



The Slavic Community in Multnomah County:
An Unsettling Profile

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Executive Summary

The Slavic community is defined as those from the former Soviet Union. It is the largest refugee-based community in Oregon, with most arriving in the decade from 1990 to 2000. In 1988, then Russian President Mikhail Gorbachev allowed some religious minorities to leave the country. Numbers grew when in 1989 the USA eased immigration laws to permit Soviet immigrants. With the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Slavic community arrived in large numbers. Migration has slowed to a relative trickle with immigrants more frequently being family-class immigrants as families seek to repatriate their members.

It is a little unusual to consider the Slavic community as a community of color, for conventionally the community is considered White, and in all databases reviewed for this research, the community is included within the White community. So why this variation? The Slavic community has arrived in this part of the USA facing similar forms of discrimination and exclusion as did the Polish, Irish and Italians many generations ago. These communities struggled with language, employment, education and social exclusion. In much the same way, the Slavic community faces these barriers to parity and to equity. As a result, the Coalition of Communities of Color has formally recognized the Slavic community as a community of color. The experiences of the Slavic community have much solidarity with other communities of color. Earlier waves of immigrants from the former Soviet Union were known to achieve parity with other European immigrants to the USA within five years of arrival.¹ Today, parity has moved further out of reach despite the fact that the local Slavic community has resided in the USA for an average of 20 years.

What does the community face today? A plethora of challenges in both economic and social arenas, with key issues named below:

- Access to higher education is limited, with only 25.6% of the adult population holding a university degree compared with 43.1% of Whites holding degrees
- The achievement gap among high school students is pronounced: ¼ fewer Slavic students meet or exceed getting satisfactory scores in standardized tests in both math and reading
- One-in-five high school students report being harassed due to their language or ancestry
- Twenty-three percent of students report working while at school with ¾ of them finding that this becomes a barrier to academic success
- Fully 38% of high school students are looking for but unable to find part-time jobs
- Only ¼ of Slavic students report finding no barriers to impede their academic progress
- This is a rapidly growing community, holding the highest fertility rate among other communities of color, and with a rate that is triple that of Whites
- Some migration out of the area is occurring as families seek employment and affordable housing
- Youth are primarily hopeful for the future with 83% feeling they will succeed and create the life they want in the future
- More than one-in-five have no health insurance

- In every measure reviewed for this report, local Slavic community members fare worse than those in King County (home to Seattle)
- The economy has had a terrible impact on the Slavic community. Between 2008 and 2011...
 - Levels of employment in good jobs shrunk by about 50% while they doubled in service jobs
 - Incomes were decimated with the average household losing ¼ of their annual income. Married couple families lost, on average, more than \$20,000 per year
 - Poverty levels got worse in every category. Child poverty rates surged from 16% to 30%
 - Unemployment more than doubled from 5.6% to 13.0%
 - More of the Slavic community lost their homes. Homeownership rates dropped from 57.6% to 54.4% and the average Slavic homeowner lost \$100,000 of home equity over just three years; the White community lost \$24,000
- In a total of 15 measures that we could track over time, disparities between Slavs and Whites widened in 13 categories while they improved in only two – but even for these two, progress did not occur. The disparities improved because Whites lost ground faster than Slavs.

In addition to the policy recommendations advanced by the Coalition of Communities of Color (and included later in this report), we identify ten Slavic-specific recommendations that reflect the priorities of the community.

- I. *Data Systems:*** We must be able to routinely and accurately know the levels of access our community has to important public services, philanthropy, not-for-profits and private industry. This is essential for moving out of the shadows. We must know the nature of barriers facing us in order to craft solutions and to build accountability measures to ensure our success.
- II. *Language Supports:*** Service access and equity depends on being able to be served. Improvements to the provision of translation and interpretation are essential to getting assistance, particularly in urgent and emergency situations. Telephone access for translation will be helpful. We also need improved access to English Language Learner programs across the lifespan: durable fixes to the ELL program in our schools are urgently needed, and so too ELL access for our adults who often simultaneously need childcare to participate are top priorities.
- III. *Naturalization:*** For the 12% of community members who do not yet have citizenship, getting naturalized is an important step that (since 1996) is a much stronger pathway for accessing income support programs, particularly for the elderly. Making these classes accessible to older Slavic people is of highest priority, along with finding subsidies for their application process to offset the \$680 fee.
- IV. *Culturally-Responsive Services:*** The foundation for culturally-responsive services is to involve Slavic community leaders at policy and administrative tables – to inform the policy, the culture and the practices, with a heavy emphasis on accountability and transparency practices to ensure that disparities are measured, reforms given priority where disparities are measured, and that outcomes are made transparent to the Slavic community so that they can decide whether they want to make use of services that have differential outcomes for their community.

- V. Health Care:** Navigating health care when one faces language barriers and when one is an outsider to the US health system is very difficult. Ensuring that health care systems become fully culturally-competent is of pressing priority. This includes language access, health literacy, staffing responsiveness, cultural understanding, accountability to the community, meaningful consultations with the community to ensure relevance of services and removal of barriers to services, adequate research practices so that disparities can be identified, and support for traditional healing customs.
- VI. Employment:** Economic development investments need to be coordinated at all levels of government. Today's economic recession has been much more harmful to communities of color, and also to low income earners, to youth, and to those without strong English language skills. Economic development needs to give priority to job creation for those at low incomes, low education, and minimal English speakers. Recognizing foreign credentials and work experience continues to be of importance to the community. Today, most such experience is ignored and access to equivalency testing and training does not exist. The local community of immigrants and refugees does not have access to foreign credential programs. Such investments by universities, colleges and by local governments would be supportive of economic development for the entire region. Increasing public and private sector hiring of Slavic workers is an additional equity goal.
- VII. Education:** Improvements are urgent to address the racial disparities that exist across the education system, including early learning, discipline, achievement, ELL, special education, attendance, graduation and success in higher education. Unfortunately we do not know the status of the Slavic community in most of these measures. We also urge our largest school boards to build alternative education programs for Slavic youth for whom the school system is not working. These programs must be culturally-specific so that parental engagement is possible, and so that building trusting relationships is possible. The depth of distrust that exists for Slavic parents with the school system is pronounced – mending that fence can best be achieved through the creation and support of culturally-specific interventions.
- VIII. Housing:** Increasing the supply of affordable and subsidized housing, with a large number of bedrooms, is essential for reducing the housing burden that the Slavic community faces. It is also essential to end the misleading practices by mortgage companies – for there was story after story of discrimination and untruths told to members of the Slavic community to, essentially, steal their money. Rigorous protections from such practices needs to be provided immediately to the community.
- IX. Community Center:** One ongoing priority for the Slavic community is its own community center. Such an addition to the community would be an impetus to establish a prideful local identity and to resource the networks of service providers and informal supports that exist interspersed throughout the community.
- X. Child Welfare and Human Services:** Slavic parents are disrespected and their childrearing practices undermined by practices at schools and in child welfare. Cultural responsiveness is a pressing need for these systems. Children, families and the entire community are best

supported by confident parents. Current discourse and messages to children about their rights serve to deplete the confidence of parents.

The problem of being a non-traditional community of color is that you are invisible. No government database reports on the experiences of the Slavic community. No administrative database does such reporting either. In addition, the decision to drop the long form from Census 2010 means that the most expansive and expensive data collection effort in the USA has decided to render the Slavic community invisible. Nothing exists in the public arena about this community. We want this practice to change and advocate, as the reader will observe in our recommendations that local research practices on equity issues need to expand to include both the Slavic community and the African community. What now follows is our first effort to profile local Slavic experiences statistically.

What is new in this report? To begin, this is the largest collection of regional information on issues facing the Slavic community. Second, this is the first time that there has been an empirically-based effort to document the size of the undercount of the Slavic community. Third, we have conducted in depth research on the social and economic challenges facing the Slavic community using two new assessments of the community's experiences: the first is a customized extraction of microfile data on this community from the American Community Survey for 2008 and 2011. The second is a language-based disaggregation of school records showing performance scores of students in Multnomah county. Nowhere else are these data available. Fourth, by repeating the study of economic variables in 2008 and 2011 we are able to gather two important insights: the trends over time on the Slavic experience and the impact of this current economic recession on the local Slavic community. Finally, we have conducted original qualitative research to gather the insights of members of the Slavic community (service providers, community leaders and parents) on their experiences and to help make these data come alive with narratives. Part of this process was to survey a total of 66 Slavic youth to gather their experiences of school, employment, income, and hopes for their future.

This is important knowledge. Before one makes use of this knowledge for building programs or improving services, however, know that the Slavic community itself must have a place at the table. Time and again, we are reminded that our organizations and leaders of color are those that hold the trust of their communities. No written product can stand alone to represent the community. The Slavic community must be invited to those tables and recognized for their leadership role in knowing the needs of their communities and orchestrating responses to these needs. Remaining invisible in public policy is no longer adequate – it is what helped get us to this deplorable situation in the first place.

It is simultaneously time to remember, as elegantly stated by Coalition colleague Nancy Ramirez Arriaga from the Latino Network, “We are more than our disparities.” We urge non-Slavic readers to remember this both in the reading of this report and in the future. The Slavic community is strong, resilient and mutually supportive. The community holds a love of life, a vitality to work, to study and to thrive. It is one marked by respect for its elders and for love of its children and one that is equipped with a deep understanding of its challenges and its needs.

All of us – Whites and communities of color – hold a “shared destiny.”² Our progress as a region is held back when pronounced inequality exists. When our communities cannot access enough work, heavier use of income support programs result. When incomes are low, repressed by narrowed employment prospects, our public dollars shrink because our tax base is low. And when our labor force cannot be robust enough to catalyze new job creation, we all suffer. Ultimately, we all pay. Often our public services pick up the pieces when lives are torn apart by profound stress – and mental illness, incarceration and drug and alcohol use increases. This is costly, and when we track it back to the root causes of such distress, we find culprits of poverty, inequality, and narrow prospects for a promising future.

As we stated in an earlier report,³

Prosperity for communities of color will build prosperity for all. Indeed, drawing from the United Nation’s Human Development Index, across the USA, we hold the position of #4 in the world, but when inequality among the population is factored into human development (specifically in education, income inequality and life expectancy), the USA drops to position #12 globally, illustrating the well being of our most vulnerable communities brings down our overall vitality as a community.⁴

The notion of a shared destiny is important in pressing for racial equity. Know that the benefits of a thriving community are in all of our interests, and so too the costs of a community in distress. It is time to work together to build a more promising future for the Slavic community and indeed for us all.