



# Homecoming

The Greater Birmingham Community  
Speaks on Regional Cooperation  
and a More Inclusive Economy

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October 2022

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a More Inclusive Economy



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Alabama Arise is a statewide, member-led organization advancing public policies to improve the lives of Alabamians who are marginalized by poverty. Our membership includes faith-based, community, nonprofit and civic groups, grassroots leaders, and individuals from across Alabama. Alabama Arise is a nonprofit organization, and our work is funded by private foundations and members. Our members select our annual legislative agenda, focusing on the issues that matter most to alleviate poverty and its effects.

# Table of Contents

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>Section 1: Introduction</b>  | <b>1</b>  |
| Why Another Study of Greater Birmingham?  |           |
| What We Heard: Key Findings   |           |
| Tools for Broadly Shared Prosperity   |           |
| <b>Section 2: Greater Birmingham—Challenges and Opportunities for Broadly Shared Prosperity</b> | <b>14</b> |
| About Greater Birmingham and Jefferson County   |           |
| Greater Birmingham and Jefferson County: The Big Picture  |           |
| Opportunities and Barriers to Progress in the Greater Birmingham Area                           |           |
| <b>Section 3: What We Heard from Greater Birmingham Area Residents</b>                          | <b>30</b> |
| How We Listened   |           |
| What We Heard Residents Say: The Big Picture  |           |
| What We Heard Residents Say: Key Policy Problems  |           |
| What We Heard: Different Communities, Different Voices But Very Similar Stories                 |           |
| <b>Section 4: Place</b>   | <b>39</b> |
| Lack of Transportation Access   |           |
| Access to Healthy Foods   |           |
| Housing, Displacement, and Gentrification   |           |
| <b>Section 5: People</b>  | <b>65</b> |
| Good Jobs   |           |
| Good Jobs: The Big Picture  |           |
| What We Learned About Work and Wages in Greater Birmingham                                      |           |
| What Can Be Done  |           |
| <b>Section 6: Power</b>   | <b>76</b> |
| Accountability and Community Benefits from Economic Development                                 |           |
| State Interference in Local Control   |           |
| <b>Conclusion</b>   | <b>86</b> |
| <b>Endnotes</b>   | <b>87</b> |

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# Homecoming: The Greater Birmingham Community Speaks on Regional Cooperation and a More Inclusive Economy

## Section 1. Introduction

**After decades of economic stagnation, Greater Birmingham, Alabama (defined here as Jefferson County, the City of Birmingham, and thirty-three other municipalities within Jefferson County’s boundaries) has experienced a recent resurgence in economic growth and civic engagement. Yet, the benefits of this new prosperity are not widely shared with the people living in the region. Economic opportunity and financial vulnerability vary widely by race, gender, and geography. And Greater Birmingham residents know it: three quarters of residents (almost 75 percent) say the region’s economic resources are not distributed fairly and only a quarter say they are personally included in Greater Birmingham’s economic revival.**

Despite recent policy and philanthropic efforts, household incomes and workforce participation remain lower than in similar cities across the South. Poverty remains elevated—especially for women and Black residents living in the City of Birmingham proper, Bessemer, and other communities north of the city—leading to significant disparities with white residents, especially those living in “over the mountain” suburbs outside Birmingham proper.

Social mobility for children born in the region is lower than the national average, and children born into low-income families grow up to earn \$12,000 less per year on average than U.S. median income.<sup>1</sup> Looking within the region itself, a child’s social mobility depends almost entirely on their zip code of birth. Adults who grew up in low-income families earn an average of \$22,000 a year—\$14,000 less than those born into high-income families. Residents born into poverty also experience higher incarceration and lower college graduation rates.

**Reversing these trends calls for an “all-in,” collaborative approach by the region’s political, business, and civic leaders—and especially by local governments (with an assist from the state level).** Greater Birmingham is home to Jefferson County and thirty-four municipalities, many of which have not worked together but rather in opposition to each other and the City of Birmingham. Yet, a broad body of research has shown the overwhelming benefits of a regional approach: Metro areas with more regional cooperation experience faster population and economic growth and generate more broadly shared prosperity than those that are governmentally fragmented and refuse to work together.<sup>2</sup>



**As a result, Greater Birmingham leaders should embrace regional cooperation as a crucial pathway to ensuring broadly shared prosperity for all residents, from the over the mountain suburbs to the City of Birmingham and outlying rural communities.** In this report, we identify and explore a range of specific and important barriers that stand in the way of this shared promise and outline a series of policy solutions for local governments to address these challenges.

## Why another study of Greater Birmingham?

This is not the first report to diagnose the ailments facing the Greater Birmingham economy—especially the growing disparities in wealth and income across racial and geographic lines—and propose solutions. High quality studies using sophisticated data analyses and in-depth interviews with leading business and government officials have identified a range of policy problems related to regional political fragmentation, uneven educational attainment, occupational and residential segregation, and lack of investment in jobs, neighborhoods, and the connections between them, all of which explain to great degree why some people and places in the Greater Birmingham region are persistently doing better than others. Some of these studies have even offered specific programmatic solutions to these challenges, often guided by the input of key leaders across the region and focused on specific initiatives that civic leaders, the business community, and—to a lesser degree—elected officials could implement in collaboration with each other.

So why conduct *another* study? Our research seeks to *complement* rather than *replicate* the excellent work already completed by providing two novel perspectives that both elevate the importance of concerns previously considered less important and provide broad directions for policymakers to address them.

First, we wanted to hear directly from the community about their concerns with the economy, including Greater Birmingham residents, grassroots activists, religious leaders, the business community, workers, and the local stakeholders often left out of previous studies in favor of more traditional corporate, philanthropic, and political leaders.

Secondly, we focused largely on the policy aspects of these economic challenges, seeking to identify their causes, consequences, and potential solutions as they relate to funding, governance, local ordinances, and state laws. We paid special attention to the policy decisions taken (or not taken) by local governments, always with an eye to the role played by state-level authority, since so much local action is constrained by state law and the Alabama constitution. In turn, this allowed us to identify fruitful areas for collaboration between local governments on the one hand and among a broad cross section of grassroots, advocacy, and service provider organizations on the other.

In some cases, our community-based approach uncovered resident concerns that align well with those highlighted in previous research and ongoing civic and political action. Indeed, we share a strong focus on the barriers keeping Greater Birmingham residents from access the jobs and services that connect them to opportunity and social mobility. Yet in other cases, we exposed policy problems largely ignored or downplayed in previous stakeholder conversations and reports on regional collaboration and equitable economic development.

## How we listened

We engaged more than one thousand Greater Birmingham area residents in several ways to understand the biggest economic concerns, challenges, and opportunities they see in attaining broadly shared prosperity for themselves and their neighbors. Specifically, we:

- **Conducted a professional survey in 2022 of 1,024 Greater Birmingham residents** to understand the challenges residents are facing and the policy solutions they support.
- **Conducted twelve focus groups with key categories of stakeholders** to learn more about the biggest challenges facing Greater Birmingham area residents. We engaged approximately eighty people, including corporate leaders, business owners, faith leaders across the racial spectrum, grassroots activists, leaders of women's groups, youth development groups, and other nonprofit leaders working in various aspects of equitable development across the area.
- **Conducted two dozen one-on-one interviews with community leaders**, including staff at local governments, regional foundations, regionwide civic initiatives of all kinds, grassroots activists, policy advocates, nonprofit leaders, neighborhood association presidents, and local developers to hear their concerns and solutions.

As we listened, we paid special attention to ensuring broad representation across race, gender, political ideology, and geography (perhaps most important, given Greater Birmingham's fragmented governance). Participants represent three basic areas:

- **Urban Core**, the predominantly Black urban areas (including the cities of Birmingham and Bessemer)
- **Over the Mountain**, the mostly white suburbs such as Mountain Brook, Vestavia Hills, and Homewood
- **Largely Rural Outlying Areas** of Jefferson County, such as Oak Grove, McCalla, and Williamsburg



## What we heard: Key findings

From beginning to end, we heard Greater Birmingham residents say they wanted economic development to achieve a more equitable economy and produce shared prosperity for everyone in the region. They identified a range of specific policy-related challenges and goals that require greater regional cooperation and neatly align with the core pillars of equitable development,<sup>3</sup> specifically the importance of investing in **place, people, and power**.

### Place

Investing in place aims to develop healthy and safe communities. This involves enhancing community health through public amenities (schools, parks, open spaces, and other services), expanding access to affordable healthy food, ensuring good air quality, and creating safe and inviting environments. It also involves promoting broader mobility and connectivity by prioritizing an effective and affordable public transportation network that supports transit-dependent communities and provides equitable access to core services and amenities, including employment, education, and health and social services. Lastly, investing in place requires preventing displacement and expanding affordable housing options that allow anyone who wants to live in the community to do so, especially current residents, and discourages displacement of viable small businesses that serve community needs.

- **Transportation: Two-thirds of survey respondents identified transportation—especially the lack of public transit—as the top challenge facing Greater Birmingham, one of the country’s most auto-dependent metro areas.**

Residents expressed concerns about the lack of public transit routes to the places they most needed to go, the lack of service during evenings and Sundays, and in some cases, their physical safety. By overwhelming margins, residents wanted more and better public transit, and they pointed to the need for increased funding and regional cooperation to make this a reality.

Residents prioritize transit as an equitable development policy largely because their ability to find a job and access basic public amenities such as grocery stores, hospitals, parks, and shops—essentially participate fully in society—depends on the ability to travel to those places. Without a car, they recognized that too many people are simply shut out of Greater Birmingham’s community life and lack the opportunity to earn a living.

**In terms of policy solutions,** we recommend:

- Increasing regional transportation funding.
- Reforming governance of the Birmingham Jefferson County Transit Authority to increase regional cooperation and investment in transit.
- Repealing Alabama’s constitutional ban on using gas tax dollars to fund transit.

**“Transportation seems to be one issue that we can find some collaboration... we had a pretty good coalition of people not only in Birmingham but those outside because they wanted people to be able to get to the jobs so that could be something to begin with.”**  
**– Faith leader from one of our focus groups**

## **Transportation: Key Numbers**

- 65 percent of survey respondents identified transportation as the top challenge facing Greater Birmingham residents.
- 65 percent rated public transit in Greater Birmingham as fair or poor.
- 41 percent said lack of funding is responsible for transit’s challenges; another 25 percent blamed lack of effective leadership at the local and county levels.
- 64 percent support changing the Alabama constitution to allow local governments to use gas tax funds for public transit.

- **Access to healthy food: More than 55 percent of residents cited the lack of access to healthy food in certain neighborhoods as a significant problem facing Greater Birmingham residents.**

Although they were unlikely to say that lack of access to fresh and healthy foods was their *most important* concern, especially compared to problems related to transportation and workers’ wages, Greater Birmingham residents consistently raised access to healthy food as an important challenge local governments should address. They viewed neighborhoods lacking access to healthy food as a real barrier holding back their lowest-income neighbors—and low-income communities more generally—from even getting started on the road to economic opportunity.

Although nonprofit service providers and residents in Urban Core expressed the greatest

concern about this problem, residents living Over the Mountain and in Jefferson County’s rural communities acknowledged healthy food access as a challenge for the region and expressed support for addressing it, even though fewer of them experienced lack of food access as for a problem for themselves.

**“Food deserts for the right food . . . if you are not eating the right food then yes your health may be suffering, and you may not be doing one hundred percent of your job and then it’s just a snowball effect.”**  
– General public focus group participant

**In terms of policy solutions,** we recommend:

- Expanding existing public-private food access initiatives beyond the City of Birmingham.
- Addressing capital access problems by using economic development funds and incentives to recruit and retain grocery stores in neighborhoods without access to healthy food.
- Redesigning transportation routes to enhance convenient access to fresh foods.

### **Access to Healthy Food: Key Numbers**

- 69 percent of Birmingham residents live in neighborhoods without access to healthy food.
- 22 percent of Greater Birmingham residents believe they definitely or probably do not have enough access to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables.
- 87 percent of Greater Birmingham residents believe that the local government should assure equal access to groceries for everyone in the area.

- **Housing, displacement, and gentrification: Almost 80 percent of respondents identified rising housing costs as a problem, while another 73 percent said the same about the overall lack of affordable housing.**

Residents named the rising cost of housing—including general unaffordability, increasing rents and property taxes, and related homelessness—as a critical challenge facing working people in the Greater Birmingham economy. Our focus groups and interviews added depth to residents’ housing concerns, with respondents connecting rising costs to the recent revitalization in downtown Birmingham and the influx of white families into Bessemer, both of which were seen as accelerating gentrification and displacement of existing (mostly Black) residents from historically low-income neighborhoods.

**“It seems there are constantly new apartments being built, but they are all luxury apartments. Where is housing for the regular folks?”**  
**– Youth advocate**

**We recommend the following policy solutions to address this challenge:**

- Include the creation of affordable, below-market rental units as requirements for permitting or any kind of public subsidy for new commercial, residential, or mixed-use real estate projects.
- Use inclusionary zoning to provide affordable housing in new developments.
- Local governments provide funding for Community Land Trusts to work regionwide.
- Provide emergency rental assistance to protect from evictions.

## **Housing and Displacement: Key Numbers**

- 73 percent said they consider more affordable housing and 70 percent said utility costs are challenges in the county.
- 64 percent of survey respondents in the Urban Core were concerned about displacement compared to 58 percent in Over the Mountain and 49 percent in Rural Outer Greater Birmingham.
- 20 percent of Urban Core residents said they had been affected by gentrification in their neighborhood in the past few years compared to 11 percent in both Rural Outer Jefferson County and Over the Mountain.
- 37 percent of households in the Urban Core are housing cost burden, meaning that they pay more than 30 percent of their monthly income on housing costs.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, 25 percent of households in Greater Birmingham outside of the Urban Core are housing cost burden.<sup>5</sup>

## People

Investing in people involves creating and advancing economic opportunity for individuals. This entails promoting local economic development and entrepreneurship opportunities, enhancing community serving establishments, and increasing quality, living wage jobs for people in all neighborhoods. Above all, it means connecting people to the institutions and services that build the capacity of individuals to access and take full advantage of economic opportunities—for example, job training programs that equip people to thrive in living wage jobs and childcare services that allow them (women in particular) to enter the workforce and work to their full potential. Given that Birmingham's labor market is regional (it pulls workers from across communities across Jefferson County) regional cooperation is essential to building residents' economic capacity.

- **Good jobs: More than 73 percent of survey respondents rated lack of good jobs as at least somewhat of a problem, including 82 percent of Black respondents and 62 percent of white respondents.**

In a likely sign of Greater Birmingham's roaring labor market, residents did not cite unemployment or a lack of jobs as top concerns. Instead, we heard repeatedly that the *real* jobs problem in Greater Birmingham had to do with the availability of *good* jobs—the kinds of jobs that pay living wages and provide adequate retirement benefits and health insurance. Despite a twenty-point gap between white and Black respondents, supermajorities of both races agree that wages and job quality are problems. Our focus groups drew a direct connection between the lack of living wage jobs and many of the other challenges facing working people trying to climb into middle class prosperity.

**"I can go get a job sitting right here for \$9 an hour but in our economy today, \$9 is not going to make a difference, \$15 won't make a difference. Are we talking about a career where people want to work and stay at a company or are we talking about just a job?"**  
– African American focus group participant

### **We recommend the following policy solutions to address this challenge:**

- Use the public sector to raise workers' wages through public employees' salary plans and economic development incentives.
- Support increased childcare subsidies to ensure workers can find and keep jobs.
- State government should raise the minimum wage or give local governments the authority to do so for private employers within their own jurisdictions.

## Good Jobs: Key Numbers

- 72 percent of residents agreed that lack of better-paying jobs with benefits is either a significant or somewhat of a challenge for Greater Birmingham, including 82 percent of Black residents and 62 percent of white residents.
- 54 percent of residents said Greater Birmingham needed more jobs requiring skills and experience that can command higher wages.
- 62 percent of residents supported unionization efforts at the Amazon facility in Bessemer, including almost half of white residents who supported the union even while saying they would not personally benefit from it.

- **Job training: Nearly 60 percent of survey respondents stated that gaining access to job training programs is a challenge and those fortunate enough to complete these programs might not find available jobs calling for their new skills.**

Respondents pointed to the importance of job training as a key strategy for ensuring access to good-paying jobs and creating ladders for better economic opportunity. But focus groups and interviewees highlighted challenges of access to new job training initiatives and skills alignment with job openings. There was a broad recognition that Greater Birmingham's workforce training system needs to do more for everyone, especially the hardest workers to reach and those most marginally attached to the workforce. One critical problem we identified involves the fact that Jefferson County's workforce development agency requires eligible workers to wait sixty days before they can begin receiving training services, which created an unnecessary barrier to participating in key training programs.

**"They have taken trades out of high school, and no one is learning welding, carpentry, auto mechanics, small engines . . . they have nothing to fall on but working at McDonald's, jobs not paying what I call a living wage." – Labor leader**

### **We recommend the following policy solutions to address this challenge:**

- Repeal the sixty-day waiting period for training.
- Support and expand public-private efforts to connect marginal workers to jobs, including apprenticeships and job connection platforms.



## Job Training: Key Numbers

- 57 percent of residents said Greater Birmingham faced challenges with providing enough opportunities to participate in job training programs that could result in better-wage jobs.
- 55 percent support ending the sixty-day waiting period, including similar numbers across every geography and race.

## Power

Investing in power means building the capacity of Birmingham residents to advocate for themselves to achieve more equitable economic development outcomes. This partly involves pushing local government officials and community leaders to practice meaningful community engagement by requiring local community participation and leadership in decision-making to reflect a diversity of voices, especially from historically marginalized communities. But it also involves understanding and advocating to reform state laws that interfere with the ability of local governments to achieve more equitable development, whether related to wages, transportation funding, affordable housing, or other key policies.

- **Community benefits from development: more than three-quarters of residents want local government to make sure companies create the jobs they promise in exchange for public subsidies or tax incentives—and require those jobs to pay living wages.**

White and Black residents expressed staunch support for attaching stringent job quality conditions to corporate subsidies and tax breaks. Throughout our research, we heard a broad consensus that government should do more to ensure that local residents and communities directly benefit from development—particularly real estate projects and new business location decisions. In our interviews and focus groups, we heard a particular desire to understand how far local governments could go in achieving community benefits, given the limitations imposed by state government interference and preemption.

### **We recommend the following policy solutions to address this challenge:**

- Include performance standards, job quality standards, and accountability mechanisms to ensure recipients of development incentives live up to their promises and create jobs that benefit local residents.
- Enact a Community Benefits Agreements (CBA) in places where subsidy contracts are insufficient to secure major benefits flow to the community.
- Enact transparency requirements for economic development projects.

## Economic Development Accountability and Community Benefits: Key Numbers

- Only 28 percent of Birmingham area residents feel included in the region's economic revival and development.
- 81 percent of residents believe local governments should make sure that private companies actually create the jobs they promise in exchange for public subsidies/business incentives.
- 76 percent of residents believe local governments should require private companies receiving business incentives to pay living wages for the jobs they create.
- 66 percent of residents want their local government to have more say over the terms of how companies come into their community.

**"We need to know what these tax incentives are actually getting us in our communities, and whether anybody except the corporations and developers are seeing any real benefit." – Nonprofit leader**

- **State interference in local control: Only about a quarter of survey respondents supported current levels of state preemption power and opposed home rule, and large majorities of Black and white residents alike want local governments to be able to set their own minimum wage.**

Alabama's constitution gives the state government significant power to interfere in local government policymaking and revenue raising. Many policies available to other cities across the country—including raising property tax rates, raising the minimum wage, and funding public transit, housing, and investments—are simply unavailable to local governments in Greater Birmingham. Participants in our focus groups and interviews went even further than survey respondents to express their opposition to current barriers to home rule. Local leaders saw state interference in local control as the single-greatest obstacle to enacting the full range of equitable development policies they felt would ensure broadly shared prosperity—from transit to housing to wages to taxes.

**"You have to convince the thirty-four cities that they need to unify to see about getting to have home rule because we cannot even hire a chief of police without going to the Alabama legislature or even give him a present." – Community activist**

### **We recommend the following policy solutions to address this challenge:**

- Build regional collaboration among all thirty-four local governments to identify joint policy solutions that are within their accepted constitutional authority.
- Change Alabama's constitution to enact more home rule and repeal the most egregious constitutional hurdles to good economic development policies.

### **State Interference and Home Rule: Key Numbers**

- Three out of every four Birmingham residents are open to home rule, with 43 percent clearly in support, compared to just 23 percent opposed. These results are similar across race and geography.
- 41 percent of residents flatly oppose state interference/preemption of local authority, while 26 percent support it, leaving about a third of residents who could go either way. Black residents had a higher skepticism of preemption than white residents.
- 58 percent of residents believe local governments in Greater Birmingham should be able to set their own minimum wage for the workers living there. These results are similar across race and geography. Support for this actually rises the wealthier the respondent.

### **Tools for Broadly Shared Prosperity**

Lastly, a quick word about what this paper is not. We are not attempting to develop a *comprehensive* policy agenda with a detailed laundry list of potential tactics for every local government and economic development office in the Greater Birmingham area to follow to achieve more equitable development. Other studies have taken this approach, some more successfully than others. Instead, we are trying to provide a broad overview of the kinds of challenges working people face in Birmingham's economy, with a special focus on the people most commonly left out of economic development and stakeholder initiative planning efforts, and then proposing a series of high-level policy solutions around their concerns. In effect, we are going for breadth rather than depth and looking to plug holes that currently exist in the region's economic development conversation.

Ultimately, we hope this paper offers a set of tools and next steps for two key audiences to take in promoting more equitable economic development in the region. First, it provides local governments, business leaders, and community leaders with key economic issues/concerns voiced by the community—especially segments of the community whose voices may not have been fully included in previous studies and stakeholder engagement efforts. Second, the paper is aimed at providing advocates with a menu of key economic policy issues (and

potential solutions) with community support that can serve as a foundation for organizing pro-equitable development regional advocacy efforts.

This paper is organized as follows: First, we provide a snapshot of Greater Birmingham's population and economy, including a brief review of the key big-picture economic governance and problems facing the region as identified in previous studies (Section 2). Next, we present a data-driven summary of what we learned from our research (Section 3), before turning to the specific details of the equitable development policy challenges involving place, people, and power in the Birmingham area (Sections 4-6). Within these sections, we discuss each of the big challenges in turn, providing a brief summary of the key survey results, discussion of the policy context related to each issue and the specific ways those challenges effect Greater Birmingham residents, before closing with policy recommendations for local governments to consider and advocates to support.

## Section 2. Greater Birmingham—Challenges and Opportunities for Broadly Shared Prosperity

**At first glance, good things are happening in Greater Birmingham**—a recent resurgence in economic growth, a revitalized downtown Birmingham, an emerging technology cluster with exciting new start-ups, and dynamic leadership in key political offices and civic engagement. The region continues to boast a low cost of living, a strong healthcare sector anchored by a world-class university, plentiful job opportunities for residents, and a local philanthropic community committed to racial and economic progress.

**Yet, beneath the surface it becomes immediately clear that the benefits of this new prosperity are not widely shared with all the people living in the region.** In a troubling legacy from its pre-Civil Rights-era past, the Greater Birmingham remains highly segregated by race, geography, and life outcomes. Black residents living in Urban Core communities like the cities of Birmingham and Bessemer earn lower incomes, face greater poverty, and experience significantly lower social mobility than their white neighbors, who live predominantly in separate suburban municipalities like Homewood, Vestavia, Mountain Brook, and Hoover.

This section examines the historical and economic contexts that have so dramatically generated the opportunities and challenges policymakers face today in seeking broadly shared prosperity across the region.

### About Greater Birmingham and Jefferson County

**Birmingham's past deeply shapes its present.** Originally founded in 1819 by an act of the state legislature, Jefferson grew to be Alabama's largest county in the years after the Civil War, especially once the City of Birmingham was incorporated in 1871. From its very beginning, the City of Birmingham was dominated by industrial and business interests. Indeed, the city was founded largely at the behest of Elyton Land Company whose investors included bankers, railroad barons, and cotton planters. Over the following century, Birmingham grew into the greatest manufacturing city in the South, rivaling even Atlanta for its industrial might, thanks in large part to geographically unique deposits of limestone, coal, and iron ore—the key ingredients for producing steel—in close proximity to each other. Companies like Pratt Coal and Coke Company, the Sloss Furnace Company, ACIPCO, US Steel, and the Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company created thousands of jobs that paid decent wages, although almost exclusively for white men. Black workers were largely shut out of these better-wage opportunities and forced through legalized segregation into lower-wage menial occupations.

But beginning in the 1970s, Birmingham's economy began to enter a period of long-term decline, as steel and manufacturing companies began to move their operations overseas, leaving the area littered with abandoned factories and mills. As with many once-proud manufacturing towns, Birmingham lost business, population, and income as its economic base steadily transitioned to service sector jobs, most of which paid low wages. Over this

period, the healthcare, banking, and higher education sectors—especially the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB)—also began to grow, paying good incomes to those educated enough to secure those jobs, but essentially inaccessible to those without the right credentials and connections.

Over roughly the same period, Greater Birmingham experienced a second revolution, where the civil rights movement succeeded in ending legal racial discrimination and segregation. Birmingham became ground zero in the battle for racial equality and civil rights, as the setting for crucial events like the Birmingham Campaign of 1963, the Children’s Crusade, Dr. Martin Luther King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” and the deadly bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church by white supremacists that killed four young girls.

Unfortunately, many white residents reacted to the end of segregation by fleeing the City of Birmingham and setting up entirely new—and often exclusively white—municipalities, school districts, and police jurisdictions throughout Jefferson County and outside the City of Birmingham itself. In these years, white flight remade the political map of Greater Birmingham, which today is home to more than thirty separate municipalities. Although many forms of legal segregation ended, de facto residential and occupational segregation continue, with people of color and women disproportionately working in low-wage occupations<sup>6</sup> and living in mostly non-white neighborhoods, largely amidst deteriorating housing stock.

Finally, Birmingham’s political legacy continues to hold sway today. Although the specific business interests leading the city have changed over the past 150 years, the political and civic influence of big business over local government continues today; residents still speak of the “Old Mules who pull strings from behind the scenes.” Historically, these interests sought to grow the economy through a development approach and under-invested in education and local government services to keep taxes down and wages low. This low-wage approach to economic development has held sway until very recently, as the Old Mules and other business leaders are beginning to grapple with the need for greater investment in K–12 education and adult job training to successfully compete in the global market for talent and talent-hungry modern businesses.

## Greater Birmingham and Jefferson County: The Big Picture

Despite the formal end of legal discrimination in the 1960s, Birmingham’s historical legacy has impacts that continue to reverberate across the years, deeply shaping the region’s economy and prospects for the people who live there—especially those living in communities of color. Specifically:

**Jefferson County continues to grow in population, while the City of Birmingham proper continues to shrink.** Today, the City of Birmingham has a population of 197,575, down one percent from 2020 and down almost six percent from 2010,<sup>7</sup> dropping it to the third largest

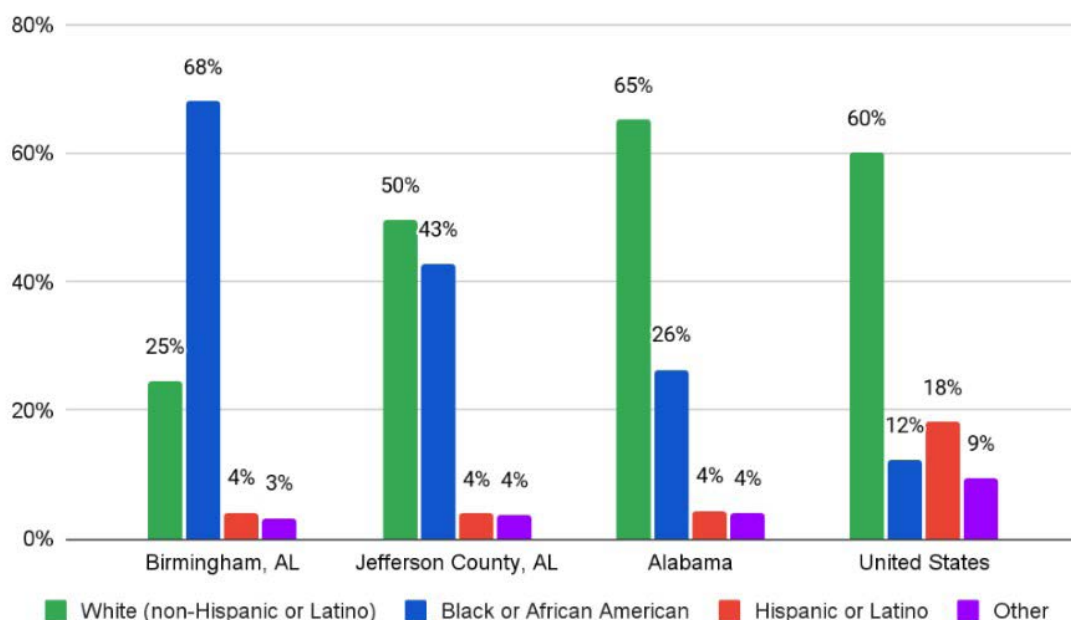


city in Alabama, behind Huntsville and Montgomery. But the surrounding county, already the largest in Alabama in terms of population, has continued to grow— from 658,466 in 2010 to 674,721 in 2020.

**Birmingham is a majority Black city in a slightly majority white county.** The City of Birmingham maintains a majority Black population, making up 68 percent of the city’s total residents—higher than the proportion of Black population in Jefferson County (43 percent), Alabama (26 percent) and the nation as a whole (12 percent). The population for Birmingham, Jefferson County, and Alabama is about four percent Hispanic or Latino in 2020— growing in size and importance but still much smaller than the proportion in the United States as whole (18 percent).<sup>8</sup>

**Figure 2.1. Birmingham is a majority Black city in a majority white county**

Population by Race/Ethnicity, 2020



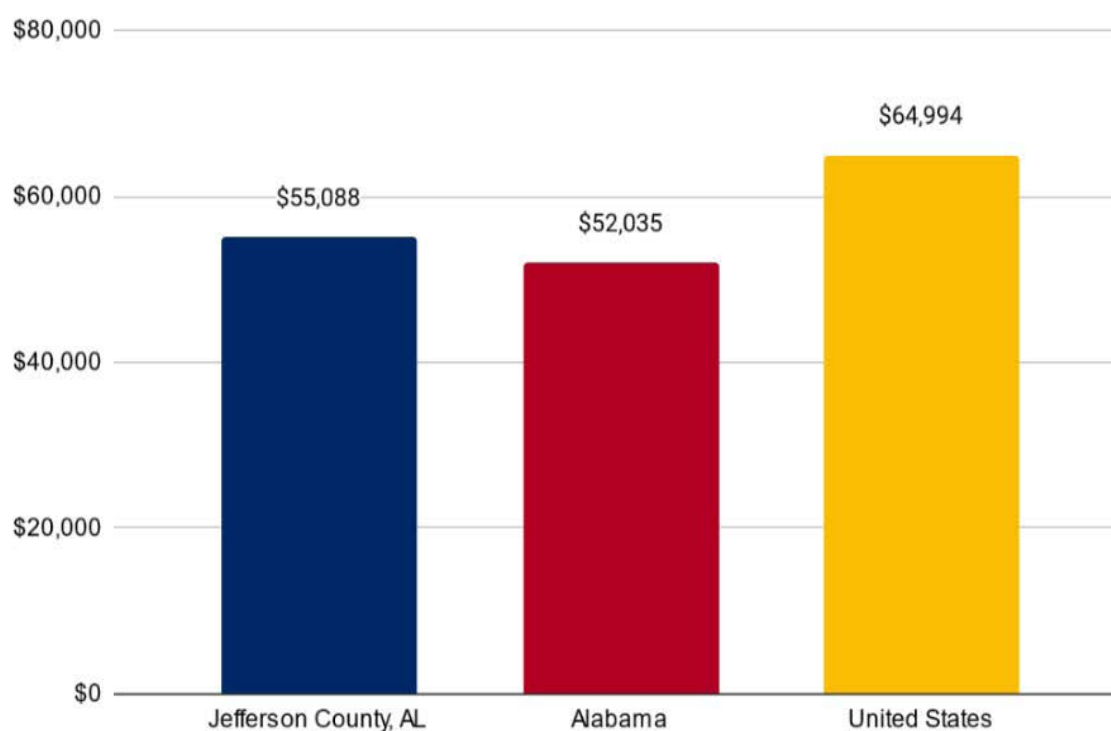
Source: American Community Survey, five-year estimates (2016-2020)

**Stark racial income inequality exists in Greater Birmingham between Black and white households.** Overall median household income in Greater Birmingham/Jefferson County is \$55,088, which is slightly higher than the median income in Alabama (\$52,035) and about \$10,000 less than the entire country (\$64,994). The fact that household income in Greater Birmingham is higher than in Alabama at large is encouraging is initially encouraging; yet a

closer look reveals deeply troubling trends, especially vast racial disparities in household income: White median household income in Greater Birmingham is \$73,945 for white households and just \$39,286 for Black households, a gap of more than \$34,000. Since the region is geographically segregated by race, the gap in household income creates uneven investment that contributes to unequal access to transportation, education, healthcare, and job opportunities.<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 2.2. Greater Birmingham residents earn more than the state average**

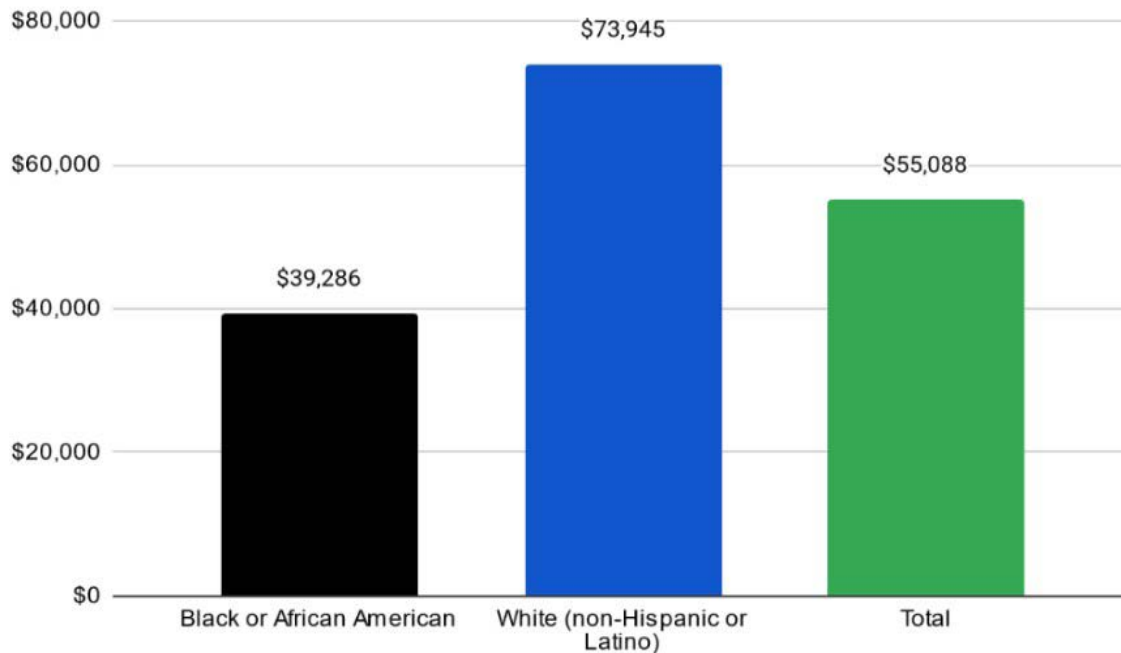
Median Household Income, 2020



Source: American Community Survey, five-year estimates (2016-2020)

**Figure 2.3. Stark racial income inequality exists in Greater Birmingham between Black and white households**

Median Household Income in Jefferson County by Race/Ethnicity, 2020

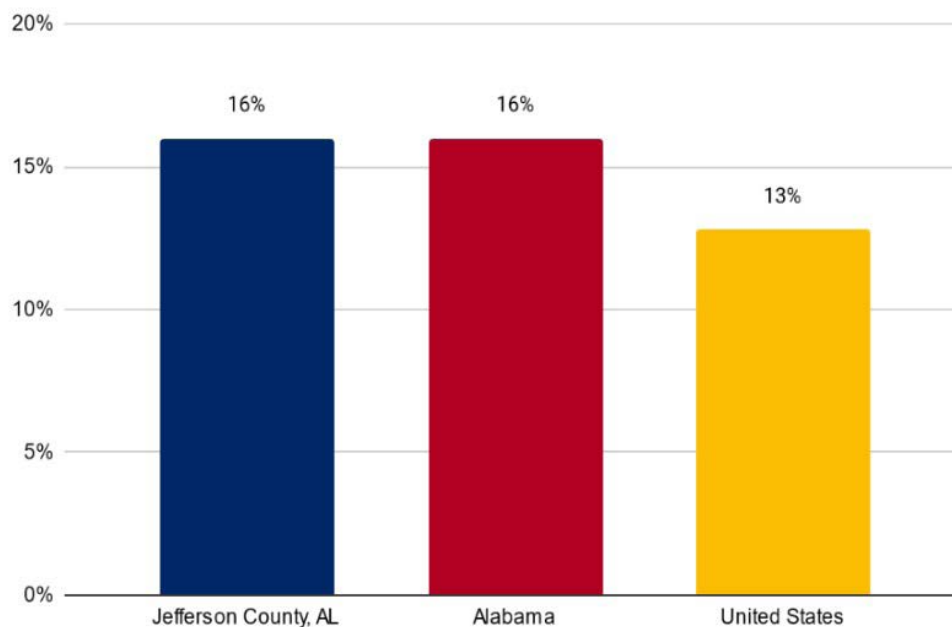


Source: American Community Survey, five-year estimates (2016-2020), Jefferson County

Similarly, the poverty rates in Greater Birmingham and Alabama are essentially the same: 16 percent in 2020, three percentage points higher than in the nation as a whole. But as with household income, poverty rates look wildly different depending on race. The Black poverty rate in the area is 23 percent, almost three times the white poverty rate (9 percent). Concentrated poverty among Black residents makes eliminating racial income and wealth gaps more difficult, as research has shown that neighborhoods with higher poverty rates make moving up the economic ladder more difficult. Even when residents of high poverty neighborhoods are not poor themselves, research suggests that those residents are exposed to more crime, worse performing schools, have smaller job seeking networks, and have worse mental and physical health outcomes.<sup>10</sup>

**Figure 2.4. Greater Birmingham poverty elevated above national average**

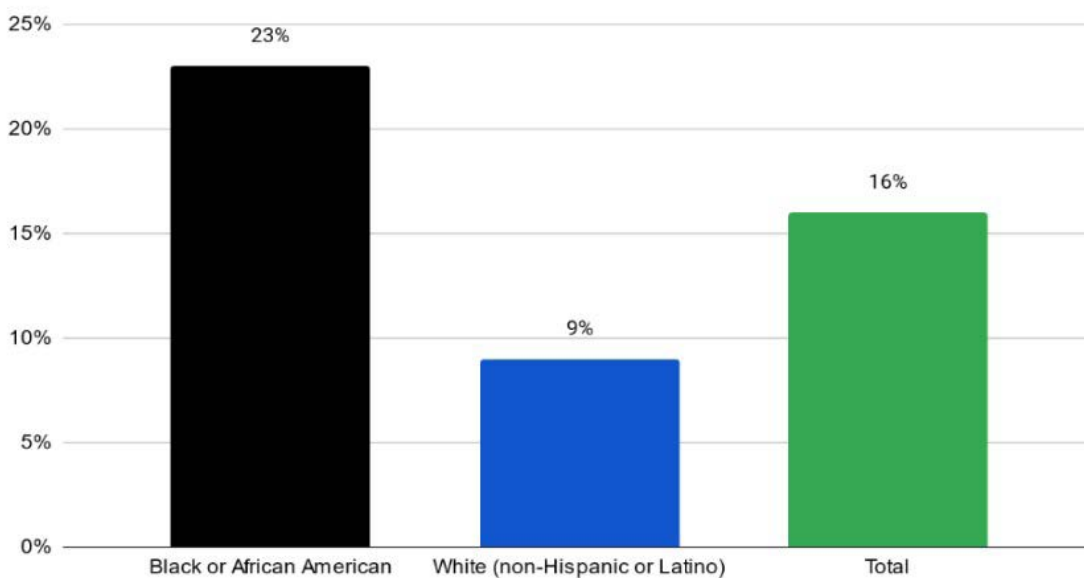
Poverty Rate in Jefferson County 2020



Source: American Community Survey, five-year estimates (2016-2020), Jefferson County

**Figure 2.5. Black households have much higher poverty rate than white households in the Greater Birmingham area**

Poverty Rate in Jefferson County by Race/Ethnicity, 2020

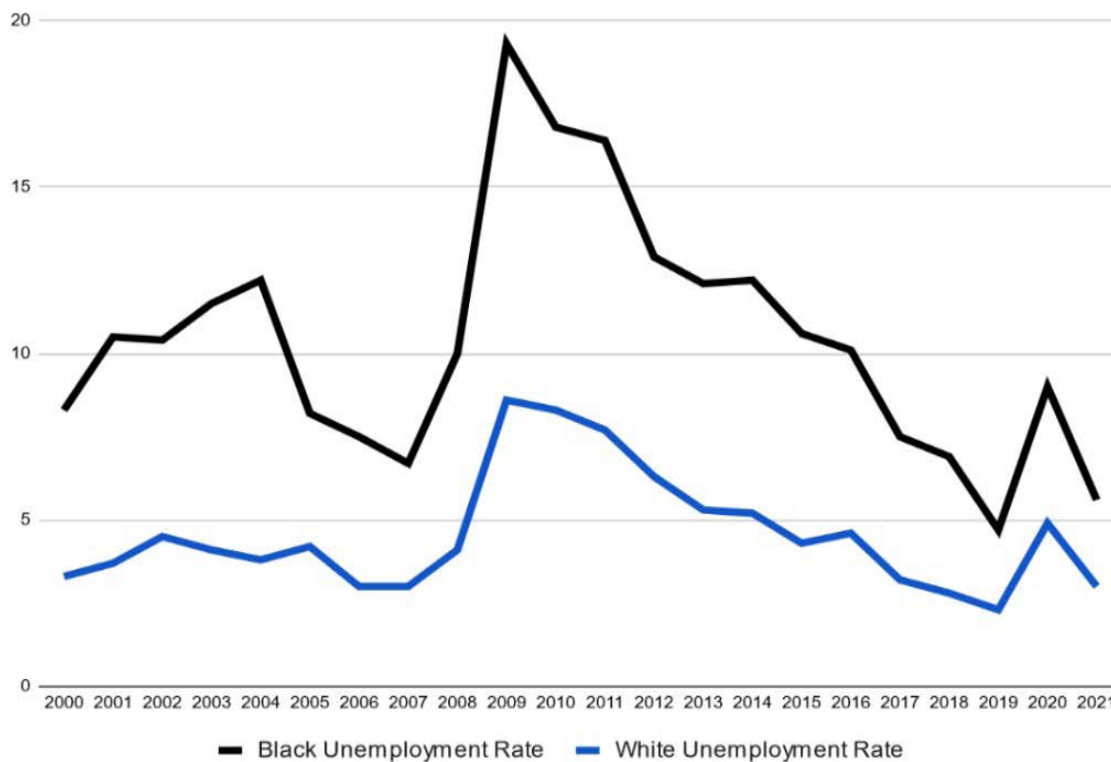


Source: American Community Survey, five-year estimates (2016-2020), Jefferson County

**Unemployment is near historic lows, but long-standing racial inequalities in unemployment rates persist.** Over the past two decades years, the Black unemployment rate in Alabama has typically run more than double the white unemployment rate. This gap was largest in 2009 during the Great Recession, when the Black unemployment rate was nearly 20 percent, and the white unemployment rate was less than 9 percent. Although Black unemployment reached its lowest point since 2000 in 2019, unemployment spiked again in 2020 during COVID and while it has continued to drop as the economy recovers, the gap between Black and white unemployment remains stubbornly high. As we discuss in greater detail in Section 5, this is largely due to long-standing barriers holding back lower-income residents of color from entering the labor force.

**Figure 2.6. Black unemployment is consistently much higher than white unemployment in the Greater Birmingham area over last decade**

Unemployment by race in Jefferson County, 2000-2022.

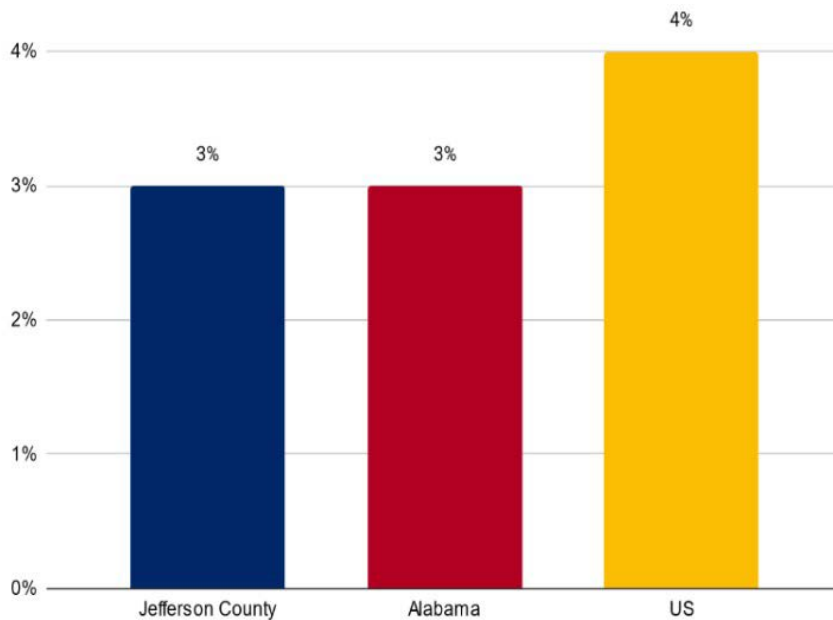


Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Local Annual Unemployment Statistics (LAUS), 2000-2021

Today, the unemployment rate in Greater Birmingham/Jefferson County is 3 percent (June 2022), the same as in Alabama and a full percentage point lower than in the nation as a whole. In 2020,<sup>11</sup> the unemployment rate for Black residents was 10 percent, more than double that of white residents (4 percent) and 3 percentage points higher than for Latino residents. Racial unemployment gaps contribute to income and wealth gaps as research has shown that unemployment and the duration of unemployment negatively impacts earnings in future jobs.<sup>12</sup>

**Figure 2.7. Greater Birmingham area unemployment lower than national average**

Unemployment Rate in Jefferson County, June 2022

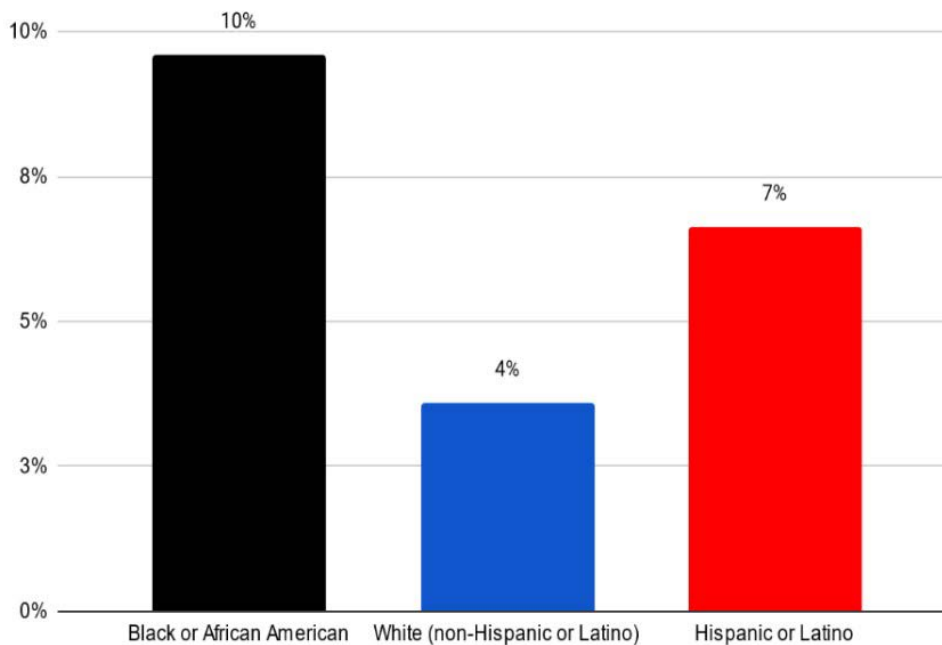


Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Local Annual Unemployment Statistics (LAUS), 2000-2021



**Figure 2.8. Black unemployment remains elevated over white unemployment in Greater Birmingham area**

Unemployment Rate in Jefferson County by Race/Ethnicity, 2020

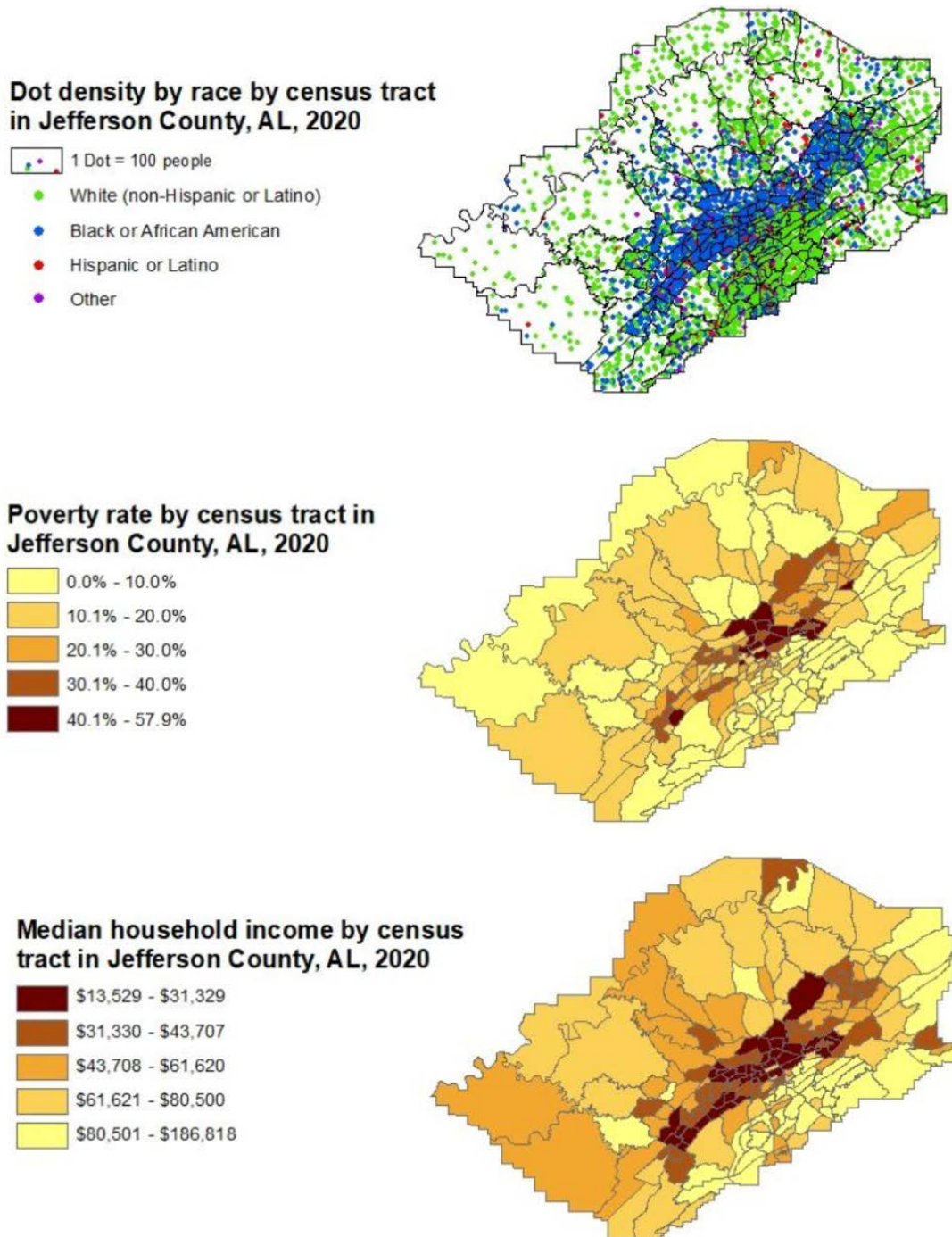


Source: American Community Survey, five-year estimates (2016-2020)

**The Greater Birmingham area is highly geographically segregated by race, and opportunities to climb the economic ladder are concentrated away from the majority Black areas of Jefferson County.** To put a number the region's segregation, it has a dissimilarity index score of 60, meaning that 60 percent of white residents would have to move to other neighborhoods to equalize the racial distribution between white and non-white populations in the county.<sup>13</sup> That pattern is reflected in the first map in Figure 2.8, which shows where people live by census tract by race. The dots, each of which represents where one hundred people live, show that the Over the Mountain communities and more rural parts of Jefferson County are predominantly white, while the diagonal axis of the county—the City of Birmingham in the center of the county northeast to Center Point and Southwest to Bessemer—is predominantly Black. Along this axis there is a cluster of high poverty areas, including North Avondale, Norwood, East Birmingham, Kingston, Evergreen, Acipco-Finley, North Birmingham, Collegeville, Woodlawn, Gate City, East Lake, Brown Springs, and Eastwood. Additionally, Bessemer has a concentration of high poverty areas. Areas with low median household incomes in the second map in Figure 2.8 are similar to those with high poverty rates. Comparing the maps of race and median household income most clearly illustrates the patterns of racial inequality in highly segregated predominantly Black census tracts. By contrast to the majority Black areas, the majority white Over the Mountain area has the lowest poverty rates and highest incomes in the county.

**Figure 2.9. Greater Birmingham area neighborhoods with most Black residents have higher poverty rates and lower household incomes than predominantly white neighborhoods**

Dot density by race/ethnicity, poverty rate, and median household income by census tract in Jefferson County, 2020



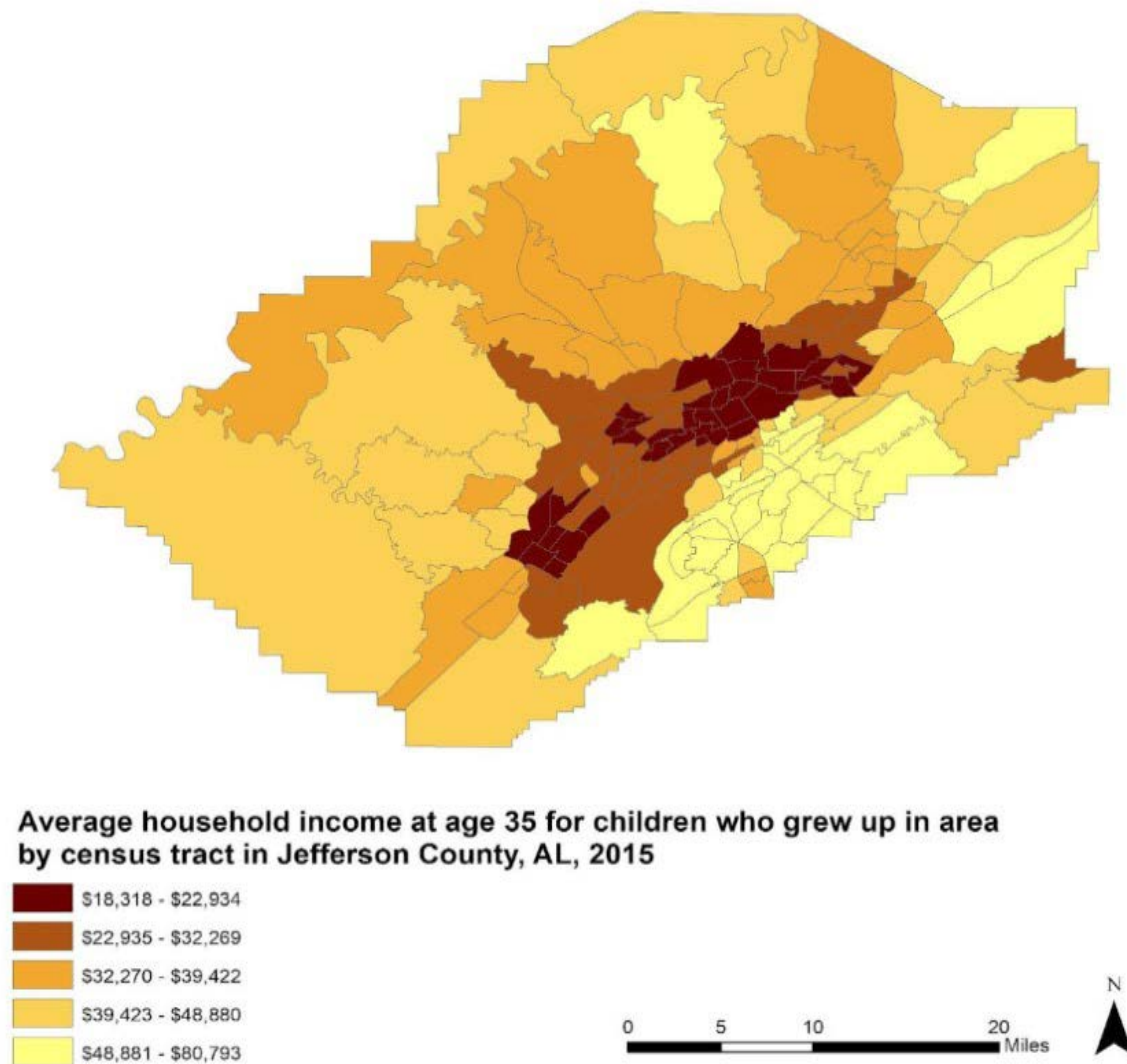
Source: American Community Survey, five-year estimates (2016-2020)

**People living in predominantly Black neighborhoods in the Greater Birmingham area suffer from exceptionally lower social mobility than those in nearby predominantly white neighborhoods.** Moving up the economic ladder is more difficult in areas with concentrated poverty and lower income because these same areas have related inequalities in the educational system, exposure to crime, and lack access to good jobs. As such, residents in many parts of the Greater Birmingham area have historically faced sharply limited upward mobility. Figure 2.9 shows income at age 35 based on the neighborhood where individuals grew up. The data can be thought of as showing where economic ladders are accessible, and where children can grow up and earn a good living in adulthood. The Central City and surrounding neighborhoods in the City of Birmingham show a large continuous area where people grew up and did not have high earnings in adulthood, with the average household income being less than \$23,000 per year. The same pattern is true in a large part of Bessemer, Lipscomb and Brighton where incomes in adulthood were less than \$23,000 per year.

By contrast, individuals at age thirty-five who grew up in Over the Mountain communities had among the highest household incomes in the region, making between \$48,881 and \$80,793. From these data, we can clearly see how opportunities to climb the economic ladder have historically been shaped by where children grew up, opportunity has been concentrated in predominantly white areas of Greater Birmingham, and many spaces that offered low upward mobility for children in the late 1970s and early 1980s still have households that lag economically behind other parts of the county.

**Figure 2.10. People living in predominantly Black neighborhoods in the Greater Birmingham area suffer from exceptionally lower social mobility than those in nearby predominantly white neighborhoods**

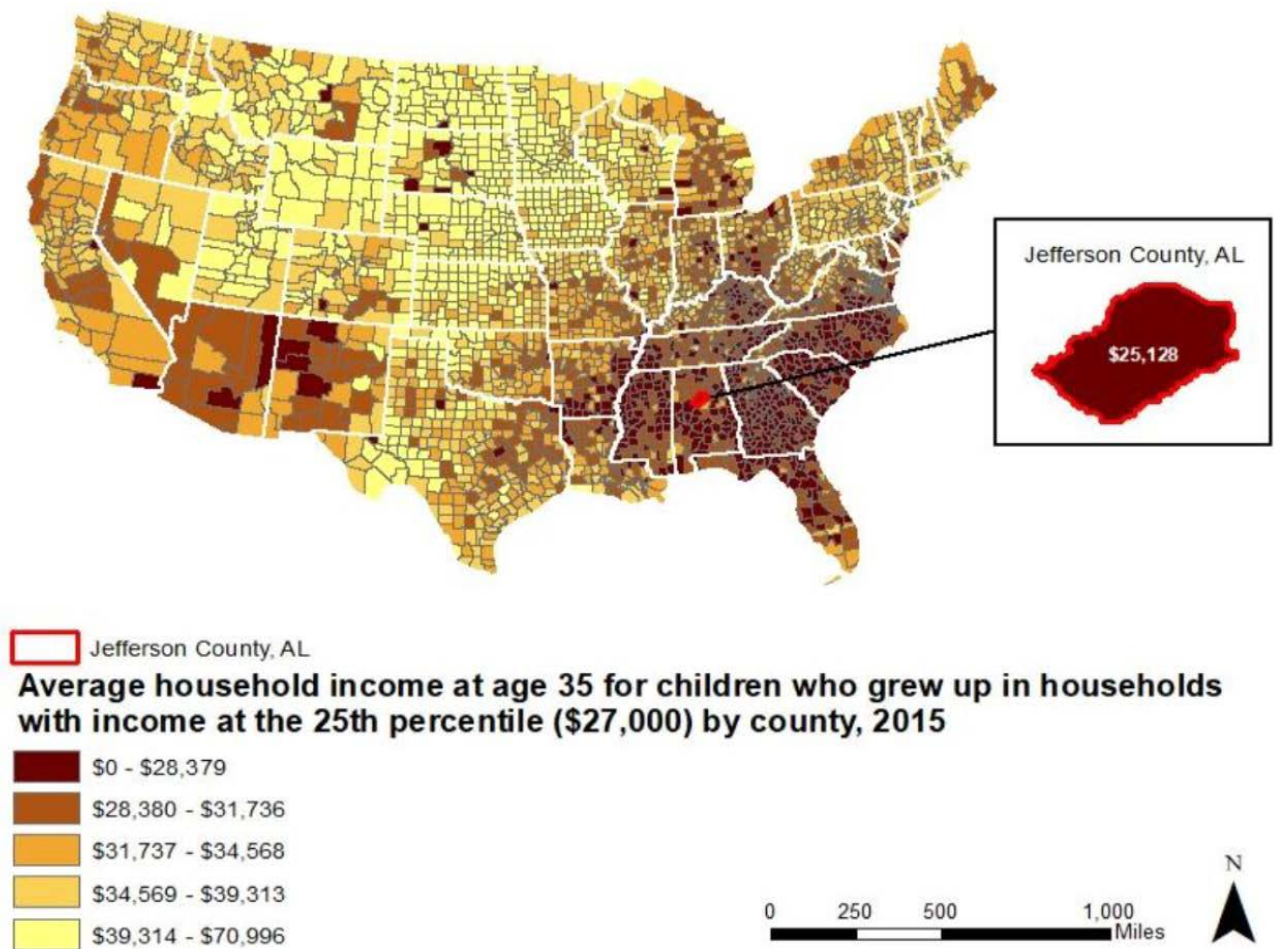
Average household income at age 35 for children who grew up in area by census tract in Jefferson County, 2015



Source: Opportunity Insights, Children's Outcomes in Adulthood

**Figure 2.11. Jefferson County residents have significantly lower social mobility than the national average**

Average household income at age 35 for children who grew up in households with income at the 25th percentile (\$27,000) by county, 2015



Source: Opportunity Insights, Children's Outcomes in Adulthood.



## Opportunities and Barriers to Progress in the Greater Birmingham Area

Taking these together, it is clear that residents across the Greater Birmingham area live in two distinct worlds that almost never overlap. Residents of color in Urban Core neighborhoods experience deeper poverty,<sup>14</sup> more joblessness,<sup>15</sup> lower incomes, and shockingly lower social mobility than their white, mostly suburban counterparts.<sup>16</sup> Various stakeholders have conducted more than a dozen studies over the past decade seeking to understand these problems<sup>17</sup> and found that **these devastating economic trends are not just a problem for the residents of color consistently being left behind, but they also present serious obstacles to economic progress for the entire region.** Specifically:

- Income inequality is holding back sustained economic growth in the region.<sup>18</sup>
- The overall Greater Birmingham area has experienced anemic wage growth<sup>19</sup> that is significantly lower than the wage growth in peer cities across the South over the past forty years—including Atlanta, Charlotte, and Memphis.<sup>20</sup>
- Labor force participation is substantially lower in Greater Birmingham than in other areas across the country, which has taken almost \$850 million in labor income out of the county's economy every year<sup>21</sup> and continues to remain one of the biggest factors explaining why Birmingham's wage growth remains so sluggish (see Section 5 for more details).<sup>22</sup>

**Put another way, overcoming Birmingham's problems with grossly unequal economic outcomes and social mobility is essential to improving the region's overall economic competitiveness and performance compared to its peers across the South;** and to create a place with broadly shared prosperity where people want to live, locate a business, and raise their families. As the plethora of recent Birmingham studies make clear, progress will require addressing four central challenges, all of which are clearly aligned with what we heard from residents and experts alike in our own research:

- **Political fragmentation.** Greater Birmingham/Jefferson County is highly politically fragmented, with thirty-four separate municipalities (and the county government)—the largest number of any metro in the South.<sup>23</sup> Having so many governments that need to cooperate does not contribute to effective or equitable government. As the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama (PARCA) put it in their innovative 2016 report on regionalism: "This pattern of fragmentation has consequences. It leads to duplication, creates intra-regional competition, concentrates economic advantage and disadvantage, and diffuses resources and leadership. It makes it difficult to arrive at consensus, pursue priorities of regional importance, or deliver services that transcend municipal boundaries. In sum, it puts the metro area at a disadvantage."<sup>24</sup> PARCA experts proposed dozens of innovative strategies for breaking down governmental silos and creating pathways for more robust regional collaboration on issues ranging from police jurisdictions and emergency response to government modernization and political consolidation. Although they represent strong



proposals for inter-governmental cooperation, these ideas leave largely unaddressed the structural economic challenges that residents in our study said they wanted local government to engage.

- **Race and racism.** Alabama's historical legacy of racial discrimination looms large over Birmingham. Greater Birmingham's neighborhoods, occupations, and schools remain almost as segregated today as they were when legal racial discrimination was abolished a half century ago.<sup>25</sup> Even the political jurisdictions of the region reflect this legacy—decades of white flight and the growth of Birmingham's suburbs are directly responsible for why the county has thirty-four municipalities. Although the radically different economic outcomes experienced by Black and white residents in Birmingham are not by themselves proof that discrimination continues, the vastness of these disparities suggest at the very least that state and local policymakers have not yet succeeded in reversing the legacies of past discrimination or creating sufficient access and opportunities for most Black residents to secure upward economic mobility and financial stability.<sup>26</sup>

- **Education.** Across the reports we viewed, there was broad consensus that educational attainment, quality, and equity remain a significant challenge for Birmingham residents. The region boasts some of the best performing schools in the state next door to some of the lowest performing, and often the difference depends on the race of the children attending and which municipality the school serves. Indeed, there are more than a dozen separate school districts within the county, often following municipal boundaries that were specifically drawn in the white flight era to exclude communities of color. School funding remains deeply unequal. Unsurprisingly, educational outcomes are marked by significant racial disparities, with students of color earning much lower high school graduation and college graduation attainment rates.<sup>27</sup>

- **Barriers to employment.** This creates a broader economic challenge for the region's employers, who by all reports are struggling to find workers with the skills and education they need. One recent report noted that the Birmingham area had significantly fewer residents with four-year Bachelor's degrees than peer cities, which the authors felt hampered the recruitment of technology firms and other knowledge-intensive industries to the region.<sup>28</sup> Although doubtless an important factor, a focus on four-year degrees ignores the majority of the workforce that works in occupations that require some type of skills training—and potentially some kind of occupational credential—but do not require a bachelors' degree (e.g., nursing, manufacturing, welding and other trades).<sup>29</sup> The lesson here is that the region should not simply seek to recruit its educational talent from outside the region but develop what it already has—the central thrust of a recent report by the Brookings Institution, which analyzed at length racial disparities in labor market participation and outcomes and identified a range of key strategies for removing barriers to full employment for residents from communities of color.<sup>30</sup> Alongside skills and training, other barriers to employment included lack of transportation and involvement in the criminal justice system.<sup>31</sup>

Birmingham residents face wildly different prospects for the future, their financial well-being, and ability to thrive depending on which zip code they live in and community they belong to. Broadly shared prosperity will continue to remain elusive as long as these big picture challenges continue to go unaddressed. In our next section, we report what we heard from residents—the specific barriers they face in securing broadly shared prosperity that provides a healthy, vibrant life for them and their families.

## Section 3. What We Heard from Greater Birmingham Area Residents

Throughout our study, we heard Greater Birmingham residents say they wanted economic development to achieve a more equitable economy and produce shared prosperity for everyone in the region. They identified a range of specific policy-related challenges and goals that require greater regional cooperation.

### How We Listened

We engaged Greater Birmingham area residents in several different ways to understand the biggest economic concerns, challenges, and opportunities they see attaining broadly shared prosperity for themselves and their neighbors. Specifically, we listened in the following ways, engaging more than a thousand people:

- **Conducted a professional survey of 1,024 Greater Birmingham residents** to understand the kinds of challenges facing residents and the kinds of policy solutions they support.
- **Conducted 12 focus groups with key categories of stakeholders** to learn more about the biggest challenges facing Greater Birmingham area residents. This included corporate leaders, business owners, faith leaders across the racial spectrum, grassroots activists, leaders of women’s groups, youth development groups, and other nonprofit leaders working in various aspects of equitable development across the area. We engaged approximately 80 people in our focus groups.
- **Conducted two dozen one-on-one interviews with community leaders**—including staff at local governments, regional foundations, regionwide civic initiatives of all kinds, grassroots activists, policy advocates, nonprofit leaders, neighborhood association presidents, local developers, and others—to hear their concerns and solutions.

As we listened, we paid special attention to ensuring broad representation across race, gender, political ideology, and geography (perhaps most important, given Greater Birmingham’s fragmented governance), including respondents from three basic areas: the **Urban Core**—predominantly Black urban areas (the cities of Birmingham, Bessemer, and others); **Over the Mountain**—mostly white suburbs such as Mountain Brook, Vestavia Hills, and Homewood; and the more **Rural Outlying Areas** of Jefferson County such as Oak Grove, McCalla, and Williamsburg.

## What We Heard Residents Say: The Big Picture

As we listened to Greater Birmingham residents, we heard a fairly consistent story about the challenges and opportunities facing the region:

- **Greater Birmingham area residents love their community.** They pointed to natural beauty, proximity to family, the low cost of living, the prevalence of jobs, and the revitalization of downtown and other community amenities such as stadiums, parks, and ballfields as reasons they enjoyed living in the area. One in five residents said they were born in the area and could not imagine living anywhere else.
- **Despite these positives, residents do not see the region's prosperity as broadly shared by all residents, including themselves.** Almost three out of every four residents said the area's economic resources were not distributed fairly, and only 28 percent said they were personally included in the area's economic revival and development.
- **Residents want more government action to solve this problem rather than less—especially at the local government level.** Our focus group participants almost universally called for robust local government action on policy challenges they identified as urgent, and our survey results repeatedly showed strong plurality or large majority support for a range of local government policy interventions to promote more broadly shared prosperity.
- **Many see regional cooperation as essential to ensuring broadly shared prosperity, but they also score current cooperation as poor.** Almost 75 percent of residents reported wanting greater regional cooperation to address the area's economic challenges, but only a third rated the current way local governments cooperate across the region as “fair” or “good.” Our focus groups gave local governments a solid “D” for how well their local governments collaborated with each other.

Many of their underlying concerns echo the findings of past studies, particularly around various impediments to shared prosperity and regional cooperation. Notably, residents pointed to:

- **Race and racism are seen as critical barriers to economic progress, although views are nuanced even within racial groups.** More than two-thirds of residents see racism in the Greater Birmingham as either solely systemic in nature, enshrined in laws or policies (9 percent) or a mix of systemic and a person's individual feelings (56 percent). Given this definition, 65 percent of residents said racism exists in the Birmingham area, including majority support from both Black (77 percent) and white residents (55 percent). Similarly, 57 percent of all residents named racism as a significant barrier to economic progress—another solid majority. Interestingly, while only 44 percent of white residents saw racism as a major barrier holding back economic progress (compared to 72 percent of Black residents), another 28 percent remain open to the idea—suggesting a basic level of common views exist across racial lines.

Our focus groups expanded on these themes, tying systemic racism to the region's political fragmentation and challenges with regional collaboration. As one Black resident put it: "We lack regional cooperation because of segregation, and the 30 plus municipalities that we have in the county, they are segregated. They were started on purpose because of the federal mandate to integrate the schools." Another resident went further: "I need you to understand that it's all on purpose; it was to keep it disconnected . . . to keep us out."

But while all recognized the historical legacy of racism, views on the impact of racism today were surprisingly nuanced; some white focus group participants viewed racism as a barrier to progress today, while a number of Black participants argued the Black community needed to "move on," which itself was a common view among a number of white participants.

- **Political fragmentation reflects the legacy of white flight and past discrimination and holds back cooperative approaches to solving the region's economic problems.**

Focus group participants saw the communities outlying the City of Birmingham are like "separate kingdoms" that have both a physical barrier (Red Mountain, for example) and a racial barrier (born of white flight) between them and the Urban Core. Residents thought it would prove difficult to get such siloed communities to support projects that might not seem beneficial to their own interests. They pointed to a variety of factors, including:

- **Mutual distrust:** Will efforts to improve Birmingham be at the expense of the surrounding cities?
- **Politics:** Leaders from the surrounding cities do not want to appear to voters as if they are directing funds from their own city to a different one.
- **Shortsightedness of suburban communities:** Outlying community residents do not acknowledge how the prosperity of their communities is tethered to the City of Birmingham's prosperity.

**"A lot of the suburban communities, that's why they exist . . . to have a separate school system, and that entrenches as well as increases inequalities that exist, and also undermines that we are all one community."— Participant in faith leaders focus group**

- **Lack of commitment to public education is a fundamental problem for equitable economic growth.** Many respondents expressed significant concerns over the quality of education and the deep disparities in K–12 access and outcomes between Black, white, and Hispanic students—structural problems that are clearly rooted in the geographic fragmentation of the area. As one resident put it, "If you live in a certain area, you go to a

school in that particular area, so if you live in a low-class area you are going to go to a low-class school. What it does is keep the lower class in place and the higher class in another place.” Our focus groups also frequently highlighted the opposition of special interests and “the Old Mules” to investing in basic education, which, in turn, is beginning to hamper business recruitment with firms looking to locate in places with an appropriately skilled workforce.

Lack of engaged leadership. Almost 90 percent of our survey respondents pointed to ineffective leadership and special interest influence as the main barriers holding back their local governments from solving problems. More than 42 percent believe that lack of change is the result of special interests “rigging” the system.

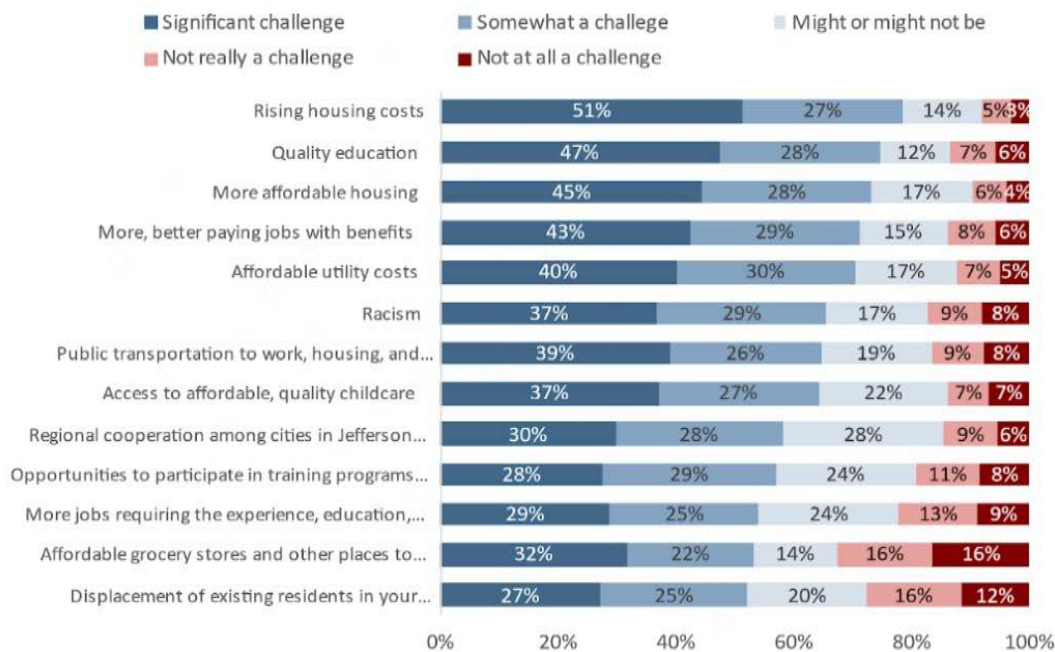
## What We Heard Residents Say: Key Policy Problems

Within this broader context, we also heard residents point to a range of specific policy challenges they want local and state policymakers to address, including:



At least 70% of the sample saw the following as challenges facing Jefferson County: rising housing costs, quality education, more affordable housing, more, better paying jobs with benefits, and affordable utility costs.

What are perceptions of challenges facing Jefferson County?



## Transportation

Two-thirds of our survey respondents identified transportation—especially the lack of public transit—as the top challenge facing Greater Birmingham. The problem is especially pronounced given that Greater Birmingham is one of the most highly auto-dependent metro areas in the country. Residents expressed concerns about the lack of routes to the places they most needed to go, the lack of service during evenings and Sundays, and, in some cases, their physical safety. Residents by overwhelming margins wanted more transit and better transit, rather than less, and they pointed to the need for increased funding and regional cooperation to make this a reality. Across all of our engagement, we heard residents prioritize transit as an equitable development policy area they wanted local governments to tackle largely because they recognized the ability to find a job and access basic public amenities like grocery stores, hospitals, parks, and shops (in other words participate fully in society) depends on the ability to travel to those places. Without a car, they recognized that too many people are simply shut out of Birmingham’s community life and lack the opportunity to earn a living.

**“Transportation seems to be one issue that we can find some collaboration . . . we had a pretty good coalition of people not only in Birmingham but those outside because they wanted people to be able to get to the jobs so that could be something to begin with.”**  
– Faith Leader from one of our focus groups

## Access to Healthy Food

Although they were unlikely to say that lack of access to fresh and healthy foods was their most important concern—especially compared to problems such as transportation and workers’ wages—Greater Birmingham residents consistently raised lack of access to healthy food in many neighborhoods as an important challenge local governments should address. They viewed lack of healthy food access as a real barrier holding back their lowest income neighbors—and low-income communities more generally—from even getting started on the road to economic opportunity. These concerns were expressed most clearly among city residents and nonprofit leaders, and less so among residents living Over the Mountain or in Jefferson County’s rural communities; nonetheless, taken together, more than 55 percent of residents still thought neighborhoods without access to healthy food were a significant problem facing Birmingham residents.

**“If you are not eating the right food, then yes, your health may be suffering and you may not be doing one hundred percent of your job, and then it’s just a snowball effect.”** – General public focus group participant



## **Housing, Displacement, and Gentrification**

Residents named the rising cost of housing, including general unaffordability, increasing rents and property taxes, and their connection to homelessness, as a critical challenge facing working people in the Birmingham economy. Almost 80 percent of respondents identified rising housing costs as a problem, while another 73 percent said the same about the overall lack of affordable housing. Our focus groups and interviews added additional depth to residents' concerns with housing, with respondents connecting rising costs to the recent revitalization in downtown Birmingham and the influx of white families into Bessemer, both of which were seen as accelerating gentrification and displacement of existing, mostly Black residents from historically low-income neighborhoods.

**“It seems there are constantly new apartments being built, but they are all luxury apartments. Where is housing for the regular folks?”**  
– Youth advocate

## **Good Jobs**

In a likely sign of Greater Birmingham's surging labor market, residents did not count unemployment or a lack of jobs as a top concern. Instead, we heard repeatedly that the real jobs problem in Birmingham had to do with the availability of good jobs—the kinds of jobs that pay living wages that allow families to make ends meet and provide adequate retirement benefits and health insurance. More than 73 percent of all respondents rated lack of good jobs as at least somewhat of a problem, including 82 percent of Black respondents and 62 percent of white respondents. Despite the 20-point gap, these are still supermajorities of both races in agreement, suggesting significant cross-racial recognition of that wages and job quality are problem. Our focus groups drew a direct connection between the lack of living wage jobs and many of the other challenges facing working people trying to climb into middle-class prosperity.

**“I can go get a job sitting right here for \$9 an hour but in our economy today, \$9 is not going to make a difference, \$15 won't make a difference. Are we talking about a career where people want to work and stay at a company or are we talking about just a job?”**  
– African American focus group participant



## **Job Training**

Our respondents also pointed to the importance of job training as a key strategy for ensuring access to good-paying jobs and creating ladders for better economic opportunity. Still almost 60 percent of residents stated that access to these training programs remained a challenge for those who wanted them and that even those fortunate enough to complete these programs might not find available jobs calling for the skills they just acquired. Our focus groups and interviews highlighted both of these challenges—access and skills alignment—and pointed to a number of new job training initiatives designed to address them. But there was a broad recognition that Birmingham’s workforce training system needed to do more for everyone, especially for the hardest workers to reach and those most marginally attached to the workforce.

**“They have taken trades out of high school, and no one is learning welding, carpentry, auto mechanics, small engines . . . they have nothing to fall on but working at McDonald’s, jobs not paying what I call a living wage.” – Labor leader**

## **Childcare**

Residents repeatedly mentioned lack of affordable, quality childcare as a barrier holding back people who wanted to work and businesses looking for people to hire. More than 60 percent of our respondents saw childcare as a significant challenge for the Birmingham economy.

**“The need for affordable childcare is really great and I think that goes hand in hand when we talk about how we are going to create an equitable economy.” – Participant in our general residents focus group**

## **Community Benefits from Development**

Throughout our research, we heard a broad consensus that government should do more to ensure that local residents and communities directly benefit from development—particularly real estate projects and new business location decisions. For example, more than three-quarters of residents said they wanted local government to make sure that companies actually create the jobs they promise in exchange for public subsidies or tax incentives, and require that those jobs pay living wages. This eye-popping support was shared by similar numbers of white and Black residents alike. In our interviews and focus groups, we heard a particular

desire to understand how far local governments could go in achieving community benefits, given the limitations imposed by state interference and preemption.

**“We need to know what these tax incentives are actually getting us in our communities, and whether anybody except the corporations and developers are seeing any real benefit.” – Nonprofit leader**

### **State Interference in Local Control**

Alabama’s constitution gives the state government significant power to interfere in local government policymaking and revenue raising. Many policies available to other cities in across the country—including raising property tax rates, raising the minimum wage, and funding public transit, housing, and investments—are simply unavailable to local governments in Greater Birmingham. Only a small minority of our survey respondents (about a quarter) supported current levels of state preemption power and opposed home rule, and large majorities of Black and white residents alike supported letting local governments set their own minimum wage—a key tool available to communities with home rule. Our focus groups and interviews went even further: Local leaders saw state interference in local control as the single greatest obstacle to enacting the full range of equitable development policies they felt would ensure broadly shared prosperity—from transit to housing to wages to taxes.

### **Other Issues**

We also heard a range of other concerns raised by residents that, while they do not directly relate to equitable economic development, are still important ingredients in helping communities thrive. They include:

- **Utility rates.** Our focus groups repeatedly brought up community concerns about rising utility rates, which are putting more lower-income people at risk of losing their homes.
- **Crime and the criminal justice system.** Our respondents highlighted two different dimensions of crime in the Greater Birmingham area. First, across all racial and geographic groups, residents expressed concerns about both violent and property crime, and the impact it has on families and community well-being. Secondly, we heard from mostly Black residents, employers, and workforce development professionals that criminal records make it almost impossible for people to find good jobs, which in turn drives crime and recidivism. Policing and criminal justice reform are also beyond the scope of this report.
- **Healthcare, especially mental health.** Residents also expressed concerns over access to affordable healthcare services. Lack of health insurance and the rising costs of basic primary healthcare were seen as significant challenges, especially among lower income

residents and advocates from communities of color. Lack of mental health services were seen as a particularly glaring problem, particularly given its connection to homelessness, unemployment, and financial insecurity. We do not address healthcare in the body of the report.

## **What We Heard: Different Communities, Different Voices—But Very Similar Stories**

As we listened, we heard far less disagreement than we expected (Sections 4–6 bear this out), although there were naturally some differences across race and geography. Some of the most notable contrasts include the following:

In general, the more affluent Over-the-Mountain area tended to encounter fewer issues or problems with living in Greater Birmingham, while the less affluent, more predominantly Black respondents in the Urban Core were more likely to have encountered issues, and more likely to support local government addressing these issues.

- **Residents in the Urban Core** reported being clearly more affected by lack of employment, housing issues, and lack of nearby access to healthy food than were residents in the other areas and were much more likely to see racism as both a prominent issue and a barrier. In addition, these residents were more likely to use and support public transportation and showed the most support for raising the statewide and local minimum wage. They also had more negative perceptions of regional cooperation and expressed greater doubt in the ability of communities in the county to cooperate on any issue.
- **Over the Mountain residents** tended to say that neighborhoods without access to health food, gentrification, and public transportation were generally not concerns affecting them personally. They were also less likely to have encountered problems with finding a job, more likely to have difficulty finding employees to work, more likely to believe unemployment benefits are discouraging people from finding a job than Black residents in the Urban Core.
- **Rural Outer residents**, who are primarily white and blue collar, were less likely than Over the Mountain and Urban Core residents to see racism as a problem in the area or a barrier to cooperation, and they showed less interest in using or supporting investments in public services, including public transit. They also did not generally support raising the minimum wage and believed raising it would adversely affect Alabama's economy.

## Section 4. Place

Place matters for the people who live in Greater Birmingham. Their prosperity, health, and ability to thrive depend greatly on what their places are actually like. Do they live in neighborhoods with plentiful, quality housing that is also affordable? Do they have access to healthy foods and parks? Do they live in a neighborhood that allows ready transportation to jobs, hospitals, and other amenities? Does their community have thriving local businesses? How residents answer these questions helps identify the real challenges people face in Greater Birmingham, and the ways regional collaboration among the county's governments can ensure more equitable development and broadly shared prosperity.

Our research identified three main equitable economic development challenges for working people related to *place*: lack of transportation access, a real estate development boom leaving too many families behind, and highly localized lack of access to healthy foods.

### 1. Lack of Transportation Access

**"If you had mass transit in Jefferson County, then the people with the skills and training can get to jobs anywhere in the county. People are transportation deprived." – Community activist**

**Transportation plays a crucial role in ensuring equitable development.**<sup>32</sup> Without adequate transportation options, residents cannot access jobs, healthy food, amenities, or schools, and neighborhoods become siloed from each other and the regional economy, deepening poverty and economic exclusion.<sup>33</sup>

Given this reality, residents clearly identified transportation generally, and public transit access specifically, as a top economic development challenge facing area residents. They wanted more public transit rather than less and strongly supported increasing funding and regional collaboration between local governments to expand transit access.

## By the Numbers: Transportation Access

- 65 percent of survey respondents identified transportation as the top challenge facing Greater Birmingham residents.
- 65 percent saw public transit access and performance in particular as a somewhat or significant challenge.
- 65 percent rated public transit in Greater Birmingham as fair or poor.
- 46 percent said they would take transit more often if it took them where it needed to go. Another 23 percent said they were open to using transit in this case.
- 41 percent said lack of funding is responsible for transit's challenges; another 25 percent blamed lack of effective leadership at the local and county levels.
- 64 percent support changing the Alabama constitution to allow local governments to use gas tax funds for public transit.
- 68 percent want local governments across Jefferson County to expand regional transit generally, and 73 percent support extending transit to their own communities.

## Transportation in Greater Birmingham: The Big Picture

**Transportation is a significant challenge for working people.** Almost two-thirds of our survey respondents identified transportation as the first or second most important economic challenge facing working people in Greater Birmingham, views that were remarkably consistent across our three different geographies. Significantly, Black and white residents largely agreed about the importance of transportation as a problem for their communities, with 69 percent of Black respondents and 61 percent of white respondents pointing to the issue as a serious challenge in Greater Birmingham. This is actually the smallest gap between white and Black residents' perceptions of what is important to them, suggesting that there is cross-racial agreement at the very least about the existence of the problem and a willingness to fix it, even if there may ultimately be differences in opinion over specific policies to adopt. We heard similar sentiments widely across our interviews and focus groups.

**This discontent is rooted in the reality that Greater Birmingham is highly dependent on automobiles for transportation**—the Brookings Institution called the Birmingham metro “auto dominant,” and rated the region as the most auto-dependent metro area in the country in 2014.<sup>34</sup> In this case, “auto dominance” means that residents overwhelmingly rely on their cars to travel everywhere they need to go—their jobs, their homes, their schools, their grocery stores, their hospitals and other public amenities. For example, 86 percent of all commuters living in Jefferson County travel to work by driving alone in their cars.<sup>35</sup> As a result, residents

need regular reliable access to a car or to public transit to participate fully in the region's economy. Those without such access are left behind.

**Unfortunately, public transit is not widely used.** Only 5 percent of residents use public transit to commute to work,<sup>36</sup> and about half of transit users have no access to a car, suggesting that only a tiny number—2.5 percent of all commuters—are choosing public transit when they do have access to a car.

**Existing transit options do not meet the needs of the region.** The primary transit system is a bus service administered by the Birmingham Jefferson County Transit Authority (BJCTA) and includes routes connecting the City of Birmingham, Bessemer, Homewood, Mountain Brook, Midfield, Center Point, Hoover, Vestavia Hills, Tarrant, and Fairfield—a service area covering 200 miles.<sup>37</sup> The BJCTA also administers a paratransit service for people with disabilities across the same geographic footprint. In addition, Birmingham Xpress bus rapid transit (BRT) line runs a ten-mile stretch along US 11 between Woodlawn and the city center, Crossplex<sup>38</sup> and the Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham and the City of Birmingham have teamed up to experiment with various ride-share pilots designed to provide additional transportation options beyond traditional transit.

**Unfortunately, residents found these various transit systems deeply inadequate—**65 percent rated it fair or poor, while an equal percentage said transit access was a major challenge for those living in Greater Birmingham. Our interviews and focus groups repeatedly found high levels of frustration with the quality and quantity of service provided by the current system, especially compared to other cities like Atlanta. As one focus group participant put it: “You don’t see the bus system that much in every part of town. Even on 280, you just don’t see the buses run that much like they do in major cities.”

**This burden falls most extensively on those who use transit the most—older, low-income people of color.** Almost eight out of every ten people using public transit to commute to work are Black (compared to just 23 percent who are white). Sixty-eight percent of public transit commuters are older than 45, and 60 percent earn less than \$25,000 every year.<sup>39</sup>

## **What We Learned About the Transportation Challenges Facing Birmingham Residents**

Birmingham residents have a strong grasp of the challenges facing the region's transportation system and how they contribute to inequitable economic growth across the county, including why challenges exist and how they affect the people who need and use transit the most.

### ***The Transportation Challenges Facing Residents***

Specifically, these challenges include:

- **Transit fails to take people where they need to go when they need to go.** Most critically, residents said the transit system has too few buses traveling too few routes with

too few stops. More than half of the thirty-four municipalities in the county have no transit stops, and those that do often have stops that are located far away from where a majority of the population lives. As a result, huge swaths of Jefferson County lack basic access to transit lines. In addition, BJCTA has cut back service on hours and on weekends (Sunday service was eliminated 30 years ago), making it even harder for people to use the bus for commuting and shopping. Commute times for public transit riders are average about sixty-three minutes—three times the average travel time for commuters in their cars.<sup>40</sup> Some riders have to wait up to ninety minutes just to change bus lines, adding to their delay.

- **Perceptions of deteriorating transit quality discourage riders.** Residents described transit quality and efficiency in Greater Birmingham as “utterly woeful.” Much of the bus fleet is seen as older, outdated, and steadily deteriorating. In addition, they pointed to rising incidents of crime and lack of public safety on the bus as a serious deterrent to using it more regularly.

- **Public transit is seen as having a social stigma based on who is riding.** Building on the concerns expressed over public safety, residents in our focus groups also acknowledged that the high prevalence of homeless, low-income, and Black commuters riding on the bus has stigmatized transit in the views of other residents, especially those living Over the Mountain or in the more rural areas of the county. Our survey results reflect this to a small degree, with four out of ten residents in these two outer geographies flatly declaring they would never transit for any reason (compared to just a quarter of City of Birmingham residents saying the same).

### *Impacts on Residents*

**Poor transit access has significant consequences for equitable economic development.** It raises meaningful barriers for working people living in an auto-dominant region and erects substantial barriers to personal financial stability and broadly shared prosperity across the region:

- **Without access to transit, many working people in low-income neighborhoods are unable to find and keep a job, for the simple reason that they have no reliable way to travel to it.** The Brookings Institution recently found that lack of transportation access reduces the likelihood of having a job by 50 percent,<sup>41</sup> and City of Birmingham staff have estimated that number is closer to 90 percent in the city’s most distressed neighborhoods. This means that someone living in a neighborhood without access to transit has only a 10 percent chance of having a job if they do not have a car. Putting this another way, Birmingham commuters using a car can access 100 times as many jobs as those commuting by transit.<sup>42</sup> And the problem is getting worse—the number of jobs reachable in a reasonable commute by residents living in high-poverty neighborhoods dropped by more than a third over the past 20 years.<sup>43</sup>



- **Lack of transit reinforces poverty, housing segregation, and economic exclusion—almost as if by design.** Without transit, residents of high-poverty neighborhoods literally cannot escape. Beyond their inability to find work without a car, they face tremendous hurdles traveling to schools, hospitals, grocery stores, and other necessary shopping amenities. Our focus group participants made the point that at times it felt like the transit system was specifically designed to perpetuate this exclusion and lock “Birmingham problems” (such as poverty) or “Birmingham people” (mostly African Americans) in their own silos and out of the surrounding suburbs.
- **Transit exclusion damages business recruitment by limiting the region’s workforce and talent pool.** To their credit, Greater Birmingham’s corporate and philanthropic communities—along with Mayor Randall Woodfin—have recently recognized and begun to address the reality that substantial portions of the region’s workforce has been shut out of the traditional labor market, which in turn has damaged their ability to use local job talent to recruit outside industry (see the Job quality section for more details). Transit accessibility can play a vital role in supporting their strategies for bringing more of the region’s talent into the labor market.

### ***Policy Challenges for Improving Transportation***

These challenges have their roots in a unique regional and statewide policy environment that makes expanding transit access extraordinarily difficult. There are two distinct sets of challenges, one related to transit funding, the other related to the politics around where transit is allowed to run in Greater Birmingham. These include:

- **Transit funding in Alabama broadly is woefully inadequate, and local governments have extremely limited options for increasing it.**<sup>44</sup> Transit systems in the United States are typically not self-supporting, since low population density makes transit more expensive to deliver than can be covered through ridership fares.<sup>45</sup> Government funds are essential to operating or expanding transit, especially now in Jefferson County, where BJCTA ridership has fallen by half since COVID hit.<sup>46</sup> Extending lines to more neighborhoods, buying more buses, filling them with gas, and hiring more bus drivers all cost money, which unfortunately neither the state nor Jefferson County’s local governments are willing or able to devote to transit. At the state level, more than 80 percent of the federal transportation dollars received by the state are allocated towards bridges, highways, and other auto-centric transportation projects, leaving just a fraction to support transit across the entire state, not just transit in the Greater Birmingham area.<sup>47</sup> At the local level, many of Jefferson County’s municipalities do not participate in transit or contribute funds, and system’s largest funder, the City of Birmingham, has underinvested in transit appropriations to the BJCTA for 30 years, leading to many of the quality and accessibility concerns expressed above. In short, there is just not enough money to support transit—a fact recognized by our survey respondents, 41 percent plurality of which identified lack of funding as the

key reason transportation has not improved. As a youth advocate put in a focus group, “[transit] would help with attracting business to the community too, so I don’t understand why we have never been able to get the funding to make that happen.”

- **The biggest limitation on state and local transit funding is the lack of a permanent, dedicated financing source, exacerbated by a constitutional ban on using gas tax revenues for this purpose.** The straightforward answer to our youth advocate’s question is that local governments are constitutionally prohibited from using gas tax dollars to fund transit in and between their communities. In most places in United States, the gas tax is the single largest dedicated source of transit funding.<sup>48</sup> Passed more than seventy years ago, Amendment 93 banned the use of gas tax dollars for any transportation use other than roads, bridges, and highways.<sup>49</sup> Without this source, local governments simply do not have the dedicated, permanent revenue source needed to fund transit in meaningful way. This has led to a myopic focus on highways, exacerbating the region’s auto dominance, and critically, insufficient local funds to meet federal matching requirements. This led Jefferson County to lose out on hundreds of millions in federal transportation funds, including those secured by U.S. Senator Richard Shelby over the last decade and then lost.

- **There is room for improvement in the way that many local governments in Greater Birmingham view, support, and fund transit in their communities and across the region.** Although 73 percent of survey respondents supported extending transit to their own communities (including 60 percent of rural and Over the Mountain residents), they pointed to elected officials and sometimes the corporate community in several suburban municipalities that are skeptical of transit’s benefits for their community, based largely over perceptions of who uses it and anxieties about importing Birmingham’s problems—often code for race. Advocates also expressed concerns that dynamics on the BJCTA board make it challenging for promoting transit, including the role played by some anti-transit elected officials in blocking transit improvements. Municipal government staff also pointed to a misalignment between funding and voting power in the board—whereby the City of Birmingham receives 90 percent of transit services, while contributing only 25 percent (\$10 million) to the \$40 million BJCTA budget while suburban governments together contribute more to the combined BJCTA budget but individually receive less transit service. This contributes to dynamics on the board which makes the City of Birmingham feel as though it needs the most transit services but lacks the power to implement pro-transit expansion policy. Meanwhile, suburban board members feel like they are paying for transit that benefits the City of Birmingham, rather than their own municipality. These challenges make it difficult to strengthen regional collaboration to expand transit.

- **BJCTA is currently experiencing a significant driver shortage, which is further reducing the number and reliability of routes.** As with transit lines in other American cities, there is a shortage of qualified bus operators, mechanics, and other transit staff able to keep the buses running on time in the established routes. Part of this is likely due to the effects to the pandemic and also partly due to low wages, the latter of which is also

related to insufficient funding to pay for higher wages. Hopefully, federal grants, including those recently awarded to the City of Birmingham can address this shortage and other challenges for transit accessibility and success.

### ***What Can Be Done to Expand Transit in Greater Birmingham***

To advance economic development in the region, Birmingham residents strongly support expanding transit and would use it more often if it met their needs. Almost half of respondents said they would take transit more often if it took them where it needed to go. Another 23 percent said they were open to using transit in a comparable situation. More than two out of every three respondents said they wanted local governments across Greater Birmingham to expand regional transit. This creates a solid base of popular support behind expanding transit. Specific policy options for accomplishing this goal includes the following:

Increase transit funding by repealing Amendment 93, allowing local governments to use the gas tax to fund transit, increase the state share of transportation dollars going to transit projects, and dedicating at least enough local government funds to secure federal matching dollars. These policies would be transformational for funding transit in the region. Repealing Amendment 93 has a broad base of support—64 percent overall, including 77 percent of Black respondents and 57 percent of white residents, suggesting strong cross-racial appeal. In addition, there is dedicated support across all geographies—68 percent of city residents, 58 percent of outer rural residents, and two-thirds of Over the Mountain residents, all support changing the constitution to allow gas tax funding.

Increase regional collaboration and reform BJCTA governance to ensure broader participation of the public and pro-transit elected officials. Residents want local governments to collaborate on transit expansion by similar margins across geographies and races. This broad base of support suggests there is an appetite for local governments to adopt more pro-transit policies in terms of their budgets and their engagement with the BJCTA. Putting more transit-favorable leaders on the board and strengthening the role of the Transit Community Advisory Board (TCAB) to influence board decisions would go a long way to translating this popular support into better transit policy.

**“Transportation seems to be one issue that we can find some collaboration... we had a pretty good coalition of people not only in Birmingham but those outside because they wanted people to be able to get to the jobs so that could be something to begin with.”**

**– Faith leader from one of our focus groups**

## Transportation Case Study: Charlotte, North Carolina

Charlotte, North Carolina, is a similarly auto-dependent southern city, yet city and community leaders have engaged in some creative planning designed to address many of the same transportation challenges facing Birmingham. Founded in 2020 and chaired by former Mayor Harvey Gantt, the Charlotte MOVES Task Force set out to research and recommend best transportation policy practices to the city council.

Comprised of twenty-five community leaders from across the Charlotte-Mecklenburg area who represent business, government, transportation and planning, education, and nonprofits, the task force recommended a **mobility investment program to increase investments in projects the city has already adopted to meet mobility goals**—dubbed the Transformational Mobility Network (TMN) of key multi-modal projects and investments from adopted and on-going plans, implemented together in a ten-year timeframe. To address the funding challenge, the report also recommended a One Cent for Mobility sales tax designed to support mobility projects for transit and non-transit.

The City of Charlotte is attempting to address several key challenges with the TMN program:

- **Affordability.** Over half of residents' income is spent on housing and transportation.
- **Equity.** Racial segregation patterns prevent minoritized communities from easily accessing transportation.
- **Growth & Prosperity.** New transit options are intended to address the links between car-centric transportation, lack of job access, and prevalence of low wages.

Fully enacting TMN will require a range of policy changes at the city level designed to protect people against displacement and promote housing affordability along transit corridors. The city is also considering the feasibility of a transit fare reduction program, and looking to foster local, state, and federal partnerships to raise funding for mobility programs.

## 2. Access to Healthy Foods

**"Food is healthcare when you boil it down, so if people don't have access to fresh foods, you are just planning their future of preventable health diseases. I don't think you can separate healthcare and food deserts; I think they're one in the same." —Housing advocate**

**Access to affordable nutritious food is a critical economic development issue**, since without enough to eat, people cannot really work or thrive. Food is a fundamental necessity to live

a healthy and productive life. Healthy diets have been shown to lower risk individuals' risks of developing chronic disease,<sup>50</sup> enhance mental health,<sup>51</sup> and improve job performance.<sup>52</sup> Lacking access to healthy food means additional travel time and associated expenses. Additionally, food tends to be more expensive in areas with fewer fresh food options.<sup>53</sup> Since neighborhoods without access to healthy food tend to be more concentrated in higher poverty areas, higher costs, more time, and health consequences create compounding challenges to individuals and families that are already struggling economically.

More than a fifth of Greater Birmingham residents believe they do not have enough access to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables. Faced with this challenge, area residents overwhelmingly supported the idea that every resident should have equal access to groceries, fruits, and vegetables and thought that the government should ensure equal access to groceries for everyone in the region.

**Government's economic development role is especially important here**—it has the unique ability to incentivize the location of grocery stores in neighborhoods without access to health food and fund food access partnerships that provide food directly to neighborhood residents in these places.

### By the Numbers: Access to Healthy Food

- 69 percent of Birmingham residents live in neighborhoods without access to healthy food
- In Birmingham, nearly three-quarters of residents are overweight or obese, and more than 11 percent of adults have been diagnosed with diabetes.
- 22 percent of Greater Birmingham residents believe they definitely or probably do not have enough access to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables.
- 87 percent of Greater Birmingham residents believe that the local government should assure equal access to groceries for everyone in the area.
- Only 57 percent of Greater Birmingham residents believe they definitely have enough access to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables.
- About one-third of Greater Birmingham residents believe affordable grocery stores and other places to buy food are a significant challenge.
- While 64 percent of residents travel ten minutes or less for groceries, 27 percent travel eleven-to-twenty minutes; 7 percent travel twenty-one-to-thirty minutes; and 1 percent travel over thirty minutes.

## Healthy Food Access in Greater Birmingham: The Big Picture

**Healthy food access is a regional economic development problem, not just a neighborhood human service issue.** While there is clearly a strong moral case for addressing food neighborhood-level hunger and food access issues, there is a compelling case that policymakers should approach it as a regional economic development challenge, too. Most importantly, hungry people cannot work, and unhealthy people are less able to work at their best. Because employers need workers and will hire them from anywhere in the region, the lack of food access in pockets across Greater Birmingham contributes to shrinking the regional pool of workers available for hire. In addition, economic development tools—especially grocery store recruitment, capital access, and farm-to-store corporate extension programs—are extremely well-suited to playing a significant role in solving the food access problem.

**A decade of philanthropic and government investment in addressing neighborhood food access has built a solid base but much more needs to be done.** Perhaps most importantly, the Alabama Healthy Food Financing Act provides \$50,000 grants to food retailers to build, expand or renovate existing buildings for grocery stores, farmers markets, cooperatives or food trucks to provide fresh fruits, vegetables and other healthy foods in areas of the state where healthy food access is limited. At the same time, partnerships between local philanthropy, nonprofit food providers like the Community Food Bank of Central Alabama, and some local governments (particularly the City of Birmingham under Mayor Woodfin) have implemented small-scale programs like mobile food markets, community gardens, and farm-to-school initiatives. A number of local governments, including the City of Birmingham, administer grocery store incentive programs used to recruit food retailers to neighborhoods without healthy food access. But more needs to be done.

**Lacking access to fresh food disproportionately impacts Black residents.** Only 69 percent of Black residents of Greater Birmingham felt they had enough access to fresh fruit and vegetables compared to 86 percent of white residents. According to research from the now-defunct Urban Food Project of REV Birmingham, 88,000 Birmingham residents live in neighborhoods without access to healthy food and almost all of the residents are Black or Latino.<sup>54</sup> The relationship between convenient healthy food access and healthy eating is clear: Residents of neighborhoods with more fresh produce sources, full service restaurants, and fewer fast food restaurants and convenience stores were at lower risk for preventable health issues such as obesity and diabetes.<sup>55</sup> In Greater Birmingham, 39 percent of Black residents traveled more than ten minutes for groceries compared to 32 percent of white residents. Looking at residents who travel five minutes or less for groceries, there was a 12 percentage point gap between Black and white residents, with 17 percent of Black residents and 29 percent of white residents traveling less than five minutes for groceries.

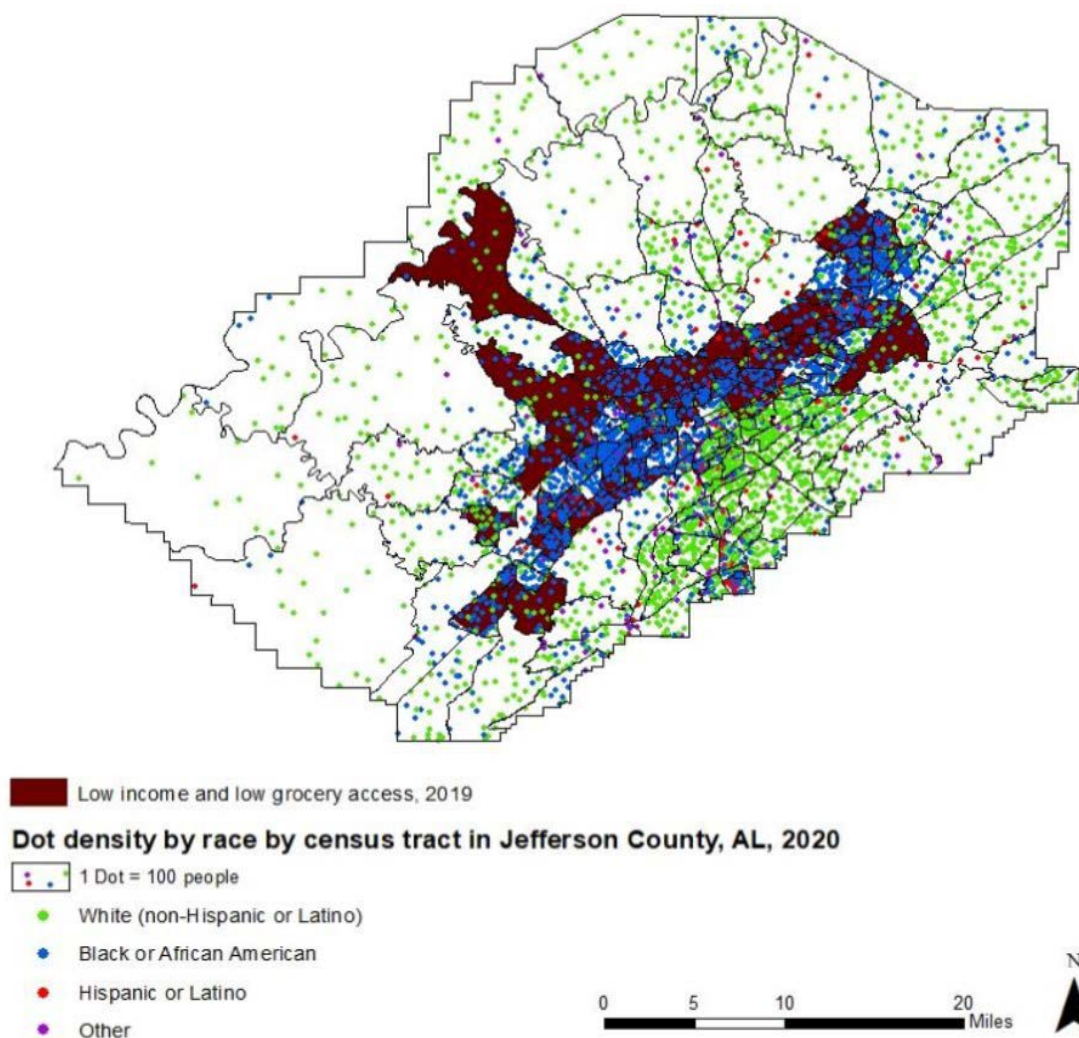
**Downtown, West Birmingham, Bessemer and several majority-Black municipalities have fewer choices of grocery stores.** Some residents of downtown Birmingham noted that even if a grocery store was within a half mile of them, there are not convenient or timely bus routes for them to travel to and from the grocery store. In West Birmingham, there appears



to only be one grocery store, which is perceived as lower quality than stores in other parts of the county. Residents of Birmingham want a better understanding of why grocers have left and how to encourage stores to be built in areas with less existing access. Figure 4.1 shows census tracts that were low-income<sup>56</sup> and had low access<sup>57</sup> to supermarkets, supercenters, or large grocery stores. The map illustrates a clear concentration of low-income and low-access areas in Birmingham but also in rural Jefferson County in Graysville and Adamsville along with Bessemer and McCalla south of Birmingham.

**Figure 4.1—Black residents have less access to fresh food and groceries than other residents.**

Dot density by race/ethnicity by census tract and low income and low grocery store access by census tract



Source: American Community Survey, 5-year estimates (2016-2020), USDA Food Access (2019)



**Many urban neighborhoods without access to healthy food also have experienced influx of fast-food restaurants that offer unhealthy, albeit cheap, options.** The low cost and convenience of fast food thus contributes to unhealthy eating habits,<sup>58</sup> especially when there are not enough health food options available, and sometimes even when there are.

## **What We Learned About the Healthy Food Access Challenges Facing Greater Birmingham Residents**

As with transportation, Greater Birmingham residents experience access to healthy food differently depending on where they live. They clearly recognize the challenges they face, understand the meaningful consequences of lack of access to health food, and recognize policy barriers to solving these problems.

### ***Food Access Challenges Facing Residents***

Specific food access challenges include:

- **Greater Birmingham residents want food access for all, although awareness about limited healthy food access varies greatly.** Despite different experiences with healthy food access across racial groups, there is a broadly shared commitment across geographic and racial lines that every resident of Greater Birmingham should have access to groceries, fruits, and vegetables. Consistent beliefs were also held by 92 percent of Black and 90 percent of white residents, who believe everyone should have equal access to health food. Similar percentages of residents earning above and below \$50,000 a year also shared this commitment. This is remarkable cross-class and cross-racial agreement, especially considering how few people realize neighborhoods without access to healthy food is a grave issue. When asked about the challenges that Greater Birmingham residents face, just 38 percent of Over the Mountain residents compared to 63 percent of Birmingham residents identified access to affordable grocery stores.
- **Access to fresh food varies geographically across Greater Birmingham and is notably lower in Urban Core neighborhoods and rural areas compared to Over the Mountain suburbs.** More than nine out of every ten Over the Mountain residents felt they have enough access to fresh food compared to just 72 percent of residents in Birmingham, Bessemer and the Urban Core, and 75 percent of rural areas. These figures mean tens of thousands of residents of Birmingham and outer rural areas have disproportionately lower access to fresh foods. A lack of convenient access across Greater Birmingham is also evident in looking at how long it takes for residents to get to the grocery store. Over the Mountain has a larger share of residents that have shorter trips to the grocery store, with 19 percent of Over the Mountain residents traveling more than ten minutes to purchase groceries compared to 39 percent of Urban Core residents and 45 percent of rural Jefferson County residents. These geographic gaps in food access reinforce other spatial inequalities relating to economic stability, health, and education.<sup>59</sup>

- **Residents recognize healthy food access is a regional problem, rather than just a hyper-local, neighborhood issue.** Our focus groups repeatedly ranked healthy food access as a top issue local governments could collaborate together to address, and about half of survey respondents rated regional collaboration as ineffective on this issue. Residents are correct that a regional perspective is necessary when thinking about neighborhoods without access to healthy food since a grocery store in one municipality can serve the needs of residents outside of that area. Large regional grocery stores can serve multiple jurisdictions at once, assuming transit lines connect them neighborhoods with limited access to healthy foods.

- **People banded together during pandemic to address food access challenges, but efforts were not sustained to address long-standing food access inequalities.** As the COVID-19 pandemic caused food access challenges related to economic insecurity, Greater Birmingham residents noted that some groups collaborated to help feed the hungry during the pandemic. While these groups were called to action by the pandemic, residents noted that there is a lack of sustained coordination and collaboration around the ongoing and persistent fresh food access challenges.

### ***Impacts on residents***

Lacking access to fresh food creates an array of economic development challenges that prevent Greater Birmingham residents from realizing their full potential and creating broadly shared prosperity across the region:

- **Food access challenges put working people at a disadvantage to performing well at work and keeping their employment.** Research has shown that nutrition can impact workplace productivity and absenteeism.<sup>60</sup> Since workplace performance and attendance are strongly related to being retained and advancement in a workplace, working people could be missing out and be substantially disadvantaged economically by lacking access to nutritious food.

- **Residents of Greater Birmingham know that food access is connected to other issues related to mental health, employment, and crime in their communities.** Residents of Greater Birmingham see food access as being intertwined with other issues facing their communities. In focus groups, residents made links between improper nutrition and hunger, and mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, and emotional problems in young people. Residents saw these mental health challenges related to food access as being significant barriers to job performance and possibly lost job and earning possibilities. With intersecting mental health and economic challenges, residents see limited access to healthy food as possibly leading to desperation and crime. Seeing the many life domains impacted by low healthy food access, it is clear how intervening with disproportionate access to healthy food can empower people in many meaningful ways that will reduce quality of life and economic inequalities.

- **Direct resident involvement in addressing food access challenges takes time, effort, and can burden those in most need.** In the absence of grocery stores, urban agriculture can play a vital role in providing food to low-access neighborhoods. However, urban agriculture is a challenge—it can create burdens for food insecure residents by requiring them to spend time and money they do not have to grow their own food. For urban agriculture to be most effective, it should not place additional time and cost burdens on those in most need.

### ***Policy Challenges for Improving Food Access***

Food access challenges are rooted in historic patterns of uneven development and access to capital that require significant intervention to overcome. Policy challenges to creating more equitable food access include:

- Neighborhoods without access to healthy food are **largely the result of the failures of free markets and past policies to overcome the historical legacy of racial discrimination.** Redlining practices from as early as the 1930s continue to impact where people live and the food they have access to.<sup>61</sup> Racial zoning maps and violence led insurers to designate businesses in newly integrated areas of Birmingham as high-risk. This in turn prevented the spread of businesses in these areas and caused others to close, as they were unable to obtain insurance.<sup>62</sup>
- **Lack of access to capital hampers movement of grocery stores into low-income neighborhoods.** Compounding the failure of the free market to deliver food in places where it is needed most, banks and other financial institutions are frequently unwilling to lend capital to these kinds of projects, which grocery store owners report is the primary barrier to opening stores in neighborhoods that lack access to healthy foods.<sup>63</sup>
- **Addressing healthy food access requires direct government action and collaboration amongst municipalities across Jefferson County that has not always happened when needed.** Many county residents suggested that their local governments could provide financial incentives to attract grocery stores to areas in need but were skeptical that their municipal and county governments actually would take action to attract grocery stores to areas of need.
- **Defining areas of highest need is difficult and requires community partnerships.** Defining those areas as having low access to health foods has often relied on understanding the geographic area rather than the individuals who live in it.<sup>64</sup> This creates a challenge because not all people in low-income areas are low-income or face the same barriers to accessing fresh food. Additionally, food access measures that rely only on understanding physical access and income miss the importance of individuals' decision-making processes and how education and encouragement of healthy eating impact choices. For example, an individual can have close access to fresh food but may opt for less nutrient dense

alternatives such as fast food. To overcome this challenge, governments must take on the challenging task of collaborating with community stakeholders to understand food access measures and viable policies to address place-specific challenges.<sup>65</sup>

## What Can Be Done to Expand Healthy Food Access in Jefferson County

Healthy food access is a regional economic development problem. Fortunately, there are a range of policy options available to local governments to ensure their residents have access to groceries, fruits, and vegetables.

- **Expand existing public-private food access initiatives beyond the City of Birmingham.**

Over the past decade, Greater Birmingham has seen a range of pilot projects and food programs like the Urban Food Project, a Farm to Corner Store Initiative that helps store owners buy, merchandise, and sell fresh and local produce within underserved communities,<sup>66</sup> and the mobile food market service until just recently provided by the Community Food Bank of Central Alabama that gives low-income families, disabled people, and senior citizens living in neighborhoods that lack grocery stores access to healthy, fresh food free of cost through a mobile trailer.<sup>67</sup> Community gardens, farm clubs, and Farm to School programs have brought together the school system, cooperative extension, and nonprofit partners to meet the needs of school aged children and their parents. Local governments across the region should appropriate funds to support these programs and encourage their work in neighborhoods across Jefferson County.

- **Address capital access problems by using economic development funds and incentives to recruit grocery stores to neighborhoods without access to healthy food.**

For example, the City of Birmingham has a multi-million dollar incentive fund to support the recruitment of grocery stores to the area, a program which recently granted \$640,000 to bring a Food Giant supermarket to a former Winn Dixie location in Five Points West. Local economic developers could easily braid together Healthy Food financing dollars with local incentive dollars to run this kind of program. Regional collaboration between adjacent municipalities could increase the amount of funds available for recruiting grocery stores able to serve both communities. In addition, banks should be encouraged to increase lending for private grocery store development in these neighborhoods.

- **Focus on retention of existing grocery stores as needed.** While incentives are good for opening grocery stores and can help them operate at a loss for beginning years, the stores must be profitable in the longer term to remain open. There are many instances of grocery stores receiving financial incentives and shutting down years later which wastes public investments. For example, a Whole Foods opened in a food desert in Chicago's Englewood Community and promised to bring fresh healthy food to a community in need. To make the dream of opening a community anchor grocery store a reality, the City of Chicago had to provide \$10.7 million to fund infrastructure upgrades to the shopping center where

the Whole Foods would be located. Despite the city's financial contribution and the store serving as an important anchor in the community (even allowing local entrepreneurs to sell goods in the store) the Whole Foods closed just six years after it opened. A Whole Foods spokesperson said closing the store was part of its plan to “position Whole Foods Market for long-term success.”<sup>68</sup> To avoid this kind of scenario, local governments should include clawbacks and accountability standards that require companies to stay in the neighborhood or give back the incentive dollars. In addition, economic developers should consider targeting their grocery incentives keeping existing food retailers in their current locations.

- **Support locally and publicly owned grocery stores.** As local economic developers consider targeting their grocery incentives, one important option is focusing on locally owned retailers rather than national chains. Locally owned businesses often stay longer and keep local dollars within the community, as opposed to national chains which tend to be more footloose, more likely to relocate somewhere else, and less likely to keep local dollars local. Another option involves establishing municipally owned grocery stores, where local governments own and operate these food retailers directly. As surprising as this may be, municipally owned grocery stores in deeply conservative places like Baldwin, Florida, and St. Paul, Kansas, have experienced significant success—generating profitable sales while winning rave reviews from the local community, especially in comparison to the privately owned grocery stores they replaced. Generally, government entities tend to be more stable due to having more resources, making this method more sustainable long-term.<sup>69</sup>

- **Redesign transportation routes to enhance convenient access to fresh foods.** Public transportation routes can be reconfigured to allow residents to access nutritious, healthy food options more easily. In addition to geographic changes, altering the operating hours of buses could allow people with opportunities to visit a grocery store after they get off work or get out of school. If existing networks cannot be easily redesigned, transit authorities or other transportation providers could offer dedicated trips to grocery stores at free or discounted rates for low-income residents with low access.

**“Encourage retail in areas that may be neglected so the commute, whether to Wal-Mart or Dollar General, is relatively minimal.”**  
**—Small business owner**

## Healthy Food Access Case Study: Prince George's County, Maryland

Residents also have lower income levels and higher rates of food insecurity. To address the challenges of food access, Prince George's County created a Food Equity Council (FEC) to address food and nutrition issues specific to the area. The FEC is composed of a broad range of representatives of the food system including representatives from advocacy groups, grocery stores, government agencies, farms, universities, and healthcare providers. One particular area the council has identified for policy interventions is "food swamps," which are places where unhealthy foods from providers such as fast food restaurants and convenient stores are more readily available than healthy foods from grocery stores.<sup>70</sup>

Addressing the challenges of food swamps has required multiple strategies that have successfully been enacted. Policies the FEC has enacted include:

- SNAP to Health, which helps farmers' markets meet requirements necessary for accepting SNAP benefits at farmers' markets. This makes fresh, high-quality food more accessible to low-income residents.
- Urban Agriculture Tax Credit, which establishes a property tax credit for property used for agricultural purposes and permits farming in residential zones by expanding the definition of urban farms. It also increases physical accessibility and quantity available of fresh food. This would likely require an act of the Alabama legislature.
- Healthy Vending on County Property, which requires that at least 50 percent of food and beverage products sold in vending machines on county property must meet nutrition standards; that healthy products be stocked in positions with highest selling potential; and that products be comparatively priced or less expensive than unhealthy options.

This effort has established an ongoing forum to engage with community stakeholders and is one of the first food councils in the U.S. to emphasize food equity, or the allocation of resources and opportunities as needed to create equal outcomes for all community members. The governance structure is also unique, as the FEC Operates independently of the county, allowing it to remain committed to both racial and economic equity.

### 3. Housing, Displacement, and Gentrification

**“It seems there are constantly new apartments being built, but they are all luxury apartments. Where is housing for the regular folks?”**

**– Youth advocate**

**Access to quality affordable housing is crucial for neighborhood stability, equitable economic development, and ensuring broadly shared prosperity.** Affordable housing helps families get ahead financially, spend money on other necessities,<sup>71</sup> and provides a stable environment in which children do better in school and grow up healthier.<sup>72</sup> As new development and amenities come to downtown and urban neighborhoods, housing costs rise, and without adequate stocks of affordable housing, long-time residents are often displaced by wealthier new neighbors, who bring new investment, attract newer, more expensive businesses, and push up housing costs so that long-time residents are unable to afford to stay where they have lived—a process known as gentrification.

Parts of downtown Birmingham and other lower-income neighborhoods in the county’s Urban Core are experiencing gentrification fueled by booming development and rapid increases in housing prices. While this development boom undoubtedly has positive aspects, particularly for wealthier residents, the downside is significant displacement of current residents, a breakdown in neighborhood stability, and ultimately the policy dilemma of how local governments can keep thousands of residents from becoming homeless.

In addition, affordable housing and gentrification ultimately become an economic development and workforce retention problem. Once gentrification begins, it does not just push out low-income residents (a headache for retention in lower-wage businesses), rising housing costs eventually become a barrier to working- and middle-income families who serve as the backbone of the workforce. Although Birmingham’s gentrification has not proceeded so far, other cities across the South are starting to see booming housing markets make it impossible for teachers, firefighters, police officers and blue collar workers in both the public and private sectors to actually live in the cities they serve. Former urban residents are forced to move farther away to outer ring suburbs with lower housing costs. Added to Birmingham’s auto-dependence and lack of public transit, the region is well on course to experience a damaging mismatch between housing, transportation, and jobs that will ultimately hamper the area’s revitalization.



## By the Numbers: Housing and Displacement

- 73 percent said they consider more affordable housing and 70 percent said utility costs are challenges in the county.
- 11 percent of survey respondents said they had personally been affected by displacement in their neighborhood in the past few years.
- 32 percent said they experienced issues related to housing.
- 14 percent said rent was too high, 9 percent experienced unhealthy housing conditions such as mold, 8 percent experienced a rent increase, and 5 percent did not have enough space for everyone who lives in their home.
- Less experienced but still noteworthy housing experiences included threat of eviction (3 percent), foreclosure or threat of foreclosure (3 percent), homelessness (3 percent), change of job location (2 percent), and landlord harassment (2 percent).
- 64 percent of survey respondents in the Urban Core were concerned about displacement compared to 58 percent in Over the Mountain and 49 percent in Rural Outer Greater Birmingham.
- 71 percent of Black respondents in Greater Birmingham were concerned about displacement compared to 49 percent of white respondents.
- 20 percent of Urban Core residents said they had been affected by gentrification in their neighborhood in the past few years compared to 11 percent in both Rural Outer Jefferson County and Over the Mountain.
- 37 percent of households in the Urban Core are housing cost burdened, meaning that they pay more than 30 percent of their monthly income on housing costs.<sup>73</sup>
- 25 percent of households in Greater Birmingham outside of the Urban Core are housing cost burdened.<sup>74</sup>

## Housing and Displacement in Greater Birmingham: The Big Picture

**Housing costs are a financial burden for many across Greater Birmingham and especially in the Urban Core.** Households being financially burdened leads to greater chances households are displaced, as they can no longer afford their current housing. In 2020, 37 percent of households in the City of Birmingham are financially burdened by their housing, meaning they pay more than 30 percent of their income on housing. In Jefferson County outside of the City of Birmingham, 25 percent of households are burdened by housing costs.<sup>75</sup> These data points

show that residents' displacement fears are well founded during a time where many area neighborhoods are seeing new investments that may not be beneficial to them.

**Gentrification is a problem for people across parts of Jefferson County and especially impacts those in the Urban Core.** Avondale, Lakeview, Woodlawn, and Central City neighborhoods have all seen recent waves of investments in infrastructure, housing, and new businesses. Local residents have seen their housing costs increase and are concerned if there are opportunities for current residents to benefit from the new investments rather than be displaced by them.<sup>76</sup> In Norwood, just adjacent to Downtown Birmingham, houses sold for an average of \$15,789 in 2015. In 2020, the average sale price increased more than 700 percent to \$136,420. With investments near the Urban Core, it is not surprising that Black residents are far more concerned about gentrification (67 percent) compared to white residents (39 percent). While investments into the core area of Birmingham are signs of a more prosperous city, if gentrification is not managed in part by empowering local residents to benefit from new investments, displacement will exacerbate the economic inequalities in the County. Gentrification is also a concern outside of the City of Birmingham, with 11 percent in both Rural Outer Jefferson County and Over the Mountain reporting having been personally affected by these pressures. More tellingly, almost half of residents Rural Outer Jefferson County and 45 percent in Over the Mountain report being *concerned* about gentrification, either for themselves or for others.

**Birmingham has a higher proportion of households that rent their housing than the rest of Greater Birmingham, making a large share of residents in Birmingham vulnerable to displacement as their neighborhoods change.** In the City of Birmingham, percent of households rent compared to 28 percent of residents living outside the city. Renting households in particular can be vulnerable to displacement because of sudden disruptions in their housing situations such as rent increases or landlords that chose to sell or repurpose their property for greater financial gains. These problems are particularly difficult for individuals on fixed income who cannot afford rent increases and may not be able to find affordable housing nearby if prices in their neighborhood increase. Homeownership provides some shelter to affordability issues, but maintenance costs and increased property taxes still pose challenges to affordability for residents in gentrifying areas.

**Much of Greater Birmingham's housing stock is older and steadily deteriorating, especially in the Urban Core—80 percent of the housings stock in the City of Birmingham is more than fifty years old.**<sup>77</sup> In many former industrial towns in the South, the steel companies built housing for its workforce in the years before World War II, and once they pulled out, they turned those aging houses over to landlords who largely allowed their condition to worsen over time. Redlining and covenantal restrictions kept Black residents from moving out of these neighborhoods as late as the 1970s, while white residents fled to suburbs with newer, higher quality, and better maintained housing. Although legal segregation has ended, the physical legacy remains—Black residents are disproportionately trapped in urban neighborhoods with

aging, 1920s-era housing that has steadily deteriorated, creating numerous problems with ventilation, asbestos, and other threats to residents' health.

**Greater Birmingham residents feel the number of homeless reflects poorly on the entire area and makes it seem like the region lacks empathy or an ability to help its residents.**

There were an estimated 943 homeless people in Jefferson County in 2022 and about 36 percent were unsheltered.<sup>78</sup> While homelessness in Jefferson County decreased between 2016 and 2020 (from 1228 to 848), that progress was interrupted by the pandemic; and homelessness began to rise again in the two years since. Our focus group participants felt that homelessness embodies leaders' greater interests in recruiting new residents than in taking care of its own. Additionally, residents say homelessness has caused them to avoid many neighborhoods such as Five Points South and Downtown/Central City because past encounters made them feel uncomfortable.

**"People don't understand homelessness . . . some people say it's just drug addicts, but it's really not; it's veterans or people who have worked all their lives and had something bad happen, not just what you call the 'bad society.' —Small business owner**

## **What We Learned About the Housing and Displacement Challenges Facing Jefferson County Residents**

Affordable housing, displacement, and gentrification pressures are present throughout Greater Birmingham, where concentrations of vulnerable renters live alongside new investments and increased speculative activity that increases prices. These challenges pose significant consequences for residents and face a number of policy barriers to addressing them.

### ***The Housing and Displacement Challenges Facing Residents***

Specific challenges our survey respondents highlighted include:

- **Lack of affordable housing and displacement are major concerns in Greater Birmingham and especially in the City of Birmingham.** Three out of every four area residents perceive a lack of affordable housing as a challenge currently facing the county. Displacement concerns are higher in the Urban Core than in rural Jefferson County and Over the Mountain, with 61 percent of Birmingham survey respondents saying displacement of existing residents is a problem, yet sizeable groups of residents reported similar concerns in rural Jefferson (44 percent) and even Over the Mountain (41 percent).

**“It’s like a vicious cycle in Birmingham because you make \$15k a year and there is no affordable housing anymore because they knocked everything down or UAB gobbled it up and I just feel like they are running a lot of people out of the city.”**

**– Participant in the general public focus group**

- **Most Urban Core residents have a negative view of gentrification.** Residents across the area see new apartment buildings going up and homes being renovated but they seem out of the price range of the current residents. Additionally, residents see the pushes to gentrify some Urban Core neighborhoods as “lipstick” for the city, as the new investments are intended to help the city by bringing in successful young professionals but that the city is not paying attention to the harms that are being caused to current residents through displacement. Residents do not see the new investments into the core of Birmingham as being negative, but rather they are concerned with how everyone in the region will benefit when they see displacement and neighborhoods that are isolated from new investments.

- **Greater Birmingham residents want landlords to provide better maintenance of their properties.** Improper upkeep of housing can lead to financial and health problems for tenants. Residents cited poor insulation in homes as an example of landlords not providing adequate maintenance. Issues such as poor insulation can cause financial challenges through increased utility bills and possibly lead to eviction. Additionally, nine percent of survey respondents indicated they had experienced unhealthy housing conditions such as mold that pose threats to their health.

### ***Impacts on Residents***

Residents clearly see the effects of gentrification, displacement, and lack of affordable housing on themselves, their neighbors, and the places they love.

- **Not having quality affordable housing prevents families from getting ahead financially.** Affordable housing helps families financially in both the short and long term. In the short term, families can spend money on other necessities such as healthcare, education, transportation, and entertainment. Longer term, affordable homeownership provides families with an intergenerational wealth building opportunity that can break cycles of poverty.<sup>79</sup>

**“The landlord will come back to me when it’s time for my lease to end and tell me what my apartment has gone to [above] what I could afford, and I am a person who works fast food or has a couple of kids and so I basically have to move out . . . I think gentrification can be a problem in the Jefferson County area.” —Labor organizer**

- **Displacement creates social and economic hardships.** Housing stability promotes long-term positive social networks with neighbors<sup>80</sup> and reduces stressors related to changing schools and altering established routines.<sup>81</sup> For working individuals, displacement can mean longer and more costly commutes if not having to leave a job entirely. These social and economic challenges related to displacement can reinforce intergenerational poverty.

- **Residents in the City of Birmingham have witnessed the loss of several hundred public housing units while only minimal strides have been made to replace those units with below-market rents.** Subsidized by city redevelopment incentives, private developers tore down the old Southtown public housing units by St. Vincent Hospital, and it is unclear how many affordable units will return once demolition is complete. In addition, the new Park Place project is replacing an old HOPE VI development, which was just purchased by Sloss Real Estate, and it is unclear how many, if any, below-market units Sloss will create. Interviews pointed to an additional operational challenge for the redevelopment of public housing—the City of Birmingham Housing Authority has experienced significant turnover in its senior leadership, with three executive directors within the past four years.

- **The locations of affordable housing can help to address transportation challenges.** Since Jefferson County residents named transportation as a top challenge facing the county, affordable housing should be targeted to and promote access to healthcare, jobs, grocery stores, schools, open space, recreation, entertainment, and more.

### ***Policy Challenges for Improving Housing Stability***

Cities often promote economic growth in ways that cater towards investors and developers without ensuring the current residents will benefit. Belief that all investment is good investment and gentrification is needed for any urban revitalization ignores the proven strategies that promote inclusive growth. Residents across Greater Birmingham are skeptical that municipalities will stop or slow down displacement and will opt to promote economic growth at any cost to current residents. In Greater Birmingham, challenges to promoting inclusive growth that does not displace residents include:

- **Stopping the harmful effects of displacement requires government action and most survey respondents did not feel municipalities would support any efforts to stop or slow down gentrification.** Residents feel that municipal governments will not try to interfere

with current investments and new developments to provide benefits for current residents because municipalities want increased tax money and investors want the developments that are most profitable. As part of the mayor's transition team in 2017, the City of Birmingham created a task force to assess gentrification, displacement, and affordable housing in Birmingham and recommend policies to promote affordable housing, economic empowerment, and zoning reforms. However, five years after the task force was formed, it is unclear what new policies have been enacted and what plans will guide the taskforce or city's efforts. The City of Birmingham's 2021 housing plan makes only one mention of gentrification, and it is listed as a possible long term (five-plus years) consideration.<sup>82</sup>

- **Lack of funding in the state's affordable housing trust fund and inadequate incentives for affordable housing development.** In 2021, the Alabama legislature created an affordable housing trust fund, but no money was actually put into the fund, so state support for local affordable housing projects remains low. In addition, Alabama has no low-income housing tax credit to support private development of affordable housing units.

- **Development and progress without displacement is challenging and requires regional collaboration and multiple strategies.** Meeting affordable housing challenges at the scale of the problem when gentrification is gaining momentum requires innovative solutions and the participation of a broad range of stakeholders regionally. The task force on gentrification and the broad range of stakeholders involved is a positive start that can be built upon moving forward. The strategies ultimately pursued should be approached with a sense of urgency since the scale of existing affordable housing issues is large and there are advantages to shaping development when it is in early phases opposed to when development has scaled up.

## What Can be Done to Provide Affordable Housing in Greater Birmingham

Strategies to protect current tenants and ensure that affordable housing is included within new developments provide a promising path forward to ensure current residents are protected and future developments will not be economically inclusive. Residents of Birmingham want their city government to ensure they are not left behind as investors gain interest in the city. Specific strategies to protect current residents and establish more affordable housing include:

- **Include the development of affordable, below-market rental units as requirements for permitting or any kind of public subsidy for new commercial, residential, or mixed-use real estate projects.** Local governments have limited power to regulate new development, and building new public housing is usually a non-starter. As a result, local governments should use the authority they do have—especially in the permitting and incentives processes—to require developers to create new affordable housing units as part of larger projects with market-rate commercial or residential units.

- **Use inclusionary zoning to provide affordable housing in new developments.** When development requires rezoning to increase height allowances and development density or allow for residential development on former commercial or industrial zones land, municipalities can require the developments to include affordable or income-targeted housing. This practice has recently added thousands of new affordable housing units to medium-sized towns and larger cities.<sup>83</sup> One particular area where inclusionary zoning can be most effective is near transit stops. New transit station projects are often accompanied by investor interest in rezoning areas to create transit oriented development (TOD) which can be stipulated to include affordable housing.

- **Local governments provide funding for Community Land Trusts to work regionwide.** Community Land Trusts (CLT) are nonprofit organizations that ensure community stewardship of land by purchasing and maintaining ownership and permanent affordability. Homeowners can purchase housing on land owned by a trust but must enter a contract that has stipulations about how much the house can be sold for (i.e., keeps it permanently affordable). CLTs can even stipulate that they get a portion of profit from a sale to reinvest in additional land or operation costs. In addition to preserving affordability, CLTs keep wealth in a community, provide stability for tenants, and expand home ownership and wealth building opportunities. There are around 277 CLTs in the U.S. with the largest one, the Champlain Housing Trust in Vermont having two thousand member homes and \$223 million in assets.<sup>84</sup> There is currently at least one CLT operating in Greater Birmingham presently—the Titusville CLT. Municipal governments can collaborate with CLTs to provide city-owned land at a discount to increase their capacity.

- **Provide emergency rental assistance to protect from evictions.** Emergencies that result in a family's inability to pay rent is made far worse if they fall behind on rent and end up being evicted. Tenants inability to pay rent also harms landlords who may themselves be unable to withstand not receiving rental income. To promote neighborhood stability and help families during emergencies, local governments across Greater Birmingham should expand its COVID-19 emergency rental assistance programs indefinitely and broaden eligibility criteria beyond COVID-19 related emergencies.

**"We are not making this community easier on people who are low income, so we are building our city's future on very shaky ground because you can't have a community move forward and leave a big part of it, which is what Birmingham is doing." —Housing advocate**



## Housing Case Study: Atlanta, Georgia<sup>85</sup>

Rapid population growth, the demolition of public housing, and investment in public infrastructure such as the Atlanta BeltLine have made Atlanta's housing market less affordable in recent years. To provide long-term affordable housing in Atlanta, the Atlanta Land Trust<sup>86</sup> (ALT) acts as both a community land trust and also provides technical assistance to establish CLTs in Atlanta<sup>87</sup>. ALT focuses on retaining affordability around the Atlanta BeltLine, a twenty-two-mile open trail and light rail system that wraps around the core of Atlanta, and other targeted areas where revitalization and new investments threaten displacement.

In the dual roles of operating as a CLT and providing technical assistance to establish and assist other CLTs, ALT has preserved affordable housing by:

- Acquiring land in parts of Atlanta where residents are vulnerable to displacement. ALT receives land donations, partners can place land in the trust, or land can be purchased with its partners.
- Supporting lower-income homeowners to acquire and maintain their homes on ALT land
- Entering agreements with homeowners to restrict resale prices to ensure that the home is affordable in the future and sold to a low income buyer.
- Educating policymakers on CLTs.
- Help to establish CLTs in Atlanta and provide technical assistance such as real estate development and legal services to other CLTs.

ALT has helped to establish three CLTs and maintains a strong network of community partners to expand affordability across Atlanta. ALT is not the only CLT that has created a collaborative network of CLTs; similar initiatives have gained traction in New Orleans; Essex County, New Jersey; Rhode Island; and Montana.

Municipal governments can support CLTs by:

- Provide startup grants or operational funds to financially support the establishment of CLTs.
- Ease regulatory burdens and fees for CLTs when CLTs pursue developments.
- Establish partnerships with stakeholders that can support the CLT such as city housing departments and county assessor offices.
- Evaluate if CLTs can be incorporated into existing municipal programs such as existing homeownership subsidy and vacant lot reuse programs.
- Transfer ownership or sell municipally owned land or properties to CLTs for below fair market values.
- Utilize CLTs to manage units built under inclusionary housing policies.

## Section 5. People

Investing in people involves creating and advancing economic opportunity for individuals. This entails promoting local economic development and entrepreneur opportunities, enhancing community-serving establishments, and increasing quality, living wage jobs for people in all neighborhoods. Above all, it means connecting people to the institutions and services that build the capacity of individuals to access and take full advantage of economic opportunities, for example, job training programs that equip people to thrive in living wage jobs and childcare services that allow them (women in particular) to enter the workforce and work to their full potential. Given that the Birmingham labor market is regional in nature (it pulls people from across entire region and is not confined within thirty-four separate municipalities), regional cooperation is essential to building residents' economic capacity.

### 1. Good jobs

**“Everything plays together. If you can’t get a good job and pay, you can’t get affordable housing or live outside the city and come into the city for work.” —Greater Birmingham resident**

**Good jobs are a key economic development problem in Greater Birmingham.** In this study, we focus mostly on ensuring local residents have access to “good jobs”—jobs that pay living wages, provide key benefits like health insurance and retirement savings, and provide opportunities for upward mobility. Unfortunately, these good jobs are less prevalent than many residents would like, less available to workers of color and women, and generally less accessible to people without the right education and skills.

Job training and workforce development are critical components of any strategy to create good jobs and ensure residents have the skills they need to access them. In addition, local hiring solutions and other hiring pipelines ensure that jobs go to local residents, rather than to people living outside Jefferson County—are also important, as are hiring platforms that connect workers marginally attached to the workforce to jobs with good wages—a critical step in a county where labor force participation is lower than the national average<sup>88</sup> and almost two in ten Black residents do not have regular, stable employment.

**Ultimately, promoting good jobs that pay living wages is a key pathway** to improving Greater Birmingham’s stagnant social mobility, while job training programs and pipelines build the capacity of individuals to find and keep good jobs and build the capacity of the region to compete with other metros to attract high-wage businesses.

## By the Numbers: Good Jobs

- 72 percent of residents agreed that lack of better-paying jobs with benefits is either a significant or somewhat of a challenge for Greater Birmingham, including 82 percent of Black residents and 62 percent of white residents.
- 54 percent of residents said Greater Birmingham needed more jobs requiring skills and experience that can command higher wages.
- 57 percent of residents said Greater Birmingham faced challenges with providing enough opportunities to participate in job training programs that could result in better-wage jobs.
- 64 percent of residents said access to affordable quality childcare was a challenge in Greater Birmingham.
- 62 percent of residents supported unionization efforts at the Amazon facility in Bessemer.

## Good Jobs: The Big Picture

The policy environment for creating good jobs for Greater Birmingham residents is deeply shaped by the region's troubled labor market, which suffers from significant wage inequality across racial, gender, and educational lines, and what economists call "underutilization," where too many workers and too much money are left on the sidelines in the region's economy.

- **Women face significant challenges in entering and staying in the labor force.** In 2019, the percentage of women participating in the labor force—e.g., who either had a job or were looking for one—came to 58 percent, significantly below the 67 percent of men in the workforce.<sup>89</sup> This gap is largely due to the real challenges many women face in entering the workforce, including caregiving burdens, lack affordable, quality childcare, lack of work family policies like paid leave, employer biases and cultural norms, and above all, the stunning reality that women in Greater Birmingham are paid 74 cents for every dollar earned by men.<sup>90</sup> These factors especially impact women of color since they are disproportionately the sole caregiver and only breadwinner for the family. Indeed, 74 percent of women in Alabama are breadwinners.<sup>91</sup>

**Figure 5.1—Black residents are over-represented in the five lowest earning occupations in Greater Birmingham and underrepresented in the five highest earning occupations**

| Occupation  | Black percent of Occupational Employment | Average Annual Earnings | Earnings Rank |
|---|--|-------------------------|---------------|
| <b>Occupations with Lowest Wages</b>                      |  |                         |               |
| Material moving occupations                               | 71%                                      | \$31,574                | 30            |
| Healthcare support occupations                            | 61%                                      | \$27,167                | 31            |
| Building and grounds cleaning and maintenance occupations | 64%                                      | \$25,265                | 33            |
| Personal care and service occupations                     | 54%                                      | \$24,187                | 34            |
| Food preparation and serving related occupations          | 59%                                      | \$19,262                | 35            |
| <b>Occupations with Highest Wages</b>                     |  |                         |               |
| Computer and mathematical occupations                     | 27%                                      | \$87,806                | 1             |
| Architecture and engineering occupations                  | 28%                                      | \$86,052                | 2             |
| Legal occupations   | 17%                                      | \$83,089                | 3             |
| Computer, engineering, and science occupations:           | 36%                                      | \$80,726                | 4             |
| Management occupations                                    | 29%                                      | \$77,338                | 5             |

Source: American Community Survey, 2015-2019.

- **Too many Black workers are kept on the sidelines of the economy; they are less attached to the labor force, less likely to be employed, and overwhelmingly working in the lowest wage occupations.**

In 2020, Black workers were less likely to participate in the labor force (60.6 percent) than white workers (61.5 percent), and a far lower percentage of Black workers as a percent of total population were employed (54.7 percent) compared to white workers (59.2 percent).<sup>92</sup> And even when they are able to find work, Black residents end up disproportionately working in the occupations with the lowest earnings—like Manual Labor/Material moving, which earns \$31,000 a year and where 71 percent of workers in that occupation are Black. As seen in Figure 5.1, the five occupations with the lowest earnings are all dominated by Black workers, compared to the five highest-earning occupations, all of which are dominated by white residents.<sup>93</sup> Research suggests that lack of transportation, involvement with the criminal justice system, barriers to educational attainment, and high neighborhood poverty play a critical role in holding back full Black participation in Greater Birmingham’s labor market and economy.

- **Greater Birmingham’s labor market also faces significant educational gaps that make it challenging for workers to achieve social mobility for themselves and for the region to compete for industry in the global economy.**

Previous research suggests that there are not enough residents with four-year degrees<sup>94</sup> and that too many residents—especially Black residents—lack access to key industry credentials in middle-wage occupations like the trades or manufacturing.<sup>95</sup> This education gap also plays a key role in perpetuating occupational segregation and the racial and gender pay gaps.<sup>96</sup>

Taking these challenges together, it becomes clear that too many people are being left on the sidelines of Greater Birmingham’s regional economy, their talents, hard work, and additional earnings they could spend to support local businesses throughout the region.

## What We Learned about Work and Wages in Greater Birmingham

Beyond the numbers, Greater Birmingham residents see the lack of good jobs and the importance of job training to secure them as key challenges they want local government to address. To greater or lesser degree depending on where they live, residents acknowledge the importance of good jobs for shared prosperity, the barriers to finding them, and the ways in which the policy environment make it harder to address the challenge.

### *The Challenge Finding Good Jobs*

Specifically, these challenges include:

- **Employers are struggling to hire because of low wages.** As one of our business leaders put it, “the businesses who can’t hire are the ones paying minimum wage. They need to do better.” Survey respondents echoed this: 55 percent of residents said low wages is why employers are finding it difficult to hire, including 38 percent who said it was the most important reason. Remarkably, traditional views on why employers cannot find workers scored much lower—just 37 percent said the worker shortage in Greater Birmingham is happening because people just do not want to work, and another 36 percent blamed the pandemic enhanced unemployment benefits, which of course ended in 2021 (six months before our survey went into field) and so as a factual matter could not play any role in the worker shortage in 2022.

**Greater Birmingham needs more good jobs, not just more jobs.** Our conversations with business leaders, economic development staff, and residents alike revealed a strong, shared view that the region’s employers needed to create or attract more good jobs that pay decent wages: Developers cared about competing with other regions to recruit high-skill, high-wage industries, workers were tired of earning low wages, and business owners are increasingly worried about finding workers to fill open jobs and are slowly realizing they need to pay good wages to do it. Thanks to the pandemic, an historically tight labor market, and 40 years of stagnant wages, the old world of growing the economy through low-wage employment is increasingly out of date. Our survey results back this up: Almost three out of every four residents agreed that lack of better-paying jobs with benefits is either a significant or somewhat of a challenge for Greater Birmingham. In a sign of strong cross-racial alignment on the issue, 82 percent of Black residents think good jobs is an important challenge and 62 percent—a solid majority—of white residents share this view as well.

**“I can go get a job sitting right here for \$9 an hour but in our economy today, \$9 is not going to make a difference, \$15 won’t make a difference. Are we talking about a career where people want to work and stay at a company or are we talking about just a job?” —Birmingham resident**

- **Residents understand that good jobs often require training, skills, and education that command higher wages—and they want to see more of these jobs in Greater Birmingham.** Increasingly in Birmingham’s economy—as in the global economy—education and skills development are a key pathway to living wage jobs, even those that do not require a college degree. Residents recognize this and see the lack of these jobs as a challenge for the region’s economy: 54 percent of residents said Greater Birmingham needed more jobs requiring skills and experience that can earn higher wages.

- **Lack of access to training holds back people from securing good jobs.** 57 percent of residents said Greater Birmingham faces challenges with providing enough opportunities to participate in job training programs that could result in better-wage jobs. As one workforce development official put it: “There is no concrete pipeline to train workers and prepare them for well-paying jobs. This is a key priority.”

- **Other barriers stand in the way of workers trying to find good jobs.** Beyond training and the basic availability of good jobs, our focus groups and interviews identified a range of other barriers holding back residents’ ability to secure living-wage employment. As mentioned in Section 4, hunger and lack of transportation sharply limit who can get a job, travel to it every day, and work productively once there. In addition, we heard repeatedly the barrier that criminal records play in holding back people from securing a job. Almost a third of Black males are involved in the criminal justice system in some way, which doubtless contributes to the gap in labor force participation and unemployment rates between Black and white residents, as employers are often unwilling to hire people with a record. Finally, access to affordable, quality childcare is a significant barrier to finding good jobs, especially for women.

### ***What it Means for Greater Birmingham***

The good jobs challenge has consequences for Greater Birmingham at three distinct levels—individuals, employers, and the region as whole:

- **Consequences for individual workers.** Wages are connected to everything else. As one resident described it: “Everything plays together. If you can’t get a good job and pay, you can’t get affordable housing or live outside the city and come into the city for work.” Without good jobs, residents do not earn enough to live on, and without training programs, it is hard to gain any social mobility. Worse, low wages are pushing people out of the city. “It’s like a vicious cycle in Birmingham because you make \$15k a year and there is no affordable housing anymore because they knocked everything down or UAB gobbled it up and I just feel like they are running a lot of people out of the city,” said another resident. Given this connection, it is unsurprising that nearly a third of Greater Birmingham residents feel like they cannot make ends meet, including 36 percent of Urban Core residents and a quarter of Rural Outer area residents. In a striking racial contrast, however, 42 percent of Black residents said they did not earn enough to make ends meet, while only 20 percent of white residents said this.

- **Consequences for employers.** Businesses are struggling to find and retain employees, partly because they do not pay decent wages, partly because of overly rigid employer screening and hiring methods, and partly because they cannot find potential employees with the right skills. Employers are well positioned to address the first two problems, but the public workforce system—including Central Six, the workforce board, and the local technical colleges—have an important role to play in educating the workforce with the skills employers need. As one business leader put it: “Promote more blue-collar opportunities and talk about how there is nothing wrong with being a plumber. We need plumbers and electricians and people working those manufacturing jobs.”

- **Consequences for the regional economy.** Given the economic trends presented above, it is clear the lack of good jobs—and people prepared to take them—is a drag on the region’s overall economic performance and any chance at promoting broadly shared prosperity. Greater Birmingham has too many workers only marginally attached to workforce or earning poverty-wage jobs, especially in communities of color. Not enough workers are adequately prepared to take living wage jobs that require a credential but no college degree (welding, trades, certain manufacturing and healthcare occupations). As the one recent report on Birmingham’s economy highlights, there are also not enough people with four-year degrees to attract enough high-wage, professional jobs in emerging sectors like fintech and software development.<sup>97</sup> Until wages rise and workers are given the necessary education and skills, the region will struggle to address its huge racial disparities in poverty, income, and social mobility.

### ***The Policy Challenges with Creating Good Jobs***

Good jobs do not happen by themselves; they are created by businesses and supported by local governments and the public sector. Yet the policy environment in Greater Birmingham presents significant obstacles to ensuring good jobs exist in the area and are readily available to the residents who need them, including:

- **Local governments have limited legal authority to raise the minimum wage within their jurisdiction without the approval of the state legislature.** In 2018, the City of Birmingham raised its minimum wage from the federal level of \$7.25-to-\$10 an hour, and the state legislature responded by convening a special session and revoking the authority of any local government (including Birmingham) from ever raising its minimum wage without explicit permission from Montgomery. In addition, Alabama Supreme Court cases have prohibited local governments from requiring the businesses they contract with to pay certain wages as part of the procurement process. Despite these limitations, they do have the option of giving their own employees a raise and putting wage standards into economic development incentive contracts (See Section 6).



- **The pipeline between K–12 and adult workforce system is broken, although local governments are promoting creative efforts to address the issue.** Our interviews revealed a general sense among stakeholders that the workforce system in Greater Birmingham is not meeting the needs of workers or employers, starting with K–12. Although this is partly due to the same underlying structural problems and racial disparities discussed in Section 3, stakeholders also reported that the connection between K–12 and the workforce system needed significant reform. As one labor official put it: “They have taken trades out of high school, and no one is learning welding, carpentry, auto mechanics, small engines . . . they have nothing to fall on but working at McDonald’s, jobs not paying what I call a living wage.” In the City of Birmingham, Mayor Woodfin’s administration has supported a range of workforce efforts, including apprenticeships, pre-apprenticeships, and Birmingham Promise, a scholarship program designed to provide graduates of Birmingham City Schools with “last-dollar” financial assistance to attend four-year or two-year college degree programs. As of 2021, more than 650 students have received scholarships through Birmingham Promise.

- **Challenges with silos and misaligned funding in adult workforce system.** In interviews, workforce system stakeholders repeatedly mentioned the fact that job training efforts in Greater Birmingham are hampered by having several separate entities responsible for workforce training—the local workforce board (CAP-T), the local workforce council (Central Six, which leads on apprenticeships, industry partnerships, and grant writing), and the Jefferson County Community Services and Workforce Development Department, which administers federal workforce dollars. Stakeholders reported significant confusion, duplication of effort, and fragmented funding that holds back the system from seamlessly supporting the kinds of job training that local businesses and workers need most. Unsurprisingly, local philanthropy, including the Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham and the Women’s Foundation of Alabama, have created their own workforce development programs to get around these challenges. In addition, Prosper Birmingham has created a web platform designed to connect marginally attached workers to training programs and job openings in the healthcare sector.

- **Jefferson County requires eligible workers to wait sixty days before they can begin receiving training services.** Jefferson County is one of only a handful of cities in the United States that directly administers federal workforce development programs, and for reasons that remain unclear, the county requires individuals to endure a sixty-day waiting period after they are deemed eligible before they can use federal dollars to pay for job training at local community colleges. Stakeholders repeatedly pointed to this waiting period as a major hole in the workforce pipeline, causing hundreds of people who needed training to never receive it.

## Childcare

**“The need for affordable childcare is really great and I think that goes hand in hand when we talk about how we are going to create an equitable economy.” —Youth advocate**

### *Childcare: The Big Picture*

- **Women in Greater Birmingham are often the main breadwinner for their families, yet they face significant barriers to participating in the workforce,** finding a good job, and earning equal wages to men when they do.<sup>98</sup>
- **Lack of childcare access is a significant obstacle for women to keep good jobs.** 64 percent of residents said access to affordable quality childcare was a challenge in Greater Birmingham, with essentially identical agreement among residents living in the Urban Core, Over the Mountain, and in the Rural Outer areas.

**“We have mostly single moms and if they don’t have childcare, they can’t work, and it adds to the whole problem.” —Housing advocate**

### *Key Takeaways*

- **Residents throughout Greater Birmingham are experiencing a kind of “childcare trap”—parents need childcare to find and keep a job, yet quality childcare services are often too expensive for parents who are working in below-living wage jobs.** This hits families of color especially hard, as they are disproportionately working in the lowest-wage occupations (see Figure 5.1) and are frequently headed by female single parents, the sole breadwinners for their families. This recognizes that parents earning as much as \$40,000 a year might still experience significant financial hardship once housing, utilities, food, and childcare costs are added, especially in our present highly inflationary economy.
- **Residents also expressed concerns that the bureaucratic rules for childcare subsidies and other federal benefit programs make it difficult for low-income parents to keep these benefits while earning additional income.** They pointed to cases where family members got a dollar an hour raise at their job, which then cost them much greater value in food and childcare benefits due to narrow federal rules that cut people off once they cross a certain income threshold. On childcare, one business leader put it like this:

“There are people who can’t qualify [for the childcare subsidy because they make “too much” money to qualify. It almost encourages people to stay impoverished because when you work harder to get a leg up, all your assistance is taken away, so it’s a difficult place to be in.” Interviews with policymakers made clear that the challenge is the rigidity of the federal income thresholds, rather than the existence of the subsidies and benefits themselves, that holds back workers. If those thresholds could be relaxed or more flexible workarounds implemented, it would provide low-wage workers with the flexibility they need to work more, earn more, and obtain upward social mobility.

- **Providing more access to affordable childcare services would play an important role in ensuring women have the opportunity to enter the labor force and ensure greater financial stability.** In our focus groups, residents strongly argued that offering accessible and affordable childcare could open more employment opportunities for single parents and ease the pervasive financial burdens facing so many parents in the area. In addition, residents also noted the importance of childcare for reducing crime, pointing out that the current lack of childcare puts too many unsupervised children and teens left at home in unsafe neighborhoods.

- **Local governments can appropriate additional local funds to support childcare slots and quality improvements.** Thanks to the work of the Women’s Foundation of Alabama, supportive legislators, and others, the State of Alabama enacted its first-ever childcare subsidies, which went to support quality improvements. Local governments can add additional funding to grow slots and support statewide quality improvements so that women do not have to choose between taking care of their children and earning the paycheck that puts food on the table.

## What Can Be Done

- **Use the public sector to raise workers’ wages through public employees’ salary plans and economic development incentives.** Although local governments are barred from mandating a minimum wage for private employers in their jurisdiction, they have the authority to raise the minimum wage for their own, public sector employees. For example, the City of Birmingham is already very close to ensuring that every employee earns a minimum of \$15 an hour. Since governments and school districts are often the largest employer in a municipality, public minimum wage increases can affect large numbers of workers and push private sector employers to raise wages as well to compete for talent. Finally, local governments can attach wage standards to economic development incentive contracts (see Section 6).

- **Support and expand public-private efforts to connect marginal workers to jobs.** Local governments should appropriate additional funds to support recent philanthropic efforts to create apprenticeships and job connection platforms.

- **Repeal the sixty-day waiting period for training.** Most importantly, Jefferson County needs to end the waiting period once residents are deemed eligible for federal training dollars. This option has strong support from residents: 55 percent support ending the waiting period, include similar numbers across every geography and race.
- **State government should raise the minimum wage or give local governments the authority to do so for private employers within their own jurisdictions.** Both options are wildly popular: 85 percent of residents support raising the minimum wage, including 90 percent of Urban Core residences, 77 percent of Rural Outer residents, and 80 percent of Over the Mountain residents. Almost 6 in 10 residents support giving local governments the authority to raise wage on their own, including 60 percent in the Urban Core, 60 percent Over the Mountain, and 51 percent in the rural areas. These are supermajority-level margins with strong cross-racial and geographic appeal.

**“Raising the minimum wage meant what? More worker loyalty, less turnover, and better productivity. That works.” – Community activist**

## Labor Unions and Worker Organizing

Another strategy for improving job quality and raising wages for working people in Greater Birmingham involves labor union organizing in key employers across the region.

### *Labor organizing: The Big Picture*

- **A labor union or trade union is an organized group of workers who unite to make decisions about conditions affecting their work.**<sup>99</sup> They bargain collectively with their employer for better wages, safer working conditions, and better benefits like retirement pensions, health insurance, paid family leave. They also run job training programs, especially in industries like the welding, plumbing, electrical, healthcare, and sometimes manufacturing. Nonpartisan research has long shown unions generating a significant wage premium for members—as much as ten percent more than comparable non-unionized workers earn for the same work with the same level of education and experience<sup>100</sup>—safer workplaces with fewer injuries,<sup>101</sup> and significantly lower income inequality when looking at the national level.<sup>102</sup>
- **Workers in Alabama and Greater Birmingham have the legal right under federal law to organize a union, although the State of Alabama sharply limits how unions operate and when they can collectively bargain.** Like ten other states (mostly in the South), public employees of local governments are prohibited from collectively bargaining with their employees. In addition, since 1948, Alabama has been a so-called “right to work” state,

where employees are permitted to benefit from union representation without belonging to the union or paying union dues.

- **Alabama has a long history of unions, including in steel, mining, the trades, and education.** In 2021, 5.8 percent of Alabama’s workforce belonged to a union (down from 7 percent in 2020), and 6.8 percent were employed in workplaces represented by a union, even if they were not members themselves. Despite long-term decline in union membership (due in large part to being a “right to work” state), Greater Birmingham has seen a recent explosion of interest in labor organizing, including two unsuccessful efforts to organize the Amazon warehousing facility in Bessemer, a successful effort (the first in Alabama) to organize a union at Starbucks in Midtown in the City of Birmingham, and an ongoing strike by United Mineworkers members in nearby Tuscaloosa County, many of whom live in southwestern Jefferson County.

### **Key Takeaways**

- Giving workers the opportunity to collectively bargain for better wages and working conditions is surprisingly popular in Greater Birmingham. More than 62 percent of residents expressed support for the workers at the Amazon facility in Bessemer forming a union, including majority support across all three geographies—69 percent in the Urban Core, 59 percent in the Rural Outer areas, and a surprising 51 percent in the Over the Mountain suburbs. Strong majorities of Black residents supported the Amazon workers (78 percent) and a plurality (and near-majority) of white residents did so as well (49 percent).
- Many residents clearly see a personal benefit from joining a union and collectively bargaining with their employer, although there are differences across race. More than half of all Black residents believed they would personally benefit from joining a union, while more than a quarter of white workers expressed the same.
- Despite these racial differences, the interesting finding here is that white suburban and rural residents supported mostly Black Amazon workers in Bessemer despite believing that they themselves would not personally benefit. This represents significant common ground for promoting worker organizing specifically and pro-worker policies more broadly.

## Section 6. Power

Equitable development puts residents in the driver's seat by ensuring they are involved in decision-making, their decisions carry weight, and that the community broadly benefits from economic development investments. This requires investing in the power of local Greater Birmingham area communities, which means building the capacity of Birmingham residents to advocate for themselves to achieve more equitable economic development outcomes.

In practice, this partly involves pushing local government officials and community leaders to practice meaningful community engagement by requiring broad participation and leadership in decision-making and reflecting a diversity of voices, especially from historically marginalized communities. But it also involves understanding and advocating to reform state laws that interfere with the ability of local governments to achieve more equitable development, whether related to wages, transportation funding, affordable housing, or other key policies.

Our research revealed two primary ways residents wanted to invest in building their communities' power: addressing state interference into local control and ensuring their community benefits from economic development through legally binding development agreements.

### 1. Accountability and Community Benefits from Economic Development

A key component of equitable development involves making sure local people are represented in the development decisions that affect them and ensuring they actually benefit from the jobs and investment that are created from development projects. To this end, our research found strong support for building the power of local residents and their communities through the more community engagement in decision-making, stronger accountability for business incentive deals, and community benefits agreements.

#### **By the numbers: Economic development accountability and community benefits**

- Only 28 percent of Birmingham area residents feel included in the region's economic revival and development.
- 81 percent of residents believe local governments should make sure that private companies actually create the jobs they promise in exchange for public subsidies/business incentives.
- 76 percent of residents believe local governments should require private companies receiving business incentives to pay living wages for the jobs they create.
- 66 percent of residents want their local government to have more say over the terms of how companies come into their community.

- 56 percent of residents either want to see people in their community give more input in business recruitment and development decisions (33 percent) or are open to the idea (23 percent).

## Accountability and Community Benefits: The Big Picture

The point of most economic development policy is to boost the local economy, often measured by new jobs, new investment, and new GDP growth. But how much does a community really benefit if the “new” jobs go to people from outside the community, or pay low wages? Does the community truly benefit if there is nothing left but an empty building if the company decides to leave after a few years? Are there training opportunities to give local workers the skills they need to take those jobs? These are the big questions residents must grapple with when considering how governments can leverage their power with private companies to ensure the community genuinely benefits from development.

**Local governments have limited ability to influence the decisions of private developers and businesses looking to locate in the area.** Most development happens through the decisions of private companies—businesses choose to locate in Greater Birmingham and real estate developers choose to put up new commercial and residential buildings. But private companies often turn to the public sector for necessary zoning changes or permitting, and also frequently request government-provided economic development subsidies in exchange for the promise of new jobs, new investment, or new real estate projects. In Greater Birmingham, the largest type of economic development subsidy is the tax abatement, whereby a local government offers to reduce the amount of taxes owed by the recipient company. In fact, these development incentives are a significant tool used by local governments in Jefferson County (and communities across the country) to generate private sector development, and so represent a key point of leverage governments can use to ensure their residents actually benefit from a proposed economic development project (e.g., residents are hired for the jobs created, those jobs pay living wages, and real estate projects contain affordable housing units and use local businesses to construct and lease space in the building).

**Local governments in the Greater Birmingham area spend hundreds of millions of dollars on tax incentives to spur private development.** For example, in the three-year period between 2017 and 2021, Jefferson County government spent \$23.8 million in economic development-related tax abatements<sup>103</sup> and set aside another \$10 million to support private investment related to the World Games.<sup>104</sup> Since 2016, the City of Birmingham has spent \$30.8 million on various tax abatements as well. Moreover, many of these deals offer companies tax abatements for multiple years, causing the loss of revenue to compound over time. In 2021, for example, Jefferson County reported a total liability of \$238 million from tax abatements



related to economic development from the previous decade.<sup>105</sup> That is more than a quarter of Jefferson County's roughly \$800 million budget for the year.

**Not only are these economic development deals expensive, but we also often do not know whether they are creating jobs, investment, and development that companies promised in exchange for the incentive.** Local governments in the state of Alabama, including those in the Birmingham area, are not required to disclose to the public the financial cost of each incentive deal, the specific number of jobs or amount of investment created, nor whether these businesses are creating the jobs they promised. As a result, with the notable exception of the City of Birmingham,<sup>106</sup> we have no publicly available data source for any of this information for the municipalities in the Jefferson County, so we have no way of knowing how any their tax incentives are performing in terms of creating jobs and private investment—or even their cost. This lack of transparency is partly why corporate subsidy watchdog organization Good Jobs First has labeled Alabama the worst state in the nation for public disclosure around economic development.<sup>107</sup> Ultimately, this matters for residents because without transparency, it is impossible determine whether any of these costly programs are at all effective in doing what they promise.

## **What We Learned about the Challenges of Accountability and Community Benefits in Economic Development**

Birmingham residents are broadly supportive of increased development, but they are wary that they or their communities will directly benefit. They acknowledge the challenge associated with getting more out of their communities' economic development, as well as the consequences when that does not happen.

### ***The Challenge of Ensuring Economic Development Benefits the Entire Community***

- **Strong majorities of residents see Birmingham's recent downtown revitalization and new job creation across the region as positives, but they do not feel like they or their communities are directly benefitting as much as they could.** Only 28 percent of Greater Birmingham area residents feel included in the region's economic revival and development. Looking across race lines, 58 percent of Black residents and 44 percent of white residents said they did not feel included. More than 73 percent of Greater Birmingham residents feel like the area's economic resources are not distributed fairly, including more than eight of ten Black residents and two-thirds of white residents.
- **Birmingham-area residents want their local governments to be more proactive in shaping economic development, so it more fully benefits their communities.** For example, 66 percent of residents want their local government to have more say over the terms of how companies come into their community, including 60 percent of white residents and 72 percent of Black residents. As one nonprofit leader put it, "We need to know what these tax incentives are actually getting us in our communities, and whether anybody except the corporations and developers are seeing any real benefit."

- **Residents called for stronger accountability and wage standards to ensure local residents can access jobs and earn living wages created through publicly subsidized economic development.** More than eight in ten residents (including equal rates of Black and white residents) want their local government to make sure that private companies actually create the jobs they promise in exchange for public subsidies and business incentives. Similarly, 76 percent of residents believe local governments should require private companies receiving business incentives to pay living wages for the jobs they create, including seven in ten white voters and eight in ten Black residents. In effect, these strong majorities are calling more governments to exercise more power in shaping deals with private developers to secure meaningful benefits of residents.

- **More government involvement in economic development does not always translate into more direct community or public input into development or business incentives decision-making.** Residents have a more nuanced view of the role of public input in economic development decisions. Taken together, 56 percent of residents either want to see people in their community give more input in business recruitment and development decisions (33 percent) or are open to the idea (23 percent). Given that only a third openly support more public input, this suggests residents want to see power over development exercised more through traditional local government channels than opened up to direct citizen involvement. It also suggests a shared sense—backed up by interviews with officials—that secrecy is a necessary ingredient for closing the deal with new businesses or developers. Finally, there is a stark racial divide on this question—just 26 percent of white residents want to see more input from the community, compared to 40 percent of Black residents. This likely reflects the concerns of white residents living over the mountain or in the county’s outer rural areas that more public input means turning more power over to people living in the City of Birmingham, who they viewed as mostly poor and Black.

### ***Policy Challenges for Ensuring the Entire Community Benefits from Economic Development***

The power of local governments to secure community benefits from publicly subsidized development projects depends to large degree on the policy context in which economic development happens. Specifically:

- **The community suffers when economic development projects fail to deliver on their promises.** In interviews, residents and policymakers alike noted that too often jobs from subsidized development do not go to local residents, do not support local business expansion and contracting (especially among historically Black businesses), and far too often do not pay living wages. In addition, the revenue that gets spent on economic development tax abatements would otherwise go to other investments that build the long-term economic capacity of a community—like education, job training, and other public amenities.<sup>108</sup> And that is when development projects work out. Frequently, companies fail to create promised jobs or leave after only a few years, leaving the local government to pay tax abatements for projects no longer located in the community.<sup>109</sup>

- **Public subsidies are an important point of leverage, as long as governments include basic accountability and job standards in the legal contract.** Every subsidy deal involves a legally binding contract between the granting government agency and the business receiving the public subsidy.<sup>110</sup> Since the business is seeking subsidy, the contract is a crucial point where local governments have leverage to try and secure community benefits in exchange for public dollars. Best practices call for putting performance standards into the contract, whereby the business must create the jobs they promise by a certain deadline, or it does not receive the subsidy. In addition, the contract can include job quality standards such as wages, health insurance, and full-time rather than part-time employees.<sup>111</sup> For real estate projects, this is where the local government can include job training, local hiring, and affordable housing set-aside requirements. While these types of standards are common in other states,<sup>112</sup> it is unclear to what extent local governments in the Greater Birmingham area, including the municipalities and the Jefferson County Commission itself, use this leverage and include performance and job quality standards in their development incentive contracts.

- **Local governments in Greater Birmingham have high flexibility and low risk to pursue greater accountability in development.** There is little evidence that accountability standards scare away developers or businesses from locating in the region.<sup>113</sup> In addition, several years ago, all thirty-four municipalities and Jefferson County signed a noncompete agreement promising to not compete against each other when recruiting business and real estate development. In doing so, local governments have given themselves and their economic developers more space to experiment with stronger accountability and job quality standards without fear of losing a project to the next town over.

## What Can Be Done to Ensure the Entire Community Benefits from Economic Development

There are several policy options available to local communities in Greater Birmingham to ensure development deals benefit the residents living there.

- **Include performance standards, job quality standards, and accountability mechanisms to ensure recipients of development incentives live up to their promises and create jobs that benefit local residents.** Local governments should adopt strong economic development policies that require these pro-community benefit provisions are put into development incentive contracts. Local governments from Nashville, Tennessee, to Atlanta, Georgia, are already doing this. Some counties, including Durham, North Carolina, have created an economic development scorecard that grades potential incentive projects on whether they meet a range of criteria, including living wages, job training program requirements, and affordable housing set-asides.

- **Enact a Community Benefits Agreement (CBA) in places where subsidy contracts are insufficient to secure major benefits.** In contrast to subsidy contracts between local governments and a single business or real estate developer, community benefits agreements are contracts between a company and representatives of an entire community, usually in the form of a 501c3 organization with a broad membership base across the community. CBAs often happen in the context of a major, transformative real estate development project or where a company plays a crucial role in the procurement process for dozens of cities. With these agreements, the community organization promises to support the project and refrain from time-consuming, expensive litigation to stop the project in exchange for significant concessions from the developer/company in terms hiring targets (e.g., the number of people from a local community the company commits to hiring), living wages, paid leave, local business sourcing, affordable housing, transit stops, and other equitable development priorities. CBAs are time-consuming and costly to negotiate, so they represent a smart choice for local advocates seeking to secure benefits from major, transformative projects, rather than run-of-the-mill business recruiting projects.
- **Enact transparency requirements for economic development projects.** Most local governments across the Greater Birmingham area do not disclose basic information—or any information—about its economic development projects, so it is impossible to assess whether subsidized projects are performing as promised or determining whether economic development programs are at all effective. An important first step for local governments to begin publicly disclosing information about each individual project and its performance.

### Case Study: Anniston, Alabama

After years of community mobilization led by Jobs to Move America, community advocates in Anniston, Alabama, signed a CBA with New Flyer, the nation's largest producers of electric buses, in May 2022. To ensure the CBA, Anniston leaders traveled to national New Flyer shareholder meetings to advocate for a CBA, while simultaneously educating big city mayors looking to buy buses about the importance of securing community benefits through this procurement process. Ultimately, the organizing effort succeeded, and the CBA won the following benefits for Anniston's New Flyer workers and community residents more broadly:<sup>114</sup>

- New Flyer committed to creating new job training programs to ensure local residents would have the rights skills to access the jobs New Flyer promised to create.
- The company also promised to boost its hiring and promotion of people from disadvantaged groups, saying that at least 45 percent of new hires and 20 percent of promotions would be given to women, people of color, and military veterans.
- The deal includes enhanced company reporting about employment programs associated with its contracts for five years.

## 2. State Interference in Local Control

**“Lack of home rule is a real barrier for solving our challenges locally. The fact that the legislature has to vote on what a local county wants to do is ridiculous.” —Nonprofit leader**

On issue after issue—from raising the minimum wage to financing public transit—state government puts the brakes on the ability and authority of local governments to solve their own problems without permission from Montgomery, and sometimes even at all. State interference in local affairs and the lack of home rule present serious challenges for address the substantive policy concerns holding back the Birmingham region from addressing the problems residents have identified, promoting economic development that benefits everyone, and ultimately ensuring more broadly shared prosperity.

### By the numbers: State Interference and Home Rule

- 3 out of every 4 Birmingham residents are open to home rule, with 43 percent clearly in support, compared to just 23 percent opposed. These results are similar across race and geography.
- 41 percent of residents flatly oppose state interference/preemption of local authority, while 26 percent support it, leaving about a third of residents who could go either way. Black residents had a higher skepticism of preemption than white residents.
- 58 percent of residents believe local governments in Greater Birmingham should be able to set their own minimum wage for the workers living there. These results are similar across race and geography. Support for this actually rises the wealthier the respondent.

### State Interference in Local Control: The Big Picture

**“I think the state passed a law saying that no local governments can pass the minimum wage ordinance, so that means that cannot happen until we change the constitution . . . the power of local governments is limited in the state of Alabama.” —Youth advocate**

**Alabama’s constitution, written in 1901, severely restricts the ability of local governments across Greater Birmingham to solve their equitable development challenges.** Local governments in states with “home rule” have authority separate and apart from what the

legislature allows them to do. Alabama, on the other hand, is a modified Dillon rule state where local governments only have the authority expressly granted them by act of the legislature or constitutional amendment, which requires a supermajority vote in the legislature and a statewide referendum. The Alabama constitution is littered with amendments applying to a single county, addressing the “most mundane of matters, including rodent control, weed control, bingo, and burying dead farm animals.”<sup>115</sup>

As a result, **Jefferson County, like all local governments in Alabama, must secure state legislative approval or constitutional amendment to enact many of the changes discussed in this report.** For example, local governments in Alabama have the authority to levy property taxes, but tax rates on certain kinds of property can only be approved by the legislature and a statewide referendum, which almost always fail. Similarly, Jefferson County can only change its occupational tax rate with the approval of the legislature, and can never use gas tax dollars to support mass transit, thanks to the constitutional ban in Amendment 93. Beyond taxes, local governments are prohibited from setting workplace wage or health and safety standards within their jurisdictions, so for example, Jefferson County does not have the authority to set its own minimum wage without state approval.

**State interference clearly limits the ability of local governments in Jefferson County to address challenges of equitable development and promote broadly shared prosperity.** The legislative and constitutional hurdles to enacting a range of equitable development policies are often too great for local governments to overcome, and must be addressed directly if Greater Birmingham leaders are ever to have the power necessary to enact the changes their residents want and vote for.

## What We Learned about the Challenges of State Interference

Birmingham residents have a surprisingly clear and nuanced view of the role played by state interference in limiting the ability of local governments to solve the economic challenges they care about, including why it happens and the impact on shared prosperity across the region.

### *The Challenges Posed by State Interference*

Residents pointed to three interlocking problems related to state interference that hold back local governments from enacting more equitable economic development policies:

- **Birmingham residents recognize the institutional barriers arising from state interference that make progress at the local level difficult if not impossible to secure.** As one women’s advocate said, “Home rule does not exist much, and I think that is extremely problematic...there are just so many layers of governments that hold us back.” This sentiment was echoed by a plurality of survey respondents—barely a quarter of respondents actually support current levels of state interference. Our focus group participants repeatedly mentioned the challenges of getting Jefferson County-specific policies passed through the state legislature and the willingness of legislators to strip away Jefferson County’s legal authority to raise the minimum wage.



- **Perceived anti-Birmingham bias in the legislature and state agencies exacerbates challenges with state interference.** Many residents in our interviews and focus groups felt that the legislature and executive branch view Birmingham negatively as a source of crime, mismanagement, and liberal politics that legislators and statewide elected officials generally oppose. This results in an anti-Birmingham bias that makes it harder for Jefferson County to secure passage of its priorities through the legislature, secure needed funds, and stave off state bans on local government decisions. Residents raised the funding issue in particular, noting that they felt powerful state agencies—especially the Alabama Department of Transportation—tended to restrict funding from being spent on the needs that mattered most to Greater Birmingham people.

- **Birmingham residents want their local governments to have more authority without state interference—especially to raise wages.** According to our survey, 43 percent of residents are open to home rule and 41 percent are opposed to state interference. In addition, and previously mentioned, almost 60 percent of residents want their local government to be able to raise their own minimum wage above the state's. As one labor leader flatly put it, "Get rid of Montgomery trying to control Birmingham or Jefferson County." Getting rid of Montgomery is also surprisingly popular across class lines—although outright support or openness to home rule still achieves a plurality among residents of all income levels, higher income residents actually support home rule at even greater levels than lower income residents. This counter-intuitive result suggests a latent base of support exists for constitutional reform in the communities we would normally have expected the opposite—higher-income whites.

### ***The Consequences of State Interference for Birmingham Residents***

Ultimately, state interference deprives local government in the Greater Birmingham area from the full range of funding and tools they need to make transformative equitable development policy (the ban on using gas tax revenues for transit is especially glaring in this context). But at a more fundamental level, state interference robs local government—and local residents—of the basic autonomy, agency, and power needed to best serve their own citizens in a democratic system of government. The question of power—and who exercises it in the Birmingham region—is where the biggest impact of state interference lies.

- **Greater Birmingham area residents did not feel like they had the power to influence the ways the economy affected them.** Only 28 percent of survey respondents said they felt personally included in the county's economic revival and development, and our focus group participants explicitly connected this to the problem of who really exercises power in Birmingham—an alliance of Over the Mountain suburban interests, anti-Birmingham statewide elected officials and legislators, and the "old mule" big businesses downtown who often block action on wages, transit, education, and other key equitable development priorities. As one business leader put it, "They can control the city without actually living in Birmingham. . . . giving Birmingham more control, leverage, and funds would mean



diminishing their power and they do not want to cooperate.” Focus groups viewed state leaders in Montgomery in the same way—they do not want to relinquish any power to the counties.

## What Can Be Done to Address State Interference

Given these political, policy, and institutional constraints, local governments in Greater Birmingham really only have two paths forward to build the power they need to enact more equitable development:

- **Build regional collaboration among all thirty-four local governments to identify joint policy solutions that are within their accepted constitutional authority.** As discussed, local governments have authority over their own public employees and contractors, so they could easily raise wages and provide paid sick days to their own workforce or make these benefits contingent on receiving public dollars for the businesses they contract with to perform core services. In addition, local governments can build on the successes of the agreement many of them signed in 2018 committing to not compete with each other or poach from each other when it comes to recruiting businesses to the area. Local philanthropy has provided several key forums for local elected officials to meet and discuss potential collective solutions, and these pathways could support future collaboration going forward.
- **Change Alabama’s constitution to enact more home rule and repeal the most egregious constitutional hurdles to good economic development policies.** Ultimately, the most effective way to give local governments the power they need to enact more equitable economic development policies is to reform or rewrite the state’s constitution to provide more home rule authority. Given that every effort to reform the constitution has failed since its initial adoption in 1901, this is obviously an uphill climb—but one that advocates occasionally attempt, and for which our focus groups found surprising support. Failing a full-scale rewrite, Birmingham would benefit from a targeted effort to repeal the most egregious and damaging provisions in the current constitution, notably the ban on using gas tax dollars for public transit. Both campaigns would require strong collaboration between the thirty-four local governments, business leaders, advocates, and elected officials.

**“You have to convince the thirty-four cities that they need to unify to see about getting to have home rule because we cannot even hire a chief of police without going to the Alabama legislature or even give him a present.” – Community activist**

## Conclusion

From the beginning to the end of our study, we heard Greater Birmingham residents say they wanted economic development to achieve a more equitable economy and produce shared prosperity for everyone in the region. They identified a range of specific policy-related challenges and goals that require greater regional cooperation and neatly align with the core pillars of equitable development, specifically the importance of investing in **place** (particularly transportation, affordable housing, and healthy food access), **people** (especially job quality, job training, and childcare services), and **power** (particularly CBAs, corporate subsidy accountability, and renegotiating state interference into local government affairs).

It is our hope that community advocates, business leaders, and elected officials find this report useful in developing a policy-oriented blueprint for future action to make the Greater Birmingham a community that thrives and where prosperity is broadly shared across all residents, regardless of race, geography, and income level.

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