

# Erie Racial Justice Policy Initiative

A 12-month-long project initiated by the Better Together Council to address potential of public policy reform in Erie

## Executive Summary July 2022

In March 2021, the Erie Better Together Council (BTC) embarked on a policy initiative to advance racial justice in Erie, Pennsylvania. Funded by Erie Insurance and the Erie Community Foundation, the initiative invited community advocacy organizations to collaborate in a year-long, community-driven effort to identify policy opportunities to enhance racial justice efforts in Erie with supporting facilitation by consultant Camille Busette. The Jefferson Educational Society (JES) participated both as a convener and a fiscal agent.

### Build a Blueprint for Policy Advocacy

The Erie Racial Justice Policy Initiative (ERJPI) explicitly decided to use this initial foray into racial justice policy as an opportunity to develop a blueprint for equity policy action in Erie. There were several steps that culminated in the ERJPI's top policy priority.

**Widely publicize the initiative.** In an initial step, the BTC publicized its effort to recruit community advocacy organizations to the table, a process that involved a formal application and an evaluation of those applications by BTC. Eight organizations were selected to participate in this initial phase of the Erie Racial Justice Policy Initiative. The organizations that were selected to participate are:

- Benedictine Sisters of Erie
- Equity Coalition of Erie
- Erie County United
- ERIWE
- NAACP, Erie chapter
- PennFuture
- STEM Equity Alliance
- Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Erie/Community Anti-Mass Incarceration Team

**Hold regular meetings, review data, connect with the community, meet with local public executives, assess capacity and impact.** The consultant and the Jefferson Educational Society convened the group of partner organizations for regular meetings between May 2021 and March 2022. The partner organizations defined a process of identifying possible policy priorities that included, in order, a review of relevant data, reaching out to community members for their ideas, creating a list of possible starting points, and then, a deliberate process of consultation with policy makers, further data analyses, impact considerations, and evaluation of the partners' capacity to be successful.

**Assess external events.** During this careful, months-long process, partner organizations reprioritized original policy options in an effort to respond to a dynamic external environment. Relevant considerations included: workforce inclusion in ongoing or planned public construction projects at the county and/or city levels; the city's

retention of a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) consultant in March 2022 and; an opportunity to update and implement Article 127 of the City of Erie’s Administrative Code, which focuses on inclusion in city contracting.

**Focus on long-neglected ZIP codes that suffer from endemic poverty.** Ultimately, the partner organizations were most concerned about the degree of endemic poverty, and particularly endemic childhood poverty within ZIP codes 16501 and 16503 and focused their efforts on policies that would generate opportunities that would put low-income residents and residents of color on a path to economic mobility.

**Racial justice can be supported by employment opportunities.** Many efforts to improve economic opportunities often start with a focus on employment, and the ERJPI examined policy options for improving employment from a number of perspectives. The partner organizations were able to interface with local governing executives, and in doing so, the ERJPI recognized that there was an overall alignment across political entities on the importance of employment as a path forward for racial justice in Erie. The ERJPI spent time refining how it might address the challenge of creating equitable employment opportunities. This included reviewing economic development plans, employment training programs, the positioning of high school and community college pipelines, and the equity and diversity employment requirements of larger local employers.

## **Identifying a Top Policy Priority**

**The ERJPI decided to champion inclusive jobs for public construction projects** as a starting point for the initiative’s policy work.

The balance of this document provides detail on the process by which the jobs policy priority was identified by ERJPI.

## **Introduction**

In March 2021, the Erie Better Together Council embarked on a policy initiative to address racial justice in Erie. The council was created in June 2019 after the city of Erie’s six-month engagement with The People’s Supper, a national organization founded in 2016 with the mission to “intentionally cultivate connection and community across differences, and to change the very definition of who belongs.” The Mayor Schember administration used The People’s Supper process to host dinners designed to bridge gaps between ethnic groups in Erie, and have discussions around race in light of a 2017 report that labeled Erie “the worst city in America for African Americans.”

Coming out of the culminating communitywide supper, the BTC was formed and tasked with exploring a range of projects to address equity in Erie. However, the Covid-19 pandemic directly impeded progress of advancing the programming-based projects that emerged at that communitywide event. In response, the council met to discuss what its members, composed of volunteers appointed by the Schember administration, could do. Members began discussing the role of public policy in addressing systemic issues and decided to formally pursue a public policy-based project throughout the pandemic.

The BTC approached the Schember administration to explain its new course of action in light of the pandemic. With the administration’s support, the council courted the Jefferson Educational Society, a nonpartisan, nonprofit think tank headquartered in Erie, to serve as its fiduciary agent, using its 501c3 status. The council also asked the JES to help facilitate what would become known as the Erie Racial Justice Policy Initiative. The council also tasked the JES with recommending a nationally renowned consultant to facilitate the 12-month initiative. The JES recommended Camille Busette, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, with affiliations in the Governance

Studies division, as well as with Economic Studies and the Metropolitan Policy Program. Busette also directs Brookings' Race, Prosperity, and Inclusion initiative, and was familiar with Erie and the Better Together Council, having presented at the JES's annual Global Summit speaker series in 2019, when she met with the Schember administration and members of the BTC.

The initiative, funded by Erie Insurance and the Erie Community Foundation, invited community advocacy organizations to participate over the course of a year, with facilitation by Busette, in a collaborative and community-driven effort to identify policy opportunities to enhance racial justice efforts in Erie.

The BTC invited community organizations from across Erie to apply to participate in the initiative. After assessing these applications, the BTC selected eight organizations to participate in this first phase of racial justice policy advocacy. These eight organizations are:

- Benedictine Sisters of Erie
- Equity Coalition of Erie
- Erie County United
- ERIWE
- NAACP, Erie chapter
- PennFuture
- STEM Equity Alliance
- Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Erie/Community Anti-Mass Incarceration Team

These selected partner organizations committed to investing time and effort during a year-long policy formulation process and received modest remuneration for their commitments.

From the outset, the BTC and the partner organizations that eventually constituted the ERJPI wanted to create an initiative that would improve both racial and social justice through public policy in the short term by addressing a specific issue and explicitly formulating a blueprint for how to engage in policy advocacy in Erie to equip these organizations and others with a toolkit to effect community change through public policy updates moving forward. Along with the choice of policy focus, the sequence of steps that yielded a policy focus was one of the desired results of the initiative.

### **Blueprint for Successful Policy Advocacy**

What was this process? Over a period of about one year, ERJPI partners met regularly with both the consultant and among themselves to identify and finalize a policy priority. ERJPI partners prioritized approaches that are driven by data and community input. The ensuing steps included: 1) identifying a larger set of potential challenges for which policy action might be feasible; 2) evaluating the larger set based on impact in the relevant communities, resources required and possessed; 3) noting whether there were similar ongoing efforts in Erie; 4) considering the timeframe in which results could be expected, dependencies, and the capacities and knowledge of the ERJPI partners. Those careful evaluations made it possible for the ERJPI partners to identify a set of three priorities in which policy advocacy would improve the life experiences of low-income residents and residents of color. Subsequently, the ERJPI partners assessed these three opportunities to determine which had the highest probability for success in the timeframe envisioned. Each of these steps will be discussed below.

## ***Let Data and Community Voice Guide the Effort***

ERJPI partners have been very committed to use statistical data and community input to guide the selection of racial justice policy challenges in Erie. The partners spent several meetings reviewing 2019 and 2020 data on income and wealth inequality, homeownership, housing conditions, and neighborhood amenities. They also considered data on educational disparities, policing, and incarceration. The review and consideration of these data were followed by evaluating census tract poverty, child poverty, incarceration, and income data that was crossed by race or ethnicity.

The overall picture that emerged was that inequities in Erie are the result of conscious policy choices that were made in the past, but for which current residents bear the burden. ERJPI partners were particularly concerned by the disturbing poverty and child poverty statistics especially in census tracts located in ZIP codes 16501 and 16503.

This data review was followed by community outreach to understand perspectives from some of the communities whose data we evaluated. That community outreach yielded more perspectives for consideration. For example, the question of what it means to feel secure is one that ERJPI partners discussed at length, noting that feeling secure in Erie is the product of wealth, income, race, and historical advantage or disadvantage. These are the issues that surfaced as a result of community outreach:

- Quality Jobs
- Affordable housing
- Extra-curricular activities for low-income children
- Fostering greater connectedness via the built environment and through cultural events
- Appropriate policing
- Nighttime safety
- Code enforcement in residential areas
- Culturally competent delivery of city social services

There were two additional findings from the community conversations that ERJPI conducted:

- Erie's Black community, in particular, is exhausted by the decades-long cycle of outreach and lack of tangible changes from the status quo.
- Community members generally feel as though they are consulted only after decisions have been made and are rarely at the table when policy ideation and political bargaining is occurring.

As a result, there is a perception in the Black community that Erie has a plan to address a range of problems, but that the plans never seem to have been formulated with community input nor eventuate in results that secure a better future for Erie's Black residents.

## ***Initial Identification of ERJPI Policy Priorities***

After reviewing the relevant data and conducting community outreach, ERJPI members identified a large set of potential policy opportunities for consideration, listed in the following in order of priority:

1. Policing
2. Quality Jobs
3. Culturally competent delivery of city services

4. Community benefit agreements
5. Extracurricular activities for low-income children

### ***Evaluate the Feasibility and Impact of Initial List***

To further streamline the list of priorities, the partners undertook a substantial review of the transformational nature of the policy opportunity, the resources needed to advance the opportunity, efforts already underway within Erie, and the risks of pursuing each of these opportunities.

This evaluation was followed by a discussion that further refined the policy options for the ERJPI, so that by August 2021, the partners had narrowed the list of priority issues to three:

1. Workforce Inclusion Goals
2. Police Reforms
3. The provision of Culturally Competent City Services

Partners then examined each of these three issues thoroughly by using the following questions to guide their thinking:

- Is it possible to identify one discrete goal that we could advance in six months?
- Likelihood of transformational impact within six months, two years, five years?
- What specific policy changes or preparation for policy changes can we achieve within six months?
- Who else needs to be involved for us to be successful? Do we have the right people assembled here to start? If not, who else do we need to consult?
- Who or what organization is already working on this policy issue area?
- What other information do we need to ensure that we are going to craft a policy that is impactful and sustainable?
- What resources will we need to be successful within six months, two years, five years? These resources could include funding, time, incentives to get others involved, legal expertise, contracting expertise, etc.
- What are the risks of working in this area? What are the risks of working in this area and not being successful?
- How can we measure our success over the short term and medium term?

As a result of this assessment, and an understanding that the city of Erie was involving a number of community stakeholders to enhance culturally competent services, ERJPI decided to pursue both police reforms and Workforce Inclusion Goals.

### ***Consultation with Public Officials***

The next step was to engage city and county officials on each of these two priorities. ERJPI partners discussed ongoing police accountability efforts with Mayor Schember's office and ongoing public construction efforts with a range of public stakeholders. Because police reform efforts were already within the domain of several stakeholders in Erie and depended upon future contract renewals with the Erie Fraternal Order of Police which was outside the timeframe of the initial phase of the ERJPI, partner organizations decided to focus on Workforce Inclusion Goals. The interest is in the hiring of local people who represent diversity relative to public construction and other development projects. With this focus on equity and inclusion to improve workforce diversity, ERJPI saw an opportunity to address several concerns that had been articulated by community members during earlier community consultations.

The partners further deepened their policy focus through gathering more information about how other cities have pursued community benefit agreements, community opportunity councils, government contracting policy with percentage local and minority hires, and more. Partners also engaged in additional data analysis in an effort to refine their precise policy goals.

### ***External Considerations Help Focus on Employment***

These deliberations and the decision to focus on equitable employment goals occurred simultaneously with three important contextual developments: ongoing public construction projects; the city of Erie's award of a contract to a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion consultant; and the determination that the city already has an inclusive jobs ordinance in its administrative code. Since the goals are intended to be scalable throughout the community and applicable to various entities, the members of the ERJPI first identified a short list of entities open to such goal setting, including Erie-based authorities with jurisdiction that includes but is not limited to the city of Erie.

Consultation with public officials revealed public construction projects that were already implementing an inclusive employment approach. In addition, the city's new DEI consultant was contracted to focus on DEI approaches and opportunities within the purview of the city, and that would include city contracts. Finally, The ERJPI partners' consultation with public officials uncovered the fact that the city's Administrative Code already included a provision for inclusive employment that, while dated, appeared to commit the city to inclusive hiring practices across a wide range of its contract activities. That ordinance, Article 127, was adopted in 1985 and focused on inclusion in city contracting. Subsequent meetings with the city solicitor established that the ordinance was neither implemented nor tracked since its inception.

Equitable contracting in Erie, as articulated in Article 127 and as applied to public contracts of all types, requires an effective pipeline of people who possess the skills to be successful as business ownership and employment opportunities become available. The ERJPI partners evaluated the training programs and approaches that would deliver a supply of skilled employees and found that training programs in Erie that are relevant to construction job opportunities are rarely inclusive of low-income residents or residents of color, hard to access, and when offered in high school appear to be under-resourced and misaligned with other student offerings. As a result, ERJPI partners determined that substantial opportunity exists to create consistent, well-resourced, inclusive training programs, particularly for the trades in Erie.

As of March 2022, the ERJPI partners are focusing their attention on inclusive training programs, city of Erie compliance with [Article 127](#), and workforce inclusion in construction-related jobs subsidized by the Erie County Redevelopment Authority, in addition to the work done by the city's DEI consultant. All of these efforts align to enhance equitable employment practices across the city's sphere of influence and lead to meaningful and positive outcomes for low-income communities and communities of color in Erie.

### **Summary**

Changing racial justice outcomes requires the courage to change the way institutions and social systems function. While partners recognize the importance of programmatic approaches to more discrete issues, ERJPI made a choice early on to focus on policy reform. Policy reform has the potential to change the systems and institutions that perpetuate racial injustices in a lasting and comprehensive manner. Public policy reform is often a lengthy process that rarely moves in a linear fashion and therefore requires patience, flexibility, a command of the facts, community involvement, coalition-building, frequent consultation with many stakeholders, and a heightened sense of self awareness and realism. But the transformational rewards of policy reform are worth the effort and commitment.

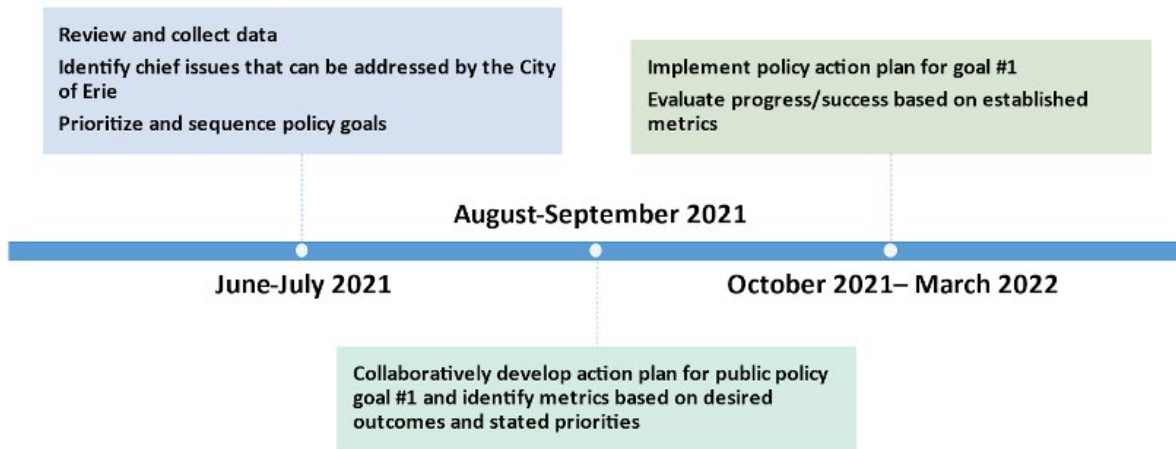


The ERJPI partners successfully developed a playbook for how to embark upon this journey in a disciplined manner and are now poised to achieve an important success in Erie: implementation of equitable employment for government construction projects (and other contracting); compliance with a decades-old administrative code (Article 127) that could open employment opportunities through contracting for long-neglected communities in Erie; and further consideration for a coordinated, sustainable diverse pipeline for job opportunities.

Low-income residents and residents of color have long had inequitable access to financially successful life experiences in Erie. There are many reasons for this, and Erie now has in the ERJPI a critical mass of champions from across the community who are engaged in bringing down the long-standing barriers to full, sustaining, economic inclusion.

## Appendix 1

### Erie Racial Justice Policy Initiative Timeline



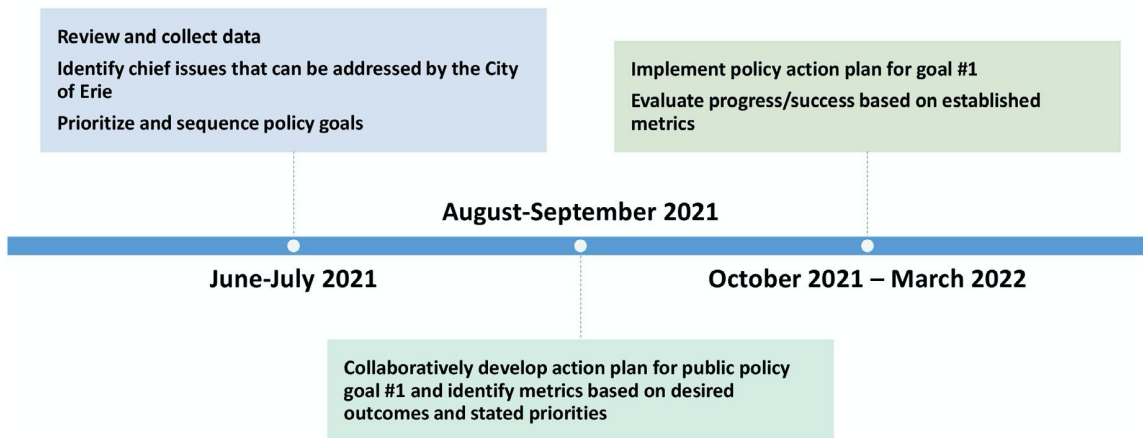


## Erie Racial Justice Policy Initiative

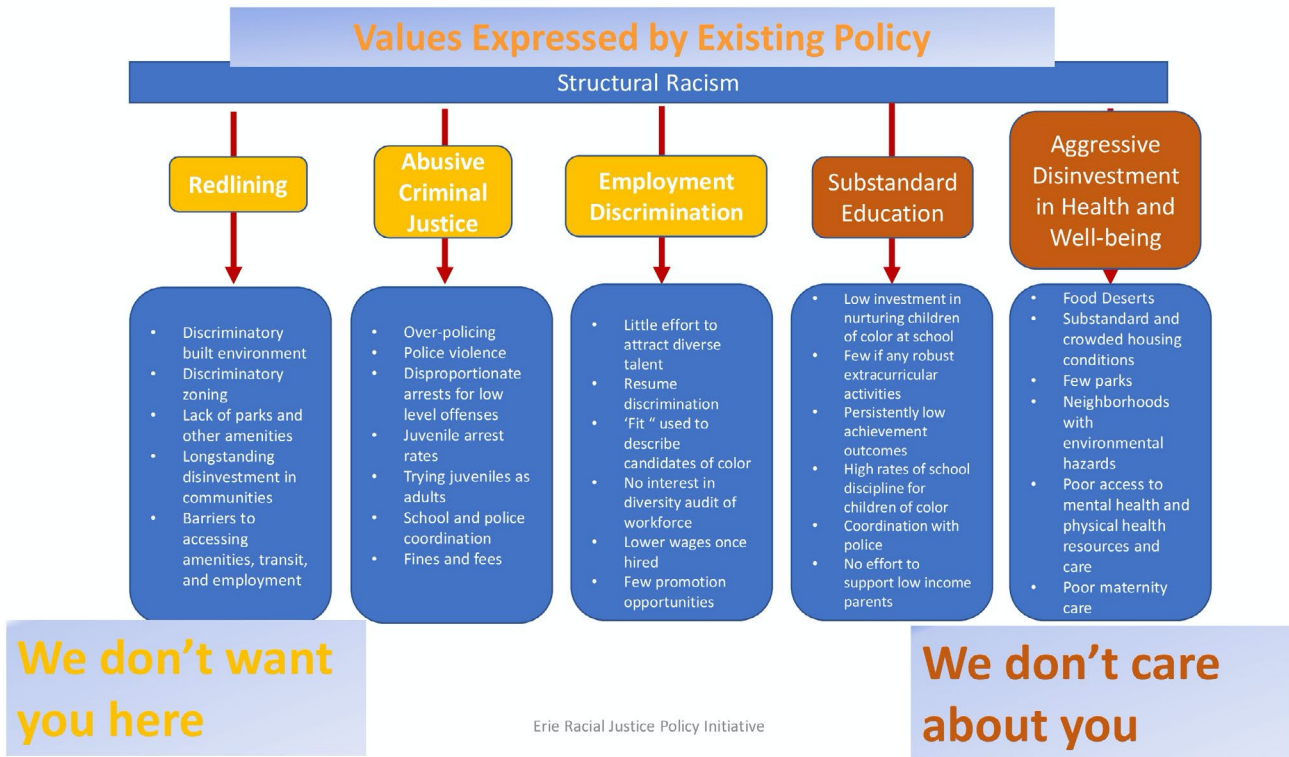
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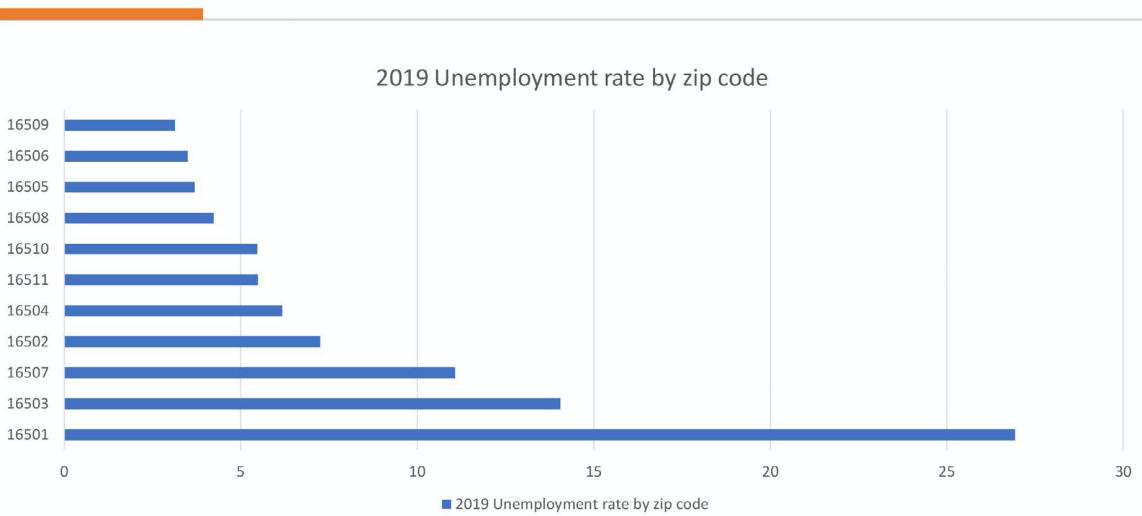
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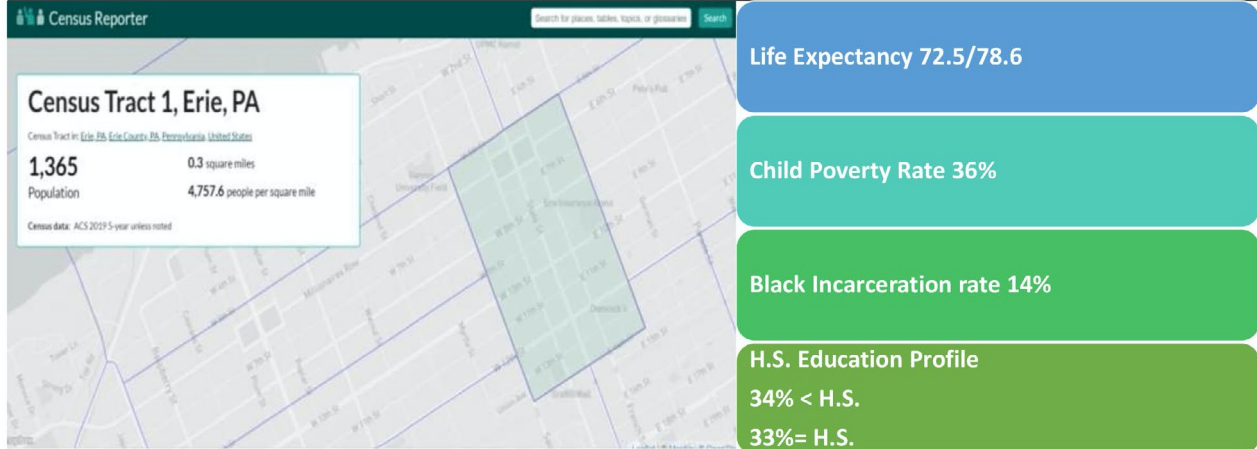
### Historically Neglected Areas Show Greatest Income Distress



BTC Just and Equitable Erie

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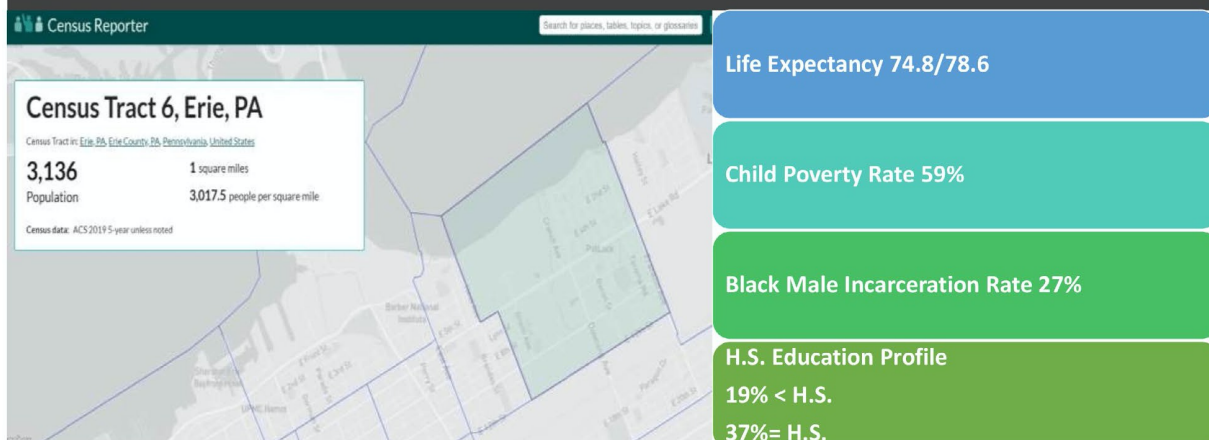
## Census Tract Data for Key Indicators of Racial Inequity



BTC Just and Equitable Erie

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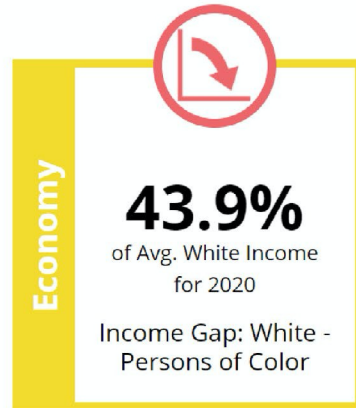
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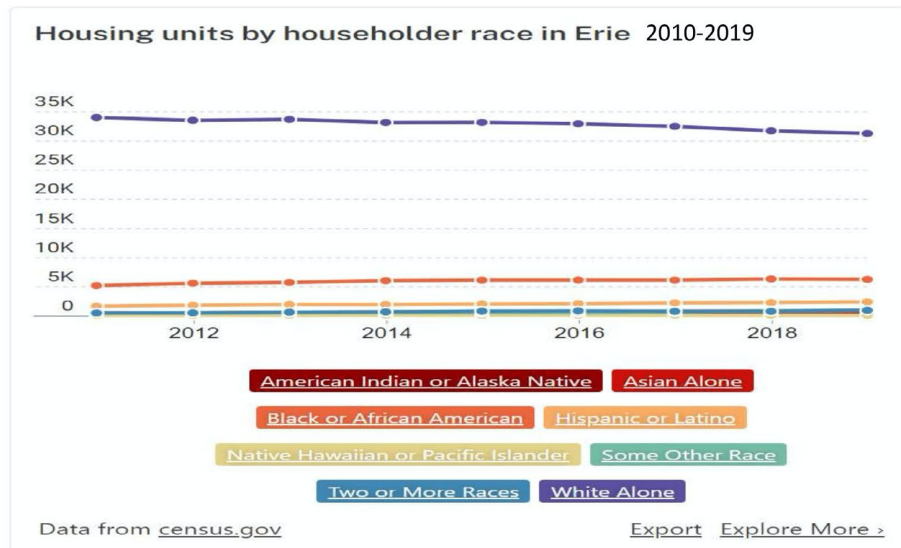
BTC Just and Equitable Erie

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# Income Gap In Erie, 2020



Source: Erie Vital Signs, 2020



*Feedback*

# POLICE VIOLENCE

SECTION SCORE: 50% ▼ .32%

## DEADLY FORCE

2 Killings by Police from 2013-20 | 0.7 every 10k arrests



<sup>\*</sup> More Killings by Police per Arrest than 52% of Depts

Source: *Mapping Police Violence*

## DEADLY FORCE BY ARMED STATUS

0% Unarmed | 50% Did Not Allegedly Have a Gun

● Unarmed ● Other ● Alleged Gun ● Vehicle



<sup>\*</sup> More Unarmed People Killed per Arrest than N/A of Depts

## POLICE VIOLENCE BY RACE

● Black ● Latinx ● API ● Other ● White

Population of Jurisdiction



People Arrested



People Killed



Source: *Uniform Crime Report, Mapping Police Violence*