



Reclaiming the Dream Policy Brief

Through a new initiative called “Reclaiming the Dream” NBC LEO gave local leaders the opportunity to learn about historical disparities for Black communities and identifying strategies for eliminating those disparities. The Reclaiming the Dream initiative recognizes that local leaders are on the front lines of the challenges of racial disparities and seeks to equip municipal officials with the tools to address inequity in their local communities and the relationship local leaders have with their residents.

Introduction

One of NLC's five constituency groups, National Black Caucus of Local Elected Officials (NBC-LEO) brings together African American municipal leaders from across the United States to network and share best practices.

Established in 1970, NBC-LEO serves as a vehicle for members to discuss problems and explore solutions, debate policy issues, and contribute to the success of American cities, towns and villages. The group meets three times a year in person and hosts a variety of webinars and programs throughout the year.

NBC-LEO takes pride in tackling current issues facing the Black and African American community. This year, it was focused on:

- ◆ Making the local municipal procurement process equitable and representative of the community.
- ◆ Helping local elected officials better understand the procurement process.
- ◆ Helping local leaders understand their role in promoting minority owned business opportunities in cities.

Through a new initiative called "Reclaiming the Dream" NBC LEO gave local leaders the opportunity to learn about historical disparities for Black communities and identifying strategies for eliminating those disparities.

Reclaiming the Dream focused on five policy areas: criminal justice reform, educating on equity in government, workforce skill development, homelessness, and working with philanthropic organizations. Members explored each area through working groups and developed local policy and process recommendations.

Addressing Criminal Justice Reform

The NBC-LEO Criminal Justice Reform working group consists of local municipal leaders that are passionate about reimagining public safety by empowering communities of color to participate in shaping what safety looks like in their cities, towns and villages. It also means eliminating the unnecessary harms that often accompany policing – including use of force and arrests – by creating safer communities through collaboration and equity.

According to the Equal Justice Initiative, racial disparities persist at every level from misdemeanor arrests to executions. The “tough on crime” policies that led to mass incarceration are rooted in the belief that Black and Brown people are inherently guilty and dangerous—and that belief still drives excessive sentencing policies today.¹

More incarceration doesn’t reduce violent crime. Using jails and prisons to deal with issues like poverty, substance use and mental illness, only makes these problems worse. People often leave overcrowded and sometimes violent jails and prisons more traumatized, mentally ill and physically unwell than how they went in.²

Rethinking the Role of Police

The municipal leaders of NBC-LEO want to combat these issues by ensuring that there are clear accountability measures along with local policies that reflect community. It’s about more than just training our police forces, but about ensuring that the right people are recruited and retained and to have representation within the communities that they serve. To ensure appropriate response, this group of municipal leaders pushes increased use of non-police responders or co-responders for nonviolent calls to be sure that those in need are directed to the appropriate services and not incarcerated.

WHAT CAN LOCAL LEADERS DO?

Local leaders can work with their municipal governments to initiate or create a program to the rethink the role of police like the pilot program that has been incorporated in Washington, DC.

Under a new pilot program in Washington, DC, 911 operators will send unarmed teams of behavioral health experts and peers to the scene as the first responders to some mental health calls in the city instead of uniformed officers. The move was recommended in June 2021 by the city’s police reform commission, part of local and national efforts in the wake of George Floyd’s killing to reduce violent contact between the public and law enforcement.³

Supporting Diversion, Deflection and Reentry

As we navigate through criminal justice reform, it is important to understand that individual cases are handled in the most effective and impactful way and that jail time isn't seen as the only resolution. If underlying causes are not addressed, individuals are more likely to end up in the revolving door of the justice system. Local leaders can work with the courts to implement and expand a variety of programs that focus on collaboration with local health organizations, non-profits and the communities in their jurisdictions. These programs should address the underlying issues rather than utilize jails as the only response mechanism. More municipalities should push for the creation of programs like problem solving courts to help individuals move toward success, health and hope.⁴

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF PROBLEM-SOLVING COURTS?

The goal of problem-solving courts is to facilitate rehabilitation of carefully screened and selected defendants who are willing to try to change their behavior. Instead of a jail sentence, defendants are given counseling, treatment for their addictions or illnesses, educational assistance and healthcare support.⁵

The system for years has permanently labeled mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, daughters, sons, husbands, wives... as ex-felons, ex-offenders, ex-cons, parolees, probationers, formerly incarcerated, and now "returning citizens." Their designation isn't as important as the wants and needs that each person has upon release from incarceration. These residents are desperately seeking the same basic things as the rest of us with their future outside of a jail or prison being at the forefront. With support from the courts, case managers, local reentry offices and other service providers- these returning citizens can get back on their feet and lead productive, healthy and hopeful lives.⁶

WHAT CAN LOCAL LEADERS DO?

Local leaders can work with their cities to develop a task force to institute their city as a welcoming city for those who have been incarcerated. For example, the city of New Orleans, LA is going to build community capacity of reentry stakeholders around the use of best practices, evidence-based practices and decision making. The New Orleans Task Force will provide research, planning, training, service delivery coordination, oversight and guidance concerning grants to internal and external partners working in reentry to see a true reduction in recidivism and improved quality of life for justice involved individuals in Orleans Parish. The Task Force will also inform and assist in the development of justice reinvestment policies and practices in Louisiana, with specific attention to New Orleans.⁷

Equity in Education on Government

According to the Center for Child Counseling, in the United States, 61 percent of Black children and 51 percent of Hispanic children have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience, compared to 40 percent of White children. In every part of the country, the lowest rate of adverse childhood experiences was among Asian children. In most areas, the population most at risk was Black children.⁸

“This is a relay race and each of us must do our part to ensure, that we stay the course, focus, and continue until we see actions take place. NBC-LEO wants to see those who need help get the help that they need.”

COUNCILMEMBER SHARON HURT, NASHVILLE, TN, FIRST VICE PRESIDENT, NBC-LEO

Why Are There Educational Gaps?

Studies have shown that when more money is consistently put into schools, it yields better outcomes for students – higher test scores, higher graduation rates and sometimes even higher wages as adults. Additional research has shown students perform better if they are educated in smaller schools where they are well known (300 to 500 students is optimal), have smaller class sizes (especially at the elementary level), receive a challenging curriculum, and have more highly qualified teachers.⁹ However, these resources do not exist in Black and Brown communities. Black and Brown children who attend schools in low-income communities are subjected to over-crowded schools, lack of funding and higher rates of dropping out, making prison more promising than obtaining a college degree. Not having the same opportunities, doesn't mean a student isn't educated, but often is the result of where the student is being educated. The same is true on every level: more money, more resources, better schools, better lifestyles, healthcare, etc. All these factors shape the economic wealth gaps, generational and perpetual poverty. White, affluent parents overwhelmingly have access to high levels of other White, affluent students with low class sizes, academic quality, and school safety despite lip-service saying they valued racial and economic diversity within their schools.

WHAT CAN LOCAL LEADERS DO?

- ◆ Create policies that reduce/prevent overcrowding: Have policymakers draft plans that won't allow the slightest of overcrowding. This should be an ongoing process as new housing is developed within and around the schools.
- ◆ Prioritize school funding: currently more money is being spent to house an inmate than is being used to educate the elementary/secondary student.
- ◆ Hold teachers accountable for the learning outcomes of the students.
- ◆ Push for policymakers to have community-elected school boards that have the power and authority to make decisions about how their students are educated.¹⁰

COVID-19, Delta Variant Effects on Education in the Black and Brown Communities

The mandates for masks and vaccinations vary from state to state and within most Black and Brown communities the grandparents are the primary guardian for most elementary and secondary students. This leaves a greater opportunity for these students to potentially get infected and bring the virus back home to their grandparents. In states like Arizona, Georgia, and Texas, kids aren't even allowed to wear masks because the governors within these states have banned them completely.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) in the last two weeks of July 2021, the number of cases in kids leapt from 39,000 to 72,000. And while it's still too new to know for sure, some experts are seeing signs that Delta hits kids harder than the original virus, with more children being hospitalized.¹¹ Unfortunately, for low-income communities of color there aren't resources for families to put their kids in private school with better learning conditions or hire private learning instructors while the guidelines for school safety are being sorted out due to this virus. A study in Tokyo found that reducing class sizes protected students from infectious diseases and helps to reduce class closures due to high rates of infection. Small class sizes also promote relationships between students and provides more time for teaching. School closures have disproportionate effects on poorer children, including Black and Brown children.¹²

One study reported: "For ninth-graders living in the poorest neighborhoods, the loss of skills due to remote learning translated into a decline of about a half a point of the standard four-point grade point average — a child who earned straight Bs pre-pandemic now would get Cs in half of their subjects, the researchers said."¹³

Another concerning challenge for Black and Brown students is the disproportionate levels of punishment based on race. African American students are four times more likely to be suspended than White students. Suspensions can lead to other problems for students, including falling behind on skills like math and reading and even means they are more at risk

of being incarcerated later in life.¹⁴ Action must be taken to reduce and eliminate these racial disparities in education. Focusing on equity and providing equitable resources improves the lives of every student, not just those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Schools with the smallest achievement gaps between demographics have the highest overall test scores.

Thought Leader Lens on Equity in Education on Government

“As we work to make sure that our children have a firm foundation and equitable educational opportunities, it is also critical that we, as legislators, engage in race equity educational training such as that provided by NLC’s Race Equity and Leadership (REAL). This provides a baseline understanding of how to establish metrics that assist elected officials in how to write and implement policy that is equitable.”

RUSSEL NEAL JR., COUNCILMEMBER, WARD 4, AKRON, OH, PRESIDENT, NBC-LEO



Addressing Workforce Skill Development

Research shows that automation trends may be widening the racial wealth gap, not to mention the current disparities exacerbated by COVID-19. The municipal leaders within this working group would like to see programs and practices created to ensure that communities of color can thrive within the economy.

McKinsey & Company reported that African Americans start from a deprived position in the workforce, with an unemployment rate twice that of white workers, a pattern that persists even when controlling for education, duration of unemployment and the cause of unemployment. This distinctly disadvantaged position is partially because they are often overrepresented in the “support roles” that are most likely to be affected by automation, such as truck drivers, food service workers, and office clerks.¹⁵

Racial Wealth Gap

As the racial wealth gap continues to grow and expose the exacerbated existing income disparities, it's important to note that African Americans will have a higher rate of job displacement than workers in other segments of the US population due to displacements related to COVID-19 and gaining a smaller share of the net projected job growth. According to McKinsey & Company, by 2030 the employment outlook for African Americans—particularly men, younger workers (ages 18–35) and those without a college degree—may worsen dramatically because people of color are laid off more and hired less. If African Americans are geographically removed from future job growth centers and more likely to be concentrated in areas of job decline, these trends, if not addressed, could have a significant negative effect on the income generation, wealth, and stability of African American families.¹⁶ Racial disparities in incarceration also have had a significant impact on the racial wealth gap. According to the Sentencing Project report released in July 2021, Black youth are more than four times as likely than their white peers to be held in juvenile justice facilities, where their educational and social development is impacted. Additionally, the Prison Policy Initiative found that the “prison penalty” in unemployment disproportionately impacts Black men and women. Black women with a history of incarceration face a 44 percent unemployment rate, compared to 6 percent for Black women overall, and 23 percent for white women with a history of incarceration. Education and training programs within jails and prisons, and reentry programs that focus on both workforce training and placement, are critical to helping people succeed.

Racial inequality has been baked for more than 400 years so there is no quick policy fix that would fully reverse the effects of centuries of racism, however we need the support of local leaders on the frontlines to develop relationships and have those crucial and vibrant conversations about what access looks and feels like for Black and Brown communities.

WHAT CAN LOCAL LEADERS DO?

- ◆ Identify your local employment disparities and community assets and set clear targets for improvement.
- ◆ Get involved with your local Workforce Investment Board and incorporate a racial equity lens into their planning process.
- ◆ Engage your local post-secondary training institutions (Community Colleges, trade schools, and apprenticeship programs) as part of the solution.
- ◆ Support Career and Technical Exploration Programs in local middle and high schools; pursue Federal [Perkins grants](#) where eligible.
- ◆ Create or share a racial equity vision with local employers.
- ◆ Build an environment of support for entrepreneurs of color (training, access to capital and networks) and help local entrepreneurship support organizations become more intentional about inclusion and diversity.
- ◆ Share data about your progress – the good, the bad, and the ugly.
- ◆ Celebrate successes along the way!



Black Economic Wealth & Development

On August 11, 2021 the nation's philanthropic institutions addressed President Biden in a letter that offered a framework for "Advancing Racial Equity & Support of Underserved Communities." The letter spoke eloquently to the reason NBC-LEO established "Working with Philanthropic Organizations" as its 5th Pillar in its Reclaiming the Dream Initiative.

The letter stated that "the combination of the federal American Rescue Plan (ARP) and potentially forthcoming infrastructure and recovery dollars in funding levels not seen in our nation in more than a half century arrives at a moment of extraordinary racial awakening in America. President Biden's inspiring Executive Order on Racial Equity-forged by the combined devastation of the Covid-19 pandemic and racial protests stirred by the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, followed by the mass shootings of Asian Americans in Atlanta and Indianapolis is best implemented by immediate application of the principles and tenets reflected in the Executive Order (EO) in the allocation of new federal spending designed to respond to the most vulnerable in our nation, and with racial equity as the lens for decision-making.

This "multi-trillion dollar opportunity" to advance racial equity presents a historic opportunity to fundamentally shift our economy towards greater inclusion and significantly narrow persistent gaps in economic, social, and educational attainment. "

NBC-LEO agrees with the letter that this is an opportunity that cannot be missed.

The recent political climate that has forced the current conversation about reparations, the opioid settlement with pharmaceutical companies and the more recent allotment of COVID-19 American Rescue Plan (ARP) dollars creates a unique opportunity for NBC-LEO membership to work with the philanthropic community and secure funding that can be used to address the systemic issues that impact our communities.

To do this, NBC-LEO has worked with its fellow constituent group partners to amend NLC Resolution H42 and request that the US Treasury allow local communities the opportunity to create COVID-19 Community Equity Funds.

The effects of the coronavirus pandemic will be with us long past the target dates that the funds must be expensed. The amended H42 resolution gives elected officials a tool to address the long-standing systemic health challenges and obstacles related to the lack of economic mobility of generational wealth that exist in the Black community. The resolution calls for disparities highlighted by the pandemic to allow funds directed to a Covid-19 Local Community Equity fund to qualify as expensed under the ARP.

WHAT CAN LOCAL LEADERS DO?

As elected officials move their communities to more equitable economic positions through policies that identify, secure and direct more equitable funding using the National League of Cities Race Equity And Leadership (REAL) metrics that identify equitable settlements and disbursement of funds. The opportunity for partnership with community nonprofits and philanthropic organizations like the Association of Black Foundation Executives (ABFE) is needed to provide the proper oversight and institutionalization of secured funds.



What is Homelessness?

Homelessness is “the situation of an individual, family, or community without stable, safe, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect means and ability of acquiring it.” It is important to note that this definition does not fully encompass every experience of homelessness. Different situations due to lived experiences, culture, geography, or other factors can affect situations and every individual’s experience is unique. Homelessness is not strictly an issue of housing instability but rather a realm of systemic problems that allow individuals to fall through the gaps of societal safety nets. These differences are important when considering methods of addressing homelessness, as one strategy does not apply for every community.¹⁷

Thought Leader Lens on Homelessness

“As a housing professional we must do a better job of educating the adjacent industries or sectors on the importance of housing and what the ramifications are when there is a lack of housing stability. If you don’t have access to safe and quality homes then that affects education, your job, your health, and other social determinants of your being. Homelessness is one of the critical and crisis issues that we are facing today and that’s why I signed on to be a part of this NBC-LEO Reclaiming the Dream local policy group.”

KELVIN BROWN, ADVISORY NEIGHBORHOOD COMMISSIONER, WASHINGTON, DC

The Facts

On a single night in January 2020, according to a nationwide count facilitated by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, 580,466 people were classified as homeless and 39 percent of individuals experiencing homelessness in 2020 were living “unsheltered.” This nationwide count also revealed that on a single night in 2020, 34,000 people under the age of 25 experienced homelessness on their own as unaccompanied youth.

Homelessness is far from just a big city issue, with roughly a quarter of all people experiencing homelessness in a predominantly suburban area and almost one out of every five people experiencing homelessness are found in largely rural areas.

Black people are significantly overrepresented among the homeless population: Making up just 12 percent of the U.S. population, Black individuals account for roughly 39 percent of individuals experiencing homelessness.¹⁸

Although many local governments have established shelters or other services for those experiencing homelessness, many refuse these options. The reasons for people experiencing homelessness to opt to live on the street and refuse shelter services are varied and personal. Some live on the street due to drug testing restrictions, others feel that shelters are overly paternalistic.¹⁹ There are also sometimes concerns of safety and privacy with congregate living situations.²⁰

Thought Leader Lens on Homelessness

“Homelessness is a topic that is rarely discussed and when you consider the existing rate of homelessness, on top of COVID-19 and the concern of more people becoming homeless due to the lack of job opportunities and affordable housing and the time it will take because of post-recovery that concerns me. It’s also concerning as a nation that we don’t discuss: What does it mean to be homeless? What services we can provide as local government officials and what policies we can put into place to support.”

DENISE MITCHELL, COUNCILMEMBER, COLLEGE PARK, MD

Driving Factors of Homelessness

Root causes of homelessness are complex, interconnected and often systemic issues. Any one individual experiencing homelessness may be facing multiple circumstances, challenges or risk factors that contribute to them losing access to stable, safe housing. But while not exhaustive, some common factors that can contribute to why someone experiences homelessness. [Click here](#)²¹ to read more.

Thought Leader Lens on Homelessness

“There is a growing issue within my city and around the country and I decided to join this group to see what others are doing in way of legislation to assist with a solution. And find out what my peers are thinking because I feel it’s a silent epidemic and no one is really talking about it, but we keep shuffling people from place to place but there is no solid solution. Budgets don’t always lead to funding for homelessness because in some eyes it’s not a crisis.”

RHONDA LOGAN, COUNCILWOMAN, MEMPHIS, TN

WHAT CAN LOCAL LEADERS DO?

- ◆ Local leaders can work with their cities to provide emergency health services for those individuals or families that are experiencing homelessness.
- ◆ Help expand the access to additional mental health service.
- ◆ Work with their cities to see how they can provide transportation, life skills, education, job training, career counseling, job placement services, access to identification and connection with financial services.
- ◆ Determine how they can help develop a unique set of services and programs to aid and assist homeless veterans.

Conclusion

The Reclaiming The Dream initiative is NBC-LEO's plan to address the systemic racism that raises its ugly head in this nation's criminal justice, educational systems, leading to lack of economic opportunity, employment opportunities and homelessness: all of which are reflected in the disproportionate wealth gap that exist within the Black community.

We understand that to change systemic structural and institutionalized racist systems we must have a plan that institutionalizes our collective work and builds new systems. These systems must be equitable and create opportunities for our communities to fully participate in all the bounty that this nation has to offer.

It is with this thought in mind that we seek to reclaim, and fulfill, Dr. Martin Luther King 's dream for the Black community. By using these five pillars focusing on Criminal Justice Reform, Education on Equity in Government, Workforce Skill Development, Homelessness and Black Economic and Wealth Development, we can give those that have been locked out an opportunity to fully participate in what this great nation has to offer.

Endnotes

- ¹ <https://ejj.org/criminal-justice-reform/>
- ² <https://ejj.org/criminal-justice-reform/>
- ³ https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/dc-mental-health-crisis-response/2021/05/17/2c761706-b746-11eb-96b9-e949d5397de9_story.html
- ⁴ <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/criminal->
- ⁵ <https://www.pacourts.us/Storage/media/pdfs/20210224/033217-problemsolvingcourts-001748.pdf>
- ⁶ <https://www.voa.org/correctional-re-entry-services>
- ⁷ <http://holareentry.org/>
- ⁸ <https://www.centerforchildcounseling.org/aces-and-minorities/#:~:text=In%20the%20United%20States%2C%2061,at%20risk%20was%20black%20children>
- ⁹ [https://www.pbs.org/weta/twoschools/thechallenge/gap/gap_3.html#:~:text=Over%20the%20past%2030%20years,sizes%20\(especially%20at%20the%20elementary](https://www.pbs.org/weta/twoschools/thechallenge/gap/gap_3.html#:~:text=Over%20the%20past%2030%20years,sizes%20(especially%20at%20the%20elementary)
- ¹⁰ <https://soeonline.american.edu/blog/5-ways-policy-makers-can-improve-the-quality-of-education#address-school>
- ¹¹ Back to School, Back to COVID-19? Delta Changes the Situation (webmd.com)
- ¹² <https://www.iza.org/publications/dp/13432/do-class-size-reductions-protect-students-from-infectious-disease-lessons-for-covid-19-policy-from-flu-epidemic-in-tokyo-metropolitan-area>
- ¹³ <https://news.yale.edu/2021/01/05/covid-school-closures-most-harm-students-poorest-neighborhoods>
- ¹⁴ <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/black-children-are-more-likely-to-be-disciplined-than-white-kids-for-the-same-behavior-2019-10-16>
- ¹⁵ <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/the-future-of-work-in-black-america#>
- ¹⁶ <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/the-future-of-work-in-black-america#>
- ¹⁷ <https://www.homelesshub.ca/about-homelessness/homelessness-101/what-homelessness>
- ¹⁸ <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/2020-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>
- ¹⁹ <https://today.ttu.edu/posts/2010/01/on-the-streets-why-homeless-people-refuse-shelter>
- ²⁰ <https://metropolitics.org/Understanding-Why-Homeless-People-Refuse-Emergency-Accommodation.html>
- ²¹ Unlocking-Homelessness.pdf (nlc.org)