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MetroWest: A region with prosperity and inequity

By **John Laidler** Globe Correspondent. Updated September 1, 2022. 1 hour ago



MetroWest residents attending a job and resource fair at South Middlesex Opportunity Council, in Framingham. SOUTH MIDDLESEX OPPORTUNITY COUNCIL

It's a suburban area with median income and high school graduation rates that exceed the state average. More than 20 percent of its jobs are in high tech, crime is relatively low, and the population is growing and increasingly diverse.

But the region known as MetroWest is also a place with pronounced racial inequities in areas ranging from poverty to homeownership, and where the fastest-growing segment of the population is people 60 to 84 years old.

That snapshot of an area that is relatively prosperous but buffeted by social challenges is highlighted in the Foundation for MetroWest's newly released update to its online data report, [Impact MetroWest](#).

"This data tells two really distinct stories," said Caroline Murphy, director of programs for the Natick-based foundation, which supports the work of community organizations in the area.

"This region is really thriving in many ways," she said. "We have a strong and very well-educated workforce. We continue to have fairly low unemployment. Homeownership and voter participation is high. But we are facing some significant challenges in providing opportunities for diverse communities to reach economic stability and sustainability."

An interactive website, Impact MetroWest provides a myriad of data on education, the economy, housing, and other facets of life in MetroWest, defined in the report as an area of 39 communities in Middlesex, Worcester, and Norfolk counties.

The foundation launched Impact MetroWest in 2020. The updated version highlights some of the same themes, but with new and expanded data.

Murphy said the information — all drawn from US Census Bureau data — can be used by the foundation and area nonprofits in designing programs and in raising funds.

"Since our 2020 launch of Impact MetroWest, we've seen the data come to life in our partnerships," said Jay Kim, the foundation's executive director. "With Impact MetroWest as a tool kit for the region, we hope to help community and business partners drive meaningful, lasting change."

Zoey Bergstrom, development and communications manager at OneFamily, said Impact MetroWest has been "an incredible resource to MetroWest nonprofits," citing in particular its documentation of racial inequities. Boston-based OneFamily provides homeless prevention services in the Boston region, including MetroWest.

"This data allows social justice-oriented organizations like ours to quantify the disproportionate and unjust barriers to economic prosperity faced by MetroWest residents of color," she said. "By seeing the full picture of where we are now, we can address these inequities in the future."

Some of the statistics in the updated data show the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, including a rise in the rate of chronically absent students from 10 percent in 2019 to 14 percent in 2021.

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Additionally, 8 percent of MetroWest residents were living in poverty in 2020 compared with 13 percent nationally and 10 percent in Massachusetts. Median household income was \$97,700, compared with \$64,994 in the United States and \$84,385 in Massachusetts.

But the report is filled with data points illustrating how not all are sharing equally in the region's advantages.

Third-grade reading proficiency in 2021 was 70 percent among Asian students, 64 percent among white students, but just 38 percent and 31 percent among Black and Latino students, respectively. In 2020, 66 percent of Asian and 52 percent of white adults had bachelor's degree or higher, 36 percent of Blacks and 28 percent of Latinos had reached that level of education.

Also in 2020, median income was \$113,000 for Asian households and \$100,235 for white ones, but only \$66,334 for Black families, and \$59,822 for Latino households. Similarly, homeownership rates were 69 percent for whites and 58 percent for Asians, compared with 35 percent and 34 percent for Blacks and Latinos, respectively.

The foundation has invested in two initiatives to address disparities highlighted in the original report: a pilot program launched in January that provides tutoring and other support to students in two Framingham schools, and funding to expand access — particularly for low-income students — to certified nursing programs at MassBay Community College.

Overall, the report found the proportion of foreign-born residents in the region rose from 13 percent to 18 percent from 2000 to 2020.

“That’s a huge strength for us,” Murphy said of the diversity. “It adds to our culture and the quality of life. But we really need to think about what supports and programs we can grow here to provide more access to education and other opportunities.”

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