

CITY PROFILE ON RACIAL EQUITY

Seattle, Washington



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REAL RACE, EQUITY AND LEADERSHIP

Seattle City Profile on Racial Equity

Developing the first Municipal Race & Social Justice Initiative (RSJI)

Considered a pioneer among U.S. cities seeking to embed racial equity in their daily business, Seattle collaborates with its counterpart, King County government, to fundamentally change the role of local government. A relay race of efforts, beginning with the election of former Mayor Greg Nickels, helped move the city in this direction. When Mayor Nickels first ran for office in 2001, he seized the opportunity to address the growing disparities and segregation he had witnessed on the campaign trail. He responded to community mobilization by confronting institutional and structural racism. Nickels' response bolstered racial equity-related work that started in the mid-90s, during which former Human Services Department head, Ven Knox, led an effort to have all of the department's 900 employees trained by the *People's Institute for Survival and Beyond*.

By 2004, the city established a Race & Social Justice Initiative (RSJI), making Seattle the first municipality in the U.S. to implement a racial equity framework. With the initiative, the city committed to addressing systemic and institutional racism. The city used community organizing tools to shed light on the local government's history of structural racism and to illustrate how current government tools could begin to unravel racist policies and systems from within. Seattle's workforce and local government served as models for the rest of the city to address the impacts of race explicitly.



Seattle residents engaging in the city's Race and Social Justice Initiative

Early RSJI work resulted in departments creating their own race and social justice plans. It also prompted city government to address concerns across the municipality and develop mandatory training for all city employees on addressing racism in government. The RSJI also resulted in the development of a Racial Equity Toolkit (RET) launched in 2008. This provided city staff and department leaders with decision-making processes for service delivery, policy development, and resource related decisions and programs.

Support for this work continued through several mayoral transitions. Community pressure and a 2008 City Council ordinance codifying RSJI and requiring city departments

to report annually on their progress sustained the continued evolution of these efforts. By 2015, Mayor Ed Murray required departments to use a toolkit to examine the racial equity impact of several department and program-level decisions and projects per year.

Leadership by Staff and Elected Officials Unites Efforts

A citywide strategy team housed within the Seattle Office for Civil Rights coordinates RSJI and provides strategic direction and support. A city subcabinet for RSJI, comprised of department heads and equity leads, provides overall leadership guidance. Within each department, *Change Teams*, made up of staff from across lines of business, champion the initiative

within their departments. Every department submits an annual RSJI Work Plan, reporting to both the Mayor and City Council on their accomplishments. The *Change Teams* support their departments' RSJI efforts by providing technical assistance, training, and support to ensure the work plan results in meaningful outcomes, including how departments use the RET.

Elected officials have continued to ensure that the Council views its work through a lens of racial equity, in support of the RSJI. All mayors since Nickels' pivotal administration have issued executive orders underscoring their continued commitment to the RSJI. Several Council resolutions have complemented the executive orders, sustaining the initiative's authority to continue to make change. Today, Mayor Jenny Durkan has reaffirmed the importance of the RSJI and supports racial justice efforts throughout the city.

Councilmember Mike O'Brien has been a vocal advocate for RSJI's work, noting that it has impacted how he view his own life. "It caused me to examine the story I perceived for my path to success by beginning to understand that people of color had very different experiences in the same city," said O'Brien. "Do my kids have access to the same as others just because of the color of their skin or other demographic considerations? Should some people be predisposed to succeed or fail? Imagine what it would be like if those disparities didn't exist." O'Brien's own path to understanding more about the way systemic racism plays out in Seattle has included being intentional about hiring staff who he could learn from, and recognizing that the RSJI leadership had invested time in his growth early in the initiative. "On the one hand, I benefit from

City: Seattle, Washington

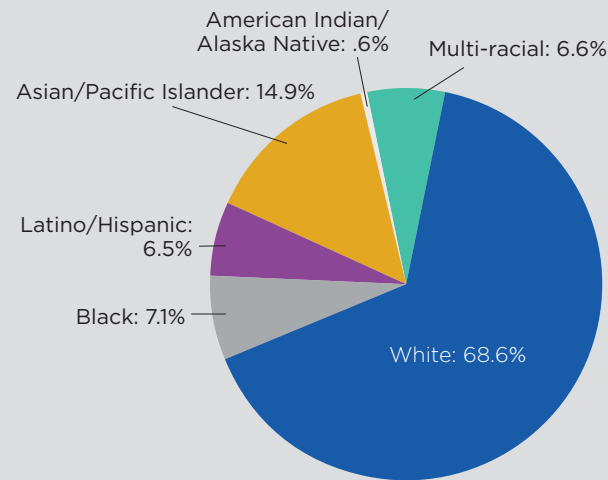
Year Starting Racial Equity Work: 2004

Mayor: Jenny Durkan

Form of Municipal Government: Mayor-Council

Population: 688,245 (2017, American Community Survey)

Demographics:



it [structural racism]. But I would be so much better off in a world without oppression weighing down on people," said O'Brien.

Changing Policy to Support Equitable Decision Making

Several municipal policy changes in Seattle have resulted directly from the city's commitment to examining how it performs when it comes to racial equity. One priority has been aligning the city's policy work with community organizing that is led with a racial equity lens. This focus has led the city to revisit its approach to issues like bail reform and youth detention. It has also changed how RSJI and the City Council approach their work in areas like residential zoning for backyard cottages and the impact of bias on residents' access to jobs and housing.

The Seattle City Council passed *Fair Chance* ordinances in 2013 and 2018 to address longstanding

community concern about systemic discrimination by employers and landlords against residents with criminal records in access to jobs and housing. These policies prevented employers and landlords from using criminal history as criteria for making decisions about job candidates and rental applicants. The road to passing these ordinances included confronting internalized biases among city staff and leaders towards people with criminal records. Other challenges included convincing business leaders to support the elimination of criminal record review in employment decisions. One key step in overcoming these obstacles was a meeting between a small group of impacted community members and the Mayor to counter concerns from landlords opposed to the idea that they wouldn't be able to deny tenancy because of an applicant's criminal history information.

Deepening the Culture Shift

Policy change has been critical to helping the city meet its goals of anti-racism, but a deeper culture shift is needed to make these changes sustainable for city-wide implementation and day-to-day practice. Over the last 12 years, Seattle's RSJI work has grown, especially in terms of its training offerings. After developing spaces to meet staff where they were, RSJI has delved deeper into more complex concepts like internalized racism, the nuances of perceptions, and supporting the self-reflection required for meaningful personal changes that serve as the building blocks for change across the city.

This capacity building work now includes a series of trainings every other month. These three- to four-hour courses include approximately 40 staff members who learn about a range of topics including understanding power and a deeper dive into implicit bias. Courses also offer spaces for staff to practice using racial equity tools and include follow-up and processing after each course. In 2018, two new training offerings explored internalized forms of racism in people of color and white people. In this way, the city hopes to continue building education to alter patterns in its institutions and practices, to root them in new norms based in anti-racist principles. This change is critical for Seattle to deliberately and successfully shift culture beyond the initial instinct to simply check a box.

Another critical component is building the capacity to address the adaptive challenges to tackling the root causes of racial inequities in Seattle. RSJI's success has enabled it to expand. The program now

includes ten to twelve equity leads. These staff members are committed to heading up equity work in their respective departments, including:

- Department of Transportation
- Office of Sustainability & Environment, through the Environmental Justice Committee
- Seattle Public Utilities
- Workforce Equity through a Planning and Advisory Committee
- Office of Arts & Culture
- Department of Planning and Development

This progress has also yielded tangible results, including transformation of practices like:

- Reorganizing the city website to make frequently-searched for information more accessible to the public
- Targeting support for community building to particular zip codes
- Prioritizing community input on topics like planning and development projects
- Adopting specific workforce equity practices including training for employers on topics like biased hiring decisions, development of employment pathways, and accountability through performance management systems
- Leveraging arts and culture-based practices to broaden the way government employees approach relationships with community members and each other

Summary: Seattle

1 Seattle's racial equity work dates back to the 2002 term of Mayor Greg Nickels, who responded to community demands for the city to address racial inequities in outcomes.

2 Several ordinances support city staff to use a racial equity lens as a guide, to help navigate through the discomfort of making changes that leadership may not have anticipated.

3 The city's Race & Social Justice Initiative, started in 2004, constantly adapts its education offerings and develops new opportunities to work with city staff to shift to an inclusive culture through training and community engagement.



REAL RACE, EQUITY AND LEADERSHIP

NLC's Race, Equity and Leadership (REAL) initiative serves to strengthen local elected officials' knowledge and capacity to eliminate racial disparities, heal racial divisions, and build more equitable communities. Learn more at www.nlc.org/REAL

This City Profile is part of a larger series made possible through the generous contributions of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation.