

Moving Towards Community- Centered Legal Epidemiology: A Crosswalk of Frameworks

PRACTITIONER GUIDE



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Moving Towards Community-Centered Legal Epidemiology: A Crosswalk of Frameworks

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This guide is a companion to **Moving Towards Community-Centered Legal Epidemiology: A Crosswalk of Frameworks (the Crosswalk)**. While the Crosswalk provides the “what,” this Guide offers the “how,” the “why,” and the “so what. When using this guide, you will be invited to consider how the laws you study and the process by which you study them can both reflect and reinforce policy barriers and may limit improving health for all when we do not authentically engage communities most impacted by those laws and policies. And, with intentional planning and collaborative design, community-centered legal epidemiology can be an impactful approach to promote health and wellbeing for all and address persistent differences in health outcomes.

This Practitioner Guide is designed to:

- ▶ **Explain key concepts** and provide additional framing for engaging and centering community throughout the legal epidemiology (legal epi) process.
- ▶ **Provide guided reflection** to help you pause, recalibrate, and align your approach to community engagement throughout the legal epi process.
- ▶ **Engage partners, collaborators, and community members** as you design and implement your legal epi process.

While we recommend using this guide during the start of designing your legal epi project, it is meant to be practical and flexible – a tool you can return to as you navigate each process step. You may not answer every question posed here, and that’s okay; the goal is to take what feels most relevant and to revisit the guide over time as your work evolves and new opportunities for reflection emerge.

For additional resources and to read stories from the field of community-centered legal epidemiology, visit the Community-Centered Legal Epidemiology Toolkit at engagementforequity.org.



ROADMAP OF THE COMMUNITY-CENTERED LEGAL EPIDEMIOLOGY PROCESS

This visual illustrates ways to engage community members at all key points in your legal epidemiology research. Each of these stages will be unpacked throughout this guide.



Getting Ready for Community-Centered Legal Epi

Legal epidemiology is the study of law as a factor in the cause, distribution, and prevention of disease and injury, helping us understand how laws and policies work, and whether they are having the effects intended.¹ The goal of community-centered legal epi is to think strategically and creatively about how to engage those most impacted by the issue you aim to address at each stage of the legal epi process. The following questions aim to help you clarify your vision, make sure you understand the community context, and identify who should be engaged.

1 Temple University Center for Public Health Law Research. (<https://phlr.temple.edu/defining-legal-epidemiology>)

1. DEFINE THE ISSUE

- ▶ What is the change that you want to see as the leaders of this project? What do your partners/the community want to see? Is there alignment?

- ▶ If there is alignment, what is it that the community wants to see? If there is not alignment, how do you find common ground to move forward on the issue?

- ▶ What words, images, or concepts come to mind?

2. IDENTIFY POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

- ▶ What does your organization want to see as an outcome?

- ▶ Which groups see this issue as a priority? What solutions are they advocating for?

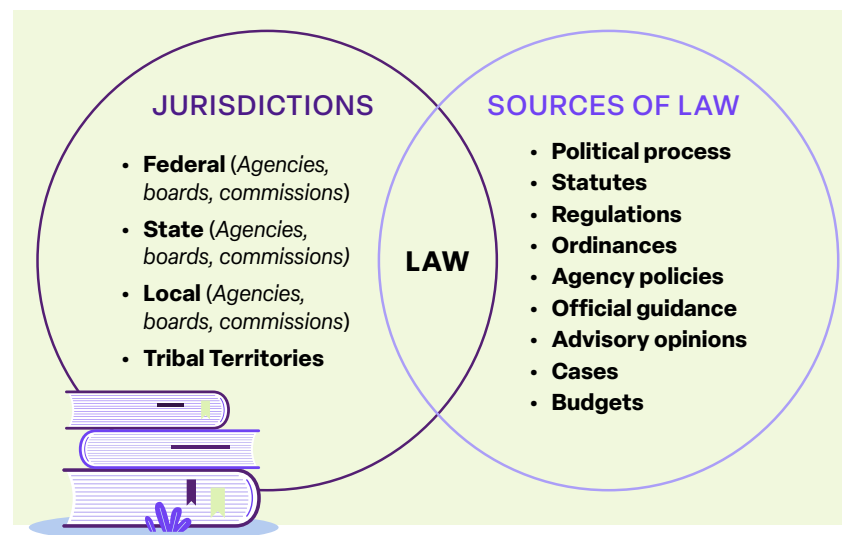
- ▶ Has this issue been addressed before in your community or others? What can we learn from those examples?

3. IDENTIFY LAWS AND ROOT CAUSES

Laws can have many sources, structures, and jurisdictions that can affect your issue. It is important to consider all these aspects of law as you begin to narrow potential solutions.

- ▶ What laws, policies, practices or norms support or prevent the change you want to see happen?

- ▶ Which do you want to focus on?



4. LIST YOUR PARTNERS AND ANTICIPATE POWER DYNAMICS

Note: For purposes of this document, “partners” can be defined however your team or organization feels is appropriate. List the partners you want to engage using the following questions as a guide:

- ▶ Who is most impacted by the issue you are trying to address and how?

- ▶ Whose voices are often missing but should be included? How do you know?

- ▶ What support or opposition do you anticipate?

- ▶ How do you and your organization see yourself in relation to the problem or the solution?

5. DEFINE YOUR VISION

- ▶ By pursuing this change, what is your vision for your community? What are you committing to?

- ▶ How will the voices you identified in step 4 guide the way you define and carry out this vision?

Together, these steps will help you create a clear starting point to understand the change you want to see, the laws in play, and the ways that communities and power dynamics can influence your path forward. With this foundation, use the next section to help ground your work in **community engagement strategies that will improve the legal epidemiology process to ultimately promote community health and wellbeing.**



Community Engagement in Legal Epidemiology

Public health aims to achieve optimal health for all. Yet, across the country, some communities consistently flourish while others consistently experience protracted and worsened health outcomes. This is in large part due to historic and still present laws and policies that act as facilitators or barriers for health and well-being.

Community-centered legal epidemiology provides a framework for bringing decision makers into authentic partnership with communities impacted by adverse outcomes. When legal epidemiology takes on a “Power-With” approach that both leverages the capacity of those with institutional influence and those most impacted by it, practitioners can deepen their analysis of barriers to health and build community capacity to address these challenges, thereby improving the effectiveness and fairness of public health laws and policies.



Community power is the ability of communities most impacted by harmful policies and practices to develop and sustain an organized base of people and influence laws and decisions that promote or prevent healthy outcomes.

WHEN WE BUILD COMMUNITY POWER, WE:

1 Act collectively to foster shared purpose and collaboration among stakeholders to improve the effectiveness of public health laws and policies.



2 Shift narratives to get at the root of why some communities experience worse health outcomes than others.



3 Engage communities authentically, to ensure inclusive, meaningful, and transparent involvement of stakeholders in the public health and policy decision-making processes.



4 Cultivate ongoing relationships to build sustained, trust-based relationships to ensure the long-term success of public health initiatives.²



² Definition adapted by Health Resources in Action, from Lead Local (<https://www.lead-local.org/glossary>)

WHAT IS NARRATIVE?

In [The Sum of Us](#), Heather McGee writes:

“... laws are merely expressions of a society’s dominant beliefs. It’s the beliefs that must shift in order for outcomes to change. When policies change in advance of the underlying beliefs, we are often surprised to find the problem still with us.”

These dominant beliefs that McGee references, or narratives, are deeply-held mindsets or values-based stories that we collectively (and often implicitly) hold to help us understand our world. When we question and uncover our own individual and collective subconscious narratives, and gather new data and listen deeply to broaden our worldviews, we can create or uplift new narratives that change our perspectives for why a disparity exists, often by amplifying the wisdom and truths of those most impacted.

The definition of Community Power Building on the previous page is quite technical, — so let’s unpack it. What does community power building mean to you?

What does it mean to **act collectively** to improve policy?

- ▶ What would this look like? Feel like? What examples have you seen work?

What does it mean to **shift narratives** on important policy issues?

- ▶ What narratives exist in society? What narratives do you want to uplift? Who carries these narratives most authentically?

What does it mean to **engage communities** authentically on policies?

- ▶ What decisions need to be made? Who might typically make them? Who could make them?

What does it mean to **cultivate ongoing relationships** in policy change processes?

- ▶ What relationships do you already have that work well? What works well about them?

- ▶ Where is there room for improvement? What would this look like? Feel like?


- ▶ What are examples of community-based relationships that are sustained over time? What makes it possible?

These questions are meant for ongoing reflection, not for one-time use. Return to these questions regularly as partners join, meaning is made, and findings move into action. By doing so, you will be better able to keep community perspectives centered, build community capacity, and improve the fairness and effectiveness of public health policies.

As you progress through the legal epidemiology process, reflect on key community engagement questions (in the right-hand columns on the following pages) to consider how community engagement can be built upon and/or strengthened throughout.

NOTES









Phase 1: Planning

In this first phase, the goal is to get clear on the issue you want to explore, identify the laws and data that matter, and create a clear plan for how to research and analyze the data. The following section translates the technical steps of legal epi into lay terms, and pairs them with reflection questions to help you describe with reflection questions to help you describe how communities most impacted will be engaged from the start in shaping the focus and approach of your project.



LEGAL EPIDEMIOLOGY	COMMUNITY POWER BUILDING
<p>Your objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Get the full picture behind your issue by looking at current and historical legal, health, and outcomes data.▶ Decide which places (jurisdictions or institutions) and levels of government you'll focus on and how you'll compare them.▶ Clarify the type of law you want to study more closely.▶ Draft a clear research question that connects the law or policy to the outcomes you care about.▶ Identify the key features of the law that can be observed and measured. For example: definitions, enforcement mechanisms, funding, and duties and responsibilities.▶ Develop a coding scheme, a set of simple question-and-answer prompts, to track those features.▶ Choose whether you will compare laws at one point in time (legal assessment) or track how they change over time (policy surveillance)▶ Write a memorandum describing the legal landscape and variation in policies across jurisdictions▶ Begin capturing and memorializing the process in a research protocol	<p>For each step in Phase 1, how can you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Act Collectively<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Key Question: How are we fostering a shared purpose for the work?• <i>Who is engaged, and who is missing, in setting agendas, defining evidence, and shaping research design?</i>• <i>How do we ensure we are authentically seeking community perspectives, and listening and learning deeply?</i> Shift Narratives<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Key Question: What narratives do historic and existing laws uphold, and how might they be shifted to help us better understand why such laws prevent some communities from flourishing? <i>What narratives inform the evidence we prioritize, the laws and policies we focus on, our analysis of what keeps communities from being healthy, and our research question?</i>• <i>Who needs to be engaged to deepen our analysis?</i> Engage Communities Authentically<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Key Question: Who is most impacted by the adverse outcomes you are trying to address and how can we shift power to center those most affected?• <i>Who holds influence (institutional or community) and how can we align with it?</i>• <i>Whose influence and interest do we want to build?</i> Cultivate relationships<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Key Question: How are we engaging partners and building trust with those most affected by outcomes of focus?• <i>How do we ensure partnerships are relational and not transactional?</i>• <i>What practices can help sustain these relationships over time?</i>



Act Collectively

- **Key Question:** How are we fostering a shared purpose for the work?
- Who is engaged, and who is missing, in setting agendas, defining evidence, and shaping research design?
- How do we ensure we are authentically seeking community perspectives, and listening and learning deeply?

Shift Narratives

- **Key Question:** What narratives do historic and existing laws uphold, and how might they be shifted to help us better understand why such laws prevent some communities from flourishing?
- What narratives inform the evidence we prioritize, the laws and policies we focus on, our analysis of what keeps communities from being healthy, and our research question?
- Who needs to be engaged to deepen our analysis?

Engage Communities Authentically

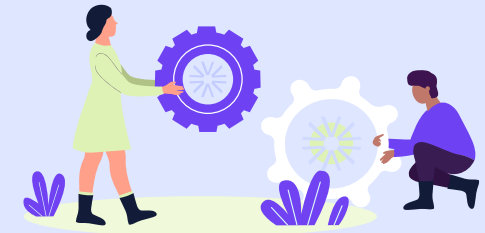
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Cultivate relationships

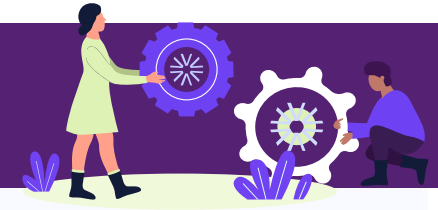
- **Key Question:** How are we engaging partners and building trust with those most affected by outcomes of focus?
- How do we ensure partnerships are relational and not transactional?
- What practices can help sustain these relationships over time?

Phase 2: Operationalization

In the Operationalization phase, the focus shifts to turning your research plan into usable data by collecting and coding the laws, then preparing them for analysis. Read across the legal epi objectives to the paired community power building questions to consider how community voices can shape what data is collected, how it is coded, and how it is made meaningful.



LEGAL EPIDEMIOLOGY	COMMUNITY POWER BUILDING
<p>Your objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Gather the laws and policies from the jurisdictions identified in Phase 1 that are specific to your research question. ▶ Code the law using questions and answers that were developed. Incorporate quality control using redundant coding ▶ Bring in both legal/policy experts and data/statistical experts to ensure the data is accurate and ready for analysis. ▶ Combine the coded legal data with health or outcome data so they can be analyzed together. 	<p>For each step in Phase 2, how can you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">  Act Collectively <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key Question: How are we seeking culturally appropriate methods that combine qualitative and quantitative approaches? • <i>Who is engaged (especially non-technical partners) in prioritizing what data is collected and how it shapes the research approach?</i> • <i>How are we fostering a shared purpose for the work?</i>  Shift Narratives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key Question: Who is engaged in making meaning of collected and selected data and how are we engaging cultural guides/interpreters to provide nuances of meaning in our analysis? • <i>As laws and policies are measured, where will we explore community narratives surrounding these policies?</i> • <i>Do the causal pathways represent our emerging narratives, and the narratives held by community and partners?</i>  Engage Communities Authentically <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key Question: How do we build the capacity of community to shift power and engage them in making meaning of the technical process of coding and analysis? • <i>Who holds power during this phase, Who are the doers and decision makers during this phase?</i> • <i>Where are opportunities to amplify community voice and center those most affected by outcomes we are trying to address?</i>  Cultivate relationships <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key Question: How are we engaging partners and ensuring partnerships are relational and not transactional? • <i>How do we communicate about technical aspects in accessible, compelling ways to cultivate and sustain community interest?</i>



Act Collectively

- **Key Question:** How are we seeking culturally appropriate methods that combine qualitative and quantitative approaches?
- Who is engaged (especially non-technical partners) in prioritizing what data is collected and how it shapes the research approach?
- How are we fostering a shared purpose for the work?

Shift Narratives

- **Key Question:** Who is engaged in making meaning of collected and selected data and how are we engaging cultural guides/ interpreters to provide nuances of meaning in our analysis?
- As laws and policies are measured, where will we explore community narratives surrounding these policies?
- Do the causal pathways represent our emerging narratives, and the narratives held by community and partners?

Engage Communities Authentically

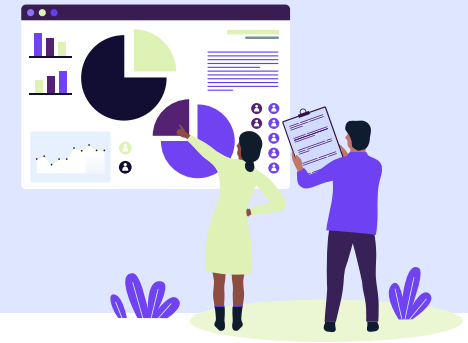
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Cultivate relationships

- **Key Question:** How are we engaging partners and ensuring partnerships are relational and not transactional?
- How do we communicate about technical aspects in accessible, compelling ways to cultivate and sustain community interest?
- What practices can help sustain these relationships over time?

Phase 3: Analyze and Disseminate

The third and final phase of the legal epi process, Analyze and Disseminate, is about understanding what your results mean and sharing them in ways that can guide policy and practice. Use the community power building questions below to think through how you will disseminate the results with community and your partners and continue relationship building.



LEGAL EPIDEMIOLOGY	COMMUNITY POWER BUILDING
<p>Your objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Engage appropriate partners and impacted communities in making sense of the findings and discussing their meaning.▶ Turn the findings into practical lessons, tools, or recommendations that can be applied in real-world settings.▶ Share your findings in the right format for the right audience: policymakers, advocates, practitioners, or the public.	<p>For each step in Phase 3, how can you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Act Collectively<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Key Question: Where can community own and influence the translation phase?• <i>Who are we engaging to interpret data and make meaning of it?</i>• <i>How can the dissemination plan and related documents or resources be co-created with community?</i> Shift Narratives<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Key Question: How can community own and share the emerging narratives?• <i>Where do findings align with or diverge from our emerging narratives (and those held by community and partners), and how can those differences be explored?</i>• <i>Who holds influential narratives that might be shifted by this analysis, and how should they be engaged?</i> Engage Communities Authentically<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Key Question: How can results translate into meaningful, community-held practice?• <i>What is the community benefit of this analysis? How do we inform a wide range of stakeholders using culturally responsive mechanisms?</i> Cultivate relationships<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Key Question: How are we engaging partners and how can we create shared accountability for long-term partnership and action?• <i>How do we ensure relationships continue beyond the project and build on trust developed during the process?</i>

Phase 3: Analyze and Disseminate | Community Power Building Questions



Act Collectively

- **Key Question: Where can community own and influence the translation phase?**
- *Who are we engaging to interpret data and make meaning of it?*
- *How can the dissemination plan and related documents or resources be co-created with community?*

Shift Narratives

- **Key Question: How can community own and share the emerging narratives?**
- *Where do findings align with or diverge from our emerging narratives (and those held by community and partners), and how can those differences be explored?*
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Engage Communities Authentically

- **Key Question: How can results translate into meaningful, community-held practice?**
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Cultivate relationships

- **Key Question: How are we engaging partners and how can we create shared accountability for long-term partnership and action?**
- *How do we ensure relationships continue beyond the project and build on trust developed during the process?*

Conclusion

The community-centered legal epi crosswalk is an invitation to practice research in a way that builds community power, shifts narratives, and sustains relationships that work towards lasting change.

As you have moved through the phases of planning, operationalization, and analysis, you have considered not only what questions to ask and how to collect and code data, but also why this work matters and who must be at the center of it. The process of aligning legal epi with community power building requires holding both rigor and relationship to ensure that our understanding of the laws we study is based on the lived experience of those most impacted by them.

SUSTAINING THE WORK

Of course, the work of community-centered legal epi does not end when a report is published. Reflect on how you might translate findings into improving policy and practice while equipping those most impacted to lead. This might require commitments between researchers, decision-makers, and community members to act on the findings together, ensuring partnerships extend beyond a single project, and making time for ongoing reflection during future efforts.



LOOKING AHEAD

At the beginning of this guide, you named a vision for your community. Now, let's revisit it:

- ▶ Has that vision evolved as a result of engaging partners and community members?

- ▶ Whose voices were amplified, and whose are still missing?

- ▶ How have your goals shifted as you deepened your understanding of both the laws and the forces that shape disparities?

- ▶ How will you strengthen accountability and relationships so that this work is carried forward?

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