

AEC Workforce Diversity Hasn't Budged Much

The National Institute of Building Sciences shared results from its second biannual Social Equity Survey. But with far fewer responses than last time, the data are hard to interpret.

by Elizabeth Waters

The diversity of the AEC sector hasn't shown much progress in two years, according to the second [Social Equity in the Built Environment Workforce Survey](#). But the survey, conducted by the nonprofit National Institute of Building Sciences (NIBS), had far fewer respondents in 2023 than in 2021, complicating efforts to compare data over time.

After hosting a social equity roundtable in 2020, NIBS decided to administer the biannual, sector-wide survey, designed in partnership with Avenue M, to better understand the workforce demographics of the building industry and inform social equity initiatives.

Response rates plummeted

In 2021, NIBS asked more than 80 organizations representing all industry sectors to send the survey to their members. Nearly [12,000 people responded](#) across 16 organizations. This year, NIBS extended the invitation to three times the number of organizations and, while 26 signed on, only 7,000 people participated—nearly half the number of 2021 respondents.

"I was elated to have more organizations sign on this year, and I thought it inevitably would create a higher response rate from 2021," said Jennifer Hitzke, director of governance and special programs at NIBS and lead on the social equity report. She expressed surprise at the lower response rate. According to Hitzke, Avenue M attributed the lower rate to several factors, including:

- organizations' prioritization of diversity, equity, and inclusion
- reduction in remote work since 2021
- changes to the way it administered the survey

"My hope is that we can learn from this experience, get more organizations to sign on, and more respondents," Hitzke concluded.

An elite group of respondents

In 30 questions, the survey collects professional, educational, and demographic data from each respondent, their perception of diversity, its importance in the building industry, and their personal experience with discrimination. The 2021 and 2023 surveys showed similar trends, but considering the disparity in response rates, the comparability of the two datasets might be limited.

About two-thirds of the respondents to the 2023 survey were men. And 80% were white. Hispanic or Latinx respondents represented the next largest racial or ethnic group at 7%, followed by Black or African American and East Asian respondents at 4% each. Most are employed full-time (73%), work for a private company (67%), and have been in the building industry for over two decades (a bit over 50%).

Respondents who identified as senior workers, managers, directors, principals, owners, and members of the C suite represent 79% of the total, while mid- and entry-level workers and la-

borers are barely represented. Hitzke explained that this breakdown “is representative of the organizations that partnered with us.” In 2023, respondents reported the most membership in The American Institute of Architects (AIA), ASHRAE, and the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC). Hitzke continued, “It is our hope that we will be able to fill in the gaps with new organizations, especially labor, signing on to participate in 2025.” (However, changing survey distribution to capture more of the workforce will further challenge efforts to compare data over time.)

Diversity and discrimination

The survey asked respondents how they define diversity. More than 70% included race, ethnicity, gender, and/or age in their definition. Close to a third held the opinion that the built environment is not diverse at all or is a little diverse—with 39% of women and 50% of Black or African American respondents answering this way. Only 24% of male and 27% of white respondents agreed.

While 79% of both women and Black or African American respondents think that increasing the diversity of the built environment is important or extremely important, only 56% of male and 62% of white respondents reported thinking the same.

Furthermore, the majority of female (61%), Black or African American (76%), Hispanic or Latinx (54%), and East Asian (59%) respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they need to work harder than others to be valued equally in the built environment.

The survey asked respondents if they had experienced discrimination throughout their careers in the building industry and, if so, what kind.

- Almost one-third of respondents reported that they experienced discrimination based on their age.

- Two-thirds of women indicated they experienced gender-based discrimination—about the same percentage as in 2021.
- More than half of Black or African American respondents said they experienced race-based discrimination, down from 75% in 2021.
- And about a third of Hispanic or Latinx and a quarter of East Asian respondents reported the same, reduced from about 50% for each in 2021.

Hitzke does not have an explanation for why some of these percentages dropped from 2021 to 2023. And although NIBS will continue to use the survey data, she said, the organization does not have plans for any further formal analysis.

So far in 2023, NIBS has convened two meetings of industry leaders to discuss how to improve equity, diversity, and inclusion across the buildings sector. The organization also has its own internal programs for building diversity. It signed the [PwC CEO Action for Diversity & Inclusion](#) in 2021. And last year, it published its 2023–2025 strategic plan, which lists Industry Development and Diversification as one of its four pillars.

Published July 26, 2023