

CITY PROFILE ON RACIAL EQUITY

Austin, Texas

An aerial photograph of the Austin, Texas skyline at dusk. The city's skyscrapers are illuminated with warm lights, and their reflections are visible in the calm waters of Lake Travis. The foreground shows a dense line of trees and a path along the water's edge. The sky is a deep blue, and the overall scene is peaceful and scenic.

NLC NATIONAL
LEAGUE
OF CITIES

REAL RACE, EQUITY AND LEADERSHIP

Austin City Profile on Racial Equity

The city of Austin was named the U.S. News and World Report's Best Place to Live award and Forbes' Next Biggest Boom Town in the U.S. But despite national accolades and the city's immense growth, Austin must face the historically overlooked truth of racial inequity. The Martin Prosperity Institute ranked Austin as the most economically segregated city in the country, a designation no city wants. Taking this challenge head on, Austin has worked to reverse trends that exclude people of color from the bright future of their city.

Acknowledging the Past in the Face of a Bright Future

In 2012 Austin's city council was restructured by referendum from 6 at-large city council members to 10 members elected by smaller districts. This gave districts with high populations of low income residents and residents of color a larger stake in their local election while increasing the number of councilmembers of color. The change positioned the council to make significant progress towards addressing Austin's inequitable past and present.

The history of Austin includes a legacy of systemic racism that divides the city both ideologically and physically. In 1928 a "negro district" was created by a City masterplan on the east side of the city's major highway, pushing residents of color into East Austin using racial covenants and other racially restrictive policies and practices. Austin utility companies cut off service for people of color in areas outside of the "negro district," while schools and businesses reinforced "white only" policies. Though these policies evolved, they laid the foundation for the disparate outcomes present in housing, the economy and the public education system.

Given these challenges, the city council, led by Councilmember Delia Garza (the first Latina to be elected to the council),



Community members and city staff working together to address equity in the city's new strategic plan.

passed a resolution to develop an equity assessment tool for city departments to address past inequitable policies. With the encouragement and assistance of community advocates (Undoing Racism Austin and Communities of Color United), the council proposed a tool to evaluate the racial impact of policies and practices of city departments. Councilmember Delia Garza believes that Austin's efforts to address the past create the greatest opportunity to move forward. "Racism and bigotry are deep, embedded kinds of things – that's the challenge, and I do believe city staff is trying to address it and make [Austin] more equitable for the most vulnerable communities," she said.

Assessing Internal Decisions to Improve Outcomes

"I think that there are a lot of systemic inequities and institutionalized unfairness that exist in society, but I don't think there [are] any that [are] as pervasive as the racial equity issue. It is fundamental to and at the base and core of everything else when you begin to talk about injustices and institutional problems. So, I started there, because that's where this starts."

– **MAYOR STEVE ADLER**

In 2015, Mayor Steve Adler led the effort to create the city's first Office of Equity. The goal of this office is to "create an

institution solely committed to reversing structural racism with the authority to advocate within the local government for more equitable policies.” To initiate the process without undertaking an excessive financial burden, the mayor utilized Austin’s preestablished African American, Asian and Hispanic/Latino Quality of Life Commissions to guide the office’s work.

The Office of Equity has accepted the council’s charge to develop and implement the racial equity assessment tool, aimed at institutionalizing policies and practices that address the city government’s impact on equity. Based on a scan of existing tools, the team devised a set of questions to guide each department in assessing the benefit and/or burden that their policies, programs, practices and budget decisions place on communities of color. The assessment is split into four categories (Departmental Analysis, Budget, Community Engagement and Alignment) that help identify which practices can reduce current and future disparities.

Using 2017 as a pilot year, eight departments used the tool during the annual budget process, examining their work through an equity lens.

Speaking Explicitly About Structural Racism

In speaking about the importance of addressing systemic racism, Mayor Adler said:

“Don’t be afraid of this. Dealing with this subject is not an indictment on people’s character or the goodness of mankind, it is simply recognizing pretty simple truths and it begins with being brave enough to actually engage in an honest conversation.”

City: Austin, Texas

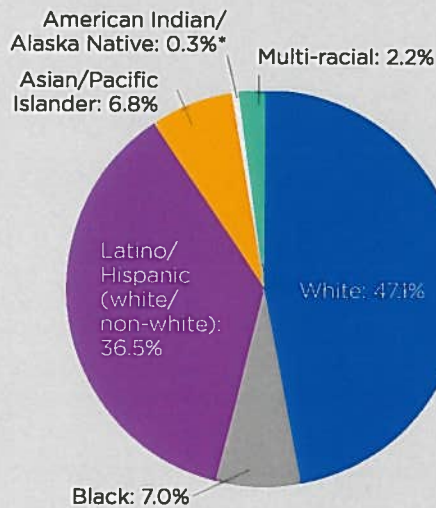
Year Starting Racial Equity Work: 2015

Mayor: Steve Adler

Form of Municipal Government: Mayor-Council

Population: 865,000 (2014)

Demographics:



*5-year community estimates

To be willing to share personal [experiences,] and where you come from individually.”

In 2016, the mayor formed the Task Force and council on Institutional Racism and Systemic Inequities, addressing Austin’s history and providing recommendations for improvement. The report of over 200 recommendations includes a housing development fund, a plan to repopulate gentrified areas with original residents and an incentive program for businesses who tutor low-income students. The task force was comprised of representatives from business, education and criminal justice. Most notably, the group was led by the president of Huston-Tillotson University, Austin’s historically black university, and the superintendent of Austin’s public-school district – two major institutions that have been

impacted by systemic inequities in Austin.

Ensuring Communities of Color Can Prosper and Remain

In 2014, a report from the University of Texas at Austin named the city as the only fast-growing city in the country with a declining population of African Americans. Austin’s swift growth has led to rampant gentrification and displacement of people of color, leading the city council to seek solutions from a racially, demographically, and geographically diverse body of community members. As a result, the Austin city council created the Anti-Displacement Task Force by resolution in late 2017. This group meets to develop strategies to preserve and expand affordable housing, preserve small businesses and increase opportunities for



income and asset creation for low-income Austinites.

Simultaneously, Austin is participating in the Equitable Economic Development Fellowship (EED) hosted by the National League of Cities, Urban Land Institute and PolicyLink. The fellowship is working to alleviate and prevent tensions as they pertain to housing, mobility and affordability-

with the goal of building an economic development strategy that supports underserved communities. Austin's EED plan is centered on growing small business entrepreneurs in traditional communities of color through economic incentives and permitting reforms, allowing the government, community and private sector to partner in making Austin a more livable city for all residents.

Summary: Austin

1 Acknowledging the Past for an Equitable Future:

Austin's work started with recognizing the impact of historic policies on today's outcomes and using that history to inform the city's strategy for achieving racial equity.

2 Developing an Assessment Tool: The city's equity office designed and implemented a racial equity assessment tool that helps each department shift its priorities according to its unique method of service delivery.

3 Using Civic Engagement Vehicles to Bring Stakeholders to the Table: Austin has brought community stakeholders together through several processes that explicitly address the history and impacts of structural racism.