

Systemic racism does not only happen in the big cities

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing July 6, 2020

 Latest in a series of posts responding to the George Floyd killing 

from Becky Bradley, “Talking Business with Becky Bradley: We Must Face Our Race and Ethnic Disparities.” Morning Call, July 2, 2020.

Data Lehigh Valley

As the collective call for justice against police brutality washes across America, it’s important that the Lehigh Valley not fall into the trap of believing that systemic racism is only happening in big cities like Minneapolis, Seattle and Atlanta.

While racial disparities have diminished since the 1969 week-long walkout of Black students and the 1971 ‘Race Riot’ at Easton Area High School, there is still much work to be done in our community.

Despite strides made toward equity, recent protests in the Lehigh Valley recognize that the region is not exempt from institutional injustices against people of color.

This is not a matter of opinion or debate. It plays out clearly in the data from the LVPC’s latest Equity Analysis of the Lehigh Valley, which uses 14 key data points to measure a person’s access to the necessities that determine quality of life — housing, employment, education and transportation. The data shows that Non-White — and Blacks and Hispanics or Latinos in particular — make less money, are less likely to own a home and have far less access to education and transportation.

The data, available at lvpc.org, provides a detailed statistical snapshot of every community in the region and can be a useful tool for area leaders to understand the context and makeup of specific neighborhoods where change might be necessary.

Let’s start with the heart of this issue: The people who live here.

The Lehigh Valley's population has become increasingly diverse, as the proportion of those identifying as White has decreased from 99% to 82% over the last half-century. The Non-White population overall has more than doubled since 1990, while the proportion of Hispanics or Latinos has been nearly doubling each decade since 1970. Today, those who identify as Hispanic or Latino make up 18.7% of the region's residents, yet the data shows they have the least access to opportunity.

Non-White Lehigh Valley residents are three times more likely to not graduate from high school compared to White residents — severely limiting their employment opportunity. It's likely the reason more than 11,000 Non-White households have an annual income below \$35,000. Non-Whites are nearly three times more likely to be in poverty than Whites, and Hispanics or Latinos are four times as likely.

Limited income potential, caused by limited opportunities for higher educational attainment, also restricts the ability of Non-Whites to purchase a home and build wealth. Lehigh Valley Whites are twice as likely to own a home than Blacks and Hispanics or Latinos. Even where Non-Whites are financially able to consider homeownership, national statistics by Pew Research show the remnants of decades-old discriminatory lending and zoning practices cause them to be less likely to be approved for a loan, and then pay higher interest rates when they are approved.

These factors, in turn, further limit educational opportunities for future generations of Non-Whites, as many families use home equity as a mechanism to pay for higher education.

If you're wondering how this lack of access looks in the real world, you need only look at the Allentown School District. The region's largest district with nearly 17,000 students is 70% Hispanic or Latino and 15% Black. When the pandemic hit, as the rest of the Valley's school districts transitioned students to online learning within a few weeks, Allentown was realizing that 43% of its students had no access to the internet. That's 7,200 students who either had no computer or no adequate internet connection.

If the moral argument for increasing equity doesn't do it for you, there are economic and productivity implications as well. Increasing equity has

been found to reduce poverty and boost economic growth, by increasing incomes and thus increasing participation in and contribution to the local economy.

Just as we did to help locate the students without internet access, we can use this Equity Analysis data to inform decision-making at the municipal, county and regional levels to effect change. Our private and non-profit partners can use it to change the way they do business.

Inequity is not an easy topic to discuss, but the importance of facing this issue cannot be overstated. We have a unique opportunity to talk about this now. It's not enough to simply not be racist. We must all be anti-racist.

The Lehigh Valley must come together to formulate changes, both big and small, to create a better tomorrow for our community.