Fiscal Fragility in Black Middle-Class Suburbia and Consequences for K–12 Schools and Other Public Services

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In the United States, most local jurisdictions are challenged as they seek to maintain fiscal strength. But majority-Black jurisdictions are uniquely burdened due to legacy and contemporary racist and racialized policies and racial capitalism. Leaders in majority-Black locales make harsher budget trade-offs than those in majority-White jurisdictions as they seek to invest in public schools and other public services. I use ethnographic and publicly available data to examine how Prince George's County, Maryland, a majority-Black and middle-class suburban jurisdiction in the Washington, D.C., region, navigates its financial constraints relative to neighboring counties with smaller Black populations. I conclude that Black jurisdictions' fiscal limitations stem from White jurisdictions' not bearing their proportionate share of responsibility for moderate-income and economically distressed households and fallout from uneven regional development, resulting in Black jurisdictions subsidizing White locales.

Keywords: Black Americans, middle class, racism, suburb, public services, schools, taxes

In the United States, residents receive their public goods and services—from potable water to public schools—through local governments. Adequate local jurisdiction financial capacity is therefore critical for Americans' quality of life. Most locales increasingly experience fiscal constraint due to recent trends in U.S. political economy, but the fiscal health of majority-Black counties is uniquely and multiply threatened due to the confluence of legacy and contemporary forms of anti-Black racism and how related policies inhere in metropolitan areas.

My study is based on Prince George's County (PGC), Maryland, and two neighboring counties—Montgomery County, Maryland, and Fairfax County, Virginia. Prince George's is a suburban jurisdiction bordering Washington, D.C., and the locale with the largest concentration of middle-class African Americans in the United States.[1] I define suburban as any local jurisdic-

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1. In June 2022, the *Washington Post* reported that Charles County, Maryland, may have more class-advantaged African Americans than Prince George's (Van Dam 2022). Regardless, Prince George's remains one of the U.S.

tion outside the principle major city in the metropolitan area, in this case the District of Columbia (D.C.). Prince George's receives and retains a disproportionate share of the D.C. region's moderate- and low-income residents. In so doing, it buffers neighboring majority- and plurality-White jurisdictions from managing their share of the tax burden incurred by supporting working class and economically distressed households. Black middle-class neighborhoods are vulnerable to disproportionate fiscal responsibility because they bear the cumulative weight of legacy and contemporary anti-Black policies—from the slave era, to the Jim Crow period, to the contemporary moment.

Majority–African American jurisdictions also endure *racial capitalism*. This term captures how market relationships are shaped by racial status, not just interactions and power dynamics based on class distinctions, those who own the means of production versus those who work for wages (Leong 2013). In the United States, the racial status of workers—White, Black, Asian, and Indigenous—and capitalists creates interdependent relationships between laborers and capital owners, as well as relationships among workers. Race also underpins relationships with governing institutions because race is a "*political category.*" Racial systems assert inherent biological differences between people by ascribing social meaning to phenotypes, most notably skin tone, even as there are no biological subcategories of human beings (Roberts 2011). Racial groups are then ranked, and groups' place in the hierarchy determines the extent of their political rights and privileges.

During the colonial period, White elites invented the racial regime we navigate today. This system served as pretext for justifying White Americans' accumulating economic and political advantages at the expense of Black and Indigenous Americans. In the antebellum years, this was done through the enslavement of Africans and the violent removal of Native Americans from their lands. After the Civil War, Jim Crow segregation and reservations for Indigenous peoples maintained White dominance. Consequently, from the 1600s forward, U.S. policies, politics, and market processes have interacted to create opportunity structures—from education to employment to housing, among others—that have starkly favored White Americans and their communities, leading to Whites, on average, having a higher quality of life than racially minoritized people.

In addition to the evolution of racial capitalism from slavery to the present, the political economy of the United States shifted markedly after World War II. First, beginning in the 1950s, the modern civil rights movement led to policy breakthroughs ending explicit racial discrimination against Black people and other people of color in core domains of life: schools, employment, housing, and voting. This opening of United States opportunity structures fostered the socioeconomic upward mobility of some African Americans.

A second major postwar change took root in the 1970s. For the past fifty years, most local jurisdictions, regardless of their race and class composition, have had to weather severe reductions in federal and state revenue transfers supporting their provision of public goods and services, and thus increasing local governments' reliance on affluent residents and commercial development to generate adequate revenue. Given this set of historical and current circumstances, majority-Black jurisdictions, relative to those majority-White, do not, on average, have the same ability to support high-quality public goods and services, even when majority-Black locales have middle-class resources.

The *virtuous fiscal cycles* of majority- and plurality-White jurisdictions are inextricably tethered to the *vicious fiscal cycles* of those majority-Black. I contend this White-Black relationship is highlighted most clearly in metropolitan areas, such as Washington, D.C., because researchers can trace the uneven flows of class and race groups, and private and public investment, into local jurisdictions. Investigators can also identify the consequences of locales' constrained fiscal capacity and the re-

counties with the highest concentration of middle-class Black Americans. Further, it has the longest history in this position, about two decades, allowing for research on the extent to which middle-class African Americans realize the same returns to their class status as their European American peers.

sulting quality of life for residents in each location.

I call the political and economic patterns I find *cascading fiscal constriction*, the convergence of three flows of financial precarity. The first of these is *historical era*—slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and contemporary market-oriented, colorblindness, which I call color callousness for two reasons: one, like layers of skin, colorblindness willfully asserts distance between ongoing and historical economic, political, and other racial injustices and, two, colorblindness constitutes heinous disregard for Black people's lived experiences. The second is *shared governing authority*—local, state, and federal governments. The third is *metropolitan area*—local government capacity as shaped by regional flows of people and capital. Ultimately, I conclude that the trend initiated during slavery hundreds of years ago—Black Americans interests being subordinated to those of their White counterparts—continues through different means. Black Americans still subsidize White Americans' well-being.

Next I discuss how Prince George's manages its fiscal constraints by showing how county officials allocated funds across program areas in fiscal year 2018 and by comparing its per capita and per pupil spending with two neighboring jurisdictions, both with smaller Black populations. Although I address budget implications for a range of goods and services, I highlight public schools because they are Prince George's largest expenditure, as is often the case for local jurisdictions. I also focus on schools because high-performing schools lead to more demand for housing in locales, driving up the market value of homes, and in turn bolstering jurisdictions' tax bases. The reverse is true too, low-performing schools reduce demand and undermine the tax base. My examination of Prince George's County, suggests that the fiscal constraints it faces are likely present to an even greater extent in other majority-Black jurisdictions because the county is majority Black and majority middle class, whereas most other majority-Black locales have fewer affluent residents.

SOCIOHISTORICAL CONTEXT AND THEORY

Several twentieth-century policies continue to influence the political economy of United States metropolitan areas as a whole, as well as the relationships between local jurisdictions within regions. The Fair Housing Act of 1968 opened housing options in the suburbs for Black Americans by prohibiting racial discrimination in the rental and sale of homes.[2] Black Americans' increased access to suburbs portended that they would have greater ability to participate in education, employment, and housing opportunity structures across metropolitan areas. Federal and state governments, as well as private industries, invested far more in suburban areas than cities after World War II. Schools, jobs, and housing in outlying portions of regions therefore tended to be more economically vigorous compared to those within the cores city or cities of metropolitan areas, where most Black Americans lived before the Fair Housing Act of 1968 (Wilson 2012).

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 extended greater access to colleges and other postsecondary training to Black Americans by outlawing racial discrimination in educational institution admissions and job hiring.[3] Hence increasing numbers of African Americans had skills and jobs allowing them to garner resources leading to middle-class status—and many Black Americans sought suburban residence as an extension of their upward mobility. The expanding Black middle class led to improved life chances for thousands of African Americans. This expansion of Black affluence also led to an increasing class divide among African Americans, between those ascending the socioeconomic ladder and those who remained on the bottom rungs (Wilson 2012).

Despite the class advancement of some Black Americans, to this day, when compared with White Americans, Black Americans regardless of class status are still more likely to be unemployed or underemployed (Pager and Shepherd 2008; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2022). African Americans are also less likely to be promoted when qualified, to have less

2. Fair Housing Act, 42 U.S.C. 3601 et seq. (1968).

3. Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Pub.L. 88-352, 78 Stat. 241, enacted July 2, 1964).

access to home loans and credit on favorable terms, and to be hyper-policed and incarcerated, among other racial disparities (Alexander 2012; Pager and Shepherd 2008; Taylor 2019). Add to this that the White-Black wealth gap, which is about 10:1, reflecting the cumulative effects of anti-Black policies over time (Darity and Mullen 2020; Oliver and Shapiro 2006). Hence a host of indicators demonstrate the lack of economic and political parity between Black and White Americans.

One key reason the wealth gap persists is the tepid growth in the value of African Americans' properties, particularly their homes, because home equity is how most Americans accrue wealth. This disparity is a function of how White dominant institutions and actors—from bank loan officers, to real estate agents, to appraisers—under value Black space, discriminate against Blacks in financial transactions, and perceive Blacks based on negative stereotypes (Howell and Korver-Glenn 2018; Korver-Glenn 2018; Perry, Rothwell, and Harshbarger 2018).

White-controlled institutions and actors also prey on Black Americans, their households, and their communities. Notably, the racial wealth gap widened after the Great Recession of 2009–2011, and the ensuing foreclosure crisis, which was more acute in Black communities because financial institutions targeted them for subprime mortgages even among those who qualified for standard mortgage terms (Kochar and Frey 2014). The combined weight of these disparities means that, overall, the Black middle class has never achieved the material conditions of the White middle class. Individual and household level headwinds are fundamentally linked to those of local governments serving majority-Black populations. Given the financial disparities outlined, decision-makers in Black communities make tough budget trade-offs between public services, often diminishing service quality as they do so, and thus the material conditions of Black households and neighborhoods (Frasure-Yokley 2015; Pacewicz and Robinson 2020). Black jurisdictions with extensive class resources are not exempt.

Beyond the White-Black socioeconomic divide, wealth and income inequality between the top 10 percent of earners and everyone else in the United States has grown exponentially since World War II (Piketty 2015). This socioeconomic trend amplifies the postwar racial gap in how government invested disproportionately in White people and the places they live. For example, the Federal Housing Administration through its mortgage underwriting policies enabled ever expanding swaths of White Americans to buy homes appreciating in value, but Black Americans were largely locked out of federally supported homebuying programs until the Fair Housing Act of 1968 (Katznelson 2005). Even with this law, studies continue to indicate anti-Black racism in the sale of homes (Korver-Glenn 2021).

One of the primary ways local jurisdiction decision-makers mitigate budget shortfalls is by pursuing more economic growth through private investment (Harvey 2007; Logan and Molotch 2007). But this strategy is far less lucrative for Black jurisdictions than those with White majorities and pluralities (Pattillo 2008; Pacewicz and Robinson 2020). First, Black neighborhoods manage scarring effects from Jim Crow era under investment by public and private institutions. Second, even Black neighborhoods with resources equivalent to those in Whites communities remain undervalued by White-dominant institutions shaping household- and jurisdiction-level financial well-being, such as banks, real estate brokerages, appraisers, and developers (Korver-Glenn 2021; Perry, Rothwell, and Harshbarger 2018). The value of properties constitutes the tax base on which tax rates are levied. Anemic tax bases in Black neighborhoods result in these communities garnering less tax revenue for investing in public services, such as public schools. Even as the United States becomes more racially and ethnically diverse, in light of 1965 immigration reform, Black Americans remain the most residentially segregated racial group (Frey 2014; Lee and Bean 2010).

School system funding challenges, specifically, largely reflect three factors: Black jurisdictions' strained tax bases, the racial resegregation of public schools, and the increasing class segregation of neighborhoods and their schools. The *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) Supreme Court decision deemed racially segregated schools "inherently unequal" and therefore unconstitutional.[4] But meaningful desegregation efforts did not begin until the late 1960s and were again curtailed in the mid-1970s. Children in the United States still largely attend school with those who share their racial status (Erickson 2016).

Milliken v. Bradley (1974), a later U.S. Supreme Court case, initiated the erosion of the integration process Brown sought to enact.[5] The *Milliken* decision banned interdistrict integration initiatives, such as busing between school districts. Courts therefore allowed White Americans to move to a different school district to avoid classrooms with Black children. Since *Milliken*, federal courts have permitted racial majorities as long as racial concentrations are not explicitly created by law (Goyette 2014; Lassiter 2006). Consequently, some school systems, such as those in Prince George's County, are disproportionately responsible for educating students whose families and communities bear the greatest economic burdens stemming from the legacy and ongoing effects of anti-Black racism and racialized capitalism. Students who do not have access to adequate material resources in their homes and neighborhoods often need schools to compensate, compounding local jurisdictions' fiscal challenges (Goyette 2014; Trounstine 2018). Counties in positions similar to Prince George's show the fallout from racially and economically resegregating schools, and other economic and political patterns after World War II. The experiences of Prince George's County also highlight that the consequences are uneven across jurisdictions and the role of political boundaries as White Americans continue to hoard resources (Lung-Amam 2023, this issue).

METHODS AND DATA

Given that majority-Black jurisdictions usually endure economic hardships that majority-White jurisdictions do not, two research questions guide this analysis and methods. First, in what ways do suburban majority-Black and middle-class county leaders' budget allocation decisions demonstrate the unique fiscal constraints they face? Second, what budget tradeoffs do officials make and what are the implications for public goods and services quality?

To answer these questions, I conducted a two-year ethnography of Prince George's County, Maryland, a suburb of Washington, D.C. Prince George's has the largest concentration of middle-class Black Americans in the United States. The Washington, D.C., metropolitan statistical area is home to 5.6 million people distributed across three states (Maryland, Virginia, and West Virginia) and the District of Columbia (the U.S. capital). There are twenty-three counties and independent cities and ninety municipalities (Lung-Amam 2017). Prince George's is the third most populous jurisdiction in the region. Fairfax County, Virginia, Prince George's western neighbor, is the most populous, followed by Montgomery County, Maryland, its northern neighbor. Each of these three counties is home to about one million residents.

As table 1 shows, Prince George's County is solidly middle class relative to Maryland and the United States. The county's median household income is about $20,000 above the national median and virtually identical to Maryland's. Median home value in Prince George's is about $91,000 above the U.S. median and about $4,000 below Maryland's. Residents of Prince George's County are also well educated, with a slightly greater percentage of residents with postsecondary education than the U.S. average, though about seven percentage points below Maryland's. But Maryland is among the wealthiest and most educated states in the country (*U.S. News and World Report* 2018).

When Prince George's is compared with its neighboring jurisdictions, however, the county's economic disadvantage is striking. The D.C. region is majority-minority with a White plurality. White Americans account for 47 percent of the population, but racial and ethnic groups are not evenly distributed across jurisdictions, nor are household, community, and neighborhood-level poverty and wealth (Lung-Amam 2017). Examining residential patterns at

4. *Oliver Brown, et al. v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

5. *Milliken, Governor of Michigan, et al. v. Bradley, et al.* 418 U.S. 717 (1974).

Table 1. Comparison Between Prince George's, Maryland, and United States, 2018

	Prince George's	Maryland	United States
Total population	909,308	6,042,718	327,167,439
Race or ethnicity (%)			
White (not Latinx)	12.3	50.2	60.2
Black (not Latinx)	61.3	29.5	12.3
Latinx (any race)	19.1	10.4	18.3
Educational attainment (%)			
Bachelor's degree	19.3	21.9	20.0
Master's degree	11.5	13.1	9.0
Professional school degree	1.8	3.2	2.2
Doctorate degree	1.7	2.6	1.5
Income and wealth ($)			
Median household income (in 2018 dollars)	83,034	83,242	61,937
Median home value (in 2018 dollars)	320,500	324,800	229,700

Source: Social Explorer (U.S. Census Bureau 2018).
Note: When selecting more than one component from the same geographical level, Social Explorer provides a total for these components in the "All Selected Geographies" column. This total is for the available geographies only within the same geographical level. When a value is missing from one or more components from the same geographical level, Social Explorer denotes it with an asterisk (*) in the All Selected Geographies column.

Missing estimates can be caused by data suppression through various methods or restrictions that are applied to ACS data to limit the disclosure of information about individual respondents and to reduce estimates with unacceptable statistical reliability.

Filtering rules, based on statistical reliability of the ACS 1-year estimates, are used to ensure that Detailed Tables are not released where the majority of the estimates in the Detailed Tables have an unacceptable level of reliability.

Learn More about missing estimates and filtering rules in the data suppression document available on the ACS website at http://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/technical-documentation/data-suppression.html.

For the new table name changes, please see Table Name Changes - ACS 1yr.

a more granular level, including by census tract and local jurisdiction, indicates that *segregated diversity* is entrenched in the D.C. area (Pinto-Coelho and Zuberi 2015).

Table 2 shows that in 2018 Montgomery and Fairfax Counties, Prince George's neighbors, had almost double the percentage of residents with college degrees or other advanced postsecondary education. Median household income in Montgomery was about $25,000 higher than in Prince George's. In Fairfax, it was about $39,000 more than Prince George's. Median home value in Montgomery was $169,000 more than in Prince George's. Fairfax's median home value was $249,000 greater. Also significant is that Montgomery and Fairfax Counties have much smaller Black populations. Montgomery has about one-third as many Black Americans as Prince George's, and Fairfax about one-sixth as many. Therefore, Montgomery and Fairfax do not manage the same long-standing, cumulative, concentrated consequences of anti-Black racism and racialized capitalism at the household and local government levels as does Prince George's.

Data Collection

From July 2017 through July 2019, I observed budget and policy development hearings several times each week during the ten months each year that the Prince George's County Council was in session. I went to committee

Table 2. Comparison Between Fairfax, Montgomery, and Prince George's Counties, 2018

	Montgomery	Prince George's	Fairfax
Total population	1,052,567	909,308	1,150,795
Race or ethnicity (%)			
White (not Latinx)	43.0	12.3	50.1
Black (not Latinx)	18.1	61.3	9.4
Latinx (any race)	19.9	19.1	16.4
Educational attainment (%)			
Bachelor's degree	26.8	19.3	30.8
Master's degree	18.6	11.5	22.7
Professional school degree	7.0	1.8	4.9
Doctorate degree	6.2	1.7	3.5
Income and wealth ($)			
Median household income (In 2018 dollars)	108,188	83,034	122,227
Median home value (in 2018 dollars)	489,000	320,500	569,000

Source: Social Explorer (U.S. Census Bureau 2018).
Note: When selecting more than one component from the same geographical level, Social Explorer provides a total for these components in the "All Selected Geographies" column. This total is for the available geographies only within the same geographical level. When a value is missing from one or more components from the same geographical level, Social Explorer denotes it with an asterisk (*) in the All Selected Geographies column.

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and full council hearings to track the evolution of draft legislation as elected officials deliberated budget appropriation decisions and performed program oversight. I also attended community meetings elected officials hosted, such as constituent townhalls, and those sponsored by community groups.

In addition, I conducted fifty-eight interviews, thirty with Prince George's County elected officials and twenty-eight with county residents. Regarding county leaders, I spoke to all council members, the majority of the school board, government agency administrators, and nongovernment leaders—for instance, church pastors and nonprofit organization executives. The twenty-eight residents interviewed were all African American, most were middle class by income (the majority earned $100,000 per year or more), and most had a college degree. I used purposive sampling to attain gender, generational, parental status, and residential location diversity. I recruited respondents at the church I attended, at businesses I frequented, and by referral.

In addition, as a Black middle-class woman, I personally managed the opportunities and constraints I observed and asked about in interviews. When I moved to Prince George's County, I lived in a single-family home in the northern tip of the county. I immersed myself in the area, including by shopping for my needs in neighborhood stores, joining a church and a gym, enjoying local cultural institutions, such as the Prince George's African American Museum and Cultural Center, and by becoming a regular at nearby coffee and barber shops.

I pair my ethnographic and personal experience with publicly available budget and other fiscal information in Prince George's County. And I place all Prince George's County data alongside fiscal and other publicly available information from two counties it borders—Montgomery County, Maryland, and Fairfax County, Virginia.

Data Analysis

Altogether, my data sources enable me to triangulate Prince George's County financial health and the implications for budget trade-offs. Following funding appropriation processes across spending categories indicates what is at stake and whose and what interests prevail in a context of fiscal scarcity. Interviews with officials allow me to analyze the meaning leaders lend to their decisions and how their constituents and other stakeholders influence the process. Talking with residents sheds light on their interests and whether and how their priorities are reflected in policy decisions.

I used the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti to identify patterns in my field notes and interviews, using both inductive and deductive coding schemes. The inductive portion entailed categorizing clusters of issues leaders and residents discussed and what they associated with them. For instance, many residents were concerned about school quality, so I coded all material in their interview related to this topic and then noted what they connected to it. On the deductive side, I paired inductive material with concepts in social science theory regarding resource distribution competition in markets and governments.

PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY FISCAL CONTEXT

Prince George's County government leaders allocate the county's budget in a fixed financial context each fiscal year, which runs from July 1 through June 30. Council members, based on Maryland law, can only distribute funds based on expected revenue the following year and surpluses from prior years. Officials can issue bonds to fund certain capital expenditures, such as building physical infrastructure, like roads and bridges, but virtually all operating expenses must be paid for through county-generated tax revenue or by money transferred to the county from federal and state governments.

Revenue Sources and Expenditures for 2018

The Prince George's County general fund budget, out of which most programs receive their allocation, was about $3.3 billion in fiscal year 2018 (Prince George's County Office of Management and Budget 2018). The three largest sources of revenue based on the county's own authority were: property taxes, 26 percent of the budget ($847 million); local income taxes, levied on residents' salaries and wages, 19.5 percent ($632.7 million); and other local taxes and receipts, such as hotel taxes, 12.9 percent ($419.7 million).

Revenue expenditures in 2018 were 61 percent for public schools and 21 percent for law enforcement, leaving about 18 percent for all other purposes—from health services to environmental protection (Prince George's County Office of Management and Budget 2017). Including the county and state contribution, schools received about $2 billion, with Maryland and Prince George's each contributing about $1 billion. Maryland provides money to schools according to the number of enrolled students and students' characteristics, including, among other factors, their socioeconomic background, English-language proficiency level, and learning capacity (for example, students requiring special education receive an additional allotment) (Checovich 2016; Hutchison 2004).

Tax Generation Limitation

Maryland grants counties discretion about how much to tax its residents. During Prince George's County's transition from majority-White to majority-Black, in 1979, Tax Reform Initiative by Marylanders (TRIM) was enacted (Prince George's County Council 2017). TRIM is a provision in the county charter requiring voter approval of all tax and fee increases. With this measure in place, county leaders are further constrained because they cannot raise taxes without the express permission of voters. Council members I spoke with said that this measure was especially onerous during economic downturns, which tend to lead to budget shortfalls, because they could not deliberate the merits of cutting public goods and services relative to the burden of increasing taxes, and make decisions accordingly. When I asked a Prince George's government civil servant in senior positions since the 1990s, "What do you think led to TRIM's passage?," he articulated the perspective I heard from most Black leaders:

> Can I tell you honestly? I think it was the transition and the color of the people that were getting into government. And I think also the desegregation [of county public schools] suit added a lot to it because people did not want to spend their money busing children from the inner beltway to the outer beltway. And we had a lot of people who did not have faith in Black people in general or Black elected officials. . . . People don't want to say it, but we have to be honest with ourselves. . . . I'll never forget I overheard a [White] councilmember say—"Oh my God—all the people with the brains are leaving Upper Marlboro [the seat of county government]."

According to this respondent, TRIM was not enacted only because White voters wanted to keep taxes low or because of their ideological commitment to fiscal conservatism. Instead, White voters passed the measure to prevent their tax dollars from going to the increasing numbers of Black residents moving into Prince George's County and because they resented Blacks' increasing political authority, which reflected their growing population. Funding for public schools was likely the public good that most animated White voters because they were then, as they are now, the county's biggest expenditure and were where White residents were interacting with Black neighbors regularly. This quote shows that fraught fiscal realities have been endemic to Prince George's politics since the county's transition from majority-White to majority-Black in the 1990s.

Today, several factors lead to county residents continuing to resist tax increases. In recent years, county executives and councils, including those who are African American, have proposed granting elected officials authority to set tax and fee rates. Voters have rejected these proposals. None of the residents I spoke with objected to TRIM outright and many indicated some degree of support for it. Those I interviewed stated one or more of three rationales for keeping TRIM: frustration about the quality of public services, Black households' thin budget margins, and skepticism of government competency generally. A middle-class retired Black woman captured the perspective of most residents I spoke with: "I think it's still a good idea for them to check with us first."

Still, the strength of respondents' opposition to overturning TRIM varied. When I asked respondents whether they would consider raising their taxes for any issues, about half said no. Among those who said yes, more funding for public schools was the usual answer. The deep reluctance of Prince George's County residents to overturn TRIM is not only about how much they believe they ought to pay in taxes. It is also a function of their satisfaction with county leadership, particularly officials' ability to use tax revenue they already receive to support residents' quality of life. Residents seem to be conveying that county leaders have not earned more of their money.

At the margins, increasing county taxes during economic downturns to maintain service levels, or raising taxes to improve services during more robust economic periods, would likely alleviate some pressure on county coffers and help maintain the quality of public goods and services residents want. However, more revenue garnered by raising county taxes is still far below the scale of new income needed to change the underlying fiscal dynamics beneath Prince George's persistent budget precarity and constraints. County officials are thus caught in a holding pattern: they cannot improve service quality without significantly more revenue, but more revenue will not be forthcoming without significant new approaches for securing it.

CONSEQUENCES OF BUDGET CONSTRAINTS AND TRADE-OFFS

Prince George's County leaders' decisions about the level at which to fund government programs inevitably lead to trade-offs among spending categories because demand for services outstrips available money. I discuss how county officials allocated funds for fiscal year 2018, noting trade-offs made, points of contestation, and the players who influenced the outcomes. I show fiscal scarcity means that many vital needs go unmet because the Prince George's treasury had too few dollars. I center public schools in PGC but discuss public goods and services more broadly.

Prince George's Public Schools' Demographics in Regional Perspective

Prince George's County Public School's (PGCPS) funding constraints are ensconced in national and regional fiscal patterns and challenges. The four most influential national patterns are federal and state government austerity from the 1970s forward, racial integration processes of the 1970s and 1980s in schools as courts enforced *Brown v. Board of Education*, contemporary racial resegregation trends, and increasing economic inequality and segregation. As these national patterns play out, local jurisdictions in the D.C. area do not receive a racial and socioeconomic cross section of the region's households. Instead, White, Black, Asian, Latinx, affluent, and economically distressed households cluster in certain neighborhoods and jurisdictions. Prince George's receives and retains a disproportionate share of the D.C. region's low- and moderate-income Black and Latinx families, even as the county is majority middle class. This is likely because, relative to the two counties that it borders, it is still the most affordable.

During the 2017–2018 school year, PGCPS served 132,322 students, making it one of the twenty largest school districts in the country (Maryland State Department of Education 2017). African Americans were the majority population at 58 percent. Latinx Americans, at 33 percent, are the fastest growing (Maryland State Department of Education 2017). Unlike the Latinx population in other major metropolitan areas, the majority in the D.C. region are foreign born. About 20 percent of PGCPS students are English-language learners (Maryland Equity Project 2017). The Latinx population in PGCPS is about 14 percentage points greater than their population proportion in Prince George's County as a whole. This reflects that a greater share of the Latinx population is of childbearing age relative to the Black population, as well as that Latinx people are the among the fastest growing populations in the country. A substantial portion of Black Prince George's residents, especially those who are middle class, are past childbearing age, and many are also retired government civil servants, consistent with Blacks' disproportionate representation in civil service positions nationally (Pattillo 2013).

In PGCPS, 61 percent of students qualify for reduced-priced meals, indicating students' and families' have substantial financial challenges (Maryland State Department of Education 2017). The school system's demographic composition means it must offer above-average levels of per pupil investment to support student learning. While Prince George's County public schools spend about $800 less than Montgomery's schools and nearly the same as Fairfax schools, Montgomery and Fairfax Counties' systems serve about half as many students qualifying for free-and-reduced-price meals (see table 3). And thus these jurisdictions do not need as many resources to meet their students' learning needs.

On a year-to-year basis, funding matters as

Table 3. Counties' Fiscal Year 2018 Spending and Student Poverty

	Prince George's	Montgomery	Fairfax
Spending per capita	$4,263	$5,225	$6,596
Spending per pupil	$14,832	$15,623	$14,862
Percent low-income students	61	34	29

Source: Fairfax County 2017; Fairfax County Public Schools 2017; Montgomery County 2017; Montgomery County Public Schools 2017; Prince George's County Office of Management and Budget 2017; Prince George's County Board of Education 2017a; Maryland State Department of Education 2022; Virginia Department of Education 2022.

jurisdictions respond to changes in the composition of their student body and those students' needs. Consistent adequate funding commensurate with jurisdictions' demographics over time matters because officials need discretion to invest in people and programs that take years to yield results—from building new schools to recruiting and retaining well-trained, experienced teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors.

From Desegregation to Resegregation

Present-day school funding challenges only make sense after considering the terms under which Prince George's desegregated its schools—and the fallout from those terms. Prince George's shift from majority-White to majority-Black in the 1990s entailed White decision-makers using laws and regulations first to subvert meaningful racial integration, then to underfund school construction and other key investments before Whites largely left the county. Racial integration began in the early 1970s after Black residents sued the county in federal court with help from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the American Civil Liberties Union (Johnson 2002). According to the chair of the committee integral to the integration plan, White resistance to school integration was intense and widespread: "It was very just raw, rank prejudice and racism—that's at the parent level. At the leadership level, it's the economics of it. This is 1973—Prince George's County particularly is a very George Wallace area—it's the upper South. People don't know each other, live together, et cetera, so when you start talking about putting the kids together, that simply wasn't going to work. So there was massive resistance—school buses being turned over, White mothers throwing eggs at the school buses."

Court intervention resulted in major change for Prince George's students and parents. During the plan's first year, about thirteen thousand additional students were bused to school than had been the year prior (Johnson 2002, 114–15). The hardest provision to execute was the one requiring all county public schools to have student bodies at least 10 percent, but no more than 50 percent, Black. Once integration was enforced, Whites moved out of Prince George's in droves, leaving fewer and fewer Whites in the county with whom Blacks could attend school. African Americans were about 25 percent of the county public school population in 1972. A decade later, that proportion had more than doubled to about 52 percent (Johnson 2002).

Prince George's was majority Black when the desegregation order ended in 1998. And with the 1974 *Milliken* decision governing the parameters local governments had for achieving integration, PGC officials conceded that their schools would have Black racial majorities. At that point, county leaders focused on attaining more school system resources from Maryland. The integration plan chair characterized the post-*Milliken* strategy this way: "What the judge ultimately came up with was desegregation that did not involve school assignment. We called them *Milliken* Schools, where you don't try to put kids on the bus from the Inner Beltway, drive them all around the Beltway just to put them next to a White child. Black parents didn't want it. White parents didn't want it. But the Black child still was not whole, still incompleteness from the years of segregation and denial and so we came up with an equal distribution of resources."

As the respondent noted, *Milliken* removed the most direct tool for racial integration—busing. *Milliken* aside, however, Black and White parents did not want busing, albeit for different reasons. Many Black parents did not like the toll it took on them and their children as they managed the logistics of going to an out-of-neighborhood school. White parents generally wanted to maintain White-only schools. Further, as Whites left the county, integration within it was no longer possible without interdistrict or intercounty busing between Prince George's and other Maryland jurisdictions, which *Milliken* expressly forbade. Thus, since *Milliken*, PGC leaders have sought to wrest as much revenue as possible from Maryland to improve its public schools.

Despite these efforts, the school system struggled financially after African Americans took the helm of Prince George's in the mid-1990s. When the first Black county executive, Wayne Curry, was elected in 1994, he inherited a financially fragile school system and county budget more broadly. Curry made budget decisions amid a $131 million shortfall. To balance the budget, he cut services and furloughed county employees, including those in the school system (James 1995).

Funding Government Services amid Fiscal Constraint

In the years since Curry's election, the fiscal outlook of Prince George's has continued to be challenging. Although the county has had increased private and public investment, it has not yielded enough revenue for consistent provision of high-quality public goods and services across spending areas year to year. To increase school funding, Prince George's officials trade off appropriations to other county services, most of which are also in need of additional revenue. When the council adopted its fiscal year 2018 budget, the chair's remarks captured how the council stewards county resources while being mindful of both residents' desires and budget limitations:

> This council has achieved the adoption of a $3.8 billion balanced spending plan. It positions Prince George's County to be an economic engine. I credit the people of Prince George's. They have been engaged. We listened, to balance your mandate within available resources. There's a famous quote about budgets—don't tell me what you value, show me your budget and I'll tell you what you value—you see education, public safety, protection of the most vulnerable. But miles to go before we sleep. The Blue Ribbon Commission for addressing the structural deficit findings were factored in and will play a future role as we safeguard our financial health.

Residents I spoke with formally and informally regularly voiced discontent about the quality of public services—from trash pickup, to maintenance of roads and bridges, to access to social and health services, to school quality. During an interview with a county council member, I asked her about the concerns she hears about most from her constituents. She was forced to support budget cuts, she explained, but understood why her constituents wanted elected officials to do more: "Whether you're talking about property taxes or just a change in service that will affect them, and they [PGC residents] perceive it, usually correctly, to be. . . . If you're giving me, for example, once a week trash service instead of twice a week trash service but not reducing my taxes, that's the same as a tax increase."

Council members such as this one are keenly aware of their constituents' dissatisfaction with public services, the basis of their discontent, and county leaders' inability to be fully responsive. Officials' capacity to respond is further undermined by national downturns that affect all local jurisdictions, though Black locales more severely. The Great Recession is a case in point. It significantly eroded the financial health gains Prince George's had made during the previous decade.

The county's communities were more severely harmed by the foreclosure crisis than any other D.C. area jurisdiction. Residents were more likely to have the types of adverse mortgages terms that often lead to foreclosure during economic retrenchment, such as interest rates tethered to the state of the economy. Nationally, financial institutions targeted Black and Latinx neighborhoods for toxic home loans (Lacy 2012). Prince George's was not exempt. The foreclosure rate in the county was 4.75 percent, whereas the rate for the D.C. region as a whole was 2.5 percent (Urban Institute 2011).

In 2017 and 2018, more than six years after the Great Recession, county officials were still making budget decisions indicating that economic recovery continued. For example, union contracts with teachers and police officers for fiscal year 2018 included pay raises to close the gap between what these civil servants were earning and what they would be making had they not experienced pay freezes during the recession. When I interviewed county officials, they spoke about "digging out" of revenue shortfalls. One council member's comments crystallize what I heard: "It took us longer than anyone in the region to dig out. We're still digging out and it affected our African American middle class in the worst way. People lost their homes and that's how you build wealth in this country, is by home ownership and it hit us hard. There's a consequence to that that I think we're still trying to figure out."

At a constituent townhall meeting after the fiscal year 2018 budget was adopted, a council member explained to his constituents how he tried to address their public service delivery concerns, but why he was unable to satisfy residents fully: "As you can see, once you take 60 percent off [for public schools], there's not much left for quality of life needs in the county, but we put money where needed to provide quality of life. . . . the good news is we had a little increase, and the deficit was less—$2 million is less than it was several years ago. Thank you for your letters and emails—we try to respond. We got a lot of hits for the roads and streets. We have been trying to do a little better."

As the county manages both chronic and acute budget constraints, the effects are felt across constituent groups. Cuts to programs supporting those most vulnerable, which go beyond children, can lead to dire circumstances, however. An example is how Prince George's sought to repair unintentional harm done to the Americans with Developmental Disabilities (ADD) community when the county raised its minimum wage. When it did so in 2017, it inadvertently hurt ADD providers because they are reimbursed at the lower state minimum wage (Blackner 2016). County officials allowed ADD entities to pay the state rate in 2017. Providers complained that this decision undermined their ability to attract and retain workers because the workers could make more money elsewhere in the county. ADD leaders requested $3.5 million in gap funding to cover the county minimum wage. The council held several hearings to learn stakeholders' concerns and provided the additional money by shifting funds from Economic Development Incentives programs.

Both Prince George's inability to cover the pay differential out of the social services budget and the overall social services budget level indicate that the county's funding of social services is far below residents' needs. By comparison, Montgomery County enacted a similar minimum wage increase in 2017 and offered gap funding for ADD providers. Montgomery increased its social services spending for 2018, without cuts to other programs or hearings about the matter (Montgomery County Council 2017). The difference between how Prince George's and Montgomery managed the need for gap funding demonstrates that counties with more robust tax bases, and thus more revenue, can more readily protect and invest in their residents without trading off other constituents' needs. Leaders in wealthier locales also expend less time and energy debating how to allocate funds, freeing them to focus on other constituent concerns.

The minimal margin in Prince George's budget shows how small budget expenditures of a few million dollars, and those of hundreds of millions of dollars, affect quality of life in the county. Under a tight budget, even seemingly insignificant levels of spending, given an overall budget of nearly $3.3 billion, are difficult for the county to make yet have a profound effect on the communities touched. At the same time, dozens of communities need tens of millions of dollars in additional investment and Prince George's decision-makers cannot afford to make them.

Slicing the School Funding Pie

Grappling with budgets trade-offs was a central line of discussion in almost all school-related hearings I attended. A schoolboard member characterized the trade-offs this way: "It's tough. We just celebrated negotiation contracts [teachers and other schools staff]. But you know, you're not given $150 million more—you have to make the decisions. Do we not have this or do we not have that?"

During a council hearing on the school budget where the superintendent discussed how he would make cuts, given the council appropriated less funding than his request for fiscal year 2018, a council member and the superintendent had this exchange:

COUNCILMEMBER: The next is numeracy and literacy, teacher mentors, and safety—all of those are reduced. How much is it going to hurt those particular programs?

SUPERINTENDENT: With literacy and numeracy, we wanted more coaches—we wanted twenty, but we're adding twelve. We'll get there. Peer assistance and review teachers are master teachers—they work with our young teachers. It would be nice if every new teacher had peer assistance and review. In terms of training for safety, we moved to an online system.

In a context of resource scarcity, school officials cannot fund all programs at levels necessary to provide a high-quality education across all Prince George's schools. As captured in the cited dialogue, numeracy and literacy are fundamental skills and coaches are critical for supporting students who are falling behind. Yet the school system received just over half of its request for certain critical personnel in 2018. PGCPS officials thus were forced to ration what should be universally provided to students. Mentor teachers for early-career instructors are integral for teacher effectiveness. According to a PGCPS teachers union officer, when the school year starts, many teachers are in the process of earning certification, indicating their limited experience and need for additional guidance. Many tenured teachers use their seniority to work at higher-performing schools or leave PGCPS for nearby jurisdictions, where they are usually paid more. The union official called Prince George's schools the "training ground" for D.C. region teachers. That Prince George's cannot retain its most qualified teachers is one way it subsidizes neighboring counties with greater White populations. Effectively, counties with smaller Black populations leverage Prince George's selection and professional development processes to expedite the advancement of their own education systems.

Whereas the school operating budget pays for day-to-day educational instruction, the capital budget funds infrastructure, such as repairing decades-old school buildings and constructing new ones. At county council and school board hearings, school officials frequently petitioned for substantial increases in dedicated capital funding. In a report issued in 2017, the county states its need for $3 billion for capital expenses between 2017 and 2022 (Prince George's County Board of Education 2017b, 6–5). "Those are the ones that are the most intractable for us. If your school is fifty years old, it's going to be fifty years old until we can build you a new school," remarked the school board chair when I asked about the greatest difficulties facing Prince George's public schools. Building new schools requires millions of dollars at the elementary and middle school levels and tens of millions at the high school level. Under the current funding arrangement for erecting schools, Maryland and the county share the cost, the state usually paying at least half (Hise et al. 2018). In a context of budget scarcity, though, Prince George's has difficulty providing its share. Therefore schools are not built commensurate with population growth—and maintenance, let alone major enhancements, is deferred.

Despite these budget constraints, parents press for schools to improve immediately as their children have needs now. At a community meeting convened by a candidate for state delegate that brought together education advocates, a school board member, and concerned citizens, a parent shared the inordinate effort it took for the county to remediate a health hazard in her child's school: "I volunteer there weekly—for three years at [name of school] we were getting sick. I went to the school board, the governor, you name it. One day I overheard a conversation between teachers and they said it was mold. I went to Channel 4. If you live in Upper Marlboro [a wealthy part of the county], you get better service. You go to the media and they [Prince George's officials] come out. It shouldn't have to be that way."

Parents like this one demonstrate that the usual course of business for investment in school infrastructure in Prince George's is inadequate, potentially even compromising the physical health of students, teachers, and staff, not just the quality of education. Some parents use media, and other external sources, to increase pressure on PGC officials to focus on their concerns. Although the "squeaky wheels get the oil," the total number of wheels needing attention is not reduced in PGCPS. What, if anything, changes is whose and what needs are prioritized.

Operating and capital budget constraints are exacerbated by student population growth and composition. Growth is uneven across Prince George's. The northern tip, where the Latinx population is concentrated, is expanding the fastest and many students are from economically distressed households. At a town hall the council convened as they started considering the fiscal year 2018 budget, the council member who represents northern communities had this exchange with the PGCPS superintendent, highlighting the consequences of budget scarcity and how her constituents experience them, particularly youth in her district.

Councilmember: In the north side of the county, it's the overcrowding issue. Not only are we out of space inside the school, we're out of space in the temporaries [trailers]. I'm disheartened we're pushing these schools we're in dire need of to 2019, instead of this year.

School Superintendent: Fiscal [20]19 is next year, we're in [20]18 now. I can't build a school if we don't get money. We need funding from county and state funding. Over the next six years, you see schools being opened are in the northern part of the county.

Although low- and moderate-income families usually cannot afford to opt out of Prince George's public school system, many middle- and upper-middle-class families can. Affluent Black families I interviewed and observed testifying at council and school board hearings regularly raised concerns about school system performance, and some threatened to leave the system altogether if their issues were not fully remedied. A common point in their statements was that they can often find a satisfactory neighborhood, charter, or specialty school, but that because high-performing schools are scarce, demand for slots outpaces their availability.

In this context, middle-class Black parents increasingly seek alternatives to public schools in the county. They often wrestled with this decision, however. They wanted to send their children to public school but felt compelled to look elsewhere because they were not confident their children would receive a high-quality education. Prince George's parents also understood that middle-class parents in neighboring counties with smaller Black populations did not face this challenge and were therefore frustrated. A parent considering whether to opt out was representative of what I heard: "Many parents in the county do look at the option of private schooling. That is because the school systems is not as good as it could be. Which is a tough thing that I've always grappled with and probably haven't done enough research to fully understand why, but to have the affluence that this county has, and for decades to not have a stellar program as many other counties do, I don't quite understand what the major driving factor is."

Geographic and Ethnoracial Variation

Prince George's residents' experiences of the county's budget constraints are not consistent across neighborhoods, nor ethnoracial groups. Generally, inner-ring communities, those within the Interstate 495 Beltway, face greater economic and social challenges than those outside the interstate. One factor contributing to the economic distress of Prince George's inner-ring communities is that Prince George's, among all D.C. area jurisdictions, shares the longest border with D.C. Many of these D.C. neighborhoods are in D.C.'s poorest wards, Wards 7 and 8. During my fieldwork, many Prince George's County leaders referred to the apartment complexes along the D.C. border as "Ward 9," indicating that they believed the county was virtually an extension of D.C. in these areas.

The District is one of the fastest gentrifying cities in the United States, with gentrification pressures mounting across the city, including in Wards 7 and 8. A 2019 report by The National Community Reinvestment Coalition found that from 2000 to 2013 Washington, D.C., experienced the most gentrification by percentage of "eligible neighborhoods" in the United States. Eligible neighborhoods were those that "if in 2000 [neighborhoods/census blocks] were in the lower 40 percent of home values and family incomes in that metropolitan area" (Richardson, Mitchell, and Franco 2019). The report estimates that about twenty thousand mostly African American residents were pushed out of their homes during that period. Although it is unclear where these residents moved—elsewhere in the District, to another jurisdiction in the region, or outside of the region—many likely considered Prince George's a viable option. The county is proximate, affordable, and accessible. Some housing units in Prince George's along the D.C.-Maryland line charge much cheaper rent than one would find elsewhere in the region. Metro bus and subway lines seamlessly connect Prince George's and D.C. neighborhoods. Family and civic institution ties, such as churches, often span the D.C.-Prince George's border, creating social ties between these jurisdictions. The church I attended while conducing my fieldwork was originally located in the District and its congregation included both District and Prince George's residents.

In 2018, a council member, when considering the trajectory of many inside-the-Beltway neighborhoods in her district, noted marked change over the past ten years, even among single-family-home owners. She stated that as she canvassed the area to campaign and held community meetings more and more signs of distress were evident, such as poorly kept properties. The council person surmised that this decline was in part due to the foreclosure crisis linked to the Great Recession. She also cited intergenerational downward mobility, which is more likely for African Americans than for their White middle-class counterparts, as another potential cause (Chetty et al. 2019): "We're fortunate in that we have some stable residents, but the unfortunate issue is that they [retirees], most of whom are African American are aging out and so what happens is their homes become available. You may have tenants in there, if they're renting it, and people may not necessarily want that."

In some respects, the changes the council members chronicle are typical neighborhood churn as individuals and households make decisions about which locations best suit their interests. But when patterns of households moving out of and into neighborhoods reflect social status differences, particularly those related to long-standing inequities in access to material resources underpinning quality of life, neighborhood demographic shifts can lead to marked changes in neighborhood capacities and character.

Many of the long-time residents in Prince George's neighborhoods are middle-class African American senior citizens who are vacating their homes because of age-related concerns, creating space for new, usually younger, residents. Many newcomers are working class and Latino. As neighborhood transitions progress, long-time and newly arrived neighbors negotiate how to live life alongside one another, such as when and how to use public space and which services should be prioritized in a context of fiscal constraint.

Spatial, ethnoracial, and class tensions are interrelated because the Latino population in Prince George's is concentrated in the northern tip of the county. When I asked a Black middle-class respondent living in northern Prince George's within the Inner Beltway to describe his neighborhood and what, if anything, stood out as significant changes over the past few years, he replied, "With new influx of Hispanic population and that continuing to grow, and then a new influx of persons of lesser income who are coming from Washington, D.C., or other places where gentrification is running rampant, the county is having to reconfigure the way that it implements policy and programs to be able to meet the needs of new folks who are coming into the county."

This respondent is aware of the demographic shifts in his neighborhood and how these changes are connected to regional and national migration patterns. He also notes how new arrivals' needs will both overlap with those of long-time residents and be distinct, necessitating negotiations about how to invest in his neighborhood.

Prince George's officials increasingly struggle to spread an already stretched budget even thinner as moderate and low-income residents move into county communities. This dynamic leads to greater scarcity and competition for public investment and requires Prince George's officials to make ever harsher trade-offs between government services and constituencies. Prince George's financial limitations are largely the downstream of regional flows of people and capital into local jurisdictions in the D.C. metropolitan area. And these trends are beyond the direct influence of county leaders. African American and Latinx households have the common goal of attaining a fair share of material and social resources through United States political and economic systems in a context of entrenched institutionalized discrimination against non-White Americans. This broader shared interest sets the stage for coalitions between these groups, even as their political priorities at times diverge.

DISCUSSION

All public goods and services stand in need of more investment in Prince George's County. I find that this majority-Black and middle-class jurisdiction, and likely those with similar demographic and fiscal conditions, face unique budget constraints. As a result, PGC government officials make significant trade-offs as they try to fund public goods and services.

Schools are, at 60 percent, already Prince George's largest budget expenditure by far. Yet the student population of mostly moderate- and low-income youth requires increasing levels of investment to meet students' learning needs. As county officials seek to improve schools by providing more funding, they trade off other core government services. Consequently, public service quality is usually compromised across the board. White parents who live in suburbs can largely take a package deal for granted—one in which they are satisfied with their home, neighborhood, and local public schools (Rhodes and Warkentien 2017). The resource bundle White Americans activate is the complement of the cumulative weight Black Americans bear from anti-Black policies and racial capitalism.

Because Prince George's absorbs more moderate- and low-income residents, the county insulates the majority- and plurality-White jurisdictions it borders—Fairfax County in Virginia and Montgomery County in Maryland—from managing the needs of economically distressed residents to the same extent as Prince George's. Black middle-class neighborhoods—already more socioeconomically heterogenous and proximate to low-income neighborhoods than White middle-class communities—are buffers between poor people, particularly low-income Black and Latinx Americans, and affluent White communities. Further, because Fairfax and Montgomery have more resources and less demand for them, they experience *virtuous fiscal cycles*, in that more high-income residents seek to live there, leading to the rising market value of properties in those jurisdictions, which in turn expands their tax bases. In contrast, Prince George's endures *vicious fiscal cycles* because the county cannot attract as many affluent residents or as much commercial investment.

The interdependent relationship between Prince George's and neighboring counties amounts to a subsidy for already unduly advantaged White middle-class residents and jurisdictions in the Washington region. The inordinate demand for housing in majority-White jurisdictions reflects systematic underinvestment by market and government actors in Black locales for decades (Katznelson 2005; Korver-Glenn 2021) and the political strategies White Americans use to maintain their economic advantages using state and local laws (Girouard 2023). If public and private investment were more evenly distributed across neighborhoods in regions, the nature of the home appreciation system would be severely destabilized (Howell and Korver-Glenn 2018). Prince George's officials navigate "cascading fiscal constriction," the convergence of three flows of financial precarity: *historical era*—slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and contemporary market-oriented, color callousness; *shared governing authority*—local, state, and federal governments; and *metropolitan area*—local government capacity as shaped by regional flows of people and capital.

Current processes maintaining inequitable K–12 public education systems and other public services do not explicitly exclude Black Americans. Yet they still extract from their households and jurisdictions. Contemporary laws facilitate a two-tiered public provision-system whereby Black Americans, on average, experience lower quality public goods and services than their White counterparts. Neither the federal government, nor any state or locale, has committed to ensuring equitable public goods and services provision across racial and socioeconomic statuses, even as all Americans share the same rights under the U.S. Constitution alongside those in their respective state constitutions. One's racial, class, and neighborhood location statuses create circumscribed citizenship for some and capacious citizenship for others.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

I draw attention to the importance of examining multiple levels of structure and social processes simultaneously—household, neighborhood, local jurisdiction, region, state, and nation—to investigate their interdependencies over time and space. Through research on intersecting dimensions of inequity, we identify how market and government actors leverage legacy discrimination to create contemporary forms—and how White Americans continue to benefit from anti-Black discrimination.

Both by design (such as unwillingness of state politicians to fund schools to the fullest extent of their authority or to raise taxes) and by default (such as political fragmentation creating pathways for Whites' resource hoarding) our political and economic systems exacerbate rather than mitigate racial inequity. In fact, our systems reward those who manipulate economic and political systems to amass disproportionate resources and power. Requiring Black Americans to use markets and other processes that heighten competition between jurisdictions when majority-Black locales uniquely bear the weight of legacy and contemporary anti-Black racism is ill-informed, at best, and at worst, a strategy to evade reckoning with how current social processes continue to perpetuate pathways for White Americans' economic advantages at Black Americans' expense. As social scientists, our charge is to trace these "evasions" to show how markets and governments remain complicit in maintaining racism through facially nonracist practices, or color-callous, policies.

Recommendations: Changing the (Political Economy) Game

One way Black and other local leaders could change the rules of the game is by advocating for regional resource distribution and other measures to ameliorate the negative consequences of regional fragmentation, the origins and continuation of which are significantly race and class inflected. A regional tax, alongside a regional minimum wage, could be designed to support economically distressed households to ensure their basic needs are met, regardless of where they live—thereby attenuating the burden borne by the least wealthy jurisdictions, which are also the most affordable for these households.

In the D.C. region, for example, the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments, the primary D.C. area body coordinating regional political and economic activities, has identified "social equity" as a concern in its Region Forward planning priorities (2018). Pursuing a regional minimum wage and regional tax would make this commitment concrete. Wealthier counties' decision-makers may be willing to participate in such a program because their middle-class residents depend on the labor of low-income workers. For instance, childcare workers and those in the food industry, individuals who often make the minimum wage or close to it, are critical to middle-class families' daily routines. When low-income workers experience financial and other forms of instability, it has an impact on affluent households' productivity and lifestyle expectations. Given the constraints of federalism, whereby national and state governments share authority, each state could enact tax increases designated for funding metropolitan area jurisdictions within that state's boundaries. In the D.C. region, Maryland, Virginia, and West Virginia would fund their own programs, alongside D.C., and then use an established institution, such as the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments, to coordinate funding distribution.

Another way to change the game would be to increase state funding to support local governments. Local leaders, with few (short-term) alternatives, tend to compete with each other for direct private investment and state funding transfers. Such competition often leads to minimal, if any, increases in public well-being broadly in the state, and those already the most marginalized usually attain the most tepid advancement. Cooperation between local jurisdiction leaders could involve them going to their respective state houses and governors to make the case for increased state support to local governments for public goods and services provision. Furthermore, United States voters need to empower leaders to do this by electing candidates who support tax increases.

Concomitant grassroots and elected official-driven strategies devoted to public education regarding the vital role local and state governments play, or could play, in providing public goods and services equitably could increase public receptiveness toward more robust government. Public education in this vein might highlight that governments, unlike private entities, are focused on public well-being, not profit maximization; accountable to an electorate, rather than to shareholders; and capable of coordinating the movement of resources between other governments and across industries in ways individual companies cannot.

Finally, the federal government could establish a Black Equity Fund. Black people experience the cumulative effects of centuries of racist government and market practices. In recent years, more policy officials and public intellectuals have discussed reparations for historic harms. Democratic Party candidates seeking the party's nomination for the 2020 Presidential election indicated support for reparations or other forms of systematic redress for Black Americans (Herndon 2019). Regardless of the policies enacted, those who are sober-minded and have a moral commitment to racial and socioeconomic justice in the United States must account for how the past fundamentally shapes the present and for how those who already have disproportionate resources use their power to keep their undue advantages. Crafting and implementing fair social systems, where all Americans flourish, requires as much effort as our country expended in creating unjust systems.

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