Lessons Learned from SSA Demonstrations: A State of the Science Meeting

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Transcript of 12:00 – 12:30 p.m. EDT: Keynote
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So, I just want to introduce, we're very, very pleased to welcome as our keynote speaker Dr. Kilolo Kijakazi of SSA. I first knew Kilolo as a program officer in the Financial Assets Unit of the Economic Opportunity and Assets program at the Ford Foundation, where she focused on building economic security for working families and working toward a racial equity. More recently, we both served as board members of The Policy Academies, a nonprofit seeking to create meaningful diversity and inclusion in the think tank community by cultivating the policy careers of college students of color.

Before working at the Ford Foundation, Kilolo held a position as a senior policy analyst for the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, where she specialized in Social Security, and worked as a program analyst for the US Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service, on the Food Stamp program. Kilolo moved to the Urban Institute in September of 2014 (sadly, one month after I left Urban), where she championed research on economic security and equity. At Urban, she developed collaborative partnerships to expand and strengthen the Urban Institute's research agenda, effectively communicate findings to diverse audiences, and recruit and retain diverse research staff at all levels.

She also conducted research in economic security, structural racism and the racial wealth gap. If you haven't heard her talk about closing the racial wealth gap. I recommend you look up one of her talks on the web later today. She was also a board member of the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, and a co-chair of the National Advisory Council on Eliminating the Black-White Wealth Gap, and was a member of the Bipartisan Commission on Retirement Security and Personal Savings.

In January of this year, Kilolo was named Deputy Commissioner, Retirement and Disability Policy at SSA. Among many other duties, she will be responsible for following through on President Biden's very first executive order, that is number 13985 for those keeping track, on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government. That executive order requires the Federal Government to pursue a comprehensive approach to advancing equity for all, including people of color and others who have been historically underserved, marginalized and adversely affected by persistent poverty and inequality. Each agency is tasked with assessing how its programs and policies perpetuate systemic barriers to people of color and other underserved groups. Here, the term "equity" means the consistent fair treatment of all individuals, including Black, Latino, and Indigenous and Native American persons, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, and other persons of color; members of religious minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer persons; persons with disabilities; persons who live in rural areas; and persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality. I would say Kilolo is uniquely qualified to take on these challenges and usher in a new era at the Social Security Administration dedicated to advancing equity.

Perhaps that is one of the many reasons she will be honored this coming November by the National Academy of Social Insurance as one of two recipients of the 2021 Robert M. Ball Award for Outstanding

Achievements in Social Insurance together with Bob Greenstein. And now, Kilolo Kijakazi, thank you for joining us!

Thanks so much, Austin. Woops, sorry clicked the wrong button. Thanks so much. It is really a pleasure to be with you and to attend this Lessons Learned from SSA Demonstrations State of the Science Meeting. The discussion today will help SSA as we determine which policies already have a good basis of information and which policies require more thought. The discussion will also help us to think of ways to better implement these projects so that they provide even more useful information to policymakers.

It will also help us better understand who needs to be involved in the consideration of policies, and that's what I'd like to focus on today. Many of the demonstrations we undertake focus on the provision of services or a change in a policy.

One of the most important questions of concern to the current administration is whether program services, and the policies on which they are based, are equitable. To answer these questions, we need to know not only how current policies and services affect applicants and participants in our programs in the aggregate, we also need to be able to desegregate applicants and participants by race, ethnicity, gender, income level, and to the extent possible, type of impairment. But it is not enough to know whether different groups are affected differently by policies and services, we need to go further and understand why. We need to understand the drivers of these differences and effects. Only then, can we develop or finetune policies and program services so that they are equitable.

Understanding why means examining systemic barriers that contribute to the health conditions of different groups. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicate that conditions where people live, learn, work, and play affect a wide range of health outcomes. These are social determinants of health. Research has shown that structural racism is one of the root causes of unequal access to health and opportunity-promoting social determinants that drive racial health inequities.

Structural racism consists of the policies, programs, and institutional practices that facilitate the well-being of white families, while creating barriers to the wellbeing of families of color. Not only does structural racism affect health status, structural barriers in the labor market are important drivers of persistent employment inequity. Devah Pager was a Harvard University sociology professor who conducted research on discrimination in the labor market. In 2017, she co-authored a journal article about a meta analysis of every field experiment on hiring discrimination against African Americans or Latinos that was available at that time. She and her colleagues found that racial discrimination in hiring has persisted over time, with white job applicants receiving 36% more callbacks than African Americans and 24% more than Latinos.

Research that I've conducted in the past, supports this finding. On average African American workers experience-I'm sorry, I just want to make sure because I'm not looking at the same screen that you're looking at that this is the first graph- on average, African American workers experience higher rates of unemployment than white workers at every level of education. For high school dropouts, the unemployment rate for African American workers is two times that of white workers. And for workers, with advanced college degrees, the unemployment rate for African Americans is still almost twice that of white workers. In addition, African American workers typically receive lower wages than white

workers at every level of education. And African American workers receive lower wages in every occupation, on average.

Women of color typically encounter both gender and racial disparities. African American women have consistently had higher rates of labor market participation than white women, yet African American women experience higher rates of unemployment than both white men and white women, at every level of education. Similarly, African American women are paid lower wages than men and white women, at every level of education. And African American women are usually paid less than men and white women in every occupation.

The Institute for Women's Policy Research estimates that if change continues at the same slow pace, as it has done for the past 50 years, it will take about 40 years for women to finally reach pay parity. For African American women, it will take a century, and for Latinos, it will take two centuries. These employment and wage disparities are not the result of individual failures. The evidence shows that higher education does not prevent racial disparities in unemployment or wages. Discrimination in hiring, pay, promotion, and retention were common, and largely legal practices until the 1960s.

And as I just indicated, racial disparities persist even after the enactment of civil rights legislation outlawing employment discrimination. For people with disabilities, the unemployment rate is substantially higher than for people without disabilities, and these rates have worsened for both groups since the pandemic. In 2019, people without disabilities had an unemployment rate of 3.5%, compared to 7.3% for people with disabilities. By 2020, people without disabilities had an unemployment rate of 7.9%, compared to 12.6% for people with disabilities. Moreover, the pattern of disparities by race and ethnicity as well as gender among people with disabilities is similar to the overall population. For white people with disabilities, the unemployment rate in 2020 was 11.6%, compared to 16.3% for African Americans, 15.7% for Asian Americans, and 16.8% for Latinos. The overall rate for men with disabilities was 12%, compared to 13.2% for women.

If we are going to move from disparities to equity, we need to develop policies and programs that address these inequities. Clearly, there is work to be done by other agencies that address the health and employment of workers. However, we can contribute to creating more equity for workers with disabilities by understanding the circumstances they face with respect to healthcare and employment. The research that we design and conduct can be more inclusive of the people whose lives we want to better understand.

One approach is through community-engaged methods, which involves some members of the group you wish to study in aspects of the research design, implementation, data collection, analysis and interpretation. Another approach is to ensure that your methods of data collection obtain information directly from the people whose outcomes you wish to affect. Don't just ask others about the people of concern, asking them about their actions, the basis for their decisions, the barriers they encounter, and what would make their labor market experience better. Questions about structural barriers need to be included in the design of the demonstrations.

The President's Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity mandates that we consider these types of questions. SSA is also in the process of revisiting how it collects and uses administrative data on race and

ethnicity. This will be important if we want to answer these questions. Too often, we presume that the only data that can be defined as programmatic– that is, the data that we need or have the ability to collect–are the data that go into decision making and program rules. We need to decide that ensuring equitable outcomes is part of the programmatic needs of government systems. We cannot assume that policies and programs will be equitable, here are too many examples of policies and programs that are, in fact inequitable, whether they were intentionally designed to be or not.

So in closing, while none of my remarks are intended to take away from the work that has been done to produce rigorous evidence through SSA's demonstrations, it does mean that we can, and should, go further. Effective research does not simply look at the individual as the source of the problem. Effective research examines the systemic barriers that impacts the individuals applying for and participating in SSA's programs. Effective research obtains information from applicants and participants about how they are impacted and what solutions they think would improve their lives. And, effective research examines how policies and programs could be made more equitable by eliminating structural barriers and implementing solutions that those affected help to design. Thank you very much.

Thank you very much, Kilolo. I would just say that some of those facts you're presenting raise some questions for me about the role that SSA could play in future demonstrations, since a lot of those facts are about labor market features and structural racism barriers that occur before folks enter into SSA's programs. So, there's that potential, you know, for affecting the program inflow, potentially by partnering with other agencies, and I'm just wondering if the Evidence Act provides new opportunities for SSA to say to partner with Departments of Labor, Education, and Health and Human Services to try new demonstrations, and what might those demonstrations look like to address some of these structural barriers?

So, the Evidence Act certainly allows us to think about how we want to approach the research that we do, and in addressing it, we've been looking at using more methodologies that are inclusive of the communities that we want to affect. Thinking about who it is we obtain data information from making, sure that it is the people who we're concerned about, either from surveys or focus groups.

But we are also trying to think through how we can actually engage these communities in helping us with the design, or doing the data collection, et cetera. With respect to working with other agencies, I think that's exactly what's needed, there needs to be an inter-agency approach, and the executive order provides an opportunity to do this. There are actually many executive orders where there's inter-agency engagement, and so hopefully, I mean, it's still early days, but we are hoping that we will be able to work with other agencies to affect the info, as you indicated, affect the number of people who are going to need our services if they are able to obtain jobs, because there is a reduction in some of the barriers that they're facing in the labor market, or if they're better able to obtain health services because there's a reduction in some of the barriers that they're facing in terms of access to high quality health care, there would be a reduction, I would think, in the number of people who need Social Security programs.

But there will always be a need for some individuals to access our services, and we want to make sure that what we are providing is addressing their needs and not are just our perception of what their needs are. And so, we need to get information directly from our participants in terms of what their needs are, and we need to get information from applicants to determine whether there are barriers that they faced

in applying for our programs. I think what I hear you saying in part is that a more participatory design process might yield a better demonstration in the future. But, I'm just wondering if you were able to just right now, push a button and have the sort of the dream demonstration begin, you know, forgetting for a moment, the demonstration authority is about to expire, what might that dream demonstration look like to address some of these issues?

A dream demonstration for me would be one that is collaboratively engaged in with the Department of labor, for example, the appropriate agency or agencies within the Department of Labor, the appropriate agency or agencies within HHS or CMS so that we could collectively look at what happens with people with disabilities, and what are the interventions that they need that would provide them with the highest quality of life. So, rather than us individually taking kind of a piecemeal approach to improving the aspect of people's lives, perhaps a more holistic, collaborative approach to research would be helpful.

There are a few questions about various topics here, but I just wondered if there's any ongoing inter-agency work that's going on right now that you could tell us about?

So there is work that my colleague Jeff Hemmeter is doing, he is participating in the inter-agency Economic Mobility Council, where there's the opportunity there to look at what individuals need, and how different agencies could affect their economic mobility, and to collaboratively work on that. There's also the implementation of the executive order that you mentioned. Each agency was required to establish an agency equity team, so we have established an equity team at the Social Security Administration that consists of the executives of the administration, and then we also have eight work groups that are addressing different issue areas, including improving data collection, sharing and, use, there's another on stakeholder engagement, another on distributional analyses of proposed policies to look at the potential impacts on different groups.

As a team lead, I meet with other agency team leads, and there's also by OMB and the Domestic Policy Council, a series of learning sessions, so they created a learning community that would help us learn how to have a more holistic and equitable approach to the work that we're doing and all the agencies are able to participate in this.

It sounds like there's a lot going on, I didn't even realize how much there was happening there. So I guess I'd probably have to sign up for email announcements from SSA to learn what the outcome of all that is. There was also a question about reanalyzing past demonstration data to sort of explore these differences by race and ethnicity, and to understand what kinds of barriers people might face. I'm just wondering what your priorities would be in terms of the reanalysis of past demonstrations versus mounting new demonstrations?

I think that it's probably worthwhile and it's probably cost effective to take a look at, trying to disaggregate some, if it wasn't done before, to disaggregate by race and ethnicity and gender what some of the findings would be with that kind of desegregation versus the initial way that the data were addressed, so certainly that would be promising.

And in addition, I think that going forward, it would be very useful to think in terms of this more community-engaged approach as one of the methods, too. So, kind of looking back and seeing what can be done with what we have, but also looking forward to see what can be done differently.

All right, thank you. It sounds like there's a lot on your plate already, but I'm sure there will be things coming out of today's meeting that will also land on your plate of ideas to do for the future as well. So, I just wanted to thank you again, very much for joining us and presenting this wonderful talk.