

# The Nonprofit Racial Leadership Gap in Massachusetts: A Race to Lead Brief



The Building Movement Project's *Race to Lead* series ([www.racetolead.org](http://www.racetolead.org)) examines the findings from more than 4,000 survey respondents working in the nonprofit sector to understand why there are so few nonprofit leaders of color.<sup>1</sup> The national findings showed that people of color have similar qualifications as white respondents and are more likely to aspire to nonprofit leadership positions. In addition, respondents across race agreed that people of color seeking leadership roles face a range of systemic barriers to advancement. The first report in the *Race to Lead* series concludes that to increase the number of leaders of color in nonprofits, the sector should challenge the assumption that people of color have to overcome personal deficits. Instead, a new approach is needed that places the emphasis not on changing people of color, but on addressing deeply embedded biases that make it harder for people of color to advance into leadership positions, despite being just as qualified as their white peers.

## Issues in the Bay State

This report, *The Nonprofit Racial Leadership Gap in Massachusetts: A Race to Lead Brief*, offers findings from the subset of national survey respondents who work in Massachusetts.<sup>2</sup> The report explores: 1) what the data indicates about the differences between people of color (POC) and white respondents in Massachusetts and 2) how the Massachusetts findings compare to the national survey results. In addition to analyzing the survey data, this report draws on insights from four focus groups held in Boston with nonprofit executive directors/chief executive officers and staff. The composition of the four focus groups was: EDs/CEOs of color, women of color (both staff and EDs/CEOs), white EDs/CEOs, and white staff.<sup>3</sup>

Through analysis of survey data and focus group responses, BMP identified the following key issues facing aspiring and current nonprofit leaders of color in Massachusetts.

1. Aspiring leaders of color face obstacles ranging from lack of mentors to little encouragement to move up within their organizations. However, they have developed skills and found advisors outside of their jobs in order to continue to advance in their careers.



### NATIONAL FINDINGS FROM *RACE TO LEAD:* *CONFRONTING THE NONPROFIT RACIAL LEADERSHIP GAP*

1. It's NOT about Differences in Background or Qualifications
2. It's NOT about a Lack of Aspirations
3. It's NOT about Skills and Preparation
4. It IS about an Uneven Playing Field
5. It IS the Frustration of "Representing"
6. It's NOT Personal, It IS the System

2. Top leaders in nonprofits need to be able to raise funds from public sources, foundations and donors who often have little understanding of—or contact with—the communities of color they are trying to support. Current and aspiring leaders of color who have more connection to community needs are frequently excluded from networks and relationships of wealth. As a result, people of color may be overlooked by funders, even though they are the leaders who could most effectively drive investments in underserved communities.
3. People of color seeking leadership positions experience barriers from white-dominated boards and executive recruiters based on assumptions about their skill levels and concerns about their ability to raise funds. Aspiring leaders of color are rarely offered the opportunities and supports needed to be successful in top leadership roles, despite the expertise and skills they bring.

## Inequality in the Commonwealth

The survey results highlighted in this report are of particular interest given the stark circumstances of inequality that characterize the Boston metropolitan region, where 55% of the Massachusetts subsample reported they worked. A 2017 *Boston Globe* poll found that more than half of African-American/Black respondents considered Boston unwelcoming to people of color, positioning it as the least welcoming of eight cities studied. The *Globe's* related series on race depicted Boston as a city deeply segregated in its key institutions, with little change for decades in the dominance of white power brokers over public and private decision-making roles and where public expenditures for development prioritize wealthy white constituencies.<sup>4</sup> Steady growth in technology, health/life sciences, and other service sector industries has been accompanied by high and rising inequality. A 2016 Brookings Institute study ranked Boston the number one city for income inequality in the nation.<sup>5</sup> Another study that year by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston found stark racial wealth gaps, with white households holding median wealth of \$247,500 compared to near-zero wealth for U.S. Black and Dominican households.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, the area's growth rests largely on immigrants and people of color, who make substantial contributions to the regional economy but reap fewer of its benefits.<sup>7</sup> While these circumstances are especially stark in Boston, they reflect broad national trends, making the findings here potentially instructive beyond Massachusetts.



In 2017, the *Boston Globe* analyzed data, launched surveys, and conducted hundreds of interviews to confront one of the city's most vexing issues—racism—as part of a seven-part series.

## The Massachusetts Respondents

Demographically, the Massachusetts *Race to Lead* survey subsample was largely similar to the national sample. Among the Massachusetts respondents, 60% were white and 40% identified as people of color, compared to 58% of the national sample identifying as white and 42% as people of color (see *Figure 1* on the following page).<sup>8</sup>

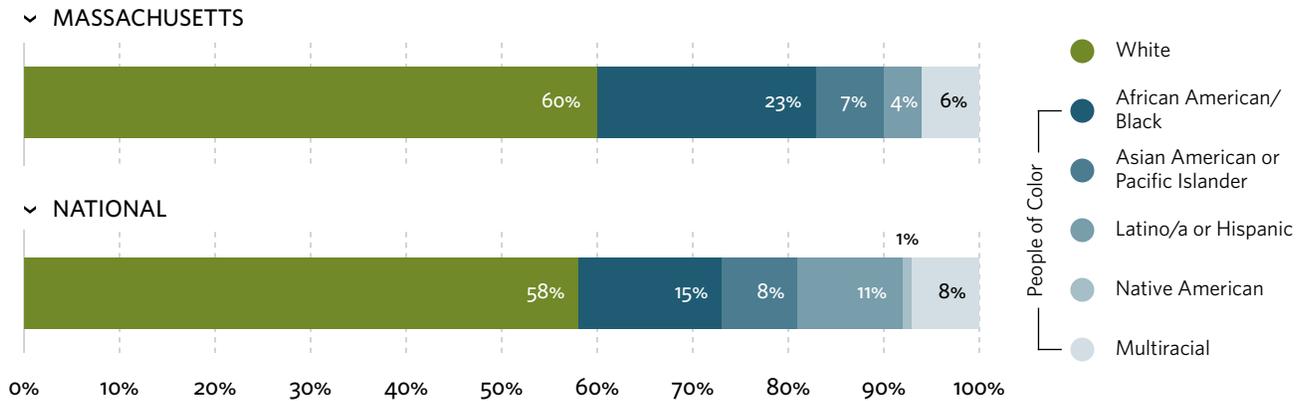


Figure 1: Race/Ethnicity

Similarly, 81% of respondents in the Bay State identified as female, 17% identified as male, and 2% as transgender/gender nonbinary/nonconforming, similar to the national data (78% female, 19% male, 3% transgender/et al.). Among both the national and Massachusetts samples, 21% of respondents self-identified as LGBTQ. Also, three-quarters (75%) of the Massachusetts sub-sample were children of U.S. born parents, 17% were the children of immigrants, and 8% reported being immigrants, all rates that were almost the same as the national sample (73%, 18% and 9%, respectively). The sub-sample of respondents from Massachusetts differed slightly from the national sample in terms of age/generation, with 42% millennials, 32% generation X, 23% baby boomers, and 3% age 70 or older, compared to the national sample of 38% millennials, 39% generation X, 22% baby boomers, and 1% age 70 or older (see *Figure 2*).

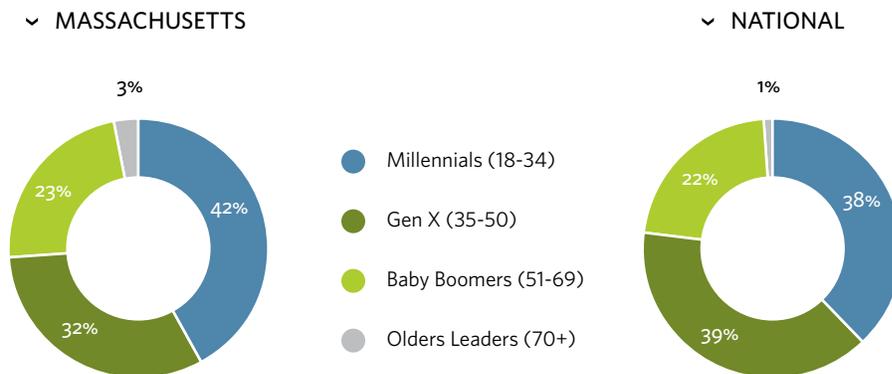


Figure 2: Age Groups by Generation

# The Findings

*The Nonprofit Racial Leadership Gap in Massachusetts: A Race to Lead Brief* looks at Massachusetts respondents' background, organizational information, leadership aspirations, supports and challenges, and opinions on barriers to the advancement of people of color to nonprofit leadership. The picture that emerges is of a nonprofit environment in which people of color are needed and recruited for jobs where they can reach and relate to communities of color being served, but have few pathways or supports for career advancement. Funders and boards seem more comfortable with white leadership, especially regarding perceived ability to raise money through traditional channels. This poses a challenge for leaders of color who may not have high-wealth donors or foundation staff in their personal networks, since those relationships are often seen as necessary to sustain and grow organizations.

## Aspirations to Lead

A key finding in the national *Race to Lead* report was that respondents of color were more interested in pursuing nonprofit leadership positions than white respondents. A similar pattern can be found in Massachusetts, where almost half of respondents of color aspire to nonprofit chief executive officer/executive director (CEO/ED) roles. However, white people in Massachusetts are more likely to aspire to leadership than white people in the national sample. As *Figure 3* shows, the ten percentage point gap in leadership ambitions between people of color and white respondents nationally shrinks to just three percentage points in Massachusetts.

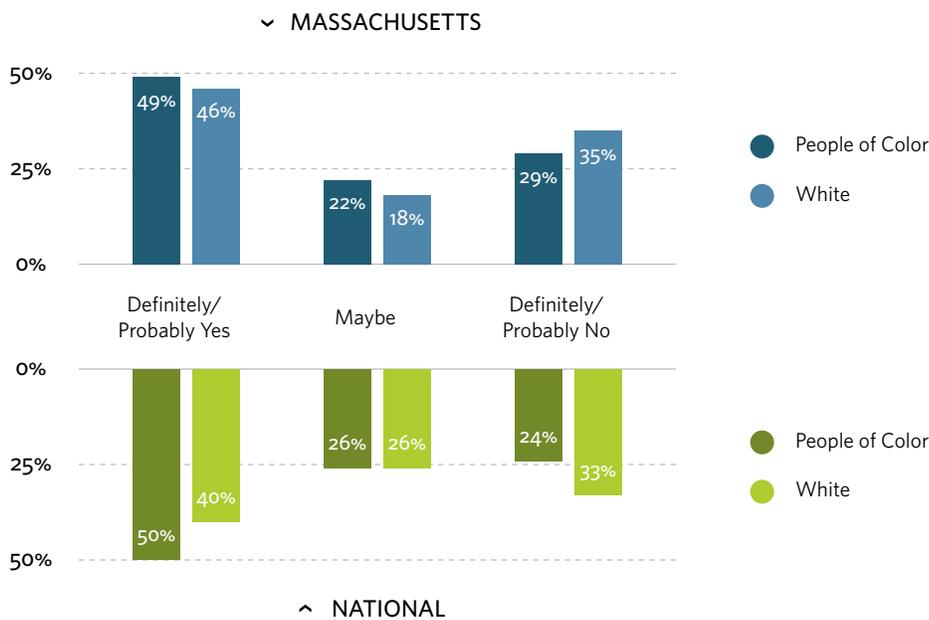


Figure 3: Level of Interest in Taking a Top Leadership Role (Among Non-CEOs)

When those who are not interested in leadership positions were asked why, Massachusetts respondents differed in several regards from the national sample (see *Figure 4*). While white and POC respondents in the national sample had similar levels of concerns about work/life balance, in Massachusetts there was a sharp difference, with 41% of white respondents saying work/life balance was an obstacle to leadership and only 19% of people of color indicating this concern. In a surprising finding, the national results showed white respondents were more likely than people of color to believe that their skills and interests are not suited for an ED role; that pattern was flipped in Massachusetts, where respondents of color were more likely than white respondents to say they were not suited for a nonprofit leadership position. Also, respondents of color in Massachusetts were more likely to report they were pursuing opportunities outside the nonprofit sector than either Massachusetts white respondents or people of color in the national data.

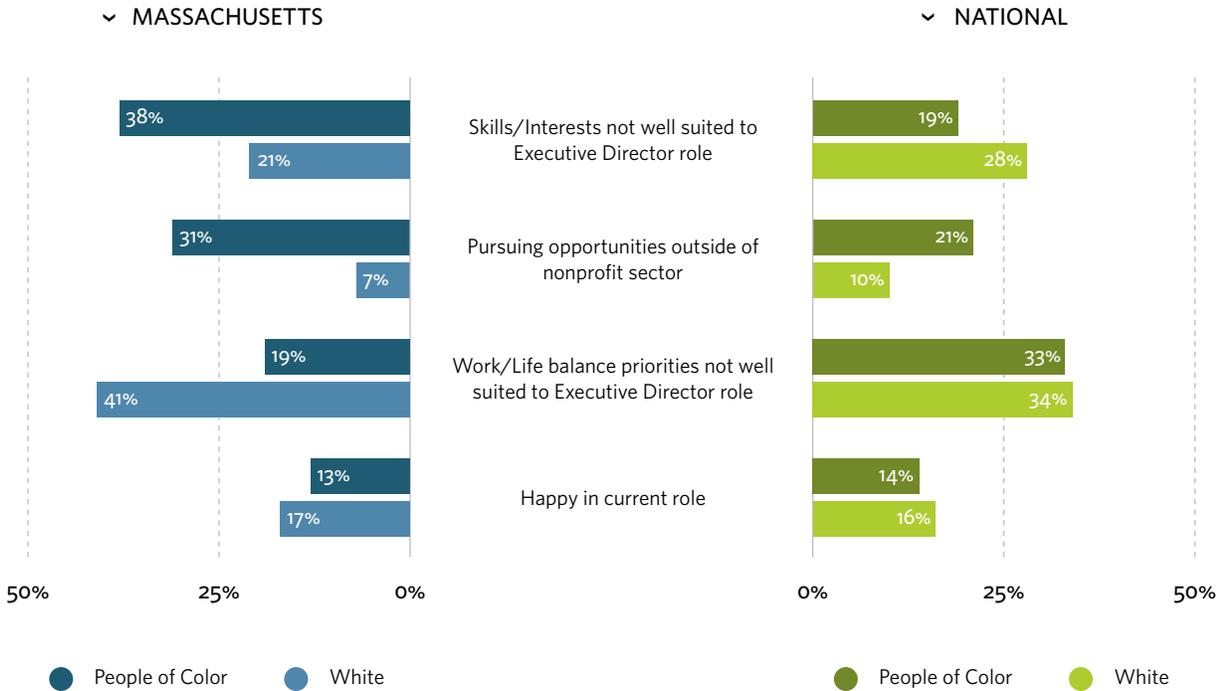


Figure 4: Reasons for Not Having Interest in Pursuing a Top Leadership Role

The number of people of color in Massachusetts who report wanting to leave the sector and the problems facing those who do aspire to leadership may be related to the racialized challenge of career advancement, a strong theme in both the Massachusetts data and focus groups. As shown in *Figure 5* on the following page, respondents of color—both nationally and in Massachusetts—were more likely than whites to report that they had too few opportunities for advancement, but there was a 12 percentage point gap between white and POC respondents in Massachusetts and just a four percentage point gap in the national data. In the focus groups, people of color talked about having to carve out opportunities for their own training, learning,

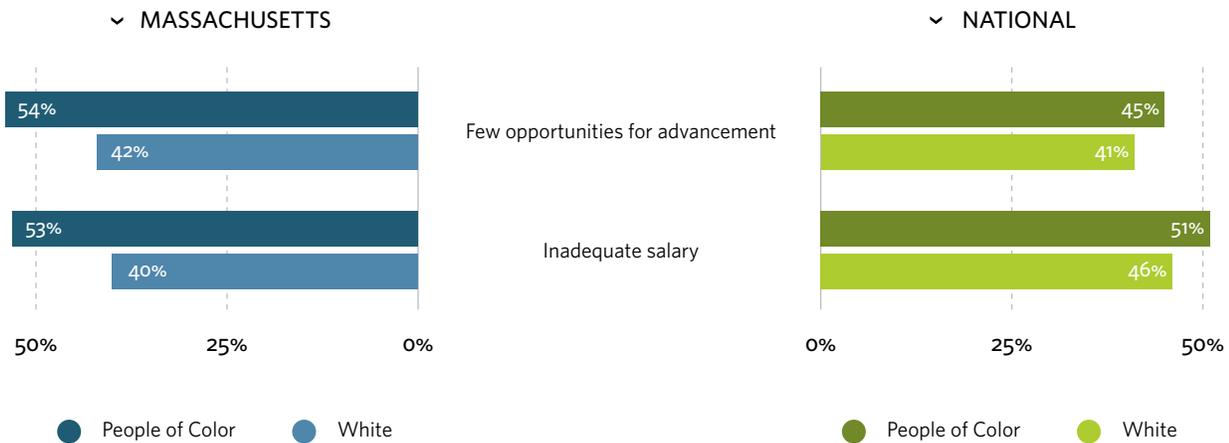


Figure 5: Challenges and Frustrations Face on the Job (“Often” or “Always”)

and professional development because those supports were not offered by their supervisors and organizations. Additionally, there were concerns about salary. The percentage of national respondents of color who named inadequate salary as a challenge was five points higher than the percentage of white respondents, but that gap was 13 percentage points in Massachusetts.

Several focus group participants of color shared stories of their own challenges to move beyond narrowly structured roles into which people of color are often pigeonholed. These stories of thwarted attempts to advance into upper-level decision-making positions align with the one-third of Massachusetts respondents of color who indicated that their race had negatively impacted their career advancement (see Figure 6 on the following page). What surprised participants in the people of color focus groups was that more POC respondents in the state reported that their race had a positive impact on their careers (55%), compared to POC respondents nationally (38%). Focus group participants hypothesized that aspiring leaders of color may initially have pathways into positions in predominantly white organizations that are trying to diversify their staff or fill a specific community outreach role, but will often encounter limited avenues or encouragement for career development once in those roles.



“Everyone needs at least one [of us] in the room. For my upward mobility professionally, at times my race and my gender and my representation for my community has fit what the organization needed ... But, when I started advocating for where I saw myself going professionally, that’s when I hit more roadblocks.”

~ PARTICIPANT IN WOMEN OF COLOR FOCUS GROUP

“I think the nonprofit community is really self-conscious about its own reputation for being racist ... My guess is people maybe have more initial opportunities, [but] I’d be curious about what the long-term trajectory actually was.”

~ PARTICIPANT IN WHITE STAFFERS FOCUS GROUP

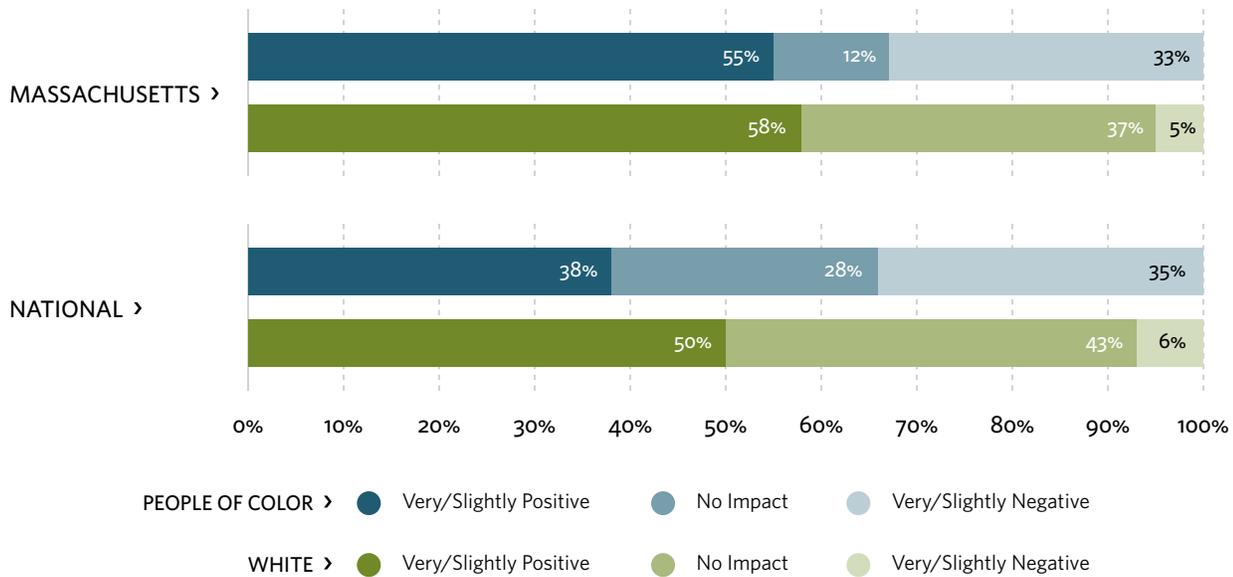


Figure 6: Impact of Race/Ethnicity on Respondents' Career Advancement

This lack of investment in people of color in the Bay State can be seen in *Figure 7* on the following page, which shows the supports survey respondents reported receiving over the course of their nonprofit careers. Although the percentage of respondents who had mentors outside of their organization is consistent across white and POC respondents, there is a striking racial gap in the Massachusetts subsample showing that far fewer respondents of color (35%) had mentors inside of the organizations where they worked compared to white respondents (52%). The struggle to find mentorship was echoed by people of color in the focus groups. Participants described how important mentoring relationships and peer support were to facing the challenges of working in nonprofit organizations. They also talked about needing validation from someone with a similar background to their own, especially when working in white-led organizations or groups where people of color felt racially isolated.



"I think in a lot of the organizations that I've worked with, there's been no real opportunity for upward mobility ... I had to move out."

~ PARTICIPANT IN WOMEN OF COLOR FOCUS GROUP

"What really changed my time [as an ED/CEO] is when I received this Barr Foundation Fellowship because it is really lonely to be in this job ... it was predominantly people of color, and it provided executive coaching, leadership development ... it took us on trips so that we'd be able to get to know each other and wouldn't be so isolated."

~ PARTICIPANT IN ED/CEO OF COLOR FOCUS GROUP



“My professional development has always been self-tailored ... and being a part of groups and hopefully finding someone similar to me [for support].”

~ PARTICIPANT IN WOMEN OF COLOR FOCUS GROUP

“Most of my mentorship, actually, has been mentors that I've sought out. Partly that's because wherever I've been [working] there have been few people of color.”

~ PARTICIPANT IN ED/CEO OF COLOR FOCUS GROUP

As noted above, people of color in the focus groups also talked about having to carve out opportunities for their own training, learning, and professional development – a type of self-advocacy – because those supports were not otherwise offered by supervisors and organizations. Perhaps this is why POC respondents in the state are more likely to have found executive coaching and peer support groups compared to white respondents, though on both measures Massachusetts respondents were slightly lower than the national sample (see *Figure 7*).

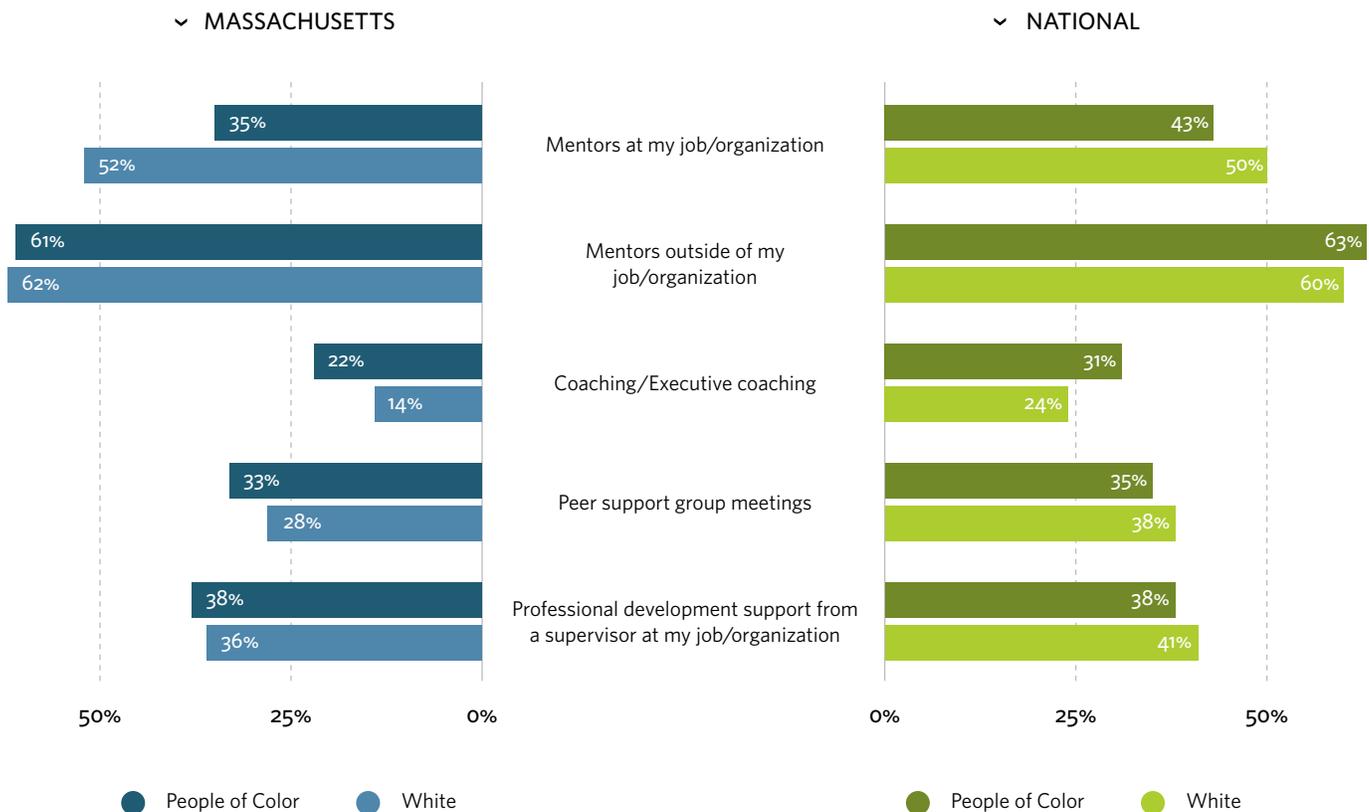


Figure 7: Formal or Informal Leadership Support Received

# Fundraising, Leadership, and Race

Much of the work of nonprofit leaders involves courting funding to build their organizations and having the capacity to tap potential donors with wealth. This often means moving in an environment where relationships among elites—in universities, hospitals, foundations, and nonprofits—frequently exclude people of color. In the four focus group discussions in Boston, both people of color and white participants returned again and again to challenges of fundraising in a deeply segregated region. The overall impression that emerged from these conversations was that local nonprofit leaders have to operate in a context where an insular, white philanthropic community wields undue influence.

Figure 8 shows the pressures and challenges of fundraising, which are higher for people of color than white respondents in both the Massachusetts and national data. Slightly more respondents in Massachusetts than in the national sample, both people of color and whites, noted frustration with lack of relationships with funders. Agreement with the statement that people of color have a harder time raising money than white nonprofit leaders was also similar between Massachusetts and the national sample, both of which showed a gap of more than 20 percentage points between people of color and whites.

“The Boston philanthropic community is very 'old money,' and because Boston is very segregated it's so much harder to get those access points.”

~ PARTICIPANT IN ED/CEO OF COLOR FOCUS GROUP

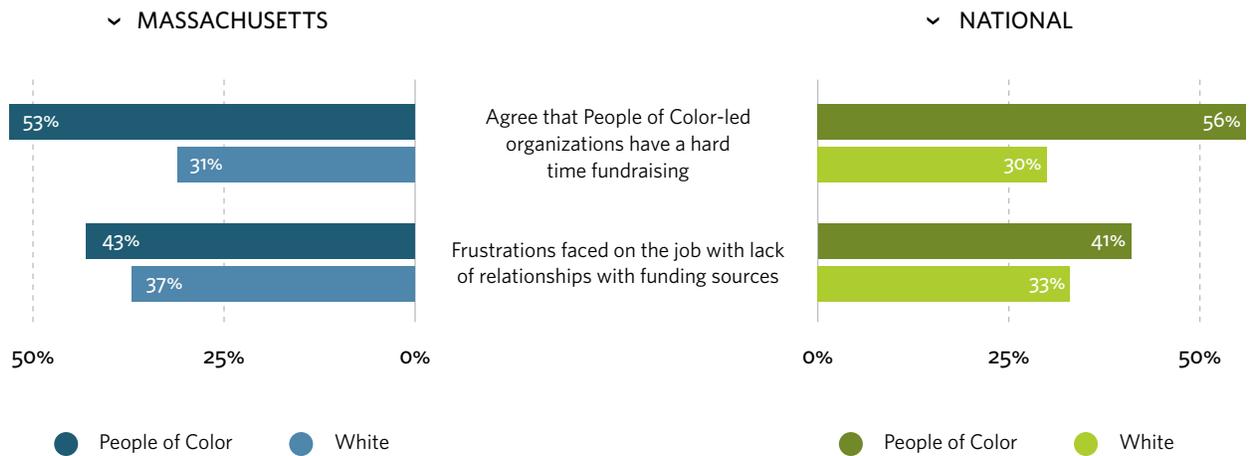


Figure 8: Frustrations and Attitudes about Funding

With little prompting, participants from all four focus groups discussed the barriers that leaders of color faced in raising money for their organizations. Several people of color who were in CEO/ED positions described how funders have little understanding of the importance of their work and of the connections their organizations have with the communities they serve. For those women of color aspiring to top leadership positions, the social/cultural distances between their personal networks and networks of wealthy white people was a substantial obstacle in their quest for professional advancement. Staff of all races working in predominantly white organizations also

noted that there are few if any structures in place to open up donor or foundation relationships to aspiring leaders.

Focus group participants—particularly people of color—also discussed how funding flows largely to white-led organizations, even when funders intend to address issues in communities of color. For instance, they shared a perception that resources are more likely to be committed in support of “diversity” programs at large, mainstream, and white-led organizations, as opposed to funding existing community-based organizations led by people of color. In both focus groups with people of color, participants shared frustrations with seeing funding go to the next “bright idea” from a new white leader about how to serve communities of color, and that organizations run by people from outside the community receive disproportionate resources to build their infrastructure and tell an outsider’s version of the community’s story.

The clear feedback in the focus groups about fundraising disadvantages for people of color, largely because of exclusion from the networks where wealth circulates, is consistent with findings from the survey. In the Massachusetts subsample, roughly one-third (32%) of people of color and 21% of white respondents identified a lack of social capital/networks as a challenge they faced in their jobs. Similarly, just more than half (53%) of people of color and nearly a third (31%) of white respondents agreed that it is harder for people of color to advance in the nonprofit sector because they tend to have smaller professional networks. These responses were similar to the national sample.

## Hiring People of Color Leaders

The national *Race to Lead* survey found that strong majorities of respondents believe that predominantly white boards of directors often fail to support the leadership potential of staff of color (see *Figure 9* on the following page). Respondents of color in Massachusetts were much more likely than the national sample to agree with this sentiment, resulting in a POC/white gap that was two and a half times larger: 26 percentage points in Massachusetts versus ten percentage points nationally. In focus groups, participants across race described a tendency of organizations to recruit board members based on their access to money and wealth; given that Boston has the highest racial disparities in income nationwide, this bias for wealthy individuals can easily lead organizations to assemble all-white or majority-white boards. Although well-connected white board members may be able to raise funds for the organization, focus group participants expressed concern that majority-white boards lack capacity to understand the issues communities of color face.

During the focus groups, people also discussed how board composition can impact an organization’s hiring decisions. Participants described how the implicit biases of board members can lead them to prefer candidates with similar backgrounds to their own, and expressed concerns that board members generally lack the skills and knowledge

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“I don't think we as nonprofits do a good job of preparing people who aren't the ED to be in relationship with the funder, and that's keeping us from changing how foundations relate to our organizations since our top leaders are white people.”

~ PARTICIPANT IN WHITE ED/CEO FOCUS GROUP

“I've watched the white woman who is now the ED tap into all of her networks, and that's how we've gotten funding. And I've wondered, 'Who the hell do I know at that level [of wealth]?'”

~ PARTICIPANT IN WOMEN OF COLOR FOCUS GROUP

“Getting the board to commit that our organization's board needs to look like the community that we're serving [can be hard, but] organizations that are successful with making that happen have been much easier to work for.”

~ PARTICIPANT IN ED/CEO OF COLOR FOCUS GROUP

“In my perception, older board members just don't see race as a huge issue, when that should be one of their priorities.”

~ PARTICIPANT IN WHITE STAFFERS FOCUS GROUP

to fairly assess candidates of color. These observations paralleled survey findings that vague notions of organizational “fit” can be a barrier when boards are considering candidates of color for executive positions. *Figure 9* shows that roughly three-quarters (74%) of Massachusetts respondents of color and half (50%) of white respondents agreed that organizations often rule out candidates of color based on intangible assessments that they are not the “right fit.” Two-thirds (66%) of people of color nationally agreed with that statement, eight percentage points lower than people of color in the Bay State, whereas white respondents nationally agreed at roughly the same rate (48%) as the Massachusetts subsample.

In addition, nearly three-quarters of Massachusetts survey respondents agreed that “executive recruiters don’t do enough to find a diverse pool of qualified candidates for top-level nonprofit positions.” As *Figure 9* shows, there was more agreement in the Massachusetts subsample between people of color and white respondents on this question as compared to the national sample. In both focus groups with people of color, respondents reported uniformly negative experiences with executive recruitment firms. They talked about frequently being contacted by executive recruiters about open positions, but rarely finding real opportunity with the organizations that were hiring. During the focus groups, people of color also reported that they did not find executive recruiters useful for filling positions in their organizations. They instead preferred to work through their personal networks to identify potential candidates.



“Boards may say, ‘Of course we want a person of color’ but then that comes up against ‘the right fit.’ [Boards have to consider] what’s the culture of the board, how white are our organizational cultures, the whole idea of what’s normal.”

~ PARTICIPANT IN WHITE ED/CEO FOCUS GROUP

“I feel used. Executive recruiters have contacted me ... They wanted to show that a woman of color was qualified and considered. But, in hindsight, I realized that they’ve already picked their candidates and they were just using me to fill their quota.”

~ PARTICIPANT IN ED/CEO OF COLOR FOCUS GROUP

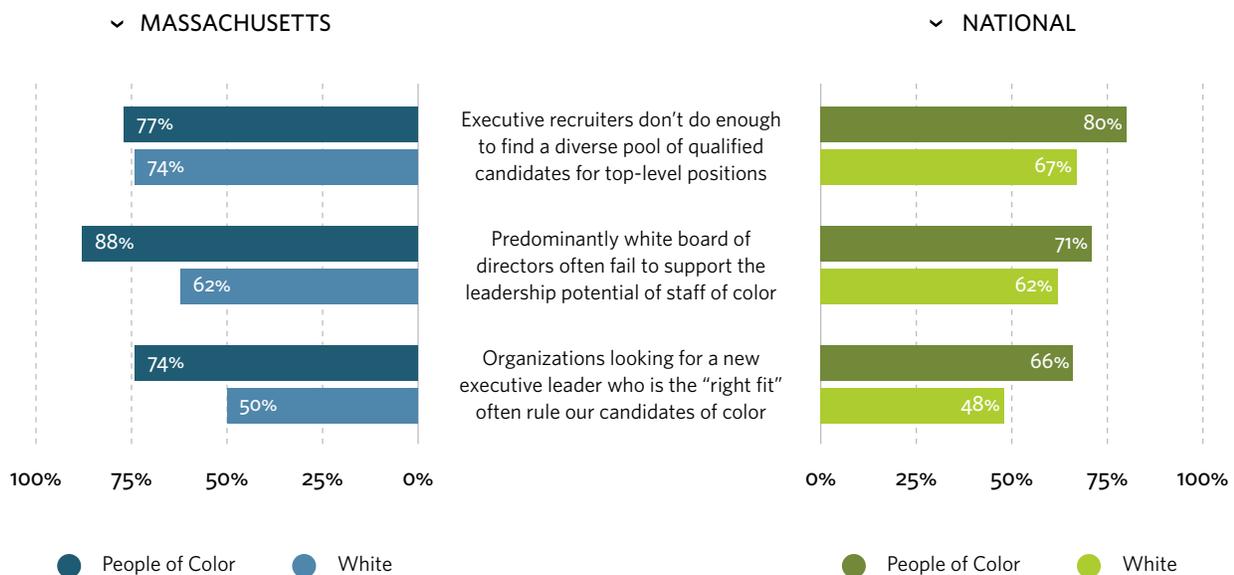


Figure 9: Response to Statements on Racial Equality (“Somewhat” or “Strong” Level of Agreement)

# What Can Be Done

To address the obstacles to advancement that people of color face in the nonprofit sector in Massachusetts, swift action and deep commitment are needed. From foundations to trade associations, from large organizations to grassroots groups, all stakeholders must take steps to address the racialized organizational and systemic barriers that block opportunity for people of color as leaders and in the sector overall.



## RECOMMENDATION 1:

### Follow the Money; Invest in Organizations Led by People of Color

Organizations led by people of color in Massachusetts need money to operate, offer salaries on par with the rest of the sector, and give leaders resources to build the networks and relationships that are necessary to advance real change. They need direct financial investments, whether in the form of program or general support, that provide security, stability, and possibility.

Funders often feel comfortable with those who share a similar background and analysis of issues. But for real change to happen—in both the racial composition of nonprofit leadership and, more importantly, for the communities experiencing the brunt of inequality—those investing in communities may be better served by listening to and investing in solutions that are grounded in those with the most knowledge of and lived experience with the issues being addressed.

Foundations and other funders in Massachusetts should conduct internal audits of their grantmaking to examine whether there are disparities in funding provided to white-versus POC-led organizations. With that information, funders can ensure that their levels of investment match their intentions to support these groups.



## RECOMMENDATION 2:

### Develop Pathways; Build Ladders and Lattices

The challenges to advancement that came to the forefront in the focus group discussions seemed to point to organizational contexts that provide people of color with little support and few pathways to move into leadership roles. To counter this dynamic, the thinking about employee development cannot be limited to the metaphor of the “career ladder,” which suggests that investments in staff advancement and growth are only worthwhile if employees take on new positions within the organization. At the same time, organizations need practical supports for replacing valued employees who may advance their careers by moving to another organization in the sector.

Overall, the Massachusetts nonprofit sector could address this issue by identifying—together—1) ways to support aspiring leaders of color and create a latticework that crisscrosses organizations, providing many pathways for nonprofit staff to take on new challenges and build their skills, 2) networks that help organizations find new staff members when current ones leave to advance their careers, and 3) financial support for staff development and transitions.



### **RECOMMENDATION 3:** **Nonprofit Organizations Taking the Lead**

Many nonprofit leaders in the Bay State are addressing race and race equity as a top priority in their work, but more leadership of this kind is needed among the state’s nonprofits. It was clear from the focus groups with both people of color and white participants that the sector’s track record on race should and can change.

Starting with their own organizations, leaders have to build capacity to engage on issues of race and equity, particularly among their boards. Given the state’s racial segregation and wealth disparities, organizations must become more critical and rigorous in recruiting board members who can contribute other resources, besides financial ones, to the organization.

Across all four focus groups, it was clear that leaders need to build community with each other to challenge the implicit and structural bias that blocks progress on racial equity. Trainings can help set the context for change, provide more practical skills for addressing issues in organizations, and develop strategies for measuring changes in practice. But in addition, both white nonprofit leaders and leaders of color need support to develop peer cohorts where people from similar backgrounds can support one another.

Finally, white leaders should speak up on behalf of race and race equity. Many have faced their own barriers—as women, as people not from elite backgrounds—and can now lend their voice and actions to address issues of racial inequities.

## Endnotes

- 1 The survey was conducted between March and May 2016, and a total of 4,385 respondents were included in the overall national analysis.
- 2 For the purposes of this analysis, the Massachusetts subsample consisted of 176 respondents after removing a small number of respondents who were nonprofit board members (rather than staff) from the sample.
- 3 Except for the women of color group, all genders were included in each focus group. A total of 35 people participated in the 90-minute focus groups, which were held in Boston on January 29-30, 2018.
- 4 Johnson, A., Wallack, T., Dungca, N., Kowalczyk, L., Ryan, A., and Walker, A. (December 10-16, 2018). "Boston. Racism. Image. Reality." *The Boston Globe*. <http://apps.bostonglobe.com/spotlight/boston-racism-image-reality/series/image/>
- 5 Holmes, N. and Berube, A. (January 14, 2016). "City and Metropolitan Inequality on the Rise, Driven by Declining Incomes," Brookings Institute. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/city-and-metropolitan-inequality-on-the-rise-driven-by-declining-incomes/>
- 6 Muñoz, A. P., Kim, M., Chang, M. Jackson, R. O., Hamilton, D., and Darity, W. A., Jr. (March 25, 2015). "The Color of Wealth in Boston" Duke University, The New School, and the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston. <https://www.bostonfed.org/publications/one-time-pubs/color-of-wealth.aspx>
- 7 Lima, A. (April 19, 2017). "The Importance of Immigrants to Boston's Continued Prosperity," Boston Planning and Development Agency. <http://www.bostonplans.org/getattachment/1eeaf05e-6505-4268-8ebc-6a3c6b16fdca>; Lima, A., Kim, C., Schuster, L. (June 2017). "Powering Greater Boston's Economy Why the Latino Community Is Critical to Our Shared Future," Boston Indicators (The Boston Foundation) and Boston Planning and Development Agency. <http://www.bostonplans.org/getattachment/886b3410-4601-4b97-a621-5780cf980b2d>
- 8 Due to rounding, some percentages that appear in the figures throughout this report may not precisely reflect the absolute numbers or add to 100%.

## Acknowledgements

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