approaches to addressing substance use and SUDs among people of color, including (1) incorporating culturally and linguistically effective practices; (2) being community-centered; (3) offering comprehensive services that address participants' SUD(s), health care, and social needs; and (4) using harm reduction and healing-centered approaches to care. However, providing this type of care is resource intensive, involves significant organizational capacity, and requires flexible and sustainable funding. Though program leaders in the study have been creative and resourceful in advocating for funds and policy changes, many reported ongoing structural hurdles. These barriers included a lack of government investment in communities of color, challenges maintaining staff with appropriate language and cultural skills, funding sources that are complex and not well aligned, and limited data and capacity to evaluate programs and build a business case for fully funding the community-driven, harm-reducing, holistic, and culturally effective care they strive to provide.

The findings from this study are not generalizable, but they provide a framework for culturally appropriate services to support people with SUDs, including their families. The study also demonstrates more research and evidence are needed to understand how the approaches described here can lead to better outcomes. Many of the structural barriers that interviewees outlined apply to substance use and human services programs generally. For example, a prior ASPE study found that rural communities lack resources, including treatment services, and this can impede child welfare agencies from supporting parents struggling with problematic substance use (Clary et al. 2020). Stigma associated with substance use and workforce challenges—including general shortages and lack of experience with SUDs—are also barriers to identifying human services participants with SUD and referring them to treatment (Waters et al. 2022b; Clary et al. 2020; Radel et al. 2018). Inflexible rules—many related to funding—do not permit programs to address the unique conditions of families dealing with problematic substance use (Clary et al. 2020; Radel et al. 2018). These barriers are amplified by the intersectionality of historical issues related to race, ethnicity, language, and immigration status. In particular, people of color facing substance use problems often have a multitude of unmet social needs, and they interact with multiple systems concurrently. As described by the programs studied, providers serving these communities have to navigate funding streams, policies, and other aspects of these systems. More research is needed to understand how these barriers can be overcome through policy mechanisms at the federal, state, and local levels.

Even with these complex challenges, interviewees described the importance of working with the strengths of the communities they served. Every community has protective factors that can support individuals and families facing substance use problems, such as churches, community-based organizations, civic associations, grassroots organizations, and libraries. The interviewees believed they were most successful when their approach worked with those protective factors. More research is needed to understand how federal, state, and local policies and programs can maximize the strengths of communities of varied backgrounds, while also implementing evidence-based practices.

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## METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX

### Study Participants

We began this study with an environmental scan and literature review of promising approaches to address substance use in communities of color, and we identified culturally and linguistically effective services as a promising approach to effectively serve people of color with substance use issues. Therefore, we use the provision of such services as a key criterion for selecting programs and models for this study. We identified the following racial and ethnic groups as the focus of this study: American Indian and Alaska Native; Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander; Black; and Hispanic/Latino populations. Another program selection criterion was that the program offered medication treatment, either methadone or buprenorphine treatment, to clients with opioid use disorder or referred clients to medication-assisted treatment. (Addressing opioid use disorder was one of the original focuses of this research, which was later expanded to include SUD more broadly.) An additional criterion for program selection was that the program addressed clients' social needs. After careful examination of the equity implications of various approaches to substance use in communities of color and in consultation with the project officers, we decided to exclude from the study approaches involving or led by the criminal legal system (e.g., drug courts) because evidence shows their harms outweigh their benefits (Gallagher, Wahler, and Lefebvre 2019).

We identified eligible programs through the environmental scan and our Office of Minority Health representatives' and project teams' professional networks. We used the snowball technique, whereby study participants made recommendations for other individuals, programs, and models to include. Though we started the project focusing on eight distinct geographical areas with racially diverse populations, we shifted to focus on programs across geographic areas that primarily serve American Indian and Alaska Native; Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander; Black; and Hispanic/Latino populations because of difficulties of travel and engaging substance use programs during the pandemic.

We reached out to representatives of 70 models and programs of substance use care for people of color across 18 states and the District of Columbia. The 27 programs whose staff participated in this study were in California, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, the District of Columbia, and Washington. The additional 43 programs that declined or did not respond to our invitation to participate were in Arizona, Georgia, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, South Dakota, and Tennessee. Program selection and exclusion criteria resulted in a sample selection of programs highly attuned to clients' and communities' needs and clinical evidence; they likely do not represent programs from these communities.

Staff from almost all of the programs study reported that their programs served more than one racial or ethnic group; nine programs serve American Indian and Alaska Native populations; 10 served Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander populations; 12 served white populations; 16 serve Black populations; and 20 served Hispanic/Latino populations. We also found that populations served by programs in our study intersect with other marginalized groups, such as people identifying as LGBTQIA+, immigrants, people experiencing homelessness, and people involved in the criminal justice system. Table A1 reports the number of programs in our study that targeted their services to specific racial and ethnic groups. While programs were available to people

of different race and ethnic groups, many of the programs designed their services to meet the unique cultural needs of people of specific backgrounds.

**Table A1. Race and Ethnicity of the Populations Served by the Study Programs**

| Racial and ethnic group                                 | Number of Programs |
|---------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| American Indian/Alaska Native, non-Hispanic             | 9                  |
| Asian, non-Hispanic                                     | 10                 |
| Black or African American, non-Hispanic                 | 16                 |
| Hispanic /Latino, any race                              | 21                 |
| Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, non-Hispanic | 13                 |
| White, non-Hispanic                                     | 9                  |
| Total programs                                          | 27                 |

**Source:** Authors' calculations of estimates provided by study interviewees and publicly available information.

**Note:** Total adds up to more than 27 because each program reported serving multiple racial and ethnic groups.

### Data collection and analysis

We conducted interviews virtually via Zoom between May and December 2020 using a semistructured interview guide, available upon request. The discussion topics included programs' approaches to serving people of color, their outreach to community, the ways in which programs integrate culturally and linguistically effective practices and address clients' social needs, programs' funding streams, and policies or resources needed to support people of color with substance use in treatment and recovery. Because the interviews were conducted amid the COVID-19 pandemic, we also collected data on ways in which substance use programs and their clients have been affected by the pandemic; these findings are presented in a forthcoming companion brief. In addition, we conducted a town hall meeting where we invited all study participants to provide feedback on preliminary findings from the interviews and give further input on policies and strategies to effectively address substance use in communities of color. We recorded, transcribed, and analyzed discussions using NVivo qualitative software to identify key themes, common facilitators and challenges, and policy ideas.

### Limitations

Our study has several limitations. Our study findings are limited by the lack of community input, including from program staff, clients, and other local stakeholders, into the research questions and design. In addition, despite our efforts to include several dozens of substance use programs across the country serving various populations of color, the pandemic considerably limited the number of programs that agreed to participate in the study, particularly those serving Asian American and Pacific Islander patients across various ethnic groups (four out of the 13 programs contacted participated), programs serving American Indian and Alaska Native communities (one out of 14 participated), and programs in the South (zero out of four participated). Also, programs that participated in the study were all located in states that expanded Medicaid eligibility under the Affordable Care Act, which could mean the communities these programs serve have more resources and fewer barriers to receipt of needed substance use treatment, health care, and social services. As such, our study programs do not represent substance use programs that primarily serve people of color across the nation. Lastly, our interviewees were primarily upper management and leadership



program staff, and we did not interview clients, community members, or other staff. As such, important perspectives and experiences may not have been captured, particularly from participants in substance use programs.

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This research would not have been possible without the voices from the field. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health and Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation thank everyone who participated in the study. Your perspectives and knowledge were invaluable.

The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Funders do not determine research findings or the insights and recommendations of Urban experts. Further information on the Urban Institute's funding principles is available at [urban.org/fundingprinciples](https://urban.org/fundingprinciples).

The authors thank Genevieve M. Kenney for her helpful review and suggestions.

### SUGGESTED CITATION

Bui, J., A. Waters, R. Ghertner, E.H. Allen, L. Clemans-Cope, K.J. Taylor, and C. Ramos. "Addressing Substance Use and Social Needs of People of Color with Substance Use Disorders." Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Minority Health and Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 2022.

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