

Understanding economic inclusion in smaller, legacy cities: Findings from focus groups

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Context overview



- 14 cities; 19 focus groups; over 200 participants
- Most cities sub 250K population
- Most were population centers for their regions
- 4%-25%+ unemployment
- 5%-35%+ family poverty rate
- 50%-70%+ labor force participation
- Most had experienced significant manufacturing job losses / in many places manufacturing remained important

What did we want to learn?

What we knew:

Economic inclusion has become an aspirational imperative for places, especially those that have diligently pursued strategies of economic growth only to find that economic well-being did not improve for all residents.

What we wanted to learn:

What are legacy cities doing to advance positive labor market outcomes for all of their residents. How are these places connecting growth to opportunity?

In pursuing this line of inquiry we wanted to understand the 'ambition of inclusion' in the context of older, primarily smaller, American cities.

Some findings

- Labor market conditions matter.
 - A tight labor market is an opportunity to bring marginalized populations into the labor force but in places with little or no economic growth, inclusion is more challenging.
 - For participants in tight labor market cities expanding the workforce was an economic imperative in order to meet demands from employers.
 - In places where there was little or no growth, while the awareness of the importance of economic inclusion may have existed, opportunities to put it into practice were limited. Conversations focused on persistent barriers where a chronic lack of equity undermined efforts to build trust.

“It is hard to build equity in an environment that is not sustainable.”

Some findings

- Fragmentation

- Geographic

- Overlapping units of government: school district boundaries conflicting with municipal boundaries
 - Resulted in disparate outcomes
 - Perpetuated us vs. them / “zero sum game”

- Programmatic

- Hundreds of programs; no evidence of impact
 - Programs as substitute for systems change
 - Siloes / lack of coordination

“Massive landscape of competing interests”

Some findings

- Misalignment
 - Capital resources
 - Leadership
 - Time horizons
 - Data
 - Capacity

“Philanthropy is not a substitute for policy.” “Inclusion is not charity.” “Programs and interventions are not a substitute for broad systems change.”

What can places do?

Barriers to employment are complex and multifaceted.

- Person specific vs. Location specific
- Location specific:
 - access to capital
 - transportation
 - childcare
 - targeted training (often in partnership with community colleges)
 - K-12 education
 - communication
- Address barriers with explicit inclusionary strategies

What can places do?



In closing: A call to action

Make the case

- Participant comments revealed that for many the 'business case' for economic inclusion still needs to be made.
- Institutional definitions of economic inclusion refer to both benefitting from and contributing to the economy. Other definitions place responsibility for economic inclusion with systems and structures and not with individuals.
- That the beneficiary of economic inclusion is the collective remains a connection that may be articulated at some levels but not internalized by all.