



Twin Cities 2050: Advancing an Equity Agenda for the Twin Cities region

by Tracy Babler, Alliance for Metropolitan Stability

The U.S. Census Bureau recently announced that more than 50 percent of babies born in the U.S. are now of color. The implications of this trend are clear: people of color will soon make up the majority of the U.S. population. The rapidly changing demographics of the nation are frequently discussed in terms of challenges: statistics about disparities and stories of inequity that demonstrate the significant barriers facing people of color. These challenges are real, but our changing demographics aren't cause for alarm. Rather, these changes bring together diverse experiences that could reinvigorate the American economy.

Last week, community, government and business leaders from the Twin Cities region came together to discuss the largely untapped potential living within our region's communities of color and how it can be harnessed to fuel our region's economic growth. At a meeting convened by [EquityNow Twin Cities](#), [PolicyLink](#) and the [Center for American Progress](#), some of the region's and nation's greatest equity thinkers outlined the steps it will take to make that happen, and to ensure that we can all prosper into the future.

Minnesota's demographic changes

Angela Glover Blackwell, one of the equity movement's most recognizable figures, traveled to the Twin Cities to facilitate the discussion. She opened by stating that people at the local level have a huge role to play in identifying on-the-ground, replicable models that can play a role nationally in removing some of the barriers facing people of color. "Local leaders are national leaders because they are solving the nation's problems," she said.

With that thought in mind, the Twin Cities leaders spent the morning discussing the very real challenges facing people of color in this region. A presentation by State Demographer Sarah Brower highlighted that Minnesota's labor force growth is slowing because of the state's aging white population. Because the younger generations are significantly more diverse, new economic growth will be driven by people of color in Minnesota. That change means that investing in the potential of young people of color is critical to our state's success.

"Population drives economic growth," said Brower. "That's why every last one of our residents becomes important to our well-being."

Glover Blackwell worried that type of investment won't happen if older white people do not feel connected to the needs of youth of color. This poses the question of whether there will be enough political will to invest in the potential of our future leaders. "Is our racial divide becoming a generational divide?" she wondered. "All people are suffering because of our inability to bridge that divide."

The ages and races of the population aren't the only changes facing the region—where people live is also playing a role in how the Twin Cities region thinks about public investment. Hennepin County Commissioner Peter McLaughlin shared that over the past few decades, a sense of separation has been heightened between urban areas and the exurbs. He said that “virulence against investing in the fundamental building blocks that made us successful in the past” will be a significant political challenge to overcome.

That geographic divide makes it difficult to discuss how to end the region's racial disparities, because funding always presents a barrier. Any discussion of school success and workforce preparedness must be accompanied by a discussion of how to fund it, said Ken Peterson, commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry. “We talk about education, but when it comes to money we run away from it,” he said. “If we can't solve the funding problem, we'll continue to have disparities and it will become worse.”

Preparing the workforce of the future

The leaders around the table pointed out that Minnesota is failing to prepare all of its residents to play a role in our economic success. As early as elementary school, there is a sizable achievement gap between white students and students of color. Large numbers of students of color are dropping out of high school, and few are seeking the post-secondary education that the jobs of the future will require. Sunny Chanthanouvong of the Lao Assistance Center said that raised a huge concern for Southeast Asian people in the Twin Cities. Only 6 percent of Lao residents are able to access any sort of post-secondary education, which will prevent them from obtaining family-supporting jobs that increasingly require an associate's degree or beyond.

Coupled with that problem is that people of color are already facing significantly higher rates of unemployment than whites. The Economic Policy Institute's annual rating of the regions with the worst black-white employment gap showed the Twin Cities at the top in 2011. Avi Viswanathan, coalition organizer for the HIRE Minnesota coalition, said that this employment gap means the Twin Cities will already be starting from a deficit when creating the workforce of the future. “We already have a mismatch,” he said. “Unless we intervene now, the problems will become dramatically worse.”

Shalini Gupta, executive director of the Center for Earth, Energy and Democracy, added that we need to start even before formal education begins when we think about the preparation of children of color. People of color in the Twin Cities, particularly women and children, have higher rates of exposure to toxic materials, which is impacting the developmental capacity of children. She argued for a holistic approach to these problems that recognizes that environmental, educational and employment disparities are all interrelated.

The role of the prison-industrial complex

One of the significant barriers to success that participants raised was the high incidence of involvement of African American males in the criminal justice system in the Twin Cities. Minnesota has the worst black-white imprisonment ratio with more than 25 African Americans imprisoned for

each white person, despite the fact that there are significantly more white people in the state. A state analysis illustrated this point clearly: young African American males are more than six times more likely to be incarcerated than to live in college housing.

University of St. Thomas Professor Nekima Levy-Pounds said that the increase of African American males in the criminal justice system has coincided with the diversity of the state. As a relatively new, African-American resident of the Twin Cities she has found that, “the Twin Cities aren’t ready for people with different experiences.”

A major concern this raises is that people with criminal records find it difficult to obtain future employment. Hennepin County District Court Judge Pamela Alexander said that there were formerly around 250 laws that presented barriers to employment for people with criminal records. At last count, there were more than 700.

Levy-Pounds has been part of an effort called [Brotherhood Inc.](#), which provides direct employment opportunities to young African American males with criminal records as a way to circumvent those legal barriers. This unique St. Paul-based program recently started a coffee shop to generate funds and create jobs. Chris Stewart, the executive director of the African American Leadership Forum, said that programs like Brotherhood Inc. demonstrate how every decision we make can either reinforce the status quo or make real change.

“We’ve been talking about policy solutions all day,” he said. “But the reality is, even where you buy your coffee can make a difference.”

Moving Forward: Creating a Culture Where All People Can Thrive

After the discussion of the challenges facing Minnesota and the Twin Cities region, there was an equally rich conversation about the opportunities being claimed and the models being advanced here. Minnesota offers many resources and is known as the best in the nation at many things—except racial equity. One of the ideas that came up the most was that equity leaders in the Twin Cities need to find ways to build space for a cultural shift that will simultaneously open up the doors to economic opportunity for people of color and benefit all people living here by reinvigorating our economy.

Part of that shift includes making sure the rooms where big decisions are being made aren’t just filled with white people, said Stewart. “Decisions are being made every day, and the rooms don’t look like this one,” he said, referring to the diversity around the table. “The social intelligence is missing. How can you lead the nation in everything except the inclusion of your own people?”

In the end, several participants said, we can only be successful if we flip the narrative. Rather than talking about communities of color as deficits or liabilities, we must always focus on highlighting the assets these communities contribute to our culture, our quality of life and our economy. One such strategy that is flourishing in the Twin Cities is the promotion of cultural corridors, which are being used as economic development engines for local communities that highlight the unique characteristics of distinct neighborhoods. The [American Indian Cultural Corridor](#) along Franklin

Avenue in Minneapolis and [Little Mekong](#) along St. Paul's Central Corridor are two thriving examples of these cultural destinations.

Metropolitan Council Chair Susan Haigh echoed the idea of placemaking, saying that her agency is shifting its investment strategies to ensure that the ideas of residents are infused into the planning of public spaces. She acknowledged that when public institutions make large infrastructure investments, they have to ensure that all people have access to that opportunity—and are allowed to offer new ideas into the process.

In closing, Repa Mekha, executive director of Nexus Community Partners, agreed that getting people of color represented at decision-making tables would be an important part of that strategy.

“We can't just be invited to respond to plans, we have to be at the table and on committees where decisions are being made and we need to think earlier in planning processes about ways to encourage entrepreneurship, home ownership and job training,” he said. “We need to be planning for equitable outcomes, not just hoping they happen.”

EquityNowTC believes that by working together, a diverse group of passionate people will achieve equity for Minnesota and beyond. To read more about how Twin Cities leaders are coming together to plan for those equitable outcomes, please visit EquityNow Twin Cities at equitynowtc.org.