



The African American Community in Multnomah County:  
*An Unsettling Profile*

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## Executive Summary

African-Americans have been present in Multnomah County and have made significant contributions to the life, culture, and development of the county since before the Oregon territory was established. Our legacy is interwoven with the state's own history of racialized discrimination and exclusion. It is also a legacy of resistance to social and economic inequity.

The struggles of African-Americans in Oregon have been a powerful agent of social change and progress. But as this report confirms, there is much to do to eliminate institutional structures that perpetuate racial injustice, poverty and disparities in opportunity for our community.

Oregon has been slow to dismantle overtly racist policies, such as mortgage lenders' redlining practices that continued into the 1990s, long after they were prohibited through the federal Fair Housing Act of 1968. These local practices deepened the well-recognized discrimination faced by African-Americans when they were denied access to both low-interest mortgages and free tuition supports after World War II.

Discriminatory policies in employment, education, housing, the criminal justice system, policing, and in economic development have had the effect of limiting the ways our community has been able to advance and thrive. Historic barriers to quality education and homeownership have resulted in few opportunities to generate and sustain wealth and economic stability. Today, the African-American community nationally holds 5 cents in wealth for every \$1 in wealth held by Whites. This disparity narrows our ability to develop resources for our community and its future generations. It impedes our capacity to withstand stress, and to weather crises and economic recessions. Communities that are denied access to critical opportunity structures become more dependent on social services and social programs, which often perpetuate the status quo, and are subject to shrinking budgets and shifts in political priorities. Many services do not meet the cultural needs of our communities.

Ongoing discrimination in housing, in lending practices, in school discipline and racial profiling with police, draw us more heavily into punitive systems like juvenile justice and child welfare, and away from systems that would benefit us like higher education, economic opportunity, protected contracting practices, private sector and civil service employment.

African-Americans in Multnomah County continue to live with the effects of racialized policies, practices, and decision-making. The stress of racism has a profound impact on health and wellness, as do other social determinants of health, such as ongoing discrimination in housing, school discipline, and racial profiling by police. Multiple systems of inequity and institutional racism results in over-representation in punitive systems like juvenile justice and child welfare, and underrepresentation in systems that advance opportunities, like higher education and civil services employment.

The result is to narrow opportunities for our future, for our children and indeed for the future of all of us, White and Black alike. Without addressing the social, racial, and economic inequities in Multnomah County, all of our futures are compromised. We affirm and applaud efforts that aim to dismantle, not perpetuate, systems of inequity. We assert the right and responsibility to hold policymakers and institutions—both public and private—accountable for progress toward racial equity.

We affirm and applaud efforts to address institutional racism and racial inequities, and seek to push these efforts further – for we must also be afforded the right and responsibility to hold public policy to account for progress towards racial equity.

The data compiled in this report demonstrate that African-Americans in Multnomah County face pronounced challenges:

- African-American family income is less than half that of White families, and the poverty rate among African-American children is nearly 50% compared to 13% for white children.
- African-Americans are deeply affected by unemployment with local unemployment levels in 2009 nearly double the white unemployment rate.
- Fewer than one-third of African-American households own their homes, compared to about 60% of white households in Multnomah County. African-Americans have experienced housing displacement and the loss of community as the historic Albina District has gentrified.
- African-Americans face substantial disparities for health outcomes like diabetes, stroke, and low birth weight, and in access to health insurance, prenatal care, and mental health care.
- In the child welfare system, African-American children are three times more likely to be placed in foster care than White children. Once in foster care, we are likely to stay in care much longer than White children.
- More than half of African-American youth do not complete high school, compared to just over a third of White students. School administrators are much more likely to discipline Black youth with suspensions and expulsions – at levels more than double those of Whites. This pattern exists despite studies that reveal Black children do not misbehave more frequently than White students.
- Black youth are 6½ times more likely to be charged with a crime than White youth, and 33% more likely to be held in detention. A White youth found guilty stands a one-in-ten chance of receiving a custodial sentence while a Black youth faces a one-in-four chance.

The composite picture of the Black community is one of deep challenges, as we strive to fulfill our aspirations for ourselves, for our families, and for our community. The evidence before us in this report must result in specific action and measurable outcomes. Approaches should consider the structures that are creating and perpetuating disparities and work to reform them for lasting change. We call for action to eliminate the County gap in income, health outcomes, social progress and educational attainment. Our County cannot afford to squander the creativity, innovation, and human potential our communities

bring to the region. African-American communities that thrive will make our entire County stronger and more competitive. Inaction is not an option.

This report includes recommendations for policies and actions that target the disparities faced by Portland's African-American community. The Portland African-American Leadership Forum (PAALF) supports and endorses the priorities of the Coalition of Communities of Color, and also acknowledges the specific needs of the African-American community to address historic and current racism. For each issue area, we present specific targeted recommendations for changing practices.

To advance these interests, we affirm the priorities advanced in our earlier work and provides specific recommendations for African-American community-defined issues.<sup>1</sup> The PAALF is committed to Portland becoming a livable city for all people, where race and economic status are not the key determinants to success in life. African-Americans must participate in and have equitable access to opportunity, and the playing field for African-Americans must be fair. Disparities in education, health, housing and economic development, and civic engagement and leadership must be eradicated.

*The City of Portland, Multnomah County, and Metro must employ a race-conscious equity strategy in planning, policy-making, and program delivery. This strategy should focus on the elimination of institutional racism: "policies, practices and programs that work to the benefit of white people and the detriment of people of color, usually unintentionally or inadvertently."*<sup>2</sup> Eradicating institutional racism requires the examination of systemic policies and practices that serve to perpetuate disparities. Putting the value of equity into practice will require changing the way these public institutions work: how government and partners make decisions; where they invest; how services and programs are delivered; how they engage with all Portlanders and newcomer communities; and how success is measured. Public sector institutions will develop and apply a set of equity tools to evaluate the development and implementation of policies, programs and business operations to reduce critical disparities. This includes work identified in the Portland Plan and for the City's Office of Equity and Human Rights plan to address deep and well documented racial disparities; Multnomah County's equity initiative; and Metro equity and diversity strategies. The following recommendations are current, achievable, and specific to the African-American community.

### **Economic Opportunity and Vitality**

- *Support Black business ownership, from entrepreneurship to growth and development.*
- *Public agency contracting and purchasing disparities must be eliminated.* Public agencies must assess the opportunities and barriers for Minority Business Enterprise participation in purchasing, consulting, and construction, and must utilize best practices for eliminating procurement disparities.
- *Public subsidies for development must advance racial equity.* Major public projects should include Community Benefits Agreements defined through public participation. These policies must go

beyond ‘good faith agreements’ to achieve measurable goals and targets that must be met for MBE utilization and workforce diversity.

### **Housing and Neighborhood Opportunity**

- *Implement plans and policies to ensure that African-American residents have affordable housing in high opportunity areas.* Anticipate and manage future development. Where there are public investments to revitalize or redevelop neighborhoods, there must be an anti-displacement strategy in place to prevent displacement. This strategy must be race-conscious in addressing particular housing barriers for African-Americans.
- *Expand support for homeownership to reduce the African-American homeownership and wealth gap in Multnomah County.*

### **Health**

- *Healthcare delivery, particularly during healthcare reform, must assess health equity metrics, including cultural competency indicators.*
- *Community health workers must be supported as a vital component of culturally-specific prevention and wellness strategies.*
- *Address ‘upstream’ factors that disproportionately impact African-American health through equitable access to healthy, affordable and culturally relevant food; housing and neighborhood stability; and support environmental justice to reduce disproportionate exposure to hazards, ensuring access to transit, and to parks and recreation opportunities.*

### **Child Welfare**

- *Shift from intervention to prevention model, committed to internal system improvement including data-based decision-making.*
- *Build community resources for African-American families, and collaborate with established family networks and community resources.* Develop and sustain culturally responsive and community-based systems of family supports and preservation.
- *Address cultural competency as a core component of Oregon Department of Human Services Workforce Development.* Enhance and transform recruitment and retention efforts for professionals of color.
- *Ensure accountability and enforcement protection by creating a plan for accountability and infrastructure.*

### **Education**

- *Define equity metrics and accountability for African-American achievement.* True education reform focuses on outcomes—closing the achievement gaps, building a culture of high expectations, and

meeting 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges for building towards careers. School districts must create equity plans that specifically address racial achievement gaps.

- *Ensure that African-American youth are prepared to enter school by investing in affordable, high quality early childhood interventions.*
- *End discipline disparities that lead to disengagement and dropout of African-American youth.*
- *Ensure that African-American youth are supported in and out of school to complete their education.*

### **Criminal Justice System**

- *Change practices that contribute to disparities/disproportionate representation of African-Americans, and other minorities in Oregon state prisons.* Reduce Oregon's over-reliance on incarceration as a response to crime and social problems, and shift toward more effective evidence based programs proven to reduce future crime.
- *Reduce recidivism and increase cost-effective crime prevention through stronger non-prison and post-prison programs.* Remove the barriers to successful community re-entry faced by formerly incarcerated people.
- *Prevent new mandatory minimum sentences, which have a disproportionate impact on African-Americans and other people of color.* Additionally, bring back judicial discretion for youth tried for Measure 11 offenses to minimize youth placement in the adult criminal justice system.
- *Adopt an approach to public safety that focuses on prevention, curbs the unsustainable growth of our prison system, invests in programs that are proven to reduce crime and save money, and strengthens support systems and services for crime survivors.*

### **Civic Engagement**

- *Ensure African-Americans are included at all the tables where African-Americans need to be engaged in policy-making and reform.* To make sure African-Americans are included every step of the way, with impact, and proactive rather than reactionary, we must be intentionally inclusive.
- *As African-American community based organizations, ensure the Black community is involved, remaining relevant and engaged in policies that affect our community.*

We implore each and every one of us to act on these recommendations. Begin today with an action plan that shows concern, compassion and a commitment to justice. To not act is unconscionable.

## Organization of this report

This report covers topics of importance for the African-American community, highlighting critical areas of disparity and disproportionate representation. The areas of analysis include: economic opportunity, housing and neighborhoods, education, health, child welfare, the criminal justice system, and civic engagement. In each area, we provide history and context, followed by data analysis that demonstrates the extent of racial disparity.

Taken together, the data on inequities show a community facing real and persistent challenges. These data point to a need for fundamental change and help to focus attention on some key drivers of that change. The depth and breadth of disparities profiled in this report, while perhaps surprising to White readers, is an affirmation of the difficult lives of many African-Americans. Importantly, this report also highlights the work of organizations that improve conditions for and in the African-American community. The approaches these organizations take to specifically confronting racial inequality demonstrate results. Their success—in improving educational outcomes, preserving homeownership, supporting parents, and increasing civic and political participation—provide models for closing the gaps. Their successes show that the disparities faced by the African-American community are neither inherent nor inevitable. While many aspects of the African-American community’s experience today are disheartening, with different approaches to equitable policy-making and resource allocation, culturally-specific program delivery, and community-driven, community-defined models, we can work towards a better future.

One general caveat for the analysis provided here relates to how data sources define racial identity. This report aims to present the conditions of the African-American community as distinct from the growing community of African immigrants. The report “The African Immigrant and Refugee Community in Multnomah County: An Unsettling Profile” denotes the unique cultural contributions and challenges for this population, and the separate effort recognizes how the history of race in America differently affects African-Americans who have experienced that history over a long term.<sup>3</sup> However, due to the relatively imprecise ways that many data sets identify race and ethnicity, it is often difficult to determine from existing data whether Black people identify as African or African-American. This failure to distinguish culture from race means definitive statements on African-Americans alone are at times difficult to make. As Multnomah County becomes home to increasing numbers of Black immigrants, it will be more important to administrative data and institutions to make the distinction among Black people in order to focus properly on the particular issues of each group. Until that time, it is important to consider when the analysis of racial disparities for Blacks may reflect not only the long term inequality experienced by African-American but also challenges of the African immigrant population that includes a substantial numbers of refugees and English language-learning students, and experiences different challenges engaging economically and politically.

The methods employed in this analysis look for two related but distinct concepts: disproportionality and disparity. Throughout this analysis, these terms have the following meanings:

Disproportionality analysis asks whether African-Americans are overrepresented among the population with a given problem compared to African-Americans' representation in the general population. For example, if Multnomah County is about 7% Black, it is disproportionate that the population of people in emergency homeless shelters is 19% Black.

Disparity asks whether the incidence of a problem within the African-American population is higher than the incidence of that problem within the dominant group. The Disparity Index (DI) is calculated as a ratio of the rate of a problem within a "Target Group" relative to the rate within a "Control Group" (in this instance, African-Americans are target, and Whites are the control). If the Target Group has a higher problem rate relative to the Control Group, the Disparity Index will have a value greater than one. Any DI substantially greater than one is an indication of disparity between the racial groups.