



Communities of Color in Multnomah County:
An Unsettling Profile

A partnership between



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Executive summary

Communities of Color are a vital presence in Multnomah County. Our leadership has strengthened efforts to improve community health and well-being in many areas. Our roles have stretched from being a sounding board to policy makers, to sitting on philanthropic boards, to staffing committees and advisory groups on matters of importance like child welfare, community development, funding patterns and growing the green economy. Our voice is valued. Yet progress of our peoples is far from assured.

Communities of color are a growing portion of Multnomah County's population. Today, the official count is that communities of color comprise 26.3% of the County's numbers and this number is growing much more quickly than that of Whites, due to high fertility rates and migration. Yet we do not really know how large our communities of color really are.

Official measures to enumerate our community members are plagued by legacies of distrust and cynicism. They are also plagued by the whiteness that pervades all forms of data collection and interpretation. As a result, population measures chronically undercount our numbers. This is due to an array of factors such as ongoing invisibility for some communities of color – for the African immigrant and refugee community, and for the Slavic community, no data are routinely collected. Also at issue are survey question dilemmas, such as the failure to count the Latino community as a community of color, or outdated practices such as allowing only one racial identity to be selected. In addition, language accessibility renders participation impossible for the estimated 5.1% of the county's population who cannot communicate in either English or Spanish.²

Traditional research practices undermine our very existence as our experiences are omitted from routine data reporting in many areas. We have had to use up a significant amount of political capital just to collect the data in this report. A key message is that our communities of color have tolerated invisibility for long enough, and insist that research and reporting practices change sufficiently to make the data on all our communities routinely available in the public arena.

Our communities themselves contribute to the undercounting, as many are reticent to participate and to identify as a person of color. While the larger context for this shame or reticence may have been created by mainstream society, we have work to do inside the community to encourage prideful identification as a member of a community of color.

This project is the result of determination among many leaders in our communities, members of the Coalition of Communities of Color, who defined the need for expanded research, and asserted our leadership and capacity to define the reach, interpret the findings, and consolidate recommendations for change. This report, *"Communities of Color in Multnomah County: An Unsettling Profile"* is the result of that determination. Before you today are the fruits, as sour and as bruised as they are, of the first two years of a research partnership with Portland State University.

This report documents the experiences of communities of color in Multnomah County. The results are indeed unsettling, as many key insights emerge from the data. **First**, disparities with White communities exist across all institutions addressed in the report. The magnitude of these disparities is alarming. Consider some of the data findings:

- Communities of color earn half the incomes of whites, earning \$16,636 per year, while white people earn \$33,095 annually. Disparities close to this magnitude exist regardless of one's family and household configuration.

- Poverty levels among our communities are at levels at least double those of whites. Our child poverty rate, collectively, is 33.3%, while that of white children is 12.5%.
- Educational attainment is stratified by race. While only 7% of Whites did not graduate high school, 30% of communities of color did not.
- Disparities exist at the preschool level. By the time children enter kindergarten, there is a disparity that, depending on the measure, averages between 5% and 15% in readiness for learning scores. Most children of color are unable to access preschool programs, though they are overrepresented in Head Start initiatives.
- One-quarter of public school students of color were racially harassed in a 30-day study period, either at school or on the way to school. The figure is constant for both students in grade 8 and grade 11.
- Educational disparities in our local public schools are deeply entrenched and gains made earlier in the decade have been lost, and the achievement gap is widening.
- The labor market is similarly bruised by disparities. Communities of color access management and professional positions at half the levels of Whites. One of every two Whites access such high status and high paid work, while less than one of every four people of color access these positions.
- Communities of color have unemployment rates that are 35.7% higher than whites.
- Health disparities, while unevenly distributed across communities of color, average out to result in significant disproportionality. Low birth weights among communities of color are 37% worse than for White babies.
- Child welfare disproportionately removes African and Native American children from their homes and places them in foster care. The longer children are in care, the much greater likelihood they are African American and Native American.
- Juvenile detention rates are much worse for children of color. They are 50% more likely to be held than released into the community once they engage with the police.
- Even systems designed to improve the challenges facing communities of color, such as the protected contracting practices at the City, County and Metropolitan levels fail to deliver sufficient benefits to our communities of color. Less than one-tenth of 1% of the City of Portland's contracting dollars goes to minority-owned businesses.³

In every system we looked at, there are significant disparities. The breadth and depth of these disparities is deeply unsettling. Our best understanding of this is that institutional, ideological, behavioral and historic racism intersect to create these harrowing results. Add to this dynamic that of whiteness and white privilege, and we create the one-two punch that leads to the horrors of racism coexisting with the privileges of whiteness. Undoing such inequities must occur at all levels of every system.

Second, communities of color in Multnomah county suffer more than similar communities of color nationally. In the measures explored in this report (incomes, poverty, occupation and education), communities of color have between 15% and 20% worse outcomes. It is more difficult to get ahead here in Multnomah County than it is more generally across the USA. When we tally the disproportionate "hit" or additional income losses for communities of color living in the county, the average tally of such costs is \$8,362/year.

This inequity does not hold true for White people. On average, one's income is enhanced by living in Multnomah County. The average benefit to a White person living in Multnomah County is \$689/year. While not a large benefit, it illustrates that the harms of being a person of color in the county is additionally disparaging when Whites have a correlated benefit.

Third, we looked to a local comparison group to see how communities of color here fared in relationship to those in a western nearby city. In comparison with King County (home to Seattle), we have worse disparities and worse outcomes on every measure examined: child poverty, those who get a university degree, incomes, occupation, and renters who pay more than 30% of their incomes on rent. In King County, the child poverty rate for children of color is 21.5%, while here it is 33.3%.

This must inform our thinking about what is possible. For King County to have better conditions for people of color, while having relatively similar concentrations of people of color (30.9% compared to ours at 26.3%), should spark our sense of possibilities.

Fourth, we wondered if local conditions were improving or deteriorating for communities of color. We examined disparities in two ways – generational changes in incomes, and a contemporary examination of the last two years of available data on a wider array of disparities. In the first instance, we found that the generational picture on incomes of White families and families of color has changed markedly. Only the wealthiest 40% of White families have gained significant ground over the last generation (at an average of \$47,663/year) while that same grouping among families of color have lost income (facing an average loss of \$1,496 per year). While it is not surprising that there has been a significant growth between rich and poor (as this fact has received considerable attention at the national level over recent years), it is disturbing that this growth between rich and poor is considerably racialized (meaning that benefits seen by White families are not shared by families of color). The net impact is that there is a significant decay of income equality between Whites and communities of color across the generation.

Our second view on changes across time was a thorough view of changes that occurred in the last year (from 2007 to 2008, as the most recent data available). In 26 measures, we found that 16 measures were worse, 6 were better, and 4 stayed the same. The crucial measures of incomes, obtaining a university degree, all poverty measures and health insurance had all deteriorated. Four of the positive gains (in home ownership, mortgage burden, unemployment and dropout rate) were due not to an improved situation for communities of color, but due to a more rapidly deteriorating situation for white people, thus narrowing disparities. We can thus conclude that there were clear gains in only two of the 26 measures – clearly demarking that current disparity reduction efforts are ineffective in achieving key positive outcomes for communities of color.

Fifth, we have learned an important lesson about our Asian communities. Many may know that these communities fare quite well in national studies, typically outperforming Whites on measures such as incomes, occupations, education, poverty and housing. That is not the situation for this community in Multnomah County. Here, the characteristics of the Asian community much more closely resemble those of other communities of color than they do of Whites.

Sixth, for the first time, two additional communities of color are profiled – the Slavic community and the African Immigrant and Refugee community. Separate sections of the report profile these communities. Overall, these two communities are very highly educated but are mostly unable to access occupations, incomes and reductions in poverty rates that are typically associated with high education levels. Within the African community, poverty levels parallel those of the African American community as the depths of racism, social exclusion, and inadequate income support programs result in more than 50% of children living in poverty. In the Slavic community, the employment barriers that prevent the community from accessing good jobs results in high levels of poverty, unemployment and income disparities among families.

Seventh, the need for expanded support for culturally-specific services is in evidence in this report. Our leaders and organizations have an array of effective services customized to meet the specific and unique needs of communities of color. The failings of mainstream institutions to address the needs of communities of color are abundant and must create the impetus to act, to act holistically, and to act under the leadership of communities of color who have the legitimacy and the urgency to remedy many of the shortcomings that besiege Multnomah County.

Eighth, we have determined that there is an undercount of youth in the 2007 American Community Survey that is in the magnitude of 4.8% and further that there is a miscoding of communities of color by an additional 14.9%. We derived these figures from the more robust and more comprehensive data from public school records (centralized at the Oregon Department of Education). This is the first “hard” evidence that there is an undercount issue within ACS. While we do not advocate modifying ACS figures with these numbers, we do highlight that counting our communities is riddled with challenges. As a solution, we are developing “culturally-verified community counts” that better reflect what we believe our accurate numbers to be.

Ninth, we affirm the following commitments and directives that aim to advance racial equity.

1. ***Affirm culturally-specific services funding.*** We affirm and appreciate Multnomah County’s dedicated funding pool within the Department of Human Services, SUN Service System and seek to expand this commitment, urging all funding units in all levels of government to make such allocations a priority.
2. ***Support equity initiatives in existence.*** At the County-level, initiatives such as the Equity Council, Undoing Institutional Racism, and Multnomah County Health Department’s Health Equity Initiative hold promise to reduce disparities.

Tenth, we make the following recommendations for addressing the needs of communities of color.

1. ***Expand funding for culturally-specific services.*** Designated funds are required, and these funds must be adequate to address needs. Allocation must recognize the size of communities of color, must compensate for the undercounts that exist in population estimates, and must be sufficiently robust to address the complexity of need that are tied to communities of color.
2. ***Implement needs-based funding for communities of color.*** This report illuminates the complexity of needs facing communities of color, and highlights that Whites do not face such issues nor the disparities that result from them. Accordingly, providing services for these communities is similarly more complex. We urge funding bodies to begin implementing an equity-based funding allocation that seeks to ameliorate some of the challenges that exist in resourcing these communities.
3. ***Emphasize poverty reduction strategies.*** Poverty reduction must be an integral element of meeting the needs of communities of color. A dialogue is needed immediately to kick-start economic development efforts that hold the needs of communities of color high in policy implementation. Improving the quality and quantity of jobs that are available to people of color will reduce poverty.
4. ***Reduce disparities with firm timelines, policy commitments and resources.*** Disparity reduction across systems must occur and must ultimately ensure that one’s racial and ethnic

identity ceases to determine one's life chances. The Coalition urges State, County and City governments and school boards, to establish firm timelines with measurable outcomes to assess disparities each and every year. There must be zero-tolerance for racial and ethnic disparities. Accountability structures must be developed and implemented to ensure progress on disparity reduction. As a first step, plans for disparities reduction must be developed in every institution and be developed in partnership with communities of color. Targeted reductions with measurable outcomes must be a central feature of these plans.

5. **Count communities of color.** Immediately, we demand that funding bodies universally use the most current data available and use the “alone or in combination with other races, with or without Hispanics” as the official measure of the size of our communities. The minor over-counting that this creates is more than offset by the pervasive undercounting that exists when outsiders measure the size of our communities. When “community-verified population counts” are available, we demand that these be used.
6. **Prioritize education and early childhood services.** The Coalition prioritizes education and early childhood services as a significant pathway out of poverty and social exclusion, and urges that disparities in achievement, dropout, post-secondary education and even early education must be prioritized.
7. **Expand the role for the Coalition of Communities of Color.** The Coalition of Communities of Color seeks an ongoing role in monitoring the outcomes of disparity reduction efforts and seeks appropriate funding to facilitate this task.
8. **Research practices that make the invisible visible.** Implement research practices across institutions that are transparent, easily accessible and accurate in the representation of communities of color. Draw from the expertise within the Coalition of Communities of Color to conceptualize such practices. This will result in the immediate reversal of invisibility and tokenistic understanding of the issues facing communities of color. Such practices will expand the visibility of communities of color.
9. **Fund community development.** Significantly expand community development funding for communities of color. Build line items into state, county and city budgets for communities of color to self-organize, network our communities, develop pathways to greater social inclusion, build culturally-specific social capital and provide leadership within and outside our own communities.
10. **Disclose race and ethnicity data for mainstream service providers.** Mainstream service providers and government providers continue to have the largest role in service delivery. Accounting for the outcomes of these services for communities of color is essential. We expect each level of service provision to increasingly report on both service usage and service outcomes for communities of color.
11. **Name racism.** Before us are both the challenge and the opportunity to become engaged with issues of race, racism and whiteness. Racial experiences are a feature of daily life whether we are on the harmful end of such experience or on the beneficiary end of the spectrum. The first step is to stop pretending race and racism do not exist. The second is to know that race is always linked to experience. The third is to know that racial identity is strongly linked to experiences of marginalization, discrimination and powerlessness. We seek for those in the

White community end a prideful perception that Multnomah County is an enclave of progressivity. Communities of color face tremendous inequities and a significant narrowing of opportunity and advantage. This must become unacceptable for everyone.

Advancing racial equity depends on eliminating the multitudes of disparities profiled in this report. We aspire to catalyze an understanding of the challenges facing communities of color and to provide us all impetus to act, to act holistically, and to act under the leadership of communities of color who have the legitimacy and the urgency to remedy many of the shortcomings that besiege Multnomah county.