

An Equity Profile of Kalamazoo County, Michigan: Summary

April 2023



Foreword

Kalamazoo County is a place of abundance, home to stunning natural landscapes, beautiful architecture, thriving industries, growing small businesses, and recently a vaccine that has had a global impact. Nationally, we're known not only for our microbreweries and universities but also for the investments we make in our young people and their education. Of course, the best thing about Kalamazoo County is the people who live here. Our community is enriched by the vibrant diversity that exists within its cities, towns, and neighborhoods, strengthened by the cultural contributions and economic innovations of the individuals who call this place home.

With all that Kalamazoo County has to offer, it is an unjust reality that not everyone who lives here can access that abundance. Even as we all do our best to provide for our families, build the lives we want, pursue our aspirations, and contribute to the community, our experiences of living here can be very different. The report, *An Equity Profile of Kalamazoo County*, asks: what are the root causes behind people in the same place living such different lives? In answer, through each page of the profile we gain an understanding of how racial, social, and economic inequities are impacting access to resources, housing, education, and power.

The data in the profile show a clear but challenging truth: systemic racism is harming Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) within our county. Disproportionate and unjust barriers woven into our community's systems, policies, and institutions make it more difficult for BIPOC families and individuals to access the things we all need to thrive. As in our state, nation, and world, racial inequity in Kalamazoo has a strong impact on both short-term outcomes and life trajectories across generations.

The good news? This report not only maps out challenges facing Kalamazoo County but also shows how to navigate our response as a community. Listening to the stories told here can act as a catalyst, bringing together philanthropic organizations, nonprofit partners, policymakers, and community members to spark strategies that advance equity and justice. Our region's talented people, abundant resources, and data-driven expertise can all be mobilized toward a more equitable and just community.

From all of the progress that has already been made, it's clear it will take effort and ingenuity to dismantle deeply embedded inequities and injustices in our systems. The commitment and support of the entire community will be vital in driving immediate action and sustaining the long-term work ahead.

Fortunately, the rewards will be shared by us all. As shown in *An Equity Profile of Kalamazoo County*, equity leads to better outcomes in a community: a stronger economy, longer and healthier lives, higher academic achievement, greater sustainability, and more resilience through change. Equity and justice have the power to unlock our community's economic and human potential. It is in the best interest of all of us to work toward a future where everyone is welcomed, valued, and prepared for the success that lies ahead.

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Overview

Kalamazoo County, like many other parts of the country, has been negatively impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The social, health, and economic impacts of the pandemic have illuminated many inequities that existed long before 2020. But the county is well positioned to come back stronger, as residents and leaders across the county align to center racial equity and inclusion in recovery efforts. By making equity a core operating principle and implementing policies and strategies to ensure low-income people and communities of color can reach their full potential, Kalamazoo can lay the groundwork for prosperity for generations to come.

Equity—just and fair inclusion—is both a moral imperative and the path to a prosperous and inclusive new economy. Kalamazoo’s economic power, diversity, and innovation attract residents from across the country and around the world, and these same assets are the key ingredients for equitable growth. There is work to do to embed an equity framework in the workforce, housing, health-care, education, and public-safety systems in Kalamazoo County, but momentum is also growing among leaders committed to advancing just and fair inclusion for all who call the county home.

Even before the nationwide moment of racial reckoning sparked by the murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the sharp increase in violence against Asian Americans in the wake of Covid-19, Kalamazoo had already begun to grapple with its own history of racism and harm perpetuated against communities of color. Residents, advocates, community groups, and nonprofit organizations are not afraid to lean into difficult conversations about structural and systemic inequities. And as the home to many prominent companies and family foundations that give back to the community, Kalamazoo County has considerable resources available to fund important equity efforts.

An Equity Profile of Kalamazoo County is designed to provide a starting point for advocates, community organizations, business leaders, and elected officials to understand the state of equity in the county and to identify priority areas for policy and systems change. The indicators included in the profile were drawn from the National Equity Atlas indicators database, a resource developed by PolicyLink and the USC Dornsife Equity Research Institute. The database incorporates data from public and private sources, such as the US Census Bureau, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, and Woods & Poole Economics, Inc., and provides equity indicators deeply disaggregated by race and ethnicity as well as gender, nativity, education, and income.

To supplement the quantitative analysis contained in the profile, this summary report highlights findings from the profile, draws upon insights that were shared during 18 interviews conducted with local community leaders and residents, and includes an inventory of policy recommendations to address the inequities revealed in our data analysis. While this document does not exhaustively address every challenge facing Kalamazoo, nor all of its assets, our hope is that it will help guide efforts to create a more equitable and inclusive county.

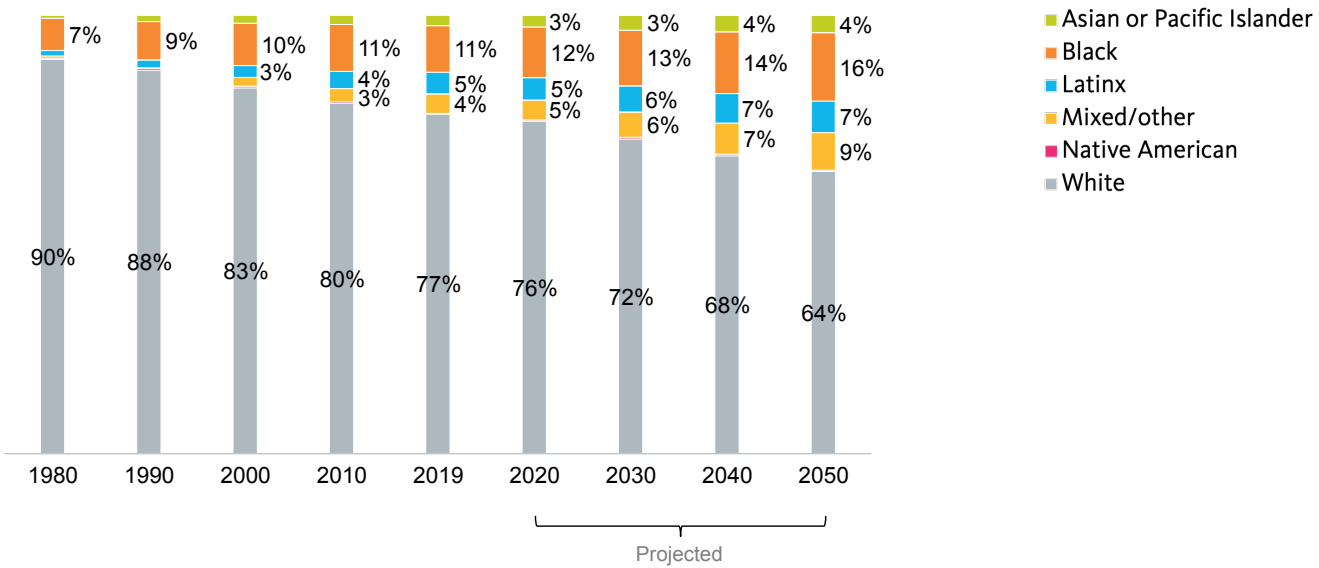
Profile Highlights

Kalamazoo is becoming more diverse

Kalamazoo’s top tier schools and companies attract a diverse array of people from across the country. The growth of the Latinx and Black communities—particularly among immigrants—is driving the county’s overall population growth. Between 1990 and 2019, the share of Kalamazoo County’s population comprising people of color grew from 12 percent to 23 percent. Among the net growth of about 42,700 people during that period, the Latinx population accounted for over 9,500 new residents.

In the context of this rapid demographic change, Kalamazoo’s youth—the county’s future workers, leaders, and innovators—are much more diverse than its older generations. In 2019, a third of young people (those younger than 18 years of age) were people of color, compared to 10 percent of the county’s seniors (those ages 65 years and older). Ensuring that the county’s diverse youth population has the resources and supports necessary to succeed is critical for the future prosperity of all.

Racial/Ethnic Composition, 1980 to 2050



Sources: US Census Bureau and Woods & Poole Economics, Inc.

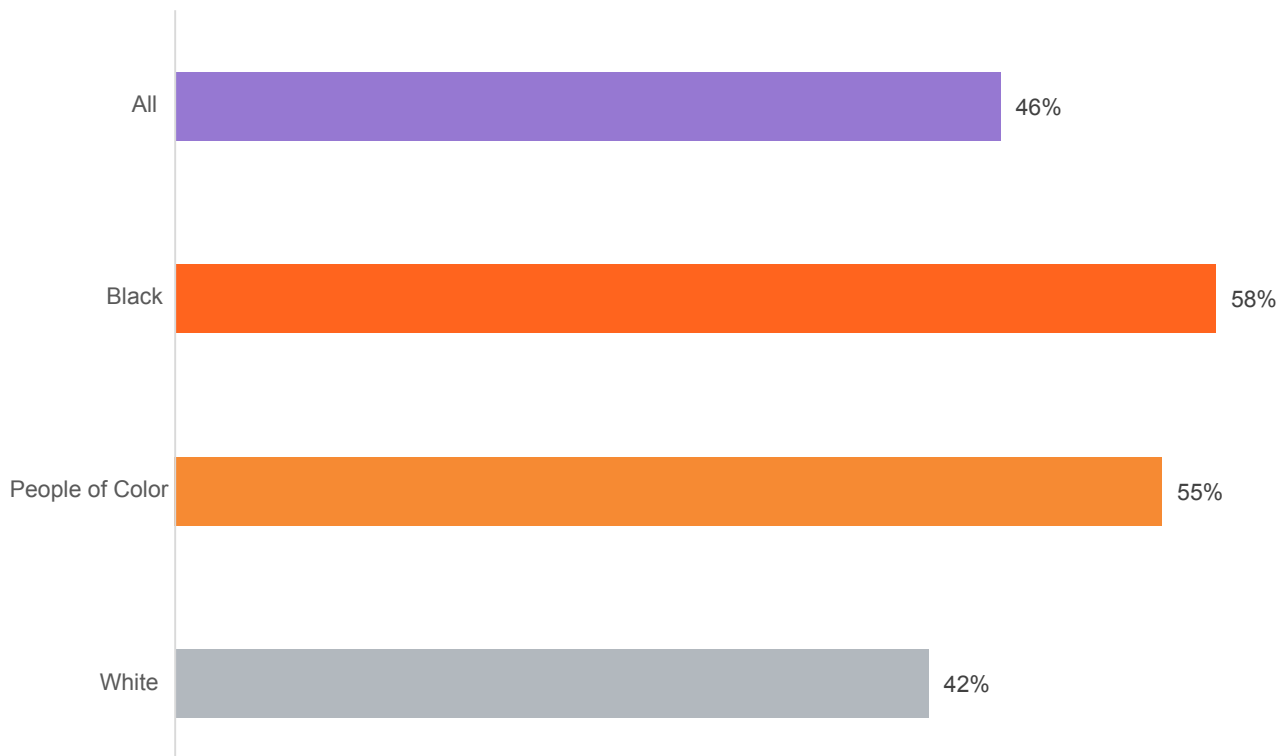
Note: Much of the increase in the Mixed/other population between 1990 and 2000 is due to a change in the survey question on race.

Housing Insecurity Remains a Top Concern

Like many places across the country, Kalamazoo still feels the deep and lasting effects of discriminatory housing and lending policies that, along with stagnant wages, have excluded many Black households and other people of color from accessible homeownership. About 70 percent of white households in the county own their homes, compared to less than a third of Black households. Many families of color are forced to pay high rents: nearly 60 percent of Black renters are rent burdened—meaning they spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing—leaving them with few resources to cover other basic expenses such as education, childcare, health care, and savings and other wealth-building opportunities.

Many of the county's jobs and educational opportunities are located in areas where housing is the most expensive. For households without vehicles, living close to the city center is necessary to be able to take advantage of employment opportunities. But unaffordable rents and segregation create neighborhoods where the transportation systems are less robust and access to jobs and services is limited.

Rent Burden by Race/Ethnicity, 2019



Source: 2019 5-year ACS Microdata from IPUMS USA . Universe includes all renter-occupied households with cash rent.

Note: Data represent a 2015 through 2019 average.

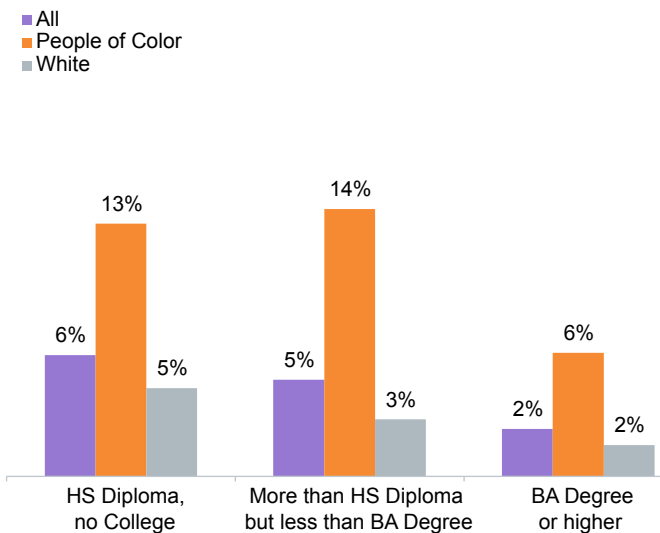
Workforce equity is key for an inclusive recovery

Jobs in health care, manufacturing, education, and retail industries make up the majority of jobs in Kalamazoo—these occupations have seen a surge in demand as the economy starts to recover from the impacts of the pandemic. However, long-term trends have seen wages stagnate or decline for all workers except those at the top of the income distribution. While early data suggests that workers in a few industries have seen modest pay increases compared to their pre-Covid levels, many workers are still struggling to make ends meet. Among full-time workers in Kalamazoo County, workers of color are nearly two-and-a-half times as likely as their white counterparts to be economically insecure. Economic recovery strategies must be paired with wage increases and other

equity-focused policies to increase economic security for all workers and families and to address persistent racial economic exclusion that leaves Black households twice as likely as white households to be in poverty.

Higher educational attainment is associated with higher wages and lower unemployment. [The Kalamazoo Promise](#) initiative helps to make in-state colleges and universities affordable for all public school students in the city of Kalamazoo. But education alone does not close racial wage gaps: at the same educational levels, white workers out-earn workers of color. And even among adults with a bachelor's degree or higher, people of color are three times as likely as their white counterparts to be unemployed in the Kalamazoo region.

Unemployment Rate by Educational Attainment and Race/Ethnicity, 2019



Source: 2019 5-year ACS Microdata from IPUMS USA. Universe includes the civilian non-institutional labor force ages 25 through 64 years.

Note: Data represent a 2015 through 2019 average. Data for some racial/ethnic groups are excluded due to small sample size.

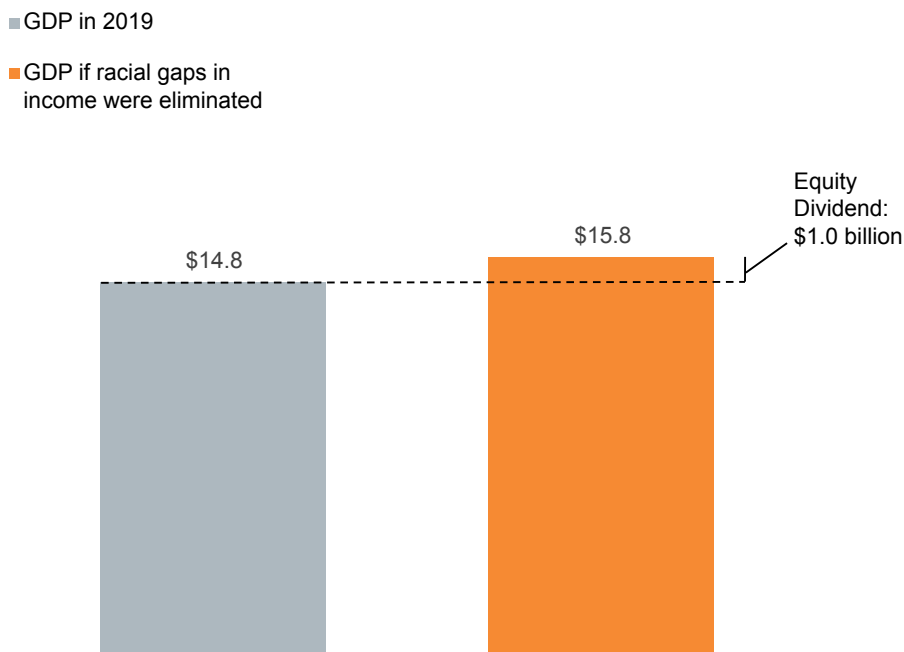
Everyone gains with equity

Equity is an issue that concerns the well-being and success of all residents in the county. *An Equity Profile of Kalamazoo County* reveals racial disparities across a wide range of issues and indicators including poverty, unemployment, and wages. Inequitable outcomes in employment and earnings are entrenched and driven by structural racism across multiple systems beyond the labor market, including housing, education, health care, transportation, and the criminal-legal system. People of color face compounding barriers to reaching their full potential, and this exclusion carries mounting costs for the entire community.

Equity and shared prosperity are the foundation of a sustainable, thriving economy, and this is increasingly true as the workforce grows more diverse. In 2019 alone, Kalamazoo County's GDP could have been about \$1 billion larger, an increase of about 7 percent, if the county's residents had experienced no racial gaps in employment and wages (i.e., if workers in all racial/ethnic groups were employed at least at the same rate and earned at least the same average wages as their white peers, adjusted for age).

Black and Latinx residents—those most likely to experience working poverty and economic insecurity—would see the greatest gains from closing these racial gaps. With equity in employment and wages, the average annual income of Black residents would rise by 71 percent, from less than \$25,000 to about \$42,000.

Actual GDP and Estimated GDP Without Racial Gaps in Income, 2019



Source: 2019 5-year ACS Microdata from IPUMS USA; Bureau of Economic Analysis.

Note: Data represent a 2015 through 2019 average. Values are in 2019 dollars.

Implications

To identify opportunities for meaningful change, we interviewed community residents, activists, advocates, elected officials, and civic leaders about not only the county's challenges but also its assets. Many community stakeholders are aware of the imperative for action and named common barriers to actionable change. In our conversations, they surfaced the following themes.

There is a strong local commitment to justice and increased opportunity for all residents.

The wave of protests and demands for racial justice that swelled in the summer of 2020 increased both awareness of and activism related to equity across the community. At the same time, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Kalamazoo City government began holding its meetings virtually, broadening access and allowing residents to more easily take part. This is one example of the energy for change in the region.

County government leaders are also actively engaging on equity in various issue areas, and there is a potential for new legislation. Residents in the county approved a millage in 2020 that will provide increased investments in infrastructure and affordable housing.

A robust ecosystem of nonprofits and organizations work in the justice space, workforce development, and racial equity. Organizations like [Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation Kalamazoo](#), [ISAAC \(Interfaith Strategy for Advocacy & Action in the Community\)](#), and [Kalamazoo Defender](#) are centering the community and providing spaces for residents to connect to resources and address harms perpetuated by systems of oppression.

Kalamazoo is home to many notable technology and pharmaceutical companies, and family foundations hold tremendous wealth and power in the county. Philanthropy is active in the region and funds many programs that provide important services but often do not address the root causes of systemic oppression. Foundations and nonprofits can address this challenge by increasing their support of grassroots organizations rooted in the community.

Segregation and redlining have created unequal access to opportunities across different neighborhoods.

With school funding tied to property taxes, underinvested neighborhoods then also have underresourced schools, further perpetuating a cycle of poverty. Coupled with a limited public transit system, residents are cut off from economic and educational opportunities that are the critical building blocks of economic security and shared prosperity. [The Kalamazoo Promise](#) provides access to education for all students, but it also fuels gentrification when higher income households move into the city to take advantage of the program. The legacy of “white flight” (the trend of higher income white households moving to the suburban areas of the county) resulted in disinvestment in communities of color, and now those same communities are at risk of displacement. Centering racial equity in economic development and housing policies is essential to ensure that long-term residents are able to stay and benefit from new investments and initiatives.

Institutions and philanthropy have a crucial role to play in the community but also need to acknowledge and rectify past harms to rebuild community trust.

Many strong higher education, health-care, philanthropic, and law enforcement institutions in the region play crucial roles in the community. But a disconnect exists between those who hold leadership roles in these organizations and the residents of Kalamazoo. This gap translates to a mistrust of institutions among community members, which results in poorer social and health outcomes for communities of color.

When patients are not represented among health-care providers, for example, their experiences and voices are too often ignored, leading to worse care and outcomes. In Kalamazoo, infant mortality for babies of color in high-income families is twice the rate as that of white infants born to low-income families.¹ Local leaders need to prioritize building stronger and more equitable educational, career, and leadership pipelines for local residents.

Overpolicing in communities of color and in schools undermines public safety, community cohesion, and the potential of Kalamazoo's youth. Policing in schools disproportionately and harshly punishes students of color, especially Black boys, and pushes them into the juvenile justice system. While public discourse has increased regarding police reform and the racial inequities perpetuated by the criminal-legal system, residents cannot understand the full extent of how incarceration in the county disproportionately impacts residents of color without a deeper commitment to data transparency. Local officials need to intentionally make space and center communities of color in determining solutions to advance public safety and deciding the role of law enforcement in the public sphere.

Policy recommendations to advance racial equity

The findings described in *An Equity Profile of Kalamazoo County* are not surprising to many of those who live, work, and go to school in Kalamazoo. Structural racism—in which policies, cultural and institutional practices, and social norms systematically disadvantage people of color—has created very different outcomes for people of color than white people in terms of economic opportunity, health, housing, education, public safety, and civic power. Organizations across the county have been working tirelessly to rectify these disparities, but sweeping systemic change is necessary to build a thriving and prosperous county where all residents can contribute their full potential to the community.

Policy and systems changes are critical to ensure Kalamazoo becomes an inclusive county for all. The federal government's investments in pandemic recovery and infrastructure provide important opportunities to steer resources toward addressing the disparities revealed in this report. Centering resident voices and grassroots organizations in the budget allocation process can ensure investments are made in community infrastructure, good jobs, financial and housing security, quality education, and public health to benefit all residents in the county.

The policy recommendations outlined below are intended to accelerate existing efforts to advance racial equity and catalyze new conversations about how residents, community organizations, grassroots groups, elected officials, and business and civic leaders can collaborate to realize high-impact equity solutions. With a deep commitment to antiracism and centering those closest to the issues, equity champions in Kalamazoo can design and move a bold agenda for just and fair inclusion across the county.

Increase affordable housing and protect tenants

Quality, stable, and affordable housing is critical for health and economic security. Living in a stable environment creates peace of mind that allows residents to focus their energy on work and school. However, housing insecurity remains a key issue in the county. According to a report in 2019, Black people made up 14 percent of Michigan's population, but 52 percent of unhoused persons.² Similar racial disparities can be found at the city and county level. Almost 60 percent of woman-of-color renters and more than 20 percent of woman-of-color homeowners in Kalamazoo County are paying more than 30 percent of their income on housing costs.

The clear racial gaps in homeownership and housing burden require the county to adopt a reparative approach to ensure that the county does not continue to leave behind Black residents and residents of color. Powered by the events in early 2020, the city council in Asheville, North Carolina, approved reparations for Black residents and prioritized increasing homeownership and entrepreneurship opportunities.³ In Kalamazoo, the recently passed millage in the county to provide additional supportive and affordable housing opportunities for low-income families is a promising start.⁴

Strategies that have worked in other places in the country include [New York City's](#) legal assistance program for renters facing eviction that was implemented after a successful pilot program prevented 5,000 evictions. Just cause ordinances, such as the one in [Philadelphia](#), limit the legal reasons for evictions and prohibit landlords from evicting tenants without cause. While a common narrative is that tenant protections harm “mom-and-pop” landlords, data indicate a rise in corporate investors and landlords who have been found to be more likely to evict.⁵ And free or low-cost home repair programs can help revitalize neighborhoods and increase the assets of low-income folks and people of color while keeping wealth in the community. The county can increase investments to support and expand existing home repair programs, such as those run by [Kalamazoo Neighborhood Housing Services and Community Homeworks](#), to ensure broader access to these services. Affirmative marketing is necessary to ensure that outreach is done in neighborhoods, such as Northside, Eastside, and Edison, that have been historically redlined and underinvested.⁶

Ensure good jobs for all workers

High-quality jobs pay a living wage and provide health and wealth-building benefits for workers and their families. Economic security provides a safety net for residents in times of financial uncertainty, as felt by so many during the pandemic. However, many low-wage workers and workers of color face barriers to these good jobs, such as reduced union bargaining power, discriminatory hiring practices, unaffordable childcare, automation, and stagnant wages. Local governments and businesses have the power to make system changes that reduce these barriers and strengthen the county's economy for all.

As Kalamazoo continues to recover from the economic impacts of the pandemic and with the shortage of workers, the county is presented with the opportunity to invest in quality jobs in growing sectors such as childcare and elder care. More caregivers are needed as the share of older residents increases. A 2019 report stated that the number of new positions for home-health and personal-care aides was three times higher than the number of jobs created for registered nurses.⁷

A focus on growing good jobs that benefit both the youth and elder populations is aligned with the two-generation approach that many local organizations, such as [Shared Prosperity Kalamazoo](#), already employ. The County and the City of Kalamazoo are slated to receive roughly \$92 million from the American Rescue Plan.⁸ Kalamazoo City and County can partner together to identify key areas for high-impact investments that focus on racial equity goals.⁹ A potential investment is purchasing and rehabilitating vacant buildings to provide more available and affordable property for county-provided services such as health clinics and early learning centers. If connected with labor unions and workforce intermediaries, this investment could incorporate job training and apprenticeship programs.

Kalamazoo is rich in higher education and health-care institutions, and an anchor collaborative can leverage their resources to invest in the communities in which they reside. For example, the [Chicago Anchors for a Strong Economy \(CASE\)](#) is a coordinated anchor procurement strategy that created a screening tool to identify and match local anchors with hundreds of people-of-color-owned businesses, creating 180 new jobs and \$51 million in revenue.¹⁰ Similarly, the [Memphis Medical District](#) and the [West Philadelphia Skills Initiative](#) are anchor collaboratives focused on linking unemployed and underemployed local residents to employment opportunities.

Invest in education and career pathways

Young people are the most diverse generation in Kalamazoo, and ensuring that they have the opportunity and resources to succeed is vital to the prosperity of the county. However, decades of segregation and reliance on property taxes for funding have led to underresourced schools in parts of the county that have high concentrations of low-income households and households of color. This disconnection has prevented many youth of color from accessing the higher education and job opportunities available in the county.

Changes can be implemented in Kalamazoo's schools to ensure that all students have the resources and support they need to succeed. **Recruitment and retention of teachers of color** can help all students, particularly students of color. Research has shown that students of color perform better in school when they have teachers of color.¹¹ Partnerships with historically Black colleges and universities to develop a teacher residency program can serve as a pipeline for Kalamazoo schools.¹² **Cradle-to-career programs** provide children with health, social, and educational system support from birth through college and career. Examples such as [Promise Neighborhoods](#) and the pioneering [Harlem Children's Zone](#) use wraparound education supports to break the cycle of generational poverty by helping children effectively learn, grow, and succeed. Professional development programs, such as the ones offered by the [Kalamazoo Regional Educational Service Agency](#), can help teachers and educators further their education and ability to support a diversity of students.

Case Study: North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University

Launched in 2017, the teacher residency program at NC A&T State University places teaching students in local schools where they can shadow current teachers and receive training on culture relevancy and combating implicit bias. This mentorship program creates a pipeline to schools in rural parts of the region for new teachers, especially teachers of color, with the experience and knowledge to support diverse classrooms.

Foster healthy communities

Health disparities are not natural or inevitable, but instead stem from inequitable access to opportunities and resources that are proven to promote health, such as safe and affordable housing, good jobs, quality education, and inclusive neighborhoods. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the ways that economic, educational, and social inequities exacerbate poor health outcomes. Frontline workers in health-care and food-service industries were essential to combating the pandemic but these workers also were the most at-risk of contracting the virus. Families with school-age children struggled to adapt to remote learning when they did not have adequate access to the internet and computers.

As the county slowly recovers from the fallout of the pandemic, municipal and county governments should take the opportunity to build a health-in-all framework that incorporates public health in all levels of decision-making, especially when deciding how to spend the federal recovery funds. For example in [Nashville](#), Tennessee, the Metropolitan Planning Organization uses criteria based on health considerations in determining which transportation projects will be funded, significantly shifting the emphasis to projects that contain pedestrian and cycling features. The Nashville Metro Public Health department now uses health impact assessments to analyze the potential health consequences of proposed policies, plans, and projects.

Disruptions to the supply chain as a result of the pandemic have highlighted the need for accessible, affordable, and healthy foods, especially for those living in areas without a large grocery store. In New Orleans, city officials partnered with Hope Enterprise Corporation and The Food Trust to launch the [New Orleans Fresh Food Retailers Initiative](#). The initiative has supported three local projects to date, including a Black-owned grocery store that was damaged by Hurricane Katrina and needed investment to reopen. The store now provides 65 local jobs, fresh food in a former food desert, and a bank branch.

Increase public safety while restoring communities

The civil uprisings in 2020 tapped into a deep hurt that people of color experience, caused by overpolicing and discriminatory criminal justice systems in their communities. Reshaping what public safety looks like across the county to be more transparent and fairer is the first step to restoring trust. Centering a restorative justice approach in the judicial and prison systems can focus on healing and rehabilitation rather than strict punishment.

One way this can happen is with community oversight boards that work collaboratively with residents to identify and prioritize community-oriented solutions that advance public safety. Overpolicing in communities fuels a vicious cycle of mistrust and government disinvestment in neighborhood services and opportunities.¹³ In New York City, [NeighborhoodStat](#) brings together civic leaders and residents to increase public safety by tackling the socioeconomic conditions linked to crime. City-Community Reimagining Public Safety Task Forces in the [City of Austin, Texas](#), and [Montgomery County, Maryland](#) are also potential examples for Kalamazoo to look to.

Alternative approaches to public safety, such as a community responder model, would reduce interactions between law enforcement and residents that might lead to escalation and use of force. Many calls to 911 can be handled without an armed officer. One study found that in Detroit, a third of calls could have been handled by community responders or administrative staff.¹

Also, increasing the use of diversion programs that focus on restorative justice has the potential to reduce juvenile detention and support youth in need. It is promising that there is support for restorative justice approaches to school discipline at the state level. In 2016, Michigan passed [Public Acts: 360-366](#), which requires schools to consider alternatives to suspension and expulsion and to take into account the student's background.¹

Conclusion

Like other communities across the nation, Kalamazoo County is reckoning with the legacy of racist policies and practices that have long locked people of color out of economic opportunities, political power, and the necessary resources for family and community well-being. Grassroots leaders, local organizations, community coalitions, and philanthropy have shown a promising commitment to a more equitable and inclusive future for Kalamazoo. Yet, there is much still left to do to put action behind words. The county is well poised to make systemic changes that concretely return opportunities and power directly back to the hands of people of color.

Equity—just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential—is the key to a resilient and prosperous future for Kalamazoo County. Community advocates, grassroots groups, business leaders, elected officials, anchor institutions, and philanthropy each have an important role to play in envisioning that future and bringing it to life.

Notes

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