

NEW JERSEY

How can NJ's municipalities make progress toward racial justice?

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While calls abound for federal and state initiatives to address systemic racism, experts and New Jersey activists are pushing for change community by community, looking to the state's 565 municipalities for justice-oriented change.

They are fighting to keep the momentum going, sparking unprecedented reckonings about race and pushing for change that they say is long overdue, even as the large-scale protests that gripped the U.S. in June slow to a trickle.

“Black and brown people know this is the reality,” said Liza Chowdhury, a social sciences and criminal justice professor at Borough of Manhattan Community College. “What’s happening now is that all of America is waking up to the reality of Black people in this country.”

'There's no healing in that community'

Some experts point to the actions individual communities can take without waiting for state or federal direction. For instance, local leaders in Asheville, North Carolina, unanimously approved a reparations measure Tuesday, saying it would fund programs aimed at closing gaps in housing, employment, education and health care.

“Officials have to shift the way they’ve been governing,” said Aaron Greene, associate counsel at the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice. “Reparations have so many different forms. It’s going to be a long process, because there’s been so much harm.”

That shift, he added, should include stepping aside to let people who have experienced the most oppression lead the way to new policies.

Changes that reflect the long-term context of racism, experts said, are needed in places such as Paterson, which is predominantly Black and Hispanic. The city, once a thriving industrial hub, experienced major economic decline, ushering in criminality and violence.

“Small-scale inequalities snowball into large-scale inequalities,” said Jason Williams, a justice studies professor at Montclair State University. “They’re tolerated and manufactured.

“We associate Blackness with downtroddenness and depravity,” he added. “The quarantining of Black bodies in spaces that are depraved and dispossessed makes them almost invisible to the eyes of others.”

Paterson Mayor Andre Sayegh in a June NorthJersey.com op-ed wrote that the city was hiring 10 new police officers with the help of a U.S. Department of Justice grant and that it had applied for an additional \$2 million in federal funding.

Hiring officers, Sayegh wrote, is a priority because Paterson’s Police Department is understaffed.

But Chowdhury, a former juvenile probation officer who studies structural oppression and has worked in Paterson for nearly 20 years, said that approach is problematic and unlikely to help.

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“Even though police presence is there, they’re only like a Band-Aid,” she said. “They’re only reacting. There’s no healing in that community.”

Suburbs, she added, are often safer because they have more economic stability, after-school programming and strong community involvement — not because they’re heavily policed.

“You can’t always depend on the police,” Chowdhury said. “They are not economists. They are not mental health practitioners. They are not drug counselors. We’re telling them to do a job they’re not equipped for. We’re not going to move the needle doing the same thing over and over again.”

She contrasted Paterson’s approach with that of Newark, where authorities in June moved to divert more than \$11 million from the city’s public safety budget — 5% — to violence prevention.

And when Newark, like so many other cities across the nation, erupted in protests, the streets were full but not violent. Police stood down as community street teams identified and isolated would-be perpetrators of destruction.

“That’s profound,” Chowdhury said. “Newark has a history of this disconnect between police and the community, but this process of healing is going on as we speak. They can be a model for the rest of the country.”

Community-level improvements aren’t limited to changes in policing, experts said. Several emphasized voter education as a key element en route to justice.

Williams works with formerly incarcerated people going through reentry and regaining voting rights. They ask him: I can vote? If I don’t vote, will I get in trouble?

“This is what we’re up against,” Williams said. “Hopelessness. Helplessness.”

Also critical is this year’s U.S. Census: Newark and Jersey City, Greene said, are first and second in the nation for the percentage of Black people living in hard-to-count areas, meaning those locales could miss out on imperative resources.

"The census is more than just a headcount that determines how many members of Congress we get," Gov. Phil Murphy said during a Friday press briefing. The census, he said, affects more than "\$45 billion in annual federal funding for New Jersey's communities, and it does it for a decade, so that's at least \$450 billion U.S. dollars — funding for public health programs and services, funding for our schools, housing, transportation, infrastructure, services for our seniors, our kids and our most vulnerable residents, and much, much more.

"Making sure we have an accurate count means we get more back from Washington to invest in our communities," Murphy said.

Communities should also push for local-level racial and ethnic data from a pandemic that has disproportionately harmed minorities, Greene said. They should release numbers of cases, deaths and people turned away from hospitals among minority groups — as well as data about how minorities are treated in hospitals, where health care disparities can abound.

"Oppression is by design," Greene said. "It is important that liberation is by design as well."

Telling a story

Rumblings of change are also beginning to shake New Jersey communities where advocates for justice once questioned whether progress was possible because people seemed blind to racism in their own towns.

On June 6, Bianca Garcia stood in front of a crowd gathered in a Wayne parking lot and held up a sign. It had pictures of the authors of the books assigned for summer reading at the township's public schools. All were white.

Nearly 5,300 people signed a petition she started, calling on the school district to diversify its curriculum, which allows four weeks to Black history across nine years of education.

In June, a group composed mostly of graduates of the Ridgewood school system founded Ridgewood for Black Liberation. The group began organizing peaceful rallies, marches and town halls.

In early July, one of the group's organizers, Thria Margareth Bernabe, was arrested while participating in a peaceful protest. She was held for hours and issued a summons for a disorderly persons offense — for stepping into the street. More than 3,700 people signed a petition asking the Ridgewood Police Department to drop the charges.

"A lot of white allies are beginning to do more research on these systematic issues," said Sean Wilson, a criminal justice professor at William Paterson University. "They're

beginning to reexamine some of their perceptions of justice and police, which is effective and necessary if we want to move forward toward reimagining what justice looks like.

“It shouldn’t take a recorded lynching to make people concerned,” he added.

On top of reevaluating police budgets and bringing local justice-oriented organizations to the table for policy discussions, city councils could have “very intentional” sessions or meetings, giving the mic to fellow community residents who experience racism daily.

“Now is the time to center the voices of the formerly incarcerated, center the voices of people who deal with daily oppression from police,” Wilson said. “We’ve relied too much on the so-called experts — the people who don’t have the lived experience.”

Such efforts must eclipse Black History Month, in February, and similar calendar moments, when programming sometimes “does not feel genuine,” Williams said.

“It has to go beyond months and weeks that we ascribe to minoritized groups,” he said. “It has to be done in ways that are intentional.”

Those emotional narratives, including sharing experiences during rallies, are among the most powerful tools available for creating change, experts said.

“Sometimes,” Williams said, “all it takes is telling a story.”

Williams tells a story of his own: He grew up in a downtrodden neighborhood, in a “total system of policing,” asking himself, “Why must I live this way?”

“From my window, I can see New York City, the pangs of capitalism,” Williams said. “It’s like two different worlds separated by the Passaic River. It’s like being locked in an open-air prison.

“This moment should call us to reflect on that,” he added. “Is it reverberating far enough?”

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